

Forgiveness

A Philosophical Exploration

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Forgiveness Ancient and Modern

Ancient pagan notions of forgiveness are a vast and poorly studied topic.¹ That such notions existed is more than merely probable. The vocabulary for them was in place, along with a cluster of related notions – pardon, mercy, pity, compassion, apology, debt relief, excuse, among others – as was a sophisticated understanding of the emotions (in particular, retributive anger) to which forgiveness somehow responds. Similarly, the ends that forgiveness proposes, such as reconciliation, peace, and certainly the forswearing of revenge, were well understood. I very much doubt that there existed a single view on any of these topics (something like “the ancient pagan view”), though establishing that point would require a careful and comprehensive study of ancient literature, law court speeches and jurisprudence, the writings of the historians and physicians, and of course the philosophical texts. As is true in respect of other ideas, it would not surprise if the philosophers rejected or modified common views about forgiveness and related notions. Nonetheless, such notions did circulate in pre-Christian pagan thought and culture (counting here the Roman as well as Greek), contrary to common wisdom.

¹ Some help concerning their role in the Western tradition (to which my discussion is limited) may be found in K. Metzler, *Die griechische Begriff des Verzeihens: Untersuch am Wortstamm syngnome von den ersten Belegen bis zum vierten Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Zweite Reihe, 44; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991); and J. Krašovec’s *Reward, Punishment, and Forgiveness: the Thinking and Beliefs of Ancient Israel in the Light of Greek and Modern Views* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 78; Leiden: Brill, 1999). I am grateful to Chris Bobonich, Brad Inwood, David Konstan, David Roochnik, and David Sedley for discussion of the issues examined in this chapter.

Another vast territory stretches between them and Bishop Butler's influential eighteenth-century account, examined in the [second section](#) of this chapter. I doubt that there existed a single view about our topics during that long period – Christian “forgiveness” too has an interesting conceptual history. Because my focus in this chapter is not primarily historical, however, and because the conceptual framework assumed here is secular, I offer only the briefest of observations about “the Christian tradition” of thought about my topics.

It is surprising and illuminating that forgiveness is not seen as a virtue by the ancient Greek philosophers. Understanding why helps to explain something about the conceptual context in which it becomes a virtue (or the expression of a virtue), as well as what it would mean to think of it in that way, and it is a chief aim of the [following section](#) to offer that explanation. I also attempt to delineate differences between forgiveness, excuse, and pardon, and to begin setting out the connection between forgiveness and anger. I argue that the perfectionism of ancient philosophical ethics, along with views about human dignity, provide the backdrop against which the ancient philosophical view of forgiveness is conceived. Limited in focus as it is, my discussion of ancient and modern forgiveness attempts to articulate the complex conceptual landscape in which forgiveness is located, thereby contributing significantly to the project of setting out a theory of forgiveness.

[i] PARDON, EXCUSE, AND FORGIVENESS IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY: THE STANDPOINT OF PERFECTION

From you let me have
 much compassion (*sungnômosunên*) now for what I do.
 You see how little compassion (*agnômosunê*) the Gods
 have shown in all that's happened; they
 who are called our fathers, who begot us,
 can look upon such suffering.
 No one can foresee what is to come.
 What is here now is pitiful for us
 and shameful for the Gods;
 but of all men it is hardest for him
 who is the victim of this disaster.

Sophocles, *The Women of Trachis*, 1264–1274²

² Trans. M. Jameson, in *Sophocles II*, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

The vocabulary of forgiveness, and certainly of political and judicial pardon, was known to Plato, Aristotle, and their contemporaries as well as successors. The Greek term typically used is *sungnômê* or a cognate.³ The rarity of the relevant use of the term by ancient philosophers, then, is not due the unavailability of the word. The verbal form of *sungnômê* is “*sunsignôskô*,” meaning to think with, agree with, consent, acknowledge, recognize, excuse, pardon, have fellow-feeling or compassion with (as in the quotation from Sophocles with which this section begins). The etymology of the term suggests cognitivist connotations. Similarly, we talk of “being understood,” where this means that one’s interlocutor has entered into one’s situation, grasped it sympathetically from one’s own perspective, seen why one has acted or reacted as one has, and made allowances (this could mean anything from forgiving to pardoning to excusing). The range of meanings of *sungnômê*—from sympathize, to forbear, forgive or pardon, excuse or make allowance for—is fascinating, and anticipates several of my questions about the connections between these notions.

We find appeals to “*sungnômê*” among the law court speeches of various ancient rhetoricians. Consider Isocrates 16.12–13 and Andocides 1.57, 2.6–7, where the defendant appeals for pardon by reminding the

³ By contrast, the verb used in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:12 is *aphiêmi*, whose meanings include to acquit (in a legal sense), release, send away, cancel a debt, excuse. The 1611 King James version translated “and forgive [*aphes*] us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” So too in Luke 11.2.4 (where the King James translates “and forgive [*aphes*] us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us”); 23.34 (“Father forgive [*aphes*] them, for they do not know what they do”). Wyclif’s fourteenth-century translation of the Bible renders the term as “forgiveness.” Yet the Liddell, Scott, and Jones *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) does not list “forgive” as one of the meanings of *aphiêmi* (though it does for the noun *aphesis*). The Latin vulgate used “*dimitto*,” meaning at base to release from, discharge, send away, with a primary context of forgiving a debt; and in Matthew, “sin” is “debita;” so too Luke 23.34, “*Pater, dimitte illis; non enim sciunt quid faciunt.*” (I am grateful to Hester Gelber for bringing my attention to the Latin, and for conversation about the complex meanings of pardon, forgiveness, and mercy in Medieval philosophy and culture.) For some discussion of the Biblical notions of forgiveness see A. Margalit’s *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), ch. 6. He notes on p. 188 that the Hebrew Bible uses two notions of forgiveness, one as “blotting out the sin” and the other as “covering it up” (disregarding but not forgetting). Only God can “forgive and forget,” that is, blot out the sin, remove it from the book of life, so to speak. See also D. W. Shriver, Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 1 and 2; and *Dimensions of Forgiveness*, ed. W. Worthington, Jr. (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1998, Part I (“Forgiveness in Religion”). For a monumental scholarly examination, see J. Krašovec’s *Reward, Punishment, and Forgiveness*. Krašovec does not tackle the Gospels, and about 700 pages of his 800-page text are devoted to the Hebrew sources. As will become evident in Chapter 2, my own view of forgiveness combines elements of “*sungnômê*” and “*aphiêmi*.”

jury of shared human shortcomings.⁴ Something similar goes on in tragic appeals based on an analogous situation, such as in Euripides' *Iphigénia in Tauris* 1401–2, where Electra, in praying to Artemis that she sympathize with Electra's love for her brother Orestes, reminds Artemis of her love for her own brother Apollo; all of which is meant to elicit "forgiveness" ("sungnômê") for Electra.⁵

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the term mainly in two connections. The first concerns the nature of voluntary action in Book III. When the agent's deeds are caused by external force or are undertaken in ignorance of the relevant facts, the person is neither simply culpable nor praiseworthy. Sometimes, maybe often, there are mixed actions, as when someone is "forced" to throw the cargo off the ship in order to prevent it from sinking. When the external force is extreme, and people commit one of these "qualified willing" acts and, we proceed from this thought: "there is pardon (*sungnômê*), whenever someone does a wrong action because of conditions of a sort that overstrain human nature, and that no one would endure" (1110a24–26).⁶

⁴ See also Andocides I.141, where the term means "sympathy." For another interesting example of a court room use of the term, see Lysias 31, where as D. Konstan notes, *sungnômê* "is not pardon or acquittal; it is more like a shared attitude." *Pity Transformed* (London: Duckworth, 2001), p. 39. I would maintain that this case is still rather like the Isocrates and Andocides passages in meaning something like "excuse"; but agree that all three assume the innocence of the plaintiff (it is not an appeal to mercy). See also Lysias 1.3 and 10.2.

⁵ Consider Sophocles *Electra* 257 and Euripides *Ion* 1440, where the term means excuse or pardon but could be understood as "forgive." See also J. de Romilly, "Indulgence et Pardon dans la Tragédie Grecque," in her *Tragédies Grecques au Fil des Ans* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995), pp. 62–77. At Thucydides 3.40, in the course of the Mytilenean debate, Cleon advocates that no hope should be extended that the rebels will "be excused (*xuggnômên*) on the plea that their error was human"; they acted intentionally, and "it is that which is unintentional which is excusable (*xuggnômon*)." Trans. C. F. Smith, in *Thucydides* 4 vols, vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). The family resemblance of the notions of excuse, pardon, and forgiveness is indicated by the fact that P. Woodruff translates here "pardon" (*Thucydides: On Justice, Power, and Human Nature* [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993], p. 70), while R. Warner chooses "forgive" (*Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War* [New York: Penguin, 1987], p. 216). When we come to "xungnômês" at 3.44, Smith and Warner both have "forgiveness," and Woodruff "pardon." Thucydides pretty clearly means "excuse" or "pardon" rather than "forgiveness" in the sense I will specify. However, it is interesting and relevant that he ties *sungnômê* to a fault with which one can sympathize, and whose expression is unintentional. Compare Herodotus VI. 86, where the term should be translated "forgiveness."

⁶ I am using T. H. Irwin's translation of the *NE* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 2nd ed; unless otherwise noted, all further references to Aristotle advert to that translation of the *NE*. I note that at *Rhetoric* 1384b3, "suggnômonikos" has the sense of being inclined to make allowance, to be indulgent.

At 1111a1–2, Aristotle remarks with respect to the ignorance condition that it is ignorance of particulars (not the universal) that makes an action involuntary. Such cases of involuntariness “allow both pity and pardon.” We read later in Book V, 1136a5–9 that

some involuntary actions are to be pardoned, and some are not. For when someone’s error is not only committed in ignorance, but also caused by ignorance, it is to be pardoned. But if, though committed in ignorance, it is caused not by ignorance but by some feeling that is neither natural nor human, and not by ignorance, it is not to be pardoned.

Thus far, *sungnômê* means something like excusing, and Aristotle is setting out conditions for permissible excusing (cf. 1109b32). Because it is a matter of excusing or pardoning rather than forgiveness, it is perfectly proper for it to be tendered by someone who was not injured by the behavior in question. Indeed that is one of the indications that we are in the presence of pardon rather than forgiveness.

