

## **Thinking about Forgiveness: A Philosophical Preamble to its Cultivation in Schooling<sup>1</sup>**

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In this article I explore and clarify issues fundamental to an understanding of forgiveness and its justification. I do so as a necessary preliminary to a related project falling beyond the scope of the present study, one that will examine the idea of nurturing a culture or spirit of forgiveness in public (state) schooling from a wider and more inclusive perspective than what has been typically advanced in the educational literature,<sup>2</sup> what this might entail, and why those directly concerned with schooling should take the cultivation of forgiving attitudes or dispositions seriously.

This present work is divided into three sections. The first identifies what I take to be the central features or characteristics of “forgiveness” insofar as its morally relevant uses are concerned.<sup>3</sup> Some of these features are formal in nature, others substantive. Most are presented with relatively moderate analysis and argument, and none are exactly new in the sense of not having been discussed in the philosophical literature on forgiveness before, though my selection and treatment may vary at times from that of others. The second section examines the reasons or grounds on which the act of extending forgiveness might be defended, as well the conditions under which forgiveness might be limited, inappropriate, or objectionable. The final section briefly identifies some issues and questions for further study that my analysis raises with respect to the *practice* of nurturing a culture or spirit of forgiveness in schooling.

Forgiveness is a complex and contestable notion, one easily given to popular misconception, e.g., that it returns a situation between two par-

ties back to normal, that it lets culprits “off the hook” or condones what they do, as well as to much derision, e.g., that it is only for the weak, the sentimental, or the religious, or that it smacks of new-age “mushiness,” and so on. Yet forgiveness is an extremely powerful idea, one critical to an understanding of the human condition, of our vulnerabilities, fallibilities, and capacities for doing both good and ill. How should we see and respond to others whose words and deeds hurt or wrong us in some way? How should we respond to ourselves when our own thoughts and attitudes are self-damaging or self-deceiving, and when we say or do things we regret? What role should forgiveness play in our flourishing as human beings, in our becoming persons more fully and, consequently, in schooling insofar as its basic purpose is (or ought to be) the preparation of students to lead as flourishing lives as possible?<sup>4</sup>

In this work I focus primarily on interpersonal forgiveness rather than self-forgiveness or social-political forgiveness.<sup>5</sup> Interpersonal forgiveness seems particularly relevant to the contexts of schooling I have in mind, notwithstanding the importance and value of the other two. My approach to interpersonal forgiveness is from a secular-philosophical perspective rather than a religious or theological one. Hannah Arendt once opined that modern societies tend to overlook or under-estimate the importance of forgiveness because it was “presumed to be a purely theological matter” (in Govier, 2002, pp. 42-43). In taking a secular-philosophical approach I acknowledge the multicultural character of our liberal and democratic society, the separation of church and state reflected in the practice of public (as distinct from faith-based) schooling, and the rational belief that in order to forgive or seek forgiveness one need not be religious or a person of faith any more than to be moral is it necessary that one be religious or a person of faith. A transcendent reality, in other words, is not a necessary presupposition of forgiveness and forgiving, though much of the history of forgiveness at least in the context of Western civilization has been closely associated with such a reality.<sup>6</sup>

I follow the lead of those (e.g., Holmgren, 1993; 2002; Govier, 2002; Roberts-Cady, 2003; Wolfendale, 2005) generally sympathetic to a Kantian ethic of respect and its ability to provide a secular-philosophical underpinning for forgiveness,<sup>7</sup> though I acknowledge this is not the only such secular basis to be advanced. In apparently challenging an ethic-of-respect rationale Eve Garrard and David McNaughton (2003) argue that forgiveness needs to be grounded not on any innate goodness of persons or on what is “noble or admirable about us” but on what is “pitiful, weak and degraded” (p. 59), i.e., on our common human predicament which is that, as a species, we are “morally pretty unimpressive” (p. 54). Since we

are all in this boat together we need (they argue) to be "forbearing about each other's weaknesses and indeed wickednesses" (p. 59).

### Conceptualizing Forgiveness

(a) Contexts that make interpersonal forgiveness a morally relevant consideration are typically those in which one person (a perpetrator) deliberately or through wilful negligence offends, harms, or wrongs another (a victim) in word or deed<sup>8</sup> and where the latter experiences negative or hard feelings in the belief that he or she has been wrongly or unjustly treated. Several implications of this claim are worth noting, the most obvious of which is the logically odd or incoherent idea of extending forgiveness to those who treat us well. To speak of forgiving others for their deeds of kindness or thoughtfulness simply makes no sense (barring a special explanation). Nor does it make sense to speak of forgiveness in cases where victims *falsely* believe they have been mistreated, or where individuals *mistakenly* see themselves as victims or as hard done by. Nor does talk of forgiveness seem to ring true where one had no *intent* to harm or wrong another or could not reasonably have known or predicted one's actions would have the hurtful effects they did, and who may thus be unaware of such consequences, i.e., where pleas such as "I didn't mean to," "I honestly didn't know," or "I was actually trying to help" are credible and sustainable.<sup>9</sup> Nor (finally) does it ring true in contexts where persons are forced against their will or driven by some inner compulsion or pathological illness to mistreat others, i.e., where there is an *absence of agency* or where factors are simply beyond one's control and pleas such as "I was made to," "I couldn't help it" are credible and sustainable. Thus, if forgiveness is to get off the ground as a logically coherent and morally relevant consideration, it is necessary that those who offend, harm, or wrong others be the agents of what they say or do, that they act knowingly and freely, and that victims are correct in thinking or having good reason to believe they have been unjustly wronged.

(b) The Greek for forgiveness, *asphesis*, means to liberate or release from bondage (Vanier, 1998, p. 135); and according to the *OED* (Compact Edition, 1987, p. 1057) to forgive is literally to *give up* something. In forgiving a loan, for example, what is relinquished is a legitimate claim one has against one's debtor, freeing that individual from any obligation to repay what is rightfully owed. In forgiving those who maltreat us (or someone close to us)<sup>10</sup> what is said to be "given up" or more appropriately "abandoned" or "overcome" are the negative emotions<sup>11</sup> and feelings we quite naturally and justifiably experience as victims as well as any temptations or desires to retaliate or seek revenge, harbour grudges or

ill will. According to a philosophically prominent account of forgiveness, the negative emotions victims need to overcome are invariably claimed to be those of anger, resentment, and hate.<sup>12</sup> No doubt certain conceptual truths concerning the cognitive content of these emotions (or their rough equivalents of indignation, bitterness, animosity) are at play here, but to limit the negative emotions that can be experienced in being victimized and that would need to be dealt with in reaching forgiveness to just these alone, especially in light of the countless ways there are of being harmed or wronged and of the diversity of contexts involved, seems both arbitrary and morally questionable. The restriction is arbitrary since the emotional responses of victims can vary widely and may at times fall outside the "standard" range of vindictive feelings. A youngster who is sexually abused or exploited by an adult in a position of trust and authority, for example, will almost certainly feel humiliation or shame, revulsion or disgust and possibly fear rather than (or in addition to) anger or hate. A teenager jilted by a girl or boyfriend in favour of some other classmate may be consumed more with jealousy and feelings of betrayal and perhaps contempt than with those of anger and resentment. And the restriction is indefensible because of its morally unacceptable consequences, namely that for victims, who, say, experience shame or disgust but not resentment; fear rather than hate, grief, or sadness but not bitterness; and who succeed in overcoming *these* emotions, forgiveness *could not* (on the standard account) be a possibility for them since none of these emotions are acknowledged to be ones the overcoming of which forgiveness is claimed to require.<sup>13</sup> A wider scope of negative emotions in contexts of human mistreatment therefore needs to be acknowledged in the analyses of "forgiveness," one that allows not only for feelings of anger, resentment, and hate but disgust, humiliation, shame, embarrassment, betrayal, jealousy, contempt, grief, and perhaps others as well.<sup>14</sup>