The second connection in which Aristotle uses the term concerns his treatment of *akrasia* in Book VII. Aristotle is arguing that *akrasia* caused by *thumos* (emotion), which reflects a partial listening to *logos*, is less shameful than that caused by *epithumia* (appetite). He adds: “it is more pardonable (*sungnômê*) to follow natural desires, since it is also more pardonable to follow those natural appetites that are common to everyone and to the extent that they are common” (1149b4–6).⁷ So we can pardon someone who has unfortunately given into a desire that is natural and common, that is, one that we can recognize in ourselves too. Presumably this requires a degree of self-knowledge, the ability to put oneself in another’s place by imagination (admittedly this is debatable), and the recognition of shared humanity. These three elements were also implicit in the passages from the orators and Euripides mentioned above, and their connection with forgiveness is indeed intuitive, a point to which I will return below. At 1150b5–12 we read:

It is similar with continence and incontinence also. For it is not surprising if someone is overcome by strong and excessive pleasures or pains; indeed, this is pardonable, provided he struggles against them – like Theodectes’ Philoctetes

⁷ Cf. 1146a2–5, where in the discussion of incontinence Aristotle remarks that if a person has belief but not knowledge, and is in some doubt, “we will pardon failure to abide by these beliefs against strong appetites. In fact, however, we do not pardon vice, or any other blameworthy condition [and incontinence is one of these].” See D. Roach, “Aristotle’s Account of the Vicious: a Forgivable Inconsistency.” *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 24(2007): 207–220.

bitten by the snake, or Carcinus' Cercyon in the *Alope*, and like those who are trying to restrain their laughter and burst out laughing all at once, as happened to Xenophantus.

In this second context (that concerning incontinence and intemperance), *sungnômê* seems somewhat ambiguously positioned between excuse and forgiveness. The incontinent action is not simply involuntary due to ignorance or external force (indeed, Aristotle rules that he acts willingly, 1152a15); on the other hand, it seems that even a person not injured by the agent's incontinence may offer *sungnômê*. Aristotle says nothing about the identity of the wronged party, so it does not seem to be the case that the wronged party alone grants *sungnômê*. Indeed, nobody but the agent himself may have been harmed by the incontinence. Consequently it seems best to interpret this as a matter of excuse and pardon rather than of forgiveness. Given the ambiguities, however, we may also grant that this passage is evidence that the idea of "forgiveness" was hovering in the air.

Irwin translates the term throughout as "pardon," with one exception, viz., 1143a19–24, where "Aristotle plays on the etymological connection with *gnômê*; 'consideration' is needed" (Irwin, p. 341).⁸ This chapter in Book VI in which Aristotle describes "consideration" occurs in the context of the discussion of the intellectual (rather than moral) virtues, and makes it clear that it is the virtue of taking all things into account: "considerateness is the correct consideration that judges what is decent; and correct consideration judges what is true." The considerate judge takes into account the particulars of the situation, and does not, as Irwin points out, simply apply the rule inflexibly.

Interestingly, for present purposes, in running through the moral virtues Aristotle discusses the mean with respect to anger: to be angry "at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time, is praised" (1125b31–32). Hitherto this "mean" condition has been nameless, so Aristotle calls it "mildness" (*praotês*, which might also be translated "calmness"; cf. *Rhetoric*, bk. II.3). But mildness immediately comes in for mild chiding, as it errs more "in the direction of deficiency, since the mild person is ready to

⁸ In the Glossary to his translation, Irwin defends his translation of "*sungnômê*" by "pardon" as follows: "it is the exercise of judgment and consideration that finds circumstances (as we say, 'special considerations') in an action that exempt the agent from the blame *usually* attached to that type of action" (p. 341). I take this as confirmation that Aristotle has in mind here excuse rather than what I am calling forgiveness.

pardon (*sungnômê*), not eager to exact a penalty" (1126a1–3). Being too mild and pardoning is "slavish," for such a person fails to defend himself and his own. The excess of anger is irascibility. Once again, the mild person's fault is his tendency to excuse or to let the offender off the hook too quickly, and this is linked to the former's tendency to give up his anger too quickly. At the same time, the anger in question is, for Aristotle, directed toward an individual (it is "personal"), and thus resembles what we would call "resentment." The connection between pardoning and giving up (personal) anger captures an intuition to be explored below.

Aristotle's analysis of the conditions under which one would excuse (in that sense, pardon) someone is perceptive. But how is excusing, so understood, to be differentiated from forgiving? The question is surprisingly complex, but at a minimum we may say that to excuse is not to hold the agent responsible, even while his or her action is recognized as wrong. In one sense or another, the agent is judged to have acted involuntarily (for Aristotle, then, excusing would seem to mean not taking a wrong act as a sign of the agent's inherent viciousness). This being accepted, and abstracting from such considerations as negligence on the part of the wrong-doer, it would be inappropriate for the wronged party to hold onto her resentment against the wrong-doer. This is a case of what one author calls "exculpatory" excuses, as distinguished from "mitigating" excuses.⁹ To forgive someone, by contrast, assumes their responsibility for the wrong-doing indeed, what distinguishes forgiveness is in part that it represents a change in the moral relation between wrong-doer and wronged that accepts the fact that wrong was indeed done, and done (in some sense) voluntarily. The difficulties arise in part because of the sheer complexity of the concept of voluntary action. One could argue that there are always mitigating excuses, that wrong-doing is never just voluntary; there is always a story about how one ended up doing the evil deed. This is perhaps why people hold that *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. Granting the complexity of the just-mentioned issues however, the common saying is mistaken, if "pardonner" means "forgive."

Why is it that Aristotle nowhere praises forgiveness (as distinguished from pardoning and excusing) as a virtue? The core answer lies in the

⁹ T. Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 55–56. For an illuminating and precise discussion of excuses, see J. L. Austin's "A Plea for Excuses," in his *Philosophical Papers*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 175–204.

character of his perfectionist ethical scheme, for it is one that seeks to articulate and recommend the character of the man – and in Aristotle, it is a man – of complete virtue.¹⁰ The gentleman possessing the perfection of moral virtue – the *megalopsuchos* – certainly has no need (by his own lights, anyhow) for being forgiven, because by definition he is morally perfect (and in any case, his pride would not allow him to recognize himself as in need of forgiveness). He also would seem unforgiving of others, for three reasons. First, he has no interest in sympathetically grasping the situation and faults of non-virtuous persons – they are of little account to him. Second, he would judge himself immune to being injured by them morally (with a problematic qualification to be mentioned in a moment), though of course he could be harmed (say, by being murdered). He would seem to be above resenting the actions of *hoi polloi* (and by definition, another *megalopsuchos* would not injure someone of the same stature). Hence Aristotle’s comment that the *megalopsuchos* or magnanimous man

cannot let anyone else, except a friend, determine his life. For that would be slavish; and this is why all flatterers are servile and inferior people (*tapeinoi*) are flatterers. He is not prone to marvel (*thaumastikos*), since he finds nothing great; or to remember evils, since it is proper to a magnanimous person not to nurse memories, especially not of evils, but to overlook them. . . . He does not speak evil even of his enemies, except [when he responds to their] wanton aggression. He especially avoids laments or entreaties about necessities or small matters, since these attitudes are proper to someone who takes these things seriously. (1124b31–1125a5, 8–10)

The magnanimous person is “self-sufficient” (*autarkos*; 1125a12). The problematic qualification to all of this is that the polis could deny him something he does very much wish for, viz. warranted honor. But the denial of that honor would not, one assumes, elicit from the *megalopsuchos* resentment or forgiveness so much as contempt, even if it also elicits

¹⁰ In *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), T. Hurka says of a “perfectionist” moral outlook that “this moral theory starts from an account of the good human life, or the intrinsically desirable life,” and that its “distinguishing ideal is that of *human perfection*” (p. 3). Hurka distinguishes between the “narrow” (and traditional) version of the view, according to which the good life “develops these properties [of human nature] to a high degree or realizes what is central to human nature” (p. 3), from the “broader” view that focuses instead on excellence (p. 4). Rawls states that for a perfectionist we are to “maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture” (quoted by Hurka as an example of the “broad” view; p. 4). The philosophers I am discussing in this chapter all see their ideals as excellences of human nature, set a high (to very high) bar for that excellence, and correspondingly (I am arguing) end up without a place for forgiveness in their moral outlook.

anger.¹¹ It is worth recalling Aristotle's comment that "it is difficult to be truly magnanimous, since it is not possible without being fine and good" (1124a3-4); the paradigm of moral virtue sets a *very* high standard. In painting the magnanimous man, Aristotle is not simply reproducing the pathology of the run of the mill aristocratic gentleman.

The third reason why forgiveness is not part of the magnanimous person's outlook is implicit in the hierarchical value scheme that is part and parcel of this perfectionist outlook, and comes across in the dismissiveness that characterizes the attitude of the *megalopsuchos* toward "inferior people." Non-magnanimous victims of wrong-doing do not seem to have any standing to be treated otherwise, or at the very least, their being wronged just does not command the magnanimous person's moral concern. Differently put, the idea of the inherent dignity of persons seems missing from this perfectionist – or as we might also say, keeping in mind the etymology – aristocratic scheme. The non-perfectionist scheme within which forgiveness has its place recognizes the reciprocal moral claims and demands that people have standing to make of one another.¹²

There is even less place for *sungnômê* in the supremely worthwhile theoretical life as Aristotle describes it, because that life abstracts as far as possible from involvement with other human beings (except, perhaps, those friends engaged in the same study of the divine; *NE* 1177a33-b1). The perfect theorizer is god, and Aristotle's god manifests no concern whatever for anything or anybody but himself qua thinking about himself. Strictly speaking he (or, it) can neither be said to *act* nor to have emotions; god neither forgives nor requires forgiveness. For Aristotle,

¹¹ Did the Greeks have our idea of "resentment," including of "class resentment" and "existential resentment"? For discussion, see D. Konstan's "Resentiment ancien et resentiment moderne;" and W. V. Harris, *Restraining Rage: the Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), ch. 8 (esp. pp. 187–197). Konstan does allow that, in spite of semantic ambiguities and the relevance of social context to determining who may be the proper object of resentment, Aristotle in particular does recognize something closely resembling our concept of resentment. And the first word of the *Iliad* certainly carries, as the context makes clear, the sense of "deliberate anger" as defined by Bishop Butler (see below). See also Konstan's illuminating chapter on anger in *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), ch. 2.

¹² I am grateful to Stephen Darwall for some of the phrasing here, and for urging me to emphasize this point with respect to the ancient philosophers. For an account of the idea human dignity involves a standing to demand certain forms of treatment, see Darwall's *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

god leads the life of the mind, and is therefore the paradigm of perfection. Consequently, we would live god's life fully, were we able.

The situation is even starker in the case of Plato, who barely mentions forgiveness (or even pardon) as a virtue at all. The word "sungnômê" in something like the sense of forgiveness certainly presents itself in Plato, but as in Aristotle, it is not put to any serious ethical work.¹³ His perfectionist ethics is more extreme than Aristotle's in its thesis that *no* harm can come to a good person. Consider Socrates' defiant statement to the jury of his peers:

Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he might kill me, or perhaps banish or disfranchise me, which he and maybe others think to be great harm, but I do not think so. I think he is doing himself much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly. (*Apol.* 30c7-d6)

Presumably a person who cannot be harmed, thanks to the armature that virtue furnishes, has nothing for which to forgive the wrong-doer;

¹³ *Sungnômê* or a cognate is used by Echecrates at *Pho.* 88c8 to mean that he sympathizes with Phaedo's plight given the failure of the arguments; at *Symp.* 218b4 Alcibiades says that his auditors "will understand and forgive" (trans. Nehamas and Woodruff) his drunken remarks about Socrates; at *Phr.* 233c4, Lysias's non-lover claims he will "forgive" (meaning excuse) the lover for the latter's unintentional errors; at *Rep.* 391e4 it means excuse (so Grube translates it) and at 472a2 "sympathy" (Socrates is saying they will sympathize with his delaying tactics when they hear the next proposition, viz. that philosophers should rule). At *Laws* 757e1 the Stranger speaks of "toleration" (*suggnômon*), as T. Saunders translates, of a shortfall from perfect justice (but perhaps "lenience" would translate the term better); so too at 921a3-4, of a cheating workman who counts on the "indulgence" of his god (similarly 906d1; cf. 731d7, for an interesting reference to [falsely] pardoning oneself due to self-love). See also *Laws* 770c4 (where the term means something like "sympathetic" or in agreement with our way of thinking); 863d4 (showing understanding of wrong-doers because of their ignorance); 866a4 (the granting of pardon, immunity from prosecution); 924d2 (excuse); 925e8 and 926a1 (a citizen is to forgive the lawgiver for inconveniencing the individual while promoting the common good, and the lawgiver to forgive individuals for their inability to carry out some orders). These last two references may mean excuse rather than forgiveness – the sense is ambiguous. At *Euthydemus* 306c Socrates says that we "ought to forgive them [the pretenders to philosophy] their ambition and not feel angry" (trans. Sprague). The connection there between forgiving (that does seem to be the right translation) and surrendering anger is noteworthy. All of the translations of Plato cited in this chapter are to be found in J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (eds.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1997). Socrates nowhere recommends that others forgive wrongs; indeed he predicts that "vengeance will come" upon those who voted to execute him (*Apol.* 39 c-d), evidently at the hands of his followers. As Mark McPherran has pointed out to me, Plato's eschatological myths too leave little or no room for forgiveness in the afterlife (though see *Pho.* 114b).

and such a person would not, by definition, injure others (as Socrates explicitly says of himself at *Apol.* 37b2–3; and at 37a6–7, he claims that he never willingly does harm). As Socrates resolutely argues in the *Gorgias*, “doing what’s unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it” (527b4–5); properly speaking, though, he does not suffer it either (he is treated unjustly, and yet in the sense that counts for him, he is not injured by injustice). Insofar as one is successful as a philosopher, as a virtuous person, one is not vulnerable to others; the transcending of mutual vulnerability seems to go hand in hand with the dismissal of the idea of inherent equal dignity, an idea nowhere defended or even proclaimed in the Platonic dialogues. In the *Apology* Socrates exhibits a certain contempt for his accuser Meletus, but no resentment or even anger; and he explicitly declares that he is not angry either with the jury for convicting him or with his accusers (*Apol.* 35e1–36a1, 41d6–7). In the *Gorgias* he seems irritated with Callicles (*Gorg.* 511b1–5 and context), and passionately intent on working out the argument, but not resentful, injured, or wounded. And nowhere else in the Platonic corpus is he portrayed as coming even that close to anger. Socrates apparently has no need to forswear resentment or to struggle with the impulse to take revenge.¹⁴

To this we may add that the Platonically perfected soul has as far as possible escaped the cares and vicissitudes of this world. The successful life of theorizing simply is not focused on others (except possibly other fellow travelers, and then only secondarily). As Socrates puts it in the *Phaedo*:

The lovers of learning know that when philosophy gets hold of their soul, it is imprisoned in and clinging to the body, and that it is forced to examine other things through it as through a cage and not by itself, and that it wallows in very kind of ignorance. Philosophy sees that the worst feature of this imprisonment is that it is due to desires, so that the prisoner himself is contributing to his own incarceration most of all. . . . Philosophy then persuades the soul to withdraw from the senses in so far as it is not compelled to use them and bids the soul to gather itself together by itself, to trust only itself and whatever reality, existing by itself, the soul by itself understands, and not to consider as true whatever it examines

¹⁴ In the *Protagoras*, to be sure, Socrates seems at times exasperated with Protagoras, and the central drama of the dialogue consists in their inability to communicate; on which see my “Relying on Your Own Voice: an Unsettled Rivalry of Moral Ideals in Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1999): 533–557. Note that at the end of the dialogue Socrates invites Protagoras to continue the conversation. I add that the view repeatedly expressed in Plato’s dialogues that nobody does wrong willingly (*Prot.* 345e, *Tim.* 86d–e, 87b, *Laus* 731c–d, 860d–861b, *Apol.* 37a) provides further explanation of the absence of forgiveness as a virtue in the non-ideal world populated by non-Sages who are injured and respond with anger. The appropriate response would be excuse or pardon.

by other means, for this is different in different circumstances and is sensible and visible, whereas what the soul itself sees is intelligible and invisible. . . . The soul of the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions; it follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine, which is not the object of opinion. Nurtured by this, it believes that one should live in this manner as long as one is alive and, after death, arrive at what is akin and of the same kind, and escape from human evils. (82d9–83b4, 84a7-b3)

As in Aristotle, the related notion of “sympathy” plays little ethical role in Plato.¹⁵ Indeed, we might add – to anticipate another of our themes – that reconciliation between individuals who have injured one another also plays little role in their ethical outlooks, even though the concept of “reconciliation” is not absent from the philosophical vocabularies in question.¹⁶

The story with respect to forgiveness is, not surprisingly, generally similar in the Stoics. The Stoics are certainly interested in the issues of common humanity and faultiness. But in true Socratic spirit, the Stoic

¹⁵ *Sympatheia* can match the sense of “sympathy” as “fellow feeling.” It occurs about ten times in Aristotle (whose range of definition is pretty well illustrated by the essay on “Sympathy” [*Problems* vii]) and regularly in later philosophers. Aristotle does not use the term in the ethical or political works in the sense at stake (mostly it is used in a physical or musical context, e.g., *Politics* 1340a13). A detailed discussion of the issues of empathy (or sympathy in the sense I am using it), the recognition of shared humanity, and forgiveness in Aristotle would have to take into account both Aristotle’s discussion in the *N.E.* of friendship, and in the *Poetics* of the spectator’s engagement with drama. I do not believe however that the central point I am making here would be affected. Aristotle does, of course, attempt to articulate the notion of shared humanity, in the sense of a theory of human nature; and he recognizes the idea of a “philanthropos” (*NE* 1155a20). As to Plato, a qualification: in *Rep.* X (605d4) Socrates speaks of the audience as “sumpaschontes” with a character’s emotions represented by Homer or a tragedian. This bears an interesting resemblance to “sympathy” in the sense of putting yourself in the shoes of another. However, Plato seems to think that the poets produce fellow-feeling rather indiscriminately by means of a kind of verbal enchantment, and in a way that is harmful. Nonetheless, he does not give the notion (let alone something like putting yourself in the situation of another) a central place in his ethics, and in that respect is at one with Aristotle. The development of the idea in Stoicism is a whole other topic. E.g., consider Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 8.61, where we are told that one must “enter into the governing mind of every man and allow every other to enter into your own.”

¹⁶ There is serviceable Greek for “reconciliation,” viz. “diallagê” (and much more rarely, “katallagê”). It is usually used in a political context (reconciling with one’s enemies) rather than a personal one, though in the *Symp.* Aristophanes explicitly recommends the virtues of wholeness and “reconciliation” with god (193b4); see also *Symp.* 213d7, *Rep.* 470e2–471a4, *Laws* 628b8. Aristotle quotes a relevant proverb at *Rhet.* 1418b35. “Katallagê” is used once by Plato (*Rep.* 566e6), and once by Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1418b37). In this meaning as “reconciliation” the terms are mainly post-classical, appearing earlier only very infrequently in historians and orators in the context of treaties between warring factions or *poleis*.

Sage is pictured as invulnerable to injury, and consequently would never judge it appropriate for him to forgive. The Sage would certainly not feel resentment. This is not to say that it is impossible to act wrongly toward a Sage, that is, to act in a way that calls for condemnation and perhaps judicial response (whose purpose – as in Plato – would be (re)education and emendation of character). But as for Plato's Socrates, one cannot wrong the Sage in the sense that counts (at least according to the Sage). Further, the Sage's judgment about what response to wrong-doing is warranted takes everything into account and is complete. Forgiveness ends up being understood as a kind of pardon, and in particular as the clemency or mercy that may be offered once all considerations of justice are in (or more precisely: the judgment as to what is just and right response to the wrong-doer already factors in any warrant for leniency). Finally, the Sage would do no harm and thus not be in need of forgiveness.¹⁷

We find fundamentally the same indifference to forgiveness in Epicurean philosophy. In fact, Epicurus and Lucretius scarcely mention or allude to forgiveness (in my paradigm sense of forgiveness), let alone count it as a virtue. The perfected soul – the one that as Epicureans we are attempting to understand and to become – cannot be injured, does no injury, and presumably surrounds itself with fellow travelers so far as is possible.¹⁸ Epicurus tells us in the *Letter to Herodotus* (77) that the Sage

¹⁷ However, on the theme of *iniuria* and the Sage see Seneca's *De Constantia Sapientis*, esp. ch. 5, and *De Clementia* bk. 2.7, where Seneca argues that the wise man will not grant forgiveness, i.e., pardon – because that would obviate deserved punishment and the Sage never does wrong – but may exercise mercy (*clementia*), which orients itself by what is "equitable." See also Stobaeus *Eclogae* II 7.11 d, Wachsmuth 2.95.24–96.9 = SVF 3.640; trans. in B. Inwood and L. P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy* 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), pp. 220–221, where forgiveness is grouped with *epieikeia* – the disposition to release a malefactor from merited punishment. Or again, cf. Diogenes Laertius 7.123: the Sages "do no harm: for they harm neither others nor themselves. But they are not prone to pity and forgive (*sungnômên*) no one." Along with *epieikeia* (equity), pity and forgiveness are rejected because they mitigate or negate the punishment that is due (the DL text is in Inwood-Gerson, p. 200). There seem to be variations in Stoic views about equity, mercy, and pardon; and differences between them and Plato and Aristotle on the same topics. Seneca also comments in *De Ira* (II.10) that "to avoid anger with individuals, you must forgive the whole group, you must pardon the human race." In *Seneca: Moral and Political Essays*, ed. and trans. J. M. Cooper and J. F. Procopé (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 49 (all further references to *De Ira* advert to this edition). Useful here is T. J. Saunders, "Epieikeia: Plato and the Controversial Virtue of the Greeks," in *Plato's Laws and its Historical Significance*, ed. F. L. Lisi (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2001), pp. 65–93; and more generally M. Nussbaum, "Equity and Mercy," in *Literature and Legal Problem Solving*, ed. P. J. Heald (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), pp. 15–54. I am indebted to Brad Inwood for his guidance with respect to Seneca and the Stoics.