(c) That we may succeed in overcoming our hard feelings, at least to the point they no longer function as barriers to forgiveness, does not mean we have thereby forgiven our offenders. In a posthumously published article, journalist June Callwood (2007, pp. 36-37) tells the story of a young woman raised in a Finnish community on the Canadian Prairies who fell in love with a man of African descent. The couple married and had a son and when the woman proudly presented the child to her mother the reaction she got was one of "naked disgust." The young woman was devastated. She eventually let go her hatred for her mother but confessed this to be "the best she could do," that she could not go on to forgive. There is clearly more to forgiveness than renouncing one's negative emotions and desires for revenge. While forgiveness involves a victim's overcoming these feelings, overcoming them is not the whole

of forgiveness. What also seems to be necessary is the presence of a positive change of heart on the part of a victim towards the perpetrator—a shift in attitude from seeing the perpetrator as a monster, villain, or piece of scum to seeing that individual in more understanding and compassionate ways as another human being, all the while not ceasing to believe in the wrongness of what was done and in perpetrator's culpability. Put succinctly, without this attitudinal transformation there can be no forgiveness. A presupposition of such transformation is the distinction of “act” and “agent” and the idea that what a perpetrator *does* is not necessarily definitive of who he or she is as a *person*; that doing something bad or even heinous does not necessarily mean the agent is of a thoroughly bad or heinous character, utterly devoid of goodness or any capacity for moral recovery or improvement. In forgiving someone, it is the *person* and not what the person *did* or who the person *was* at the time of wrongdoing, that is forgiven;<sup>15</sup> and it is the *wrongdoing* that is condemned, not the *wrongdoer*.<sup>16</sup>

(d) It is of course easy to read too much into this transformative component of forgiveness. Margaret Holmgren (1993, p. 347) has contended, for example, that adopting an attitude of what she calls “real goodwill” toward the offender, that is, an attitude in which the latter is seen as “a valuable human being who has made a mistake and done wrong” but has yet “to come to terms” with it, is sufficient. Joanna North, on the other hand, seems to think this is not enough. Forgiveness, North argues, ideally involves replacing our bitterness and anger with attitudes of love and affection (1998, p. 24ff.) and of restoring the wrongdoer to “his original place in our esteem,” as well as overcoming estrangement (1987, p. 507). Instances of forgiving that exemplify North's account can no doubt be found, but as a general rule or guideline for governing this attitudinal component her rendering of it seems to demand too much. For it would deny, unjustifiably I believe, the legitimacy of attributing forgiveness to those who, having abandoned their hard feelings and ill-will, come to regard their wrongdoers *not* with affection or as being restored to a former place in their (the victims') esteem—for victim and perpetrator can sometimes be complete strangers—but with attitudes of civility or decency, of understanding and fair-mindedness instead. Moreover, North's appeal to “overcoming estrangement” may render the ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation too close and run the risk of inflating what can be a *benefit* of forgiving (in the sense it may lead to reconciliation as an outcome) into a *conceptual point* about forgiveness itself. Just as an earlier discussion bore out the need for a wider range of negative emotions beyond anger, resentment, and hate, the overcoming of which makes forgiveness a possibility, so too is there need of a more

realistic interpretation of what a victim's "transformed outlook" needs to involve.

(e) How then may we characterize what it is to "forgive," to "be forgiven," and to be a "forgiving person"? First, to forgive is to let go our negative emotions or hard feelings and to adopt in their place a more generous or compassionate attitude towards our wrongdoers as *persons* or *human beings*, all the while condemning what they did and holding them responsible for it. Forgiving, in other words, is not something that entirely "wipes the slate clean" nor is it a matter of "turning the other cheek," as if to imply that judgments on the part of victims are not involved in reaching forgiveness.<sup>17</sup> Second, to *be* forgiven is to understand that, while one is not absolved of responsibility or blame for what one did, there will be no further recriminations; that one will no longer be despised or viewed as an object of hatred or contempt but instead with an attitude of understanding and basic respect. And third, to be *forgiving* is to be the sort of person who does not readily hold grudges, who sees revenge or retaliation as a morally bereft response to being maltreated, and who is generally optimistic about human nature and the presence of a basic goodness in others despite their shortcomings or fallibilities and the havoc they can wreck in peoples' lives. To have such a disposition, however, does not mean that one is obligated to forgive whenever victimized any more than being a generous person implies that one is obliged to donate to every good cause that comes along. The exercise of moral virtue, as Aristotle (1970) poignantly argued, involves the making of sound judgment that takes relevant circumstances into account and is aimed at striking a defensible mean or middle ground between opposing and undesirable extremes. This is surely no less true of forgiveness where rushing to forgive or being too forgiving (see [h] below) on the one hand, and being hard-hearted or completely unforgiving on the other, are extremes that generally ought to be avoided.

(f) A number of fairly common misunderstandings continue to plague the notion of "forgiveness." It is often thought, for example, that to forgive is to *forget*. But if this were this true then victims who do not or cannot forget could not (logically) forgive. Such a conclusion runs counter not only to the experiences of those who have indeed forgiven but *not* forgotten the suffering they experienced nor who was responsible for it, but also to the conception of "forgiveness" articulated in this work in which "forgiving" is logically compatible with the idea of not ceasing to condemn what one's perpetrator did to one nor to holding that individual accountable. Without remembering, forgiveness would be impossible. Another popular misunderstanding is to think that to forgive is to *excuse* or *absolve* the wrongdoer of blame or responsibilities barring of

course situations in which pleas such as "I honestly didn't mean to" or "I couldn't help it" constitute legitimate or genuine excuses—but as just explained this reduction too runs contrary to what forgiveness from a moral point of view logically entails. What's more, a victim's refusal to let the culprit off the hook does not mean that forgiveness must be out of the question. "I can't excuse what you did to me; it was wrong and hurtful but I am willing to forgive you nonetheless" is hardly an incoherent claim. A further misconception is involved in thinking that to forgive is to *condone* what the wrongdoer did or to minimize its seriousness as if to say "it was nothing, don't worry." Being wilfully victimized *is* a morally serious matter; and to think that extending forgiveness (which acknowledges that seriousness) is to turn a blind eye to one's mistreatment or to take it lightly is, itself, a serious confusion. Forgiveness is consistent with condemning what one's culprit did, not with condoning it. Neither is forgiving the same as *pardoning*. To pardon (typically) is the prerogative of persons in positions of legal authority (e.g., judges) who are not themselves victims of the injustices over which they adjudicate. Unlike interpersonal forgiveness, a pardon is offered on an impersonal basis by an independent third party; thus a pardoned offender or one who is shown mercy by being released from further legal punishment is not thereby a forgiven offender. Whether that individual ought to be forgiven or whether a forgiven offender ought to be punished are further legitimate questions. "Forgiveness," which is about a positive change of heart or attitude, and "punishment," which is about justice being done, are neither mutually exclusive nor logically incompatible. Finally, to forgive is not the same as to *reconcile* with one's wrongdoer, though a new or renewed relationship of mutual trust and confidence between victim and wrongdoer may at times be an upshot of forgiving. But there can be forgiveness without reconciliation and reconciliation without forgiveness. In overcoming one's devastation and sense of utter betrayal by the sexual dalliances of one's spouse (for example) and eventually finding a way to forgive, a victim would not be acting inconsistently with his or her forgiving behaviour by filing for divorce and an end to any further meaningful relationship; and it is conceivable that a victim and victimizer may be willing and able to work co-operatively and in a civilized manner on a common or joint project (for example) despite the grievances of the former not having been resolved and thus without the latter having been forgiven