¹⁸ H. Usener lists a single occurrence of "sungnômê" in the Epicurean works (Ep. Fr. 16). *Glossarium Epicureum*, edendum curaverunt M. Gigante et W. Schmid (Rome:

will, as one commentator puts it, “avoid being in any condition of weakness or need towards his fellow humans; in this way, he will manage to avoid both anger and gratitude.” For them as quite probably for Lucretius, the gods rightly conceived are (our pictures) of the ideal – tranquil, self-sufficient, and unafflicted by emotions such as anger or resentment. They neither do nor suffer wrong, and have no concern for the human. They are perfect. The successful Epicurean too creates protective walls around himself, and from within his fortified “*templa serena*” gazes out safely at a suffering world (*De Rerum Natura* II.7–8).¹⁹

We may conclude that forgiveness (as distinct from pardon, mercy, lenience, compassion, and excuse) is not a virtue within these perfectionist ethical schemes. The perfected person is nearly or totally immune from mistakes in judgment; there is nothing of the past for him or her to undo, reframe, or accommodate, at least so far as the past is connected with perfected agency. The character type on whom such theories are focused, and which they hold up as the moral exemplar, is perfect or like-the-perfect, and thereby rises quite distinctly above the merely human. Forgiveness is more appropriate to an outlook that emphasizes the notion of a common and irremediably finite and fallible human nature, and thus highlights the virtues that improve as well as reconcile but do not aim to “perfect” in the sense we have been examining. Forgiveness is a virtue against the background of a narrative about human nature and its aspirations that accepts imperfection as our lot (in a religious view, our lot absent divine grace, and in a secular view, our lot unalterably). Our interdependence as social and sympathizing creatures; our embodiment and our affective character; our vulnerability to each other; our mortality; our standing to demand respectful treatment from one another, as befits creatures of equal dignity, and our obligations to one another; the pervasiveness of suffering – most often unmerited where it is intentionally inflicted – and of pain, violence, and injustice: these are part and parcel of that imperfection. In short, the context is that of creatures

Edizioni dell’Ateneo & Bizzarri, 1977), p. 615. Similarly, consider the Epicurean works by Philodemus; in his *Peri parrhêsias, sungnômê* – which the Konstan edition translates as “pardon” – occurs only in Fr. 20.6 and Col. Xb.3. See *Philodemus On Frank Criticism: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, by D. Konstan, D. Clay, C. Glad, J. Thom, and J. Ware (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 38, 124.

¹⁹ The commentator is M. Nussbaum; see her “‘By Words not Arms’: Lucretius on Gentleness in an Unsafe World,” in *The Poetics of Therapy*, ed. M. Nussbaum (Edmonton, Canada: Academic Printing & Publishing, 1990), p. 53. Nussbaum briefly discusses the debates as to whether or not the Epicureans understand the gods as human projections, and as to the sense in which (projections or not) we are to model ourselves on them.

such as ourselves, inescapably rooted in a world that is, so to speak, fractured and threatening. Forgiveness is responsive to the demands of a world so understood, and in a way that helps to enable its possessor to live a good life.

Contemporary discussions of forgiveness often mention the views put forward by another advocate of a perfectionist moral outlook. Different though Nietzsche's conception of the ideal may be from the thinkers mentioned above, he too denies that forgiveness is a virtue in ways that resonate with theirs. For him, the reactive feeling of *ressentiment* is tied to the "slave revolt in morality," which revolt "gives birth to values" including pity, benevolence, and prudence.²⁰ He writes:

For the *ressentiment* of the noble human being, when it appears in him, runs its course and exhausts itself in an immediate reaction, therefore it does not *poison* – on the other hand it does not appear at all in countless cases where it is unavoidable in all the weak and powerless. To be unable for any length of time to take his enemies, his accidents, his *misdeeds* themselves seriously – that is the sign of strong, full natures in which there is an excess of formative, reconstructive, healing power that also makes one forget (a good example of this from the modern world is Mirabeau, who had no memory for insults and base deeds committed against him and who was only unable to forgive because he – forgot.).²¹

As in the classical perfectionist outlooks I have mentioned, forgiveness is not a virtue because the perfected soul is by definition almost, or entirely, immune from receiving injury, or from doing injury. Nietzsche also sees forgiveness as part of a moral system that must be rejected *in toto*, for it is a system in which the weak and ignoble are empowered, control is

²⁰ I take the term "reactive feeling" from P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment* (New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 6; resentment and gratitude are among his examples of reactive feelings or attitudes.

²¹ *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. M. Clark and A. J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), First Treatise, par. 10, p. 21 (Mirabeau is a rather odd example, given his famously venal habits!). All other references to *GM* advert to this translation. I note that in par. 11, Nietzsche refers to the "instincts of reaction and *ressentiment*" (p. 23); and in par. 14, tracing how *ressentiment* creates new ideals, he remarks "not being to avenge oneself is called not wanting to avenge oneself, perhaps even forgiveness ('for *they* know not what they do – we alone know what *they* do!'). They also talk of 'love of one's enemies' – and sweat while doing so." So forgiveness is actually the *expression* rather than the forswearing of resentment. Nietzsche's argument is usefully explored by M. Scheler in his "Negative Feelings and the Destruction of Values: *Ressentiment*," trans. W. W. Holdheim; in *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing*, ed. H. J. Bershady (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 116–143. He comments that "thirst for revenge is the most important source of *ressentiment*" (p. 117). I am grateful to Lanier Anderson for discussion of Nietzsche's view of resentment and forgiveness.

exercised through sentiments such as guilt, and in which it is impossible to “say ‘yes’ to life” (*GM I*, 11, p. 24). On his view, one “forgives” when revenge is impossible; but as this would be insincere forgiveness, one nurses resentment. What Nietzsche does seem to be advocating in this passage is *forgetting* wrongs (this is not dissimilar to the way in which Aristotle’s *megalopsuchos* simply overlooks most wrongs or at most responds to the wrong-doer with contempt, or to the way in which Plato’s Socrates does not think he can be injured in the relevant sense). That is deeply different from forgiveness even if the effect is to liberate the wronged party from resentment. Simply giving up resentment cannot be a sufficient condition of forgiveness. At the end of the paragraph from which I have quoted, Nietzsche insists that the noble soul will actually admire, indeed love, an enemy truly worthy of the name (cf. *Gay Science* III.169). Forgiveness frequently has as its end reconciliation with one’s enemies; Nietzsche praises instead a certain gratitude toward noble enemies with whom – qua enemies – one is *not* reconciled, even if one feels a certain kinship with them. I should think that Nietzsche would say of forgiveness what he says in the *Twilight of the Idols* of pity: “strong ages, noble cultures see in pity, in ‘loving one’s neighbor,’ in a lack of self and of self-esteem, something contemptible.”²²

The noble soul seeks autarky, and this is understood as freeing one’s self-conception from dependence on what we today might call the “moral community.” The perfectionist views I have discussed are embedded in narratives that minimize, if not eliminate, the ethical ties binding the ideal human type to common life as well as the common run of humanity. We have mentioned the seminal Platonic version of this story. Of course the Epicurean version is by contrast deeply anti-transcendentalist, and in some sense is the Nietzschean (the doctrine of the “eternal return” complicates the picture).

Not *every* perfectionist scheme necessarily marginalizes forgiveness as a virtue; and non-perfectionist schemes may also have little place for forgiveness (such seems to be the case in Kant), or simply say little about it (as in Hume and Smith).²³ Yet the influential perfectionist views I have

²² *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), p. 73.

²³ One reason why Hume and Smith do not count forgiveness as a virtue, indeed scarcely mention the word, may have to do with its religious associations. Ken Winkler suggests to me that Hume may also have connected it with humility (of which he was highly critical). It may be that Hume’s optimism about moral and political progress offered comes to a narrative that is insufficiently “tragic” to afford much of a place to forgiveness. Yet Smith does not share that optimism. On Kant, see fn. 47 as follows.

discussed do marginalize this virtue because of their assumptions about what perfection would involve (and this is distinct from whether or not perfection is attainable – the theories mentioned above differ on that point).²⁴ I take that to be one constructive upshot of this discussion, as is the recognition that notions such as sympathy, understanding another, common humanity, and fallibility, have long been clustered together. They ought also to be distinguished from one another; excuse, for example, from forgiveness.

If forgiveness is a virtue in a sense of the term “virtue” inspired by Aristotle (in spite of his unwillingness to count it as a virtue), then it will involve several other characteristics: the shaping (habituating) of a passion or emotion or disposition (moral education, in short); being concerned with both feelings and actions; requiring a central role for practical reason or judgment; and assuming a conception of the good to which the agent aims in molding his or her character. It will also be the case that while the virtue lies on a spectrum, it itself occupies a narrow range on it. In spite of common parlance, one cannot be “too forgiving” (for one is then not forgiving but doing something else). To exercise the virtue is by definition to feel and to act just as one should given the particulars of the situation. While one may specify general conditions under which “as one should” obtain, assessment of the particulars is indispensable to the exercise of the virtue. I believe that all of these claims are true of forgiveness. More precisely, the admirable trait of being disposed to forgiveness (in the right way, on the right occasion, and such, as determined by practical reason) – the quality predicated of a forgiving person’s character – is “forgivingness,” on analogy, say, with “courageousness.”²⁵ Forgiveness is the moral state of affairs that follows upon the expression of the settled character trait in question, and is either completed or under way (forgiveness can carry a “present participle” sense). Forgiveness is what forgivingness expresses, it is what a forgiving person’s virtue of forgivingness gives rise

²⁴ For a helpful commentary on perfectionist views and the virtues, see C. Swanton’s *Virtue Ethics: a Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 206–211. As an indication of the complexity of the relation between forgiveness and the background issue of perfectionism (or the lack of it), consider that Christ not only declares that “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matthew 6.14), but also in the Sermon on the Mount, and almost in the same breath: “therefore you shall be perfect (*teleioi*), just as your Father in heaven is perfect (*teleios*)” (5.48). *The New King James Bible* (New York: T. Nelson Publishers, 1979).

²⁵ One of the few commentators to revive the term (taken as denoting the virtuous character trait) is R. C. Roberts, “Forgivingness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995): 289–306.

to (under the specified conditions, and so on). Following standard practice, however, I will be speaking of the virtue of forgiveness, just as one normally would when, say, defining the virtue of courage.

How can forgiveness be seen, in Aristotelian fashion, as a “mean” between excess and defect? An excess of forgiveness would amount to excusing injury too readily; the name for this vice is perhaps “servility,” and the dispositional state to which it corresponds would be (as Aristotle indicated) a defect of anger (of resentment and indignation, we might say). A defect of forgiveness would amount to withholding forgiveness when it is due; we may name this vice “hard-heartedness,” and its dispositional state would be an excess of anger or resentment. The forgiving person, then, will experience anger in the right way, at the right time, and toward the right object. Good judgment is essential to that effort. Forgiveness is certainly difficult to acquire, and results from proper habituation, practice and moral example. It can also be helped along, or badly undermined, by luck.

At least in the paradigmatic interpersonal scene of forgiveness, there are two parties involved, and I have just sketched the sense in which one of them – the injured party – expresses forgiveness. But what of the person requesting forgiveness? Is there a correlative virtue involved? My argument will imply an affirmative answer for to request forgiveness properly requires judgment and expresses praiseworthy traits of character. For example, the offender should communicate contrition in the right way, at the right time, to the right person. A person who incessantly and compulsively expressed contrition, at times with cause and at times not, would very probably not be a credible candidate for forgiveness. She would exhibit the excess of the requisite virtue. And one who regularly failed to show appropriate contrition would express a defect of the requisite virtue.

If forgiveness is the expression of the virtue of forgiveness owned by the injured person, and “servility” and “hardheartedness” its excess and defect respectively, what is the correlative virtue expressed by the offender?

We do not have a name for this virtue. Some might propose humility; but in addition to its religious connotations – inappropriate to my present investigation – it fails to capture the elements of forthrightness, of taking responsibility for self honesty, good judgment, and the willingness to change one’s ways. If a single term is to be applied here, I would suggest integrity, as it can be understood to encompass the nexus of qualities just mentioned. Its defect also has no one name, but would encompass the

privations of these qualities, and apply to a person who refused to face up to her wrong-doing and to take the appropriate if difficult steps I shall outline. Perhaps the defect might be termed “evasiveness.” The challenge is similar in the case of the excess of the virtue; what is wanted here is a counterpart to servility – a term for the excessive propensity to apologize. That propensity betokens an ongoing fear of finding oneself out of step – even through, say, unintentional or trivial giving of offense – and a correlative inaccurate sense of one’s responsibility for injuries, or even the true character and extent of injury.

On my as well as Aristotle’s account, denominating a characteristic disposition “a virtue” appeals as well to an ideal of a human life as a whole – to a “picture” of what a good life would be. What are the ideals that such a life would seek to embody? When discussing the question as to why forgiveness is desirable, and the relationship between narratives and forgiveness (II.viii, ix), I will sketch an answer. As should be clear from the discussion so far, a picture of the world as we have it, including ourselves as embodied, affective, and vulnerable creatures, plays into the judgment as to what will count as a virtue. Virtues express praiseworthy or excellent ways of being responsive to the world, given the sorts of creatures we are. Assessing what they are also requires, then, a view about the obstacles to achieving excellence.

[ii] BISHOP BUTLER’S SEMINAL ANALYSIS

Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out; for as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law, but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing over it, he is superior; for it is a prince’s part to pardon. . . . This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well.²⁶

Resentment and forgiveness are routinely linked in modern discussions of our topic, and this is due in no small measure to the seminal contribution of Joseph Butler. In two consecutive sermons he sets out a justly praised analysis, and it is well worth careful examination both because of its merits and its illuminating limitations.²⁷ Butler provides a

²⁶ F. Bacon, “On Revenge,” in *The Essays*, ed. G. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930), pp. 9–10.

²⁷ Sermons VIII and IX, in vol. 2 of *The Works of Joseph Butler*, ed. W. E. Gladstone, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896). All quotations are from this edition; in this section, I have included the pagination directly in my text.

useful path further into the complex terrain of our topic, and I therefore devote the second part of the current chapter to his analysis. The issues include the reasons for linking resentment and forgiveness; the nature of the emotion of resentment and its relation to hatred, anger, indignation, and the desire for revenge; the virtues and vices, as it were, of resentment; the tendency of resentment to demonize the wrong-doer, as well as to spin a self-justifying narrative of its pitch and aims; and the distinction between forgiveness and the administration of justice. As in the preceding section, my aim here is primarily conceptual; and I make no claims about Butler's philosophy as a whole.

Butler quotes the same passage from Scripture at the start of both sermons (Matthew 5.43, 44: "love your enemies . . ."), and in the second refers back to the first. They are meant to be read together, for an important reason: resentment and forgiveness are on his account intimately tied to one another. The claims that there is such a tie, and that the tie has the character he asserts, are not self-evident. Indeed, Butler is regularly misquoted as defining forgiveness as the "forswearing of resentment."²⁸ Butler actually claims that forgiveness is the forswearing of *revenge* (not that resentment is always left just where it was). Is the misreading of Butler, regrettable though it may be from an exegetical perspective, actually the expression of a better understanding of the concept of forgiveness? What sense are we to make of Butler's view that resentment is compatible with loving your enemies, in short, with general philanthropy? Let us examine his influential analysis in some detail, starting with the topic of resentment. We shall find that many of his points are on the mark, that others are not, and that his discussion is incomplete in crucial and instructive ways.

²⁸ For example, see Murphy in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, ed. J. G. Murphy and J. Hampton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 15 ("Forgiveness, Bishop Butler teaches, is the forswearing of resentment"); echoed by Hampton, p. 35. All further references to Hampton and Murphy advert to their exchanges in this book, and are often included directly in my text. On the misreading of Butler see also P. E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*, pp. 15–16 ("Bishop Butler, for example, argued that forgiveness required an injured party to eliminate such resentment"); or again M. R. Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic value of Persons," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993), p. 341. The definition often seems more or less taken for granted now, even when Butler is not mentioned; e.g., Strawson's *Freedom and Resentment*, p. 6: "to ask to be forgiven is in part to acknowledge that the attitude displayed in our actions was such as might properly be resented and in part to repudiate that attitude for the future (or at least for the immediate future); and to forgive is to accept the repudiation and to forswear the resentment."

Each sermon is prefaced by a reflection on the unavoidable fact of human imperfection. While the relevant imperfections are multiple, Butler underlines such traits as fallibility, partiality to self, the resistance of the passions to reason, and of course the tendency to injure others. The question is not why God failed to make us more perfect creatures; but rather, taking human nature and its situation as we find them, what constructive role could so “harsh and turbulent a passion as resentment” (p. 137) possibly play. That it must play *some* such role, Butler takes as given thanks to his theological framework. So one justificatory perspective he offers hinges on the idea of utility; because Creation as a whole is good, the “end” of a passion will lie in its contribution to the good of the whole. This assessment is offered from the standpoint not of the participant but of the observer; however, Butler does not clearly distinguish between the two perspectives in the way that later thinkers such as Adam Smith insisted on doing.

Butler's question can be entertained outside of his theological framework. The controversial argument is that resentment does have a constructive moral role to play, and that resentment in and of itself is “natural” and not intrinsically good or bad (pp. 138–139). He is aware, of course, of the opprobrium normally attached to the sentiment of resentment; indeed the intuition that it harbors something suspect, perhaps mean and belittling (both to its possessor and its object), remains with us. To call someone a “resentful person” is not to compliment. One reason why the passion is suspect is that its ultimate end is the infliction of pain and misery on another person (p. 161). Butler agrees that in a counterfactual state of perfection, resentment would have no place (p. 150); but he also insists that in the world as we have it, it is the “abuse” of the passion only that is the proper object of blame.²⁹ Let us consider each of Butler's two sermons in turn.

²⁹ In the course of a long excursus on resentment and human imperfection, Adam Smith notes that “resentment is commonly regarded as so odious a passion, that they [most people] will be apt to think it impossible that so laudable a principle, as the sense of the ill desert of vice, should in any respect be founded upon it. . . . Nature, however, even in the present depraved state of mankind, does not seem to have dealt so unkindly with us, as to have endowed us with any principle which is wholly and in ever respect evil, or which, in no degree and in no direction, can be the proper object of praise and approbation.” Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*), ed. A. L. Macfie and D. D. Raphael (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1976), I.ii.3.8 (all further references to *TMS* advert to this edition).

[ii.a] Resentment

What is resentment? Butler distinguishes between two species: the first is “hasty and sudden” anger; the second is “settled anger,” which turns out to be “deliberate resentment, malice, and revenge” (as eventually becomes clear, he does not take these terms as synonymous). In the bulk of his analysis, Butler quite rightly uses “resentment” in this second sense only; I should think it clearer to see resentment as a species of anger, than as the obverse.

Sudden anger is normally “instinct” – the sort of response you have when stub your toe against the asphalt step; it is a response to hurt or pain and nothing more. Butler points out that infants and non-human animals feel it (and to anticipate slightly, we might add that non-human animals do not seem to experience “deliberate anger,” malice, and the wish for revenge – in short, resentment). The utility of what one could call non-moral sudden anger is that it helps us to defend ourselves, allowing us better “to prevent, and likewise (or perhaps chiefly) to resist and defeat, sudden force, violence, and opposition, considered merely as such, and without regard to the fault or demerit of him who is the author of them.” But sudden anger may also be a response to injury, which, as distinct from harm, “suggests to our thoughts” – or may follow from our “representing to our mind” – some “injustice” or other, along with that which is the cause of that injustice (p. 139). Butler is distinguishing, then, between hurt or harm on the one hand, and injury or injustice on the other. Sudden *moral* anger focuses also on the blameworthiness – or to be more precise, the appearance to the victim of blameworthiness – of the cause of one’s pain. It “may likewise accidentally serve to prevent, or remedy, such fault and injury” (imagine your immediate reaction upon receiving what looks to be a serious and intentional threat to your child’s well being). What unites both types of sudden anger is the swiftness of one’s reaction, their relatively brief duration, as well as the support they offer to our self-defense and thus self-preservation.³⁰

³⁰ It is interesting that Diderot’s *Encyclopédie: ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (14:186) offers a quite similar definition of resentment (*ressentiment*). I do not know whether this reflects common wisdom about the subject, or shows Butler’s influence. For the entry on “Ressentiment,” see www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/encyc/. Also Smith, *TMS* II.ii.1.4: “Resentment seems to have been given us by nature for defence, and for defence only. It is the safeguard of justice and the security of innocence.” The distinction between sudden anger and resentment seems ancient; see Homer’s *Iliad* I.80–84, where the words are *kholos* and *kotos* respectively. The latter seems bodily (one can “swallow” it down). *Mênis* (the first word of the poem) is

By “deliberate,” Butler does not mean that it is entered into “on purpose”; but rather that it is sustained over time, has in view the presumed cause of one’s injury, is purposeful (as when one seeks to “even the score”), plots the means of its gratification (in that sense deliberates), and in some way or other is associated with moral judgment. So the temporal projection of self into the future is one important way in which sudden and deliberate anger are distinguished. Settled anger is *never* occasioned by harm alone (p. 144); and it would seem that non-moral sudden anger never leads to desire for *revenge*. Sudden anger defends us by attempting to make the pain stop forthwith; settled anger seeks to defend us by attempting to punish the source of injury and not simply to stop the injurer from inflicting the injury. Butler rightly associates *malice* with resentment; one does not feel malicious when angry unless there is a moral component to the emotion.

While the duration of “sudden” and “settled” anger cannot be fixed a priori, the etymology of “resentment” favors Butler’s seemingly awkward distinction between them. For to resent is to feel a sentiment again, and therefore later in time. The English word derives from the French “ressentir,” where this point is clearer. The reproduction of anger considerably past the event that occasioned it requires not just memory of that event, but a memory that continues to provoke; and the recurring idea, kept alive by the imagination, of the uncorrected “wrongness” of the event, is a prime candidate for the job.³¹

Indeed, even non-moral anger that continues for a long period of time often takes on an overlay of resentment. Imagine that your body is attacked by an intermittent, painful, and persistent disease that you had no part in bringing upon yourself; the “sudden anger” each stab of pain would prompt may turn into a settled anger at, even hatred of, the illness. I think it likely that this hatred might *feel* like resentment, and call itself by that name, in part because the on-going pain seems so *unfair* (“what did I do to *deserve* this,” one asks). The diminishment of one’s capacities and prospects – in short, of the duration and quality of

also sustained anger or fury, is normally ascribed to the gods, and in the *Iliad* is used only of Achilles. For discussion of anger terms in Homer and elsewhere, see W. Harris, *Restraining Rage: the Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity*, ch. 3; and Konstan’s *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* ch. 2 (“Anger”). (My thanks to Richard Martin for references and discussion.)