(g) Depending on the nature and extent of the harm or wrong done to one and the circumstances involved, arriving at forgiveness can be a complex, difficult, and lengthy process. Not only must hard feelings be resolved or overcome and one's attitude towards the perpetrator trans-

formed, decisions need to be made as to how one might wish to convey one's forgiveness (see [i] below) as well as about the sort of relationship (if any) one might wish to have with the perpetrator thereafter. For some victims the journey to forgiveness may be impossible to start, let alone complete, especially if they can scarcely imagine doing to another human being what had been done to them or their loved ones,<sup>18</sup> while for others the journey may be less arduous. David Novitz (1998, pp. 309-10) has argued that being able to think empathically or "to see things differently and depart from our own settled perspective" is a "necessary part" of the task of reaching forgiveness. One cannot forgive, he suggests, unless one "tries to understand the other side of the story; ... [and] attempts to construe events from the point of view of the person who has acted wrongly toward [one]" for which one needs to "identify imaginatively" with the wrongdoer's thoughts and feelings. Molly Andrews (2000, pp. 81-2) suggests a more direct approach claiming that an "important first step to realising forgiveness" is for victims to accept their wrongdoers "for who they are" and then engage them in "dialogue" in order to get a better sense of their social contexts and backgrounds and why they did what they did. As hopeful or promising as these appeals to "empathy" and "dialogue" seem to be in terms of lowering barriers to reaching forgiveness, what should not be overlooked (as Novitz actually concedes) is the possibility that once the motives of one's culprit are thus more fully revealed or discerned, the greater one's anger, hate, disgust, or contempt may actually become, making forgiveness more rather than less difficult to reach as a result. Nor should a questionable implication of Andrews' account be ignored either, namely that unless a victim is willing to dialogue with his or her offender and find out more about the latter's history—which assumes the offender to be both accessible and communicative—the victim could not be in any position to forgive.

Another human quality that may enhance or facilitate the possibility of forgiveness—either in reaching or in seeking it—is humility or the ability and willingness of a person to recognize and admit to his or her own limitations, weaknesses, and fallibilities. In their most recent work on forgiveness in particular, Garrard and McNaughton (2010, Ch. 6), who seldom if ever use the term "humility," nonetheless strongly argue that our readiness to acknowledge our darker side or "morally tainted nature," and to realize that in this respect we are really no different from anyone else, is a critical factor in reaching forgiveness; that this awareness can help us (as victims) be more understanding and even perhaps more merciful in judgment and to realize that, in other similar circumstances, we could just as easily be the perpetrator in need of forgiveness ("there but for the grace of God go I," as they put it). This,

they conclude, should give any victim serious pause about withholding forgiveness and quite possibly a good reason to extend it.

(h) The notion of forgiving hastily or prematurely, i.e., before the process of reaching forgiveness is complete, can be problematic for several reasons. A hurried forgiveness may signal a victim's rather desperate yearning to be accepted by others, even at times (ironically) by the offender, although a victim's low self-esteem is unlikely to be improved by being un-hesitantly forgiving; and, even if it does make a victim feel better about him or herself, such forgiving may be too self-focused to constitute a genuine forgiveness (see *Justifying Forgiveness* below). A hasty forgiveness might also suggest a victim paid insufficient attention to the negative emotions experienced—perhaps for want of patience, resolve, imagination, or social support needed to work these feelings through—choosing instead to suppress or rid of these feelings as quickly as possible. A too-quick forgiveness might signal, in other words, one's failure to appreciate that *in* being abused, betrayed, deceived, exploited, rejected, etc., one has every right to be more than momentarily angry or resentful. According to Murphy (2005, pp. 35-36), our feelings of resentment in particular stand as "emotional testimony" that we do "care about ourselves and our rights"; and that for victims to have any hope of recovering their self-respect it is crucial they take their time in overcoming their resentment.<sup>19</sup> A hurried forgiveness may also be evidence of a victim's inability or reluctance to grasp the real nature and extent of the harm or wrong inflicted; or of a weakness or defect in that individual's moral character (North, 1988, p. 506). Equally disturbing is the idea that offenders who are too readily forgiven may conclude their victims had little or no objection to being mistreated and be tempted, as a result, to re-offend, believing the risk worth taking rather than seeing it as a morally flawed decision leading to further and needless suffering. In sum, a premature or facile forgiveness raises numerous concerns about the mental and emotional states of victims as well as their understanding of forgiveness itself. While an early or quick forgiveness might conceivably be better on occasion than no forgiveness at all, there is much that tells against this practise.

(i) There is *no one* way in which forgiveness *must* be offered or extended. In his still-relevant and Wittgensteinian-style analysis of the concept, William Neblett (1974, p. 273) reminds us that forgiveness can be extended without saying "I forgive you" or indeed without using words at all (as in conveying forgiveness by way of understanding looks, sympathetic smiles or other kindly gestures directed to our wrongdoers). Neblett also pointed out that we may forgive even "without committing an overt act, *without ever communicating [our] forgiveness to the person*

*forgiven*" (emphases in original). If this latter case sounds extraordinary we need only recall (he adds) that speaking of "forgiving someone in our hearts" is a matter of accepted linguistic usage that constitutes, thereby, a "genuine variant of 'forgiving' behaviour."

It might of course be objected that the sheer lack of public-ness associated with forgiving silently in one's heart, and the fact that wrongdoers would be unaware of their state of forgiven-ness, either fails as "forgiving" or at least renders it incomplete. Yet forgiving silently may at least benefit the victim insofar as affording that individual greater peace of mind and the opportunity to move on with his or her life. Neblett's observations notwithstanding, certainly the more common practice in extending forgiveness is to use the appropriate language and say to one's wrongdoer "I forgive you"; and while this is not a necessary formula for conveying forgiveness it can nonetheless be sufficient provided the normal conventions applying to speech acts are satisfied.<sup>20</sup> Victims who utter these words in hollow or mindless ways, for instance, or who say them in condescending tones or without any sense of compassion or goodwill would, in doing so, have failed to forgive. So too would "I forgive you" spoken with inappropriate motives or reasons in mind such as uttering these words solely with the intent, say, of pleasing those in positions of authority (e.g., a parent, teacher, employer), or for extricating oneself from a difficult, embarrassing or unwanted situation. Barring such "miss-fires" or "infelicities," however, the person whose "I forgive you" is indeed spoken from the heart and with a transformed attitude towards the wrongdoer, having worked through the process of reaching forgiveness, would have succeeded (other things being equal) in forgiving.

### Justifying Forgiveness

Since extending forgiveness in the face of being deliberately harmed or wronged is neither the easiest nor most natural of responses to make, and if done hastily can be problematic from either a psychological or moral point of view, or both, what sorts of reasons or considerations might there be for forgiving one's wrongdoer, especially when other more immediate and possibly gratifying responses such as exacting revenge, holding grudges, shunning the offender, or simply letting bygones be bygones are readily at hand?

Let us consider two ways of approaching the question "Why should one forgive?" The first and perhaps more common approach appeals to the *instrumental* value of forgiveness or its value as a *means* to achieving certain desirable outcomes or *benefits*, most particularly for those directly involved but quite possibly others as well. Some of these benefits

have been alluded to in the forgoing.<sup>21</sup> For example, one good (motivational) reason to forgive is that those who do are deemed to be in a better psychological state of mind as a result of having been released from their negative feelings and the hurt or unpleasantness of the past, and of being freed to move on with their lives in more fulfilling or engaging ways. Those who are forgiven stand to benefit too by being freed of the “stigma of negative labels,” as Govier (2002, p. 48) puts it, as well as by having their worth as persons re-affirmed and by being given the opportunity to turn over a new leaf or make a fresh start. In fact, according to Hampton (1988, p. 86), the “greatest good” that forgiveness can achieve is the freeing of wrongdoers from their victim’s moral hatred or contempt and from what she called the “hell of self-loathing” (though her claim arguably makes assumptions about wrongdoers that may not always bear scrutiny). Other benefits that may be attributed to forgiveness, and that can constitute a (motivational) reason to forgive, include improvements in the relationships between victims and wrongdoers, though, as argued in (f) above, reconciliation is not a necessary outcome of forgiving. Forgiveness can also pave the way to an easing of tension, fear, or hurt within a group or community—e.g., a family, classroom, or neighbourhood where there has been (say) a pattern of victimization—and quite likely to greater social peace and stability as a result. It is of course true that forgiveness can also be motivated for the wrong sorts of reasons, such as forgiving simply to satisfy one’s own need or desire to feel superior to one’s culprit, or to gain praise from others or be held in higher esteem by them, though the rather self-serving character of these reasons can only cast serious moral doubt on the authenticity and sincerity of the forgiveness extended.