³¹ Butler’s analysis could usefully be deployed to understand ongoing social resentments, given the essential role of memory in settled anger and that such memory can be socially shaped and nurtured.

one's life – caused by the accursed illness, as well as the need to develop strategies of self-defense against an active threat, feel like an injury (possibly even a punishment) and not just on-going harm. Of course, the use of “resentment” in such a case may not be quite proper.³²

Butler's first illustration of resentment (that is, of longer term, settled, deliberate anger) is actually what Adam Smith would call sympathetic resentment, that is, *indignation*. Reading a powerful fictional account of villainy, the moral sentiments are aroused though we are not touched personally by the matter (this must be implicit in Butler's example), we nonetheless object, on behalf of the injured party, to deliberate or designed wrong-doing against anyone, including this victim. This “fellow-feeling” is one of the “common bonds” – granted, not always a very strong bond – that unites us (p. 141). The more vivid the imagination, the closer the injury to those with whom we identify, the more acute the indignation, and the more eagerly we will wish for the wrong-doer to be punished.³³ It is noteworthy that Butler's first example is literary; the choice implicitly underlines the importance of *narrative*.

I have used the word “hatred” several times; is hatred to be distinguished from resentment? Butler uses the word sparsely, and in a way that suggests that he takes it as synonymous with resentment, as in his

³² The territory here is complex: consider, by contrast, the settled feeling of anger one might have toward a wrong-doer who is “criminally insane”; as such, the wrong-doer is more like a force of nature than an accountable agent. Or yet another case: a loved one who has acquired Alzheimer's, behaves viciously toward you (his caretaker) on a regular basis, and is in general a heavy burden. You might feel, among other things, on-going anger. Do you feel *resentment*, properly speaking, in either case? Of these sorts of examples, Strawson argues that we would not feel a range of reactive feelings including “resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, or the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other,” for we would likely have taken an “objective” (rather than “participant”) attitude toward the person (*Freedom and Resentment*, p. 9). We do, though, sometimes feel anger, even while *also* taking the objective attitude; and possibly also feel guilty about feeling angry. Presumably we feel resentment, in such cases, while not believing that the target of our resentment is really to blame (hence the feeling of guilt, as one is having a feeling one knows is not warranted).

³³ Smith, *TMS* II.i.2.5: “When we see one man oppressed or injured by another, the sympathy which we feel with the distress of the sufferer seems to serve only to animate our fellow-feeling with his resentment against the offender. We are rejoiced to see him attack his adversary in his turn, and are eager and ready to assist him whenever he exerts himself for defence, or even for vengeance within a certain degree.” Should the victim be killed, we feel an “illusive sympathy with him,” and “that resentment which we imagine he ought to feel, and which he would feel, if in his cold and lifeless body there remained any consciousness of what passes upon earth. His blood, we think, calls aloud for vengeance.”

grouping of “hatred, malice, and revenge” (p. 138), or as when he writes: “anger also or hatred may be considered as another [in addition to self-love] false medium of viewing things, which always represents characters and actions much worse than they really are” (p. 162; this in the paragraph admonishing us from treating wrong-doers as though they are “monstrous”). It does indeed seem both that hatred is kin to deliberate rather than sudden anger (I don’t *hate* the asphalt on which I stubbed my toe), and that one can hate persons as well as their actions. The objects of hatred are of wider scope than those of resentment, including inanimate things, conditions such as illness, theories or principles, groups of people (all rapists, for example), states of affairs such as poverty, and oneself (in modern English, one would strain in saying “I resent myself,” but not “I hate myself”). Retribution does not necessarily follow from hatred, as it so naturally does from resentment. Misanthropes may hate humankind, but without believing they’ve been injured by them, or wishing to inflict punishment. Even moral hatred is not necessarily provoked by injury to self or to near and dear, as when one hates a racist political outlook (granted, the possible injuriousness of the outlook is part of what makes it hateful). One can hate without resenting (in the sense of the term being explored here). At the same time, “hatred” may be used when malicious envy is meant; this captures one sense of “ressentiment” and some uses of “resentment” (as in, “class resentment”).

Jean Hampton argues that “whereas the object of hatred can be and frequently is a person, the object of resentment is an *action*. When resentment is directed at a person, it is in response to what he did, not who or what he is. Hence we say ‘I hate you,’ and ‘I resent what you *did*’ but not ‘I resent *you*’ (unless ‘resent’ is used to mean ‘envy’).”³⁴ If hatred is distinguished from envy, then this does not seem quite right: for if I hate you as a person, it is either because of what you did, what you threaten to do, or what you stand for (as noted, the hateful principles you stand for are in practice injurious). Nonetheless I don’t *resent* you on account what you stand for unless the tie-in to action or possible action is tight; this reflects the link between resentment and injurious deeds. But when the tie-in is tight – when you may be credited with the injurious action – then you are the proper object of the action. We do not resent the action; we resent you for doing it, you as its author. So it is misleading to say that “the object of resentment is an *action*.”

³⁴ J. Hampton, “Forgiveness, Resentment, and Hatred,” in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, p. 60.

Can one resent without hating? If the cause of the resentment is relatively minor, then surely one may do so; but “settled anger” concerning a significant injury does seem describable as moral hatred.³⁵

Resentment, then, is a moral sentiment in the sense that it is aroused by the perception of what we (the spectator to the scene, or the victim) take to be unwarranted injury. It is therefore not just a “raw feel” but embodies a judgment about the fairness of an action or of an intention to do that action. Properly speaking, it is provoked by the appearance of moral, not natural evil. The object of the sentiment is not just the action but also its author. And it is a reactive as well as retributive passion that instinctively seeks to exact a due measure of punishment. When felt on behalf of another, “in a generalized form” as Strawson says, it is typically referred to as indignation (sympathetic resentment); though we may also speak of indignation when we ourselves are the victim, and quite rightly as I argue below (ch. II.ii).³⁶ The sentiment assumes that the wrong-doer is responsible for the deed (if it was caused by carelessness, then one assumes he is responsible for being careless, *ceteris paribus*). The degree of the resentment ought to be in proportion to the degree of the evil intended, and the degree to which the deed has the intended effects (we resent the evil deed more than we do the intention to do the evil deed (p. 143); unlike Smith, Butler does not address the “moral luck” issues this brings in its train). It is important to note that the sheer pain that prompts sudden anger is assumed by settled anger or resentment, even if it is preserved and revisited in memory – especially easy to do when it was non-physical pain to start with (such as an insult to one’s reputation and dignity). I accept this broadly Butlerian view of resentment, and its distinction from anger or hatred as such, in what follows.

³⁵ By contrast, at *Rhetoric* 2.4, 1382a1–14, Aristotle defines *anger* as about what happens to oneself, as directed at individuals, as wanting to inflict pain, and in that sense as retributive; whereas *hatred* (*to misein*) can be directed at a type of person (all rapists, for example), does not necessarily seek to inflict pain so much as harm, and may result from harm done to others. While his “anger” resembles what Butler is calling “resentment,” these distinctions do not map onto ours perfectly. E.g., Aristotle also sees anger as aroused by an insult and not just injury; in the passage referred to, he also does not distinguish between moral and non-moral anger, or between short term and deliberate anger.

³⁶ Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment*, p. 15. As he also puts it, this “sympathetic or vicarious or impersonal or disinterested” reactive attitude of indignation is felt “towards all those on whose behalf moral indignation may be felt, i.e., as we now think, towards all men” (pp. 14–15). This seems part of what makes indignation “impersonal,” though the fact that “one’s own interest and dignity are not involved” (p. 14) also plays a role. On p. 14 he concedes that “one can feel indignation on one’s own account.”

As noted, the natural “end” of this passion is self-defense against actual or possible injury (it may “prevent or remedy” injury, as Butler says on p. 144). Presumably it is effective against possible injury because the person who contemplates doing the injury knows that he will be the object of indignant resentment, and therewith of the desire for retribution. As to *why* injury – and we should here include, with Butler, not just cruelty, but other forms of disrespect – leads us to defend ourselves, Butler does not say; it is taken as a given. A deficiency of an appropriately resentful response is taken as a moral defect in the agent, as we have seen is the case for Aristotle as well.³⁷

As to why self-defense against injury (as distinct from harm) leads us to retaliate (and not just stop) the offender, Butler also does not say. He does argue that its effects can be salutary. Were resentment not in principle aggressive in this way, pity and compassion might prevent our punishing injustice and cruelty: for we would feel as much pity toward the offender as we do toward the victim; and compassion with the suffering that punishment would cause the offender would disincline us to administer it (p. 147). Butler takes it that reason alone is not reliable enough to prevent us from doing wrong, or to lead us to punish it (p. 148). Moral evil is cause for reprobation, but in his benevolence, God did not leave us without weapons with which to respond: resentment, a “generous movement of mind” (p. 149) in Butler’s startling phrase, is our primary weapon. Butler does not offer the unlikely proposition that such third-personal considerations of utility explain resentment’s well established proclivity for retribution.³⁸ What then does?

Perhaps it feels as though the only way to relieve oneself of the ongoing painfulness of the injury is to shift it to the agent who caused it (hence the pervasiveness of terms such as “getting even” and “payback”). That

³⁷ So too Smith, *TMS* I.ii.3.8. At II.i.5-9, Smith notes that “Upon some occasions we are sensible that this passion [resentment], which is generally too strong, may likewise be too weak. We sometimes complain that a particular person has too little spirit, and has too little sense of the injuries that have been done to him; and we are as ready to despise him for the defect, as to hate him for the excess of this passion.”

³⁸ Its unlikeliness is insisted upon by Smith at *TMS* II.i.2.4; but he perceptively adds that when the wrong-doer is about to meet his just punishment, is no longer a cause of fear, and shows repentance, “generous and humane” spectators begin to feel pity rather than resentment, and are “disposed to pardon and forgive him.” Such reflections should be counterbalanced by considerations of general utility (the requirements of upholding the rule of law, and such). See *TMS* II.ii.3.7.

strategy is not necessarily successful – bringing the wrong-doer down to your level of misery does not in fact relieve your misery.³⁹

It seems to be part of the primitive idea of retaliation both that the injurer should be made to suffer for the particular injury caused *to me*, and that punishment should not come about adventitiously (say, through the injurer's contracting a suitably horrible disease) but deliberately. The wrong-doer is to suffer and know that he suffers because of the particular wrong he caused this particular person (as Smith notes, *TMS* II.i.I.7). "Ideally" all this is not only to be performed in full view of the victim, but performed by the victim's hands in full view. For the "publicness" of the wrong-doer's deserved suffering seems wished for by revenge; perhaps this has something to do with wanting to ensure that the wrong-doer's "life story" be permanently marked. Were the wrong-doer successfully to pass himself off as an innocent, insult would be added to injury. The unforgiving resentful person imagines that the ideal way to bring about these ends would be to administer the punishment oneself, all the more fully to enjoy the so-called "sweetness of revenge." Such are the fantasies and the fallacies of revenge.

There is a kernel of another thought that is expressed in the retributive impulse, namely that the wrong-doer be made to see and acknowledge that he cannot simply treat others as though they were of no account. Revenge, on this view, is a (misguided) way of communicating moral protest and of demanding accountability. Smith put this well:

the object, on the contrary, which resentment is chiefly intent upon, is not so much to make our enemy feel pain in his turn, as to make him conscious that he feels it upon account of his past conduct, to make him repent of that conduct, and to make him sensible, that the person whom he injured did not deserve to be treated in that manner.

What enrages us is the wrong-doer's

absurd self-love, by which he seems to imagine, that other people may be sacrificed at any time, to his convenience or his humour. (*TMS* II.iii.I.5)

Vengeful resentment may seek to communicate a moral principle that all reasonable people would acknowledge, and whose acknowledgment

³⁹ Cf. Nietzsche's comments on the demand of *ressentiment*, to which revenge (ineffectively) responds, for the "anesthetization" of pain; *GM* III.15. And if the injury takes the specific form of an insult, revenge may relieve one's anger, as Aristotle notes (*Rhetoric* II.2).

is required if one is to form part of the moral community.⁴⁰ The wish that the revenge be public would express the implicit universality of the moral claim being made (viz., “nobody may be treated in this manner,” “a person is accountable for doing this sort of thing”). Seeing the retaliatory impulse in this way helps, in turn, to understand the conditions ideally required if forgiveness is to be granted. It is one reason for seeing revenge as an “abuse,” viz., that it actually obscures rather than establishes the type of implicit moral point just sketched. Even when badly expressed, however, resentment and revenge engage their owner in a morally tinged exchange with the community. This is, once again, one of the reasons that the advocates of “perfectionism” discussed above wrote resentment and revenge out of their narratives of the accomplished, self-sufficient life.

Perhaps there is another impulse implicit in revenge, and articulating it helps shed light on the task confronting forgiveness. Revenge seeks to change the past by punishing the agent who made the relevant aspect of the past painful and injurious – for it conceives of no other way of getting at and changing what has been done. In the eyes of revenge, the alternatives must seem to be either condonation, or passive acceptance and resignation. Both would seem to betray a deep lack of respect for self and for the injured or dead. It is as though revenge believes itself morally bound to make the past come out differently.

Not only is this view of the “either condonation or resignation” alternatives false – as the possibility of forgiveness shows – but its own path is futile. For the past cannot ever be changed, and it is a sort of metaphysical delusion to imagine otherwise. Violence directed at the agent of injury will certainly not undo the effects of the past deed. Forgiveness accepts that the past is unchangeable, but asserts that our responses to it are not (and these include our decisions about the future). It denies that the alternatives to vengeful violence are either condonation or resigned and submissive acceptance. And it claims to express both respect for self and the dead or injured. I am arguing in this book that truth-telling is an essential component of that expression of respect.

To return to Butler: the next step to seeing how he connects resentment with forgiveness is to understand the possible abuses of this form of anger, and he provides us with a list. The most important possibilities are widely remarked upon: settled or ongoing anger can be “imagined,”

⁴⁰ Stephen Darwall has brought out with force and clarity this aspect of Smith's thought; see his *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. See also Strawson's “Freedom and Resentment,” pp. 14–15.

in the sense that it can be misinformed (for example, about the identity of the true author of the injury), or be out of proportion to the injury done. Importantly, demands for retribution are easily fueled by the passion's drive to gratify itself, a drive "justified" by a certain narrative. Unchecked, resentment consumes everything and everyone, including its possessor.⁴¹ The passion evidently gives some satisfaction to its owner, presumably that of standing so shinningly in (what feels like) the right, and perhaps of being the object of sympathetic resentment. Butler perceptively speaks of the "great mixture of pride" that can accompany settled anger. It is a potentially toxic brew.

The passion of settled anger has, then, a powerful tendency to feed on itself and to justify its own aggrandizement.⁴² And this tendency to self-justification brings out another point of some importance to my account: resentment is a story-telling passion. Resentful people create narratives about their injurers, the injury, and their victimization. The classic formal elements of narrative are normally present – a beginning, middle, end, plot structure, conflict and resolution, vividly drawn characters who learn (in this case) through suffering, and a 'moral' to the story. A person in the grip of resentment often demands that the narrative be heard, and yearns that it be published, so to speak (resentment loves company). The content of the narrative will of course depend in large part on the type of injury, and thus the type of resentment, in question. Presumably the sting of a possibly damaging public insult is resented differently than a physical assault; injury that is connected with betrayal has a different texture than one connected with violation by a stranger; and so forth. As we will see, the forgiver too tells a narrative, but one that requires changes in resentment's tale. This is achieved in part by virtue of its incorporation into a larger account in which resentment becomes but a chapter.

⁴¹ The phenomenon has long been noted. Recall Achilles' words about the sweetness of anger, quoted at the start of this book.

⁴² Not, perhaps, a characteristic unique to resentment, but especially dangerous in its case. Smith remarks that "when we are about to act, the eagerness of passion will seldom allow us to consider what we are doing, with the candour of an indifferent person. . . . every thing appears magnified and misrepresented by self-love. . . . We cannot even for that moment divest ourselves entirely of the heat and keenness with which our peculiar situation inspires us, nor consider what we are about to do with the complete impartiality of an equitable judge. The passions, upon this account, as father Malebranche says, all justify themselves, and seem reasonable and proportioned to their objects, as long as we continue to feel them" (*TMS* III.4.3; Smith cites Malebranche's *De la recherche de la vérité* V.11).

Note that there is no dispute here that the person resented ought to be punished, assuming the injury to be of the relevant sort. The point is that unchecked resentment is not a stable basis for assessing whether or when punishment is due, and cannot by itself assess whether it has attained the appropriate pitch. It comes as no surprise that Butler underlines, as one of the greatest abuses of resentment, the *partiality* of perspective the emotion can engender in its owner. He is committed to the view that one can feel resentment wrongly (in the wrong way, or to the wrong degree, or toward the wrong person), and so to the view that there is a standpoint, other than that of the agent at the moment, from which such an assessment can be made. But he is not claiming – indeed, it is important for his account that it not claim – that resentment is in principle and always distorting of perspective. Rightly focused, it is the legitimate response to injury (Butler even claims that it “is an inward witness on behalf of virtue,” that is, of “the reality of virtue”; p. 148). Hence he never recommends extirpating resentment altogether.

For reasons such as these, Butler holds that self-defense against injury that provokes settled anger – revenge, in short – is not to be confused with the “administration of justice” (p. 140). That crucial distinction helps to ground the qualified defense of resentment, and I shall return to it. To his list of abuses of vengeful resentment, I add the “metaphysical delusion” (perhaps this should be called a mistake rather than abuse) mentioned in this section. I realize that the point may bear on the morality of even the judicial administration of punishment. But the rationale for judicial punishment is not exhausted by the (faulty) idea of changing the past.

[ii.b] Forgiveness

Butler's argument leads to the conclusion that it is “only the excess and abuse of this natural feeling [resentment], in cases of personal and private injury” that are forbidden (p. 152). The “abuses” mentioned thus far are moral vices, and are pretty easily recognizable as such. Now, Butler does not suggest that refraining from *abuses* of resentment in and of itself amounts to forgiveness, and certainly does not say that forswearing resentment itself is forgiveness. That virtue enters when he turns to the most dangerous abuse of the passion, viz. *revenge*; it is the most dangerous because it expresses the emotion in actions designed to cause pain and misery, and because its character as a vice easily escapes us. Indeed, ethical systems grounded in notions of honor do precisely that, Butler correctly

claims (p. 153). In effect they valorize what Butler wants to think of the ultimate abuse of resentment; for “nothing can with reason be urged in justification of revenge” (p. 157).⁴³

Butler does not quite say this clearly enough, but by “revenge” he means retaliation by an individual as he or she judges to be appropriate. And as noted, Butler also means to distinguish revenge from the “administration of justice” (p. 140). What he is counseling, in other words, is that proper resentment at a wrong-doer be expressed in punitive action when and as judged appropriate by independent agents, in accordance with established principle. He does not here spell out what exactly the impartiality of agents and law would involve, though he offers two suggestions discussed below. But he does spell out the distortions that its absence entails, and then goes further in noting that just as resentment feeds on itself, so too revenge (understood in the sense just adumbrated) will “propagate itself” (p. 153). That violence begets violence, leading to an ever worse spiral of retaliation, has of course been endlessly observed, and the desirability of stopping the spiral is often cited as one of the main motivations for prohibiting revenge.

This is the resolution of an apparent paradox in Butler’s account, namely that he commends the utility of resentment because it helps “prevent or remedy” injury, and yet prohibits revenge. For if the passion were not followed by retaliation, how would it accomplish that useful goal? The answer seems to be that the passion prompts retaliation, and its natural goal is accomplished when expressed impartially through the administration of justice. As noted, Butler is making a crucial distinction between the sphere of justice, and a sphere of other moral relations. He is opposing himself to an outlook, most prominently one centered on codes of honor, that runs together this distinction between public and private expressions of anger and demands for right. In so doing he is preparing the ground for the now standard view that forgiveness is, so to speak, a “private” matter between the wronged and the wrong-doer, and “about” that as well as the relation of an agent to his sentiments (such as resentment, or guilt). This in turn opens up the possibility that the

⁴³ Individuals acting corporately—as mobs, families, formal associations, or even states—can also take revenge in the sense of expressing punitively their partial, “deaf” resentment; and I see nothing in Butler’s analysis that would prevent him from recognizing that fact. But he is here concerned with the paradigm case of an individual’s unleashed resentment. There may nonetheless be reason to think that resentment is expressed as revenge all the more easily where the injured party is joined by sympathizers.

wronged person could forgive, while also insisting that the wrong-doer be judicially punished.⁴⁴

What role then does Butler leave for forgiveness? The answer is by now pretty clear, viz., it is first and foremost the forswearing of revenge, and secondly, of the other abuses of resentment. He puts the point by reintroducing the idea that we are to love our enemies: "this supposes the general obligation to benevolence or good-will towards mankind: and this being supposed, that precept is no more than to forgive injuries; that is, to keep clear of those abuses before mentioned." That this does not require forswearing resentment *simpliciter* is explicit:

Resentment is not inconsistent with good-will. . . . We may therefore love our enemy, and yet have resentment against him for his injurious behaviour towards us. But when this resentment entirely destroys our natural benevolence towards him, it is excessive, and becomes malice or revenge. (p. 158)

At first sight this seems impossible: how can one simultaneously love and resent the same person?