A more grounded approach to the question “Why forgive?” appeals to reasons that “justify” forgiveness as distinct from reasons that “motivate” it.<sup>22</sup> Could those who commit utterly appalling or heinous deeds such as molesting or torturing children ever be justifiably forgiven? Might such deeds not put them entirely beyond the pale or the reach of forgiveness? Or, are there steps that even the worst of culprits could take, given they are not deemed incapable of moral reform, and that might in turn make forgiveness a reasonable or defensible possibility? If so, what might these steps be? Or, if not taken, would this necessarily eliminate all possible moral grounds for extending forgiveness? In pursuing this line of thinking further it will be necessary to differentiate forgiveness as conditional or redemptive in nature or character on the one hand, from forgiveness as unconditional or unilateral on the other, and to briefly examine the case both for and against each.

***Forgiveness as Conditional***

According to the thinking that informs the notion of conditional forgiveness, it would be patently unfair if those bearing the brunt of mistreatment and suffering were the *sole* agents in the forgiving process while those responsible were required to contribute or do nothing. Implicit in this claim is an appeal to a retributive theory of justice—a theory which maintains that justice is served when those who prove they are worthy or deserving in some respect are rewarded in kind, and those undeserving are unrewarded. Thus, unless a perpetrator first redeems him or herself by offering the victim what the latter is said to be justly owed, thereby erasing the “debt” incurred by the misdeed and restoring a moral balance, the perpetrator would be in no position either to be forgiven or to seek forgiveness. What is it, then, that those who wilfully victimize others would need to *do, say, or feel* in order to cancel their “debt” and thereby earn or merit the good will or compassion of their victims?

To put the case succinctly, perpetrators would need to demonstrate in reasonably open and convincing ways that they are capable of moral reform or of changing their attitude and behaviour for the better: first, by distancing themselves from their wrongdoing and showing they no longer wish to be associated with it, not in the sense of denying responsibility but of confessing their guilt and denouncing what they did, while vowing not to do the same again and, where appropriate or possible, offering to make amends or reparations. In seeking forgiveness, in other words, perpetrators at the very least need to demonstrate they are now in attitudinal agreement or “solidarity” (Roberts, 1995, p. 293) with their victims in jointly condemning what they (the perpetrators) did. Second, earning forgiveness also seems to require that perpetrators demonstrate some understanding or appreciation of what it must have been like to be in their victim's shoes, for which a sense of empathy is indispensable, as well as a willingness to regard their victims no longer as “pitiful” or “losers” or as objects to be used and abused but as other human beings of equal worth and dignity, for which a sense of humility seems indispensable. And the feelings that wrongdoers who seek forgiveness need to be open to and capable of experiencing beside those of guilt in acknowledging their culpability, include those of regret over what they did or of remorse in acknowledging the suffering they caused and wanting perhaps to undo it if they could (Taylor, 1987), as well as shame in realizing they could actually be the sort of person to have done what they did.

This conception of moral transformation is embodied for the most part in our common understanding of “repentance” and “moral apology,”<sup>23</sup> which, within contexts of conditional forgiveness and retributive justice, leads to the conclusion that, unless there is repentance or a

sincere apology, a victim has no grounds or basis on which to forgive the wrongdoer. In short, no repentance, no forgiveness.<sup>24</sup> As Angelo Corlett (2006, p. 34) puts it, unrepentant wrongdoers lack the “moral standing ... to be eligible for forgiveness or to have forgiveness accrue to them.” And as long as they remain unwilling to show that their going off the rails (as it were) was not indicative of any permanent moral deficit or lack of human decency within, or as long as they remain unmoved or indifferent to the hurt and suffering they caused, their victims are morally justified in not showing any compassion or understanding towards them. A wrongdoer's failure of confession and lack of remorse not only places limits on forgiving, it constitutes a moral barrier to it. With conditional forgiveness *both* parties ultimately have to be engaged: the perpetrator, because he or she needs the generosity and good will of the victim, and the victim, because he or she needs the repentance or moral apology of the perpetrator.

That a victim accepts the perpetrator's moral apology—and thus has good reason or grounds on which to forgive that individual—does not mean the former is thereby obligated to forgive (any more than does a moral apology confer on the offender the right to demand forgiveness of his or her victim). A good reason to do something is not thereby an obligation to do it. What the presence of repentance (moral apology) does is to establish a legitimate context in which a victim is free to choose whether to forgive or not; and should the decision be in favour of forgiving, the victim would normally be justified in doing so. Repentance (apology), in other words, is what makes forgiveness morally *permissible*, not morally *binding*. Victims of repentant wrongdoers still need to navigate the process of reaching forgiveness and all that this involves even if a sincere apology may render the process at times psychologically easier. Nor is it out of the question that those accepting the apology of their victimizers may never be uneasy or hesitant about taking the next step to forgive. David Sussman (2005, p. 87) rightly speaks of the need for victims to exercise considerable “discretion” in assessing the risks involved in forgiving conditionally—is the evidence of a culprit's reform sufficiently convincing or is there reason to be concerned about the likelihood of moral backsliding—and thus in judging whether forgiveness “seems most appropriate in response to repentance and apology.” Even if a culprit's confession, remorse, and pleas for forgiveness are unquestionably sincere, the heinous nature of a crime and the circumstances involved may render forgiveness extremely difficult and perhaps humanly impossible.<sup>25</sup>

It is not the case, then, that the presence of “forgiving conditions” makes forgiveness a moral duty. Nor is it the case that in choosing not

to forgive a repentant offender has the victim necessarily done something morally wrong or unjust. Victims remain free to decide, all things considered, if those who harm or wrong them have sufficiently proven they are worthy of forgiveness, or not. It is only in the former of these that not to forgive could be a moral failing.

### ***Forgiveness as Unconditional***

But why, it may be asked, should a victim have to wait for the perpetrator's confession and show of remorse before considering forgiveness? What might be so terribly wrong with forgiving the unrepentant or with a forgiveness that arises *solely* from a transformation of the *victim's* feelings and attitudes regardless of the state of mind and heart of the wrongdoer? Implicit in such questions is the belief that forgiveness ought not to be reserved only for those who demonstrably show they have earned it. What is most unique or distinctive of forgiving unconditionally or unilaterally is the idea of it being a *gift*—a gift of undeserved compassion or good-will that is freely extended with no strings or conditions attached and, in the manner of true gifting, without any particular regard for what the one forgiving might hope to gain or benefit in return. For this reason, and the fact that unconditional forgiveness transcends the moral logic of its conditional counterpart (no repentance, no forgiveness), the former is said to be "supererogatory" in nature or above and beyond the call of duty (Benbaji & Heyd, 2001). Nonetheless, it might still be wondered why anyone who unjustly treats another, especially in particularly egregious or unspeakable ways and who remains unrepentant, could really be forgiven; or why the onus in forgiving should fall exclusively on the victim. If not for reasons of a culprit's contrition then on what grounds could forgiveness as unconditional possibly be justified? Is not the idea of "forgiving the unforgivable," which it seems to imply, incoherent?

In responding to these questions a different conception of justice is implied, namely "justice as respect for persons" (Roberts-Cady, 2003) or for the inherent worth or dignity of persons regardless of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, as well as for the capacity of persons for autonomous moral agency. According to the first of these presuppositions, no one by nature can be wholly or utterly corrupt nor can anyone—the material circumstances of their upbringing or other negative social influences in their lives notwithstanding—become so indelibly or thoroughly rotten as to be beyond all possibility or hope of moral reform. No matter how dark or despicable a person's deeds, assuming the absence of pathological illness, a basic humanity of that person is not entirely erased or destroyed. According to the second presupposition, all human beings have the potential for bringing change—including moral

change—into their lives however difficult at times this may be to do. That a perpetrator of brutality or of any lesser offense fails or chooses not to overcome a moral blind-spot or improve his or her ruthless ways does not mean that such a prospect is completely out of the question or that the individual is un-free to do so, but that for whatever individual or social reasons—again short of pathological conditions—there has been a failure of resolve or willingness on the part of that person to exercise his or her capacity to choose differently. To claim that those who willfully use or abuse others are devoid of all worth or dignity, completely outside the human community and beyond all hope of reform, is to seriously misconstrue important aspects of the human condition and to demonstrate a lack of moral love or respect. As Lucy Allais (2008, p. 45) points out, that we ought to respect our perpetrator’s humanity and recognize her intrinsic value is “by no means incompatible with judging that she has done culpable wrong and holding this against her.” Indeed, it is only if we have this kind of respect for others as moral agents, she argues, that “we can judge them to be culpable of wrongdoing in the first place,” and the same applies to seeing forgiveness “as a belief in the *possibility* that the wrongdoer will change” (emphasis in original).

This belief in the basic humanity of wrongdoers as a justification for extending forgiveness, regardless of their track record, seems to be exemplified in Nelson Mandela’s response to those in the former apartheid regime of South Africa who had him imprisoned for 27 years. Mandela’s “crimes” were his relentless struggles to rid South Africa of its apartheid policies and practices and secure for Blacks of that nation their basic rights and freedoms as human beings. Following his release in 1990, and showing no evident bitterness or vindictiveness, Mandela forgave his remorseless adversaries unconditionally. In doing so he was surely not implying he had ceased to denounce or condemn what his oppressors had done to him and others in their struggle; rather he was displaying his humanness and compassion, indicating that he did not *need* their contrition in order to forgive. His forgiveness, it seems, was grounded in a moral love and in his belief in the basic humanity of others (Mandela, 1994, p. 490) despite the unspeakable horrors some of them had visited upon members of his community. Mandela’s forgiveness, one could say, is explainable (at least in part) by his willingness and ability to disassociate in his own mind the dreadful *deeds* of the oppressors from who they are as *persons*, as members of the human family and, as such, not utterly devoid of a goodness or decency within. A victim who forgives unconditionally, who extends the gift of undeserved goodwill to the unrepentant wrongdoer, does so for reasons of respect for the basic humanness of that individual. Implicit in this type of forgiving, arguably,

is the notion of not giving up on other people no matter what, of giving them a second chance in the hope that in being freely forgiven they might be inspired to reassess their behaviour and the beliefs or attitudes that shaped or informed it, or perhaps shamed into changing their ways for the better, even if the possibility of reform be faint indeed.

It might be argued that, with unconditional forgiveness, victims would invariably be obliged to forgive out of respect for the basic humanity of the perpetrator, whether the wrongdoing is of minor or major proportions, thus undermining the charitable character of this form of forgiveness. In drawing on a further Kantian distinction here, unconditional forgiveness may be deemed an "imperfect" rather than a "perfect duty," or one that admits of no exceptions. As an imperfect duty, unconditional forgiveness clearly calls for the exercise of discretion on the part of victims in deciding whether to forgive their unrepentant offenders while at the same time always striving to be forgiving in attitude.<sup>26</sup>

Advocates of unconditional forgiveness may argue, as has Jessica Wolfendale (2005), for instance, that its conditional counterpart cedes too much power to the offender and too little to the victim. They might claim (for example) that, on the conditional model of forgiveness, offenders who have not repented and have no intention or interest in doing so put their victims in the untenable position of being un-free to forgive and to move forward in their lives; and that being forced in this way to remain in a state of un-forgiveness is not only detrimental to their emotional and mental health, but morally indefensible. And where, they might ask, lies the justice in this? It might also be argued that since unconditional forgiveness is extended freely as a gift and not as any part of a negotiation or exchange with the perpetrator it comes much closer to a "true" or "ideal" forgiveness than does its conditional counterpart.<sup>27</sup> Proponents of conditional forgiveness, on the other hand, might respond by accusing those who forgive unconditionally with "going soft" on their perpetrators or with readily accepting their perpetrator's inferior opinion of them,<sup>28</sup> and argue that far from inspiring perpetrators to reform, placing no demands on them by forgiving them unconditionally only encourages perpetrators to re-offend causing further needless suffering and running the risk, ironically, of implicating their victims in the wrongdoing. Or they might claim with Tara Smith (1997, p. 39) that treating victimizers on the basis of some "sunny disposition about [human] kind" only "counsels blindness to [their] known deeds" rather than a decision to treat them "as they deserve" and as justice demands. Proponents could also claim that forgiving the unapologetic, insofar as it puts the onus in reaching forgiveness exclusively on the shoulders of the victim, yields a too-unbalanced and thus unjust forgiveness at best

or a counterfeit form of forgiveness at worst.

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For present purposes—and given the rather strident division of philosophical opinion as to whether forgiveness is more properly or justifiably conceived as conditional or unconditional in character—it is unnecessary to pursue this debate further. My primary task has been to sketch some essential differences between these two forms of forgiveness and the respective grounds on which forgiveness may be justified: a culprit's genuine repentance in the case of conditional forgiveness, and respect for the basic humanness of the culprit in the case of unconditional forgiveness. In the practical contexts of public schooling it will be prudent, I believe, to keep open the possibility that *both* types of forgiveness, despite their points of tension, have a place, though not always or necessarily with equal emphasis or aptness across situations and ages: conditional forgiveness for the prominence it assigns to taking responsibility for the consequences of one's words and deeds, and to the role of moral apology in human life; and unconditional forgiveness for its charitable quality, its optimism or hope concerning the human condition, and its appeal to personal autonomy. Of the two, conditional forgiveness is arguably the easier to grasp. It is more concrete or tangible in that it is something that has to be earned in demonstrable ways and that both victim and wrongdoer in the end must contribute to the process of reaching forgiveness. Unconditional forgiveness is arguably the more conceptual and perhaps more difficult to comprehend with its appeal to notions of possibility or hope and to the inherent worth of human beings. Such speculations might suggest from a maturational point of view that conditional forgiveness would be the more apposite on which to focus with children in elementary and middle years, and unconditional forgiveness in later years of schooling. This might seem a reasonable conclusion provided it is not so rigorously drawn and adhered to that the possibility of youngsters in lower and middle grades developing an aptitude for unconditional forgiveness is not dismissed out of hand as unattainable or unthinkable, or the possibility of adolescents in higher grades concluding that conditional forgiveness is the only type of forgiveness that makes any sense to them, is not deemed a disappointment or failure.<sup>29</sup>

## **Forgiveness and Schooling**

A form of schooling that takes seriously the idea of nurturing a culture or spirit of forgiveness would need to be concerned not only with the cultivation of forgiving or compassionate attitudes among students and between students and teachers, but among and between teachers and administrators and, quite possibly, between teachers and parents or guardians as well. None of this will be easy, of course, though not for any dearth of school contexts and situations that make forgiveness a relevant consideration. These range from countless incidents of incivility and betrayals of trust amongst youngsters to bullying (face-to-face and cyber) that currently covers a multitude of “sins” including physical intimidations or beatings; racist, homophobic and other abusive or degrading slurs; sexual harassment; relentless teasing or shunning of peers for the way they look, dress, speak, or the beliefs they hold; and so on, leaving victims variously fearful, harmed, humiliated, or vengeful. As well, students are capable of acting in hurtful ways towards teachers by being rude or insolent, defiant, threatening, dishonest in their assignments, spreading malicious gossip about them, and so on; and teachers of ill-treating students by prejudging them, addressing them in cutting or sarcastic tones, being overly zealous or unreasonable in discipline, turning a blind eye to bullying, and on rare occasions sexually exploiting them. How common is it for teachers and principals to forgive students who behave in offensive ways towards them, or for teachers and principals to seek the forgiveness of students whom they have mistreated? There seems to be little hard evidence to suggest that staff members actually seize such opportunities either to teach about forgiveness or to exemplify it in the life of schooling.