Butler alleviates the tension by noting that "it cannot be imagined, that we are required to love them [our enemies] with any peculiar kind of affection" (p. 160). In other words, "love" is being understood here not so much as a feeling but as the recognition that others are not to be treated unjustly (which, by stipulation, revenge has the tendency to do); and still more deeply, as the recognition that even the most heinous human being is still "a sensible creature; that is, capable of happiness or misery." The obligation to recognize him or her as such prevents the resentful victim from taking a step that it is very easy to take, viz., of *demonizing* the wrong-doer; indeed, the demonizing, or dehumanizing, or objectification of one's enemies is a commonplace. In addressing yet again the way in which unchecked resentment distorts perspective, Butler comments on the tendency to see the "whole man [the wrong-doer] as monstrous,

⁴⁴ In similar spirit, J. D. Mabbott writes: "No one has any right to forgive me except the person I have injured. No judge or jury can do so. But the person I have injured has no right to punish me. Therefore there is no clash between punishment and forgiveness since these two duties do not fall on the same person nor in connection with the same characteristic of my act." "Punishment," *Mind* 48 (1939), p. 158. I take qualified exception to the first premise; and agree with the conclusion, though this question still nags: if the offender somehow escapes just punishment – say, because of a "miscarriage of justice" – is it not more difficult to forgive him? The question was poignantly raised in South Africa, following the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (and thus arguably not because of the miscarriage of justice, but for other reasons). See L. S. Graybill, *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p. 49.

without any thing right or human in him”; and he is plainly denying that there are any “moral monsters.” The “whole man” is not “without any thing right or human in him,” so we should refrain from resenting him without qualification (p. 139). Resentment has, one might say, this *totalizing* tendency; and that is surely one of its dangers. To refrain from totalizing one’s negative judgment is referred to in the recent literature as “re-framing” the wrong-doer, as seeing that he is, in some sense, not reducible to his injurious behavior – a theme to which I return in below. Demonizing the wrong-doer is a reductive move: the wrong-doer is nothing but a wrong-doer, and thus “monstrous.” Forgiveness is “love” in the sense that it affirms our commonality, as human beings, with the morally worst amongst us. Butler infers that nobody is in principle unforgivable.⁴⁵

Butler is not requiring that we either give up feeling resentment altogether, or that we acquire the *feeling* of love toward those who have injured us. His “forgiveness” does not, though, leave the sentiments altogether untouched. First, the requirement that we see the wrong-doer as human-like-us, and not as monstrous, checks the degree of resentment one is entitled to feel. Second, the injurer also injures himself, presumably by degrading himself; and is therefore the proper object of compassion. Butler only provides the barest assertions here, but does suggest that feeling compassion for the wrong-doer, for this reason, is an ideal. His example of this “utmost perfection” of forgiveness is Christ on the cross praying compassionately that his torturers be forgiven on the grounds that “they know not what they do.”⁴⁶ Third, Butler is insisting that all the “abuses” of forgiveness be given up; and this means that resentment guided by partial or misinformed beliefs be modified (normally, that would mean moderated). The emotion is to be proportionate to the offense, and this too has affective consequences.

What is the criterion of proportionality (or, as previously, of impartiality)? Butler seems to suggest two answers to this question here,

⁴⁵ I discuss the question of “the unforgivable” in II.vii. Butler’s conception of “love” as a disposition rather than affection raises the question as to whether forgiveness is an emotion or feeling, or has an affective dimension. Does the moderation or forswearing of resentment produce a specifiable feeling? If so, I do not know what it is. *Not* feeling resentment doesn’t seem to me to be this or that specific emotion.

⁴⁶ It is striking that Christ does not himself forgive his torturers. He authorizes (or implores) God to forgive them on his behalf. This looks like an exercise in third-party forgiveness, or better, judicial pardon by the supreme Judge. B. Lang notes that Christ implies that his torturers do not request forgiveness (they do not even know that they do wrong). Lang, “Forgiveness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994), p. 108. It is a strange choice of a paradigm for forgiveness, from the perspective of Butler’s general line about forgiveness.

neither sufficiently worked out, and neither clearly related by him to the other. The first is offered from the detached "objective" or theorist's standpoint that considers the pitch of the passion best suited to the given passion's doing its job in the whole – in this case, contributing to self-defense, deterrence, and punishment. Resentment "ought never to be made use of, but only in order to produce some greater good," viz., the "remedy or prevention of evil" (p. 155). Now, the achievement of *that* goal falls first and foremost on restraining designs for *revenge*; and I suggest that it is an important reason why Butler stresses the importance of forswearing, through forgiveness, revenge rather than resentment altogether. The natural end of resentment is not just to feel a certain anger, but "to *do* mischief, to be the author of misery . . . this is what it directly tends towards, as its proper design" (p. 157, emphasis added).

The second answer is mentioned only once by Butler; it was later to become, in a much more developed form, the core of Adam Smith's reply to the question I posed at the start of the preceding paragraph. Butler writes that the person injured "ought to be affected towards the injurious person in the same way any good men, uninterested in the case, would be; if they had the same just sense, which we have supposed the injured person to have, of the fault" (pp. 160–161). Note that "uninterested" does not mean without interest; the spectator (to use Smith's term) is uninterested – or better, disinterested – in the sense of not herself being the victim of the wrongdoing. As a "good" person, she will bring to bear her "fellow feeling" (p. 141), the right dispositions, understanding, imagination (recall my discussion of Butler's example of our reading the "feigned story" of wrong-doing, and feeling sympathetic resentment). In short, he brings *perspective* to bear, if "placed at a due distance" (p. 162) from the scene. Unlike the perspective of the detached theorist, this second perspective – that of the disinterested spectator – is fundamentally social. Butler assumes but does not here explain why the two perspectives – the theorist's, and that of the sympathetic bystander – should endorse the same judgment, but assumes that they do.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ The first of Butler's answers, unlike the second, is consequentialist in form. It does seem that forgiveness fits rather easily into a consequentialist moral framework, as is noted by B. Lang, "Forgiveness," p. 110. He there adds that it does not fit as easily into a deontological framework, citing inter alia Kant's view of moral agency: "the person who, acting as a rational agent, at one time harmed someone else, is identical to the person who now (let us say) seeks forgiveness – or who, now or later, might commit the same violation again. . . . Consistent with this, there is for Kant no third-level duty to forgive that supervenes on the first-level obligation to do what one ought to do and the second-level obligation to punish violations of the first-level duty." Cf. J. R. Silber's comments in his "The Ethical Significance of Kant's *Religion*," in *Religion within the Limits of Pure*

Butler has in effect defined forgiveness as (i) the forswearing of revenge, as well as (ii) the moderation of resentment as judged appropriate by a sympathetic “good man” and the informed objective observer. Resentment has been distinguished from anger or hatred generally. He has commended a forgiving resentment, if I may use so paradoxical a phrase, on the grounds that it defends us against injury, recognizes the humanity of the injurer, and for one further reason with which he concludes: viz., that the injured too has caused injury. Of the “man of antiquity” who said “that as he never was indulgent to any one fault in himself, he could not excuse those of others,” Butler is harshly critical (p. 164). Because we are ourselves in need of forgiveness, consistency demands that we be forgiving of others (p. 167).

By way of concluding my analysis of Butler’s two sermons, let me revisit the question as to why he sees forgiveness as the forswearing of revenge rather than of resentment simply. I offered two reasons as to why he takes this line. The first is a defense of *moderated* resentment on the grounds that it is an appropriate response to injury, helps us to identify the injury for what it is, and indeed is an “inward witness on behalf of virtue.” Secondly, Butler is concerned with the social benefits of properly focused resentment, and the disastrous effects of resentment unleashed. By contrast, another commentator has argued that Butler takes the position he does because his theory of the emotions is non-cognitivist. It would make no sense for Butler to commend something which it is not in an agent’s

Reason Alone, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. cxxxii: “Kant could see clearly the incompatibility of forgiveness and absolute freedom”; and “we cannot ignore the problem of forgiveness nor can we accept Kant’s futile resolution of it” (p. cxxxiv). Note however that the context of Kant’s discussion in *Religion* is that of *divine* forgiveness. While the issues are too complex to explore in this chapter, it is not clear to me that forgiveness largely drops out of Kant’s moral philosophy because of his view of our “absolute freedom”; indeed if we were not free, excuse would replace it. I note that Kant mentions “Vergeben” (forgive) just once in *Religion*, in a religious context, though one could argue that the idea is at play in the discussion of “reconciliation” or “atonement” (*Versöhnung*). For the reference, see *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. and trans. A. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 88. Elsewhere, Kant does claim, almost in passing, that it is a “duty of virtue” to refrain from revenge and to be forgiving, and discusses an imperfect duty to gratitude as well; it is difficult to see in principle why on his account forgiveness ought not merit a similar place. See *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 253 and 248–249. It certainly seems that Kant downplays, perhaps is ambivalent about, non-divine forgiveness as a virtue. For a very helpful discussion of the matter, see D. Sussman’s “Kantian Forgiveness,” *Kant-Studien* 96 (2005): 85–107. I am grateful to Eckart Forster and Allen Wood for discussion of Kant’s views of the matter.

power to do, viz. subdue an emotion by changing his [the agent's] understanding of its appropriateness, proportionality, or what have you.⁴⁸ The problem with this interpretation is that while Butler certainly does not claim, with the Stoics, that emotions just are judgments or beliefs, he characterizes resentment in terms that assume that it has a strong cognitive component, as when he remarks that "reason suggests to our thoughts that injury and contempt, which is the occasion of the passion," and that reason "can raise anger" only "by representing to our mind injustice or injury of some kind or other" – a phrase that underlines the capacity of reason to do just that. He speaks of instances of resentment as "the effect of reason." Sudden anger, by contrast, does not require a *moral* thought of any sort; plain hurt and pain will do, for they are "occasioned by mere sensation and feeling" (p. 140).⁴⁹

All of this is compatible with the view that while the emotion of resentment at a person may evaporate quite quickly in light of emended beliefs of a certain sort (typically a factual sort, having to do, for example, with one's mistaken identification of the wrong-doer), cognitive emendations of other sorts (say, to the effect that the wrong suffered was not all *that* bad, that one's response is disproportionate) may take time to get a grip on the emotion, and may require significant effort on the agent's part. And there is that brute sting of pain; it may simply take longer to subside than the relevant emended beliefs warrant. An emotion such as resentment is quasi-cognitive; we do not credit it to pre-linguistic humans, which suggests that it includes beliefs (whose content can be stated propositionally). But it also is an affective, bodily state.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ I refer to P. Newberry, "Joseph Butler on Forgiveness: A Presupposed Theory of Emotion." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2001): 233–244.

⁴⁹ As A. Speight nicely puts it, for Butler (as for Hegel) forgiveness includes a "revision of judgment." See his "Butler and Hegel on Forgiveness and Agency," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43 (2005), p. 299.

⁵⁰ The debate over the extent to which the emotions are cognitive is intense and on-going. For an argument against the view that emotions are beliefs (the straight cognitivist standpoint) see P. E. Griffiths, "Towards a 'Machiavellian' Theory of Emotional Appraisal," in *Emotion, Evolution, and Rationality*, ed. D. Evans and P. Cruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 89–105; his *What Emotions Really are: the Problem of Psychological Categories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and the first two chapters of C. DeLancey's *Passionate Engines: what Emotions Reveal about Mind and Artificial Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Among the many complex issues at stake is the meaning of "cognition" itself.