In light of my forgoing analyses any defensible approach to educating for forgiveness—which I shall assume for the present to be justified in terms of the goals of schooling—would need to consider not only the moral and emotional dimensions of forgiveness and the roles of empathy and humility therein, but the implications of these for teaching, curriculum, school organization, and ethos. In what follows I can only flag some of the more critical points and questions for purposes of further study.

A primary concern in educating for forgiveness will be the moral development of children and adolescents and whether their basic sense of “right” and “wrong” and levels of moral understanding are sufficient for them to realize when they are being victimized and when, by their own words or deeds, they are the victimizers. While moral learning remains a responsibility of the home, and while many and perhaps most youngsters come to school knowing that to be ridiculed, harassed, beaten, lied to, stolen from, or shunned is to be wrongfully treated and that to do the same to others is equally reprehensible, some and perhaps many arrive

with little or no moral understanding or conscience at all, most typically for want of parental love and sound guidance. This leaves schools the considerable task of doing what they can to not only offset such moral deficits but widen the understanding of *all* students to what are and are not morally decent or acceptable attitudes and behaviours.

A good deal here turns on the overall manner and tone with which schools are organized and governed. Is there an air of civility, trust, concern, or respectfulness in classrooms, corridors, and cafeterias in the daily life of schooling? Are children and adolescents being encouraged by teachers and principals to accept responsibility for their words and deeds, especially those hurtful to others: to develop the confidence to admit to bad things they say or do against their peers, especially if, in owning up, they fear ridicule or rejection? What sorts of considerations could help youngsters who are landed with unwanted, hurtful, or embarrassing situations be more open about acknowledging what was done to them rather than choosing silence?<sup>30</sup> Are youngsters being taught what a *moral* apology is and how to recognize the genuine article? Are they being encouraged and given opportunities to offer such apologies as a possible step towards forgiveness? How should teachers and principals respond to those in school (students or colleagues) who fabricate excuses for their wilful mistreatment of others by saying “I didn’t mean to; it was an accident” or who weasel out of apologizing either with “I am sorry for what happened to you” or the outlandish “I wish I could tell you how sorry I am.”<sup>31</sup> Could the idea of *mutual* forgiveness in which both parties are at once victim *and* victimizer (often the case in adversarial relations amongst youth) be a promising place to get students going on the idea of forgiving? Are sufficient curricular topics available, particularly in language arts, history, and social studies, that are pertinent to exploring themes of forgiveness and related ideas: sources depicting individuals—real or fictional, historical or contemporary—who have struggled in reaching (or refusing) forgiveness that could enhance student interest in discussing these matters and taking them more seriously? Should teachers be open about their own views on forgiveness and invite criticisms or challenges to these from students, using such occasions to clarify misunderstandings students might have concerning forgiveness (e.g., that it is only for “wimps,” that it lets the wrongdoer off the hook, etc) and to explore the moral shortcomings of revenge or ill-will with them, thus providing relevant frameworks in which students could seriously reflect on the question “Why should *I* forgive (or be forgiving)?” At what levels of schooling might it be appropriate to introduce the act-agent distinction and related ideas concerning the inherent worth of persons, and so on?

As with early moral learning, most children begin school already familiar with the basic human emotions of anger, joy, fear, and sadness (Sherman, 1999) and possibly others as well, such as disgust (Nussbaum, 2004). But the task remains of helping youngsters develop their capacities for experiencing and identifying a wider range of human emotions, in particular those associated with being victimized as well as those (e.g., guilt, remorse, shame) involved in seriously seeking forgiveness. How might youth develop a more adequate understanding of what emotions basically *are*, what occasions them, and how they may be differentiated one from the other (e.g., jealousy from envy, embarrassment from shame, regret from remorse, etc.)? To what extent should classes in creative writing, dance, or drama be devoted to the emotional development of students, to encouraging them to identify and express through language or movement their own feelings about what they observe around them; or classes in music, art, and literature by asking students to discern and discuss the emotions they think a musical composition or work of art is expressing; or those the characters in a novel, play, or short story might be undergoing? How might the common but misleading view that emotion and reason do not mix be most effectively addressed: that emotions are not simply feelings which well up inside us and sometimes overwhelm or disrupt our lives, but are “perspectival” in character and depend on the ways in which we “see” or “appraise” certain sorts of situation or the beliefs we have about those situations?<sup>32</sup>

To many young people (and perhaps some teachers too) this account of “emotion” may seem strange and unconvincing at first, especially the idea that what makes emotions the sorts of thing they are is not their accompanying physiological sensations (e.g., blushing, shaking, perspiring, etc) but their epistemic or thought content; and the logical consequence of this account that misperceptions or false beliefs about one's situation can result in “inappropriate” or “unjustified” emotions. Perhaps one of the main lessons for students about “forgiveness” that can arise out of educating the emotions is for them to realize that to overcome or abandon the negative feelings associated with being badly treated will require changes in the ways they “judge” or “see” their situations, including the ways in which they “regard” their offenders from how they had initially sized things up, and to realize just how difficult at times this change of perspective, however commendable, can be. Equally important is a lesson from the side of seeking forgiveness, namely that it too requires shifts in perspectives (and thus in feelings) by those responsible for harming others.

Finally, given the roles empathy and humility can play in reaching (and seeking) forgiveness and the apparent lack of both in many con-

temporary youth as instanced, for example, in the prevalence of bullying and teen violence, in the pervasive culture of “youth entitlement,” and social pressures on youth to “put themselves out there,” a huge challenge awaits schools in nurturing these qualities whether a spirit of “forgiveness” is advocated or taken seriously or not. Teachers may justifiably despair at the unwillingness of students to look with some compassion on those of their peers who are harassed or marginalized, and at the readiness of many to take pleasure or delight in the misfortunes of others.<sup>33</sup> The fact that empathy does not come naturally or easily is all the more reason why schools should assist students in developing their capacities to better discern and understand others’ feelings and situations. The task of encouraging a sense of humility or modesty in youngsters is no less challenging, not just for reasons already cited, but also for the ease with which “humility” is often confused with notions of “low self-esteem” or “humiliation” despite long-standing reminders (Hare, 1993) that having a poor opinion of oneself is not at all what humility is about. Teachers may in fact be part of the problem here, especially those who, for reasons of not wanting to offend students or their parents and fearing the results of doing so, stay clear of giving accurate feedback about their limitations or weaknesses; or who may think it inappropriate to encourage and help students engage in realistic self-appraisals, and to acknowledge that they, like everyone else, make mistakes, yet can learn from them. Promoting the development of empathy and humility is fundamentally about helping young people enhance their abilities and willingness to understand more fully their own humanity (its strengths and shortcomings) and that of others. How this may best be done in school, thus making the achievement of forgiving attitudes a more attainable possibility, is a vital question. But without creating sufficient opportunities for students to imagine what it would be like to trade places with others less fortunate, for which the study of literature and drama (at the very least) seems critical, and to understand that a measure of modesty is not a bad thing, progress on “forgiveness” in schooling will certainly be hampered as a result.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

This brief speculative account of what it might take to cultivate a climate of forgiveness in schooling underscores the need for teachers and administrators to possess or develop both a sympathetic understanding of forgiveness and the moral courage sufficient to exemplify it in their dealings with students and each other where situations warrant. It also underscores the critical importance of teachers having the emotional intelligence sufficient to assist students in the development of theirs, and

their empathy and humility. And last though not least, my account calls for greater latitude within the Humanities and Social Science divisions of school curricula than what might currently be the case for teachers and students to explore more extensively such themes as revenge, repentance, apology, forgiveness, and un-forgiveness: this in an attempt to help young people gain a better sense of their own humanity and the human condition more broadly, and of how they ought (morally) to feel and respond when they maltreat others and when others maltreat them.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This is a revised and extended version of “Forgiveness in Schooling: A Philosophical Exploration,” a paper given at the annual conference of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society, Carleton University, Ottawa, May 25, 2009. I wish to thank colleagues Sandra Bruneau, Ann Chinnery, and Don Cochrane for their helpful comments on earlier drafts, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions. I dedicate this work to the memory of Mary Cronin. It had its origins in discussions we had about forgiveness that were cut short by her untimely death.

<sup>2</sup> Research on forgiveness in schooling has been largely empirical in nature coming mainly from the field of developmental psychology (see works by Robert Enright and associates) with comparatively little from educational philosophy, though two notable exceptions are those of White (2002) and Papastephanou (2003). Most such studies focus primarily on students while tending to overlook the fact that schools are communities consisting not only of children and adolescents but teachers, administrators and, by extension, parents or guardians, all of whom are involved in a complex of inter-personal relationships vulnerable to any number of hurtful things youngsters, teachers, principals, care-givers are capable of doing to one another. A notion of schooling that takes seriously the idea of nurturing a culture or spirit of forgiveness would need to approach this subject in a manner that takes these wider considerations more fully into account.

<sup>3</sup> I shall not be concerned with light-hearted or playful uses of “forgive,” “forgiving,” and “forgiveness” or with uses that imply relatively minor or harmless infractions. Examples include our seeking forgiveness for arriving late to a meeting, for interrupting a conversation, for our disheveled appearance, absent-mindedness, unorthodox habits, or for being embarrassingly good at something, etc; as well as cases of “forgiving” someone who hastily jumps to a conclusion, misses the point of an argument or a joke; of refusing to forgive the person who trounces us in chess, of choosing to play on golf courses that are more “forgiving,” and so on. In several of these uses “forgive” is often a substitute for “excuse” (but see (f) under “Conceptualizing Forgiveness”).

<sup>4</sup> Becoming persons more fully is a notion I have explored at some length elsewhere (Stewart, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Examples of which may be found in the proceedings of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission; in the recent public confessions and requests for forgiveness of several mainline Canadian churches addressed to Aboriginal

communities for the physical, sexual, and cultural abuses of Indigenous children in many church-run residential schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries; and in the proclamations of the Dalai Lama on behalf of his community in which he forgives the Chinese for their atrocities against the Tibetan people (Dali Lama and Victor Chan, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> I have the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in mind. Forgiveness plays a critical, though not identical, role in all three of these faith systems, and is a prominent feature in most if not all of the world's great religions.

<sup>7</sup> It might be argued that the realities of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and other atrocities of which humans are capable place an ethic of respect in this context in serious peril. The subject of "evil" falls beyond the scope of this present work. For various philosophical discussions of forgiveness in relation to evil see Hampton in Murphy and Hampton (1988, Chapter 2) and Govier (1999; 2002, Chapter 7). Govier takes issue with those who, like Kekes (1990), argue that, for various reasons or conditions, some people develop or have permanently evil characters, that we indulge in false hopes if we think such people can change for the better, and that there is no fallacy in drawing inferences from evil deeds to an evil character. Govier's response to this sort of objection is that such inferences do not necessarily go through, that the moral reform of evil-doers is not beyond the realm of possibility and does, in fact, sometimes occur even though the odds may seem stacked against it. We go "too far" she claims if we insist that some people are so irredeemably bad there is no hope of their reform (1999, p. 69). We know from experience (she adds) that after committing appalling crimes some perpetrators have shown the capacity for "moral change and sometimes for change so fundamental as to deserve the name 'moral transformation'" (2002, p. 119), and she cites examples to support her claim. See also my section "Justifying Forgiveness."

<sup>8</sup> Agreement on what counts as "offensive," "harmful," or "wrong" may not always or easily be achieved, a point upon which some might seize to dismiss the idea of forgiveness altogether. It is worth recalling, however, that forgiveness is necessarily embedded within a wider public and moral-social framework which in principle places limits on the extent to which individual or subjective notions of "offence," "harm," etc., may be justifiably pushed and defended. There is, too, the spectacle of those who exaggerate the trifling wrongs done to them or who take offense too easily: being annoyed at having one's name forgotten, mispronounced or misspelled, for example, or being provoked by another's politically incorrect use of a term or by receiving a deservedly low grade from one's instructor, and so on. If forgiveness has any currency in these cases it is likely that those with thin skins, prickly dispositions, or an overly-exercised sense of entitlement are the ones who should apologize to, if not seek forgiveness of, the individuals to whom their unwarranted sharp or harsh responses are directed. Unless there are good reasons for regarding a person as indeed a victim rather than one who is merely upset, annoyed, or irritated by what another said or did, and where being regarded a victim implies an offender's behavior is harmful or wrong from a moral point of view, it is unlikely that conditions are such as

to make forgiveness a relevant consideration. A crucial distinction implicit in this discussion is that between what one finds offensive and what is "inherently offensive" (See Barrow, 2005) such as reprehensible behaviors in which others are deceived, discriminated against, demeaned, dehumanized, silenced, etc.

<sup>9</sup> It might be objected here that mistreating another unwittingly does not rule out the possibility of forgiveness or make it an irrelevant consideration. From a logical point of view, however, if we take "unawareness" at face value—i.e., that in the circumstances one could not *reasonably* have known or been in a position to predict that one's words or deeds would have the negative effects (on another) they did, the possibility of conscious intent to harm or wrong, along with notions of "offender" or "perpetrator," are ruled out; and so, therefore, is the applicability of "forgiveness" and notions of "victim." And from a psychological point of view, if one were to be in this situation of unawareness and yet be told that he or she is nonetheless forgiven one would, I think, have good reason to be offended! On the other hand if one's unawareness is the result of laziness, indifference, or lack of due diligence, that is, if one could and should have had a pretty good idea of the ill effects his or her words or deeds would have, then one *is* culpable, in which case forgiveness is at least a relevant consideration or possibility.

<sup>10</sup> There is a general consensus in the literature on forgiveness that victims alone are entitled to forgive, and that no independent third party can (logically) do so on a victim's behalf. This restriction does not readily extend to the notion of "secondary" victim, i.e., of a person related to or closely associated with the one directly wronged or harmed and who, by virtue of that relationship, can claim to have been hurt or to have suffered as well.

<sup>11</sup> Misgivings about the categorization of emotions as "positive" and "negative" have been expressed. Solomon and Stone (2002, p.143), for example, speak of the "facile" use of these categories as "simple-minded and detrimental to serious research on emotions." And Kristjansson (2003, p. 361) argues "there are no emotions around which we can helpfully refer to collectively as 'negative' although there are of course painful emotions, emotions that incorporate negative evaluations or states of affairs...". He notes, though, that some emotions we call "negative" can have redeeming features. Murphy (2005) would certainly concur insofar as resentment is concerned (see (h) above); while guilt and remorse—emotions of self-assessment (Taylor, 1987)—may actually motivate some wrongdoers to repent and seek the forgiveness of their victims. I shall continue with the expression "negative emotions" if only because of its widely accepted usage in the philosophical literature on forgiveness.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Butler, the 18<sup>th</sup> century English theologian, who defined forgiveness (roughly) as the "forswearing of resentment" (1969, Sermons viii and ix), and Peter Strawson's (1974) essay on "Freedom and Resentment" seem to have had a significance influence in the formation of this account.

<sup>13</sup> I have followed the lead of Norvin Richards (1992) here. To my knowledge he was the first to point out that a victim who felt (say) contempt, sadness, or disappointment but not anger, resentment or hate, and who succeeded in abandoning these feelings should not be precluded from forgiving. Interestingly, Jeffrie Murphy (2003, p. 59), a proponent of Butlerian notion of forgiveness (note 12) has recently confessed to being persuaded by Richards that it is a mistake

to define forgiveness so narrowly. Murphy now thinks it is more “illuminating” and indeed “more loyal to the texture of our moral lives—to think of forgiveness as overcoming a variety of negative feelings that one might have towards a wrongdoer—resentment, yes, but also such feelings as ... loathing, contempt, indifference, disappointment, or even sadness.”

<sup>14</sup> Macalester Bell (2008) has recently argued that acknowledging a wider variety of negative emotions in the context of forgiveness inevitably leads to the possibility of an expanded base of reasons that could justify forgiveness.

<sup>15</sup> Even though we sometimes speak of forgiving what the wrongdoer *did*. The problem with speaking of forgiving a misdeed, as Govier (2002) points out, is that acts, unlike actors, are not endowed with motives or intentions, thoughts, or feelings. Of course we say of some deeds, e.g., acts of parental incest, that they (the deeds) are “unforgivable,” implying our belief that they ought never to be tolerated or condoned under any circumstances (though it does not necessarily follow that a perpetrator of such deeds ought never to be forgiven). See the section “Justifying Forgiveness.”

<sup>16</sup> This, of course, is reminiscent of St. Augustine’s famous injunction to hate the sin but love the sinner. The Dalai Lama makes a similar distinction in claiming that when the virtue of patience is “combined with our ability to discriminate between act and agent, forgiveness arises naturally,” enabling us to “reserve our judgment toward the act, [yet] ... to have compassion for the individual” (1999, p. 106). This distinction is also acknowledged in some Aboriginal cultures (see Gossens, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Allais (2008) seems to think that forgiveness *does* “wipe the slate clean” in the sense that it allows the wrongdoer “to make a genuinely fresh start” (p. 68). This may be so. But my reference to this metaphor is (I believe) the more defensible in the sense that if “forgiving” is logically compatible with the continuing belief that one’s wrongdoer is culpable and his or her deed condemnable, then forgiveness does not wipe the slate entirely clean, nor is it a matter of turning a blind eye to the wrongdoing one suffered. See also the discussion in (f).

<sup>18</sup> The story of Clifford Olsen, a serial killer convicted in 1992 of murdering eleven British Columbia children and whose 2006 plea for parole was denied, is a case in point. His still defiant-looking demeanor might suggest a hardened criminal entirely comfortable within his own skin. No one could blame the parents for never finding it in their hearts to forgive; indeed, to do so, some might argue, would dignify the man beyond all reason.

<sup>19</sup> I would argue that similar claims could be made about victims not hastily overcoming several other victim-related emotions such as grief or anguish, contempt, disgust, and so on.

<sup>20</sup> So far as I am aware Austin (1974) did not specifically discuss “I forgive you” as a performative, though others have. Jeremy Watkins (2005, pp. 64-66) claims that what a victim *does* in saying “I forgive you,” other than reporting his or her “psychological change or alteration in value,” is to “lift” or “remove” guilt from the shoulders of one’s wrongdoer. This seems to assume that guilt must already be acknowledged by a wrongdoer, which may not always or necessarily be the case in forgiving (see “Justifying Forgiveness”).

<sup>21</sup> There is also the more recent practise among psychotherapists of urging forgiveness with clients as a means of helping them deal with certain personal or inter-personal conflicts and hurts in their lives. For a critical assessment of this strategy see Lamb and Murphy (2002).

<sup>22</sup> I adapt this distinction from Roger Straughan's (1988) work on moral education.

<sup>23</sup> Here and throughout I use these terms as roughly equivalent. For recent analyses of "moral apology" see Gill (2000), Govier and Verwoerd (2002), and Bovens (2008).

<sup>24</sup> From which it does not follow (as I argue presently) that if there is repentance there must be forgiveness. Repentance is necessary but not sufficient for (conditional) forgiveness.

<sup>25</sup> Though not perfectly illustrative of this point, Simon Wiesenthal's (1997) moving story is relevant. Wiesenthal tells of being brought as a prisoner of the Nazis to a makeshift hospital room in Poland during the Second World War where a young Nazi soldier lay dying from serious wounds. The young soldier had been complicit in rounding up a group of Jewish people (including children), herding them into a wooden building, and torching it with orders to shoot dead anyone who tried to escape. He desperately wanted to confess his share of guilt and seek the forgiveness of a Jew. Wiesenthal happened to be the one selected as a "token" victim to hear the deathbed confession. After listening to the young man's tale, seeing his profound remorse, and being besieged for forgiveness, Wiesenthal said nothing and in a few moments left the room in silence, without forgiveness in his heart though troubled by the whole experience.

<sup>26</sup> On these points I am indebted to the work of Marguerite La Caze (2006) in the related context of political forgiveness.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida (2001) favors such a position. He argues that while a true or ideal forgiveness is impossible to achieve, a forgiveness that is freely offered out of moral love or compassion is one that most closely approximates the ideal, and that "ordinary," i.e., conditional, forgiveness is scarcely a forgiveness at all. On this see also Jana Thompson (2010).

<sup>28</sup> A fairly common criticism of unconditional forgiveness in the philosophical literature has been that it presupposes a lack of self-respect on the part of the forgiving victim (see, for example, the treatment of this matter in Murphy's writings). Glen Pettigrove (2004), however, has recently argued that victim self-respect may in fact derive from the "perceived nobility" of forgiving an unrepentant wrongdoer, from "one's pride in manifesting what one takes to be a virtue" and it may be affirmed (he adds) by the forgiver's community insofar as they see the victim's forgiveness of the unapologetic wrongdoer "as a sign of moral strength." He concludes that in both these ways forgiving unconditionally can "enhance rather than diminish one's self-respect" (p. 198).

<sup>29</sup> These comments are made in light of the "six styles of forgiveness" (reminiscent of Kohlberg's six stages of moral judgment) constructed by Robert Enright and associates (1992; 2000; Gassin, 2005) that purports to identify how "forgiveness" is understood at different levels of cognitive maturation. The person who thinks that forgiveness is justified provided a victim can first punish the offender to a degree that matches the hurt the victim sustained is said to

display a Style 1 understanding, whereas a person who sees forgiveness as the gift of love has a Style 6 understanding. Styles in between are characterized as progressively more adequate: those who see forgiveness as “restitutional” or “compensational” have a style 2 understanding, and those who see it as justified if it is an expectation of their religion or moral principles, a style 4 perspective, and so on. While Enright *et al* claim that forgiveness styles, unlike moral stages, are not hierarchical (1992, p. 104) this seems not to square with their observations that “[e]ach subsequent forgiveness style is a developmental advance over former styles because each *higher level* requires a more adequate and complex social-perspective taking” (p. 107, emphasis added), and by their observation that “all styles other than Style 6 *distort* the concept of forgiveness in its moral sense” (p. 111, my emphasis). Their account privileges unconditional forgiveness (Style 6) over conditional forgiveness (Style 2) and expectational forgiveness (Style 4) without any apparent philosophical justification, and the implication or suggestion that one cannot think in terms of forgiving unconditionally without first having understood conditional forgiveness is a debatable point that may sell short the ability of younger students to comprehend more complex or abstract notions—a possibility I claim should be left open.

<sup>30</sup> For a useful report on the “culture of silence” around youth victimization in schools see Christine Oliver and Mano Candappa (2007).

<sup>31</sup> Desmond Tutu’s (1999, ch.11) observation, that one of the most difficult things for people anywhere to say to others is that they are truly sorry for what they did to them, is worth heeding here.

<sup>32</sup> “Perspectival” is Nussbaum’s (2004) term. Her position on emotions as having an epistemic core is commensurate with a widely-held philosophical position on “emotion” traceable to Aristotle and is one to which I subscribe.

<sup>33</sup> “I can’t count the times I’ve seen teenagers rushing to cheer a fight at school... Many see it as a spectator sport; they go to watch and applaud,” laments Quebec teacher Freda Lewkowicz (“Let’s teach our kids empathy,” the *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Wednesday, December 9, 2009, p. A17). She continues, “It’s not difficult to understand the pleasure that some teens take in watching a victim crumble when being dumped... I have witnessed the fallout that sometimes occurs when students make mistakes or don’t know the answer, ‘You’re so dumb, you loser’ the class will guffaw loudly... Being called to the principal’s office elicits, perhaps, the wildest hoots or derision.”

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