

## *Must I be forgiven?*

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Why do we find it upsetting when the victim of our wrongdoing refuses to accept our apologies? Why do we find it upsetting when the victim is unwilling to grant us the forgiveness that we are asking for?

Let us introduce some terminology to address these questions. The offender *initiates a redemption practice* by apologizing or asking forgiveness. If the victim accepts the apologies or grants forgiveness, then *the practice succeeds*. If the victim does not accept the apologies or refuses to forgive, then *the practice fails*. *Offender's distress* is the distress that an offender typically experiences when a redemption practice fails. As a matter of convention, the masculine pronoun refers to the offender, the feminine to the victim.

So, suppose that we have two offenders who initiate a redemption practice and they are counterparts in all respects except for the fact that for the former the practice fails, whereas for the latter the practice succeeds. I will try to provide a *normative* account of the fact that the former typically experiences a kind of distress that is absent for the latter. That is, I will try to provide an account of offender's distress that makes the emotion into an *apt* emotion. I start with three unsuccessful attempts that are implicit in the literature on forgiveness, then construct my own account, and conclude by showing how my account provides error theories for the unsuccessful accounts.

### 1. *The threat of revenge*

Redemption practices stop the cycle of revenge. The victim commits herself to forswear resentment and taking revenge would be inconsistent with such a commitment (Butler 1827: Sermons VIII and IX; Griswold 2007: 38–43; Murphy 1988; Hampton 1988). One might suggest that this accounts for offender's distress. The offender fears revenge and a successful redemption practice is what guards him from this threat.

Consider the following objection. We want offenders to initiate redemption practices because they feel bad about what they did, not to stave off revenge. The fear of revenge does not count as a good reason to initiate a redemption practice. Hence, the objection goes, what is distressing about a failed redemption practice should not be that one failed to stave off revenge. But this does not follow. The motivation for engaging in a practice may be very different from the reason for experiencing distress when the practice fails. Even if a wrongdoer initiates a redemption practice because he feels bad about what he did, the fact remains that the fear of revenge may be upsetting to him in response to a failed practice. Hence the objection does not hold.

But nonetheless, the account is flawed as a general account of offender's distress for the following simple reason. When we offend against people who are much weaker than us and cannot harm us in any way, we are typically just as distressed when the redemption practice fails, assuming that our remorse is genuine.

We might think that this can be explained away in Humean fashion. Hume considers a case in which a person is suspended in an iron cage from a high tower. He knows that the construction is secure and yet he 'cannot forbear trembling' (Hume 1978: 148) due to the fact that in ordinary circumstances such exposure is associated with the possibility of harm. Emotions shift from circumstances in which they are apt to circumstances that bear a resemblance to them but in which they are not apt. And this might then explain away offender's distress as an untoward emotion when the victim is too weak to take revenge.

But this will not do. Typically we try to self-correct such emotions by intentionally shifting our focus – e.g. Hume's man in the cage will focus on the solidity of the construction. However, this is not the case for offender's distress with a weak victim. If our remorse is genuine, then shifting our attention to the fact that the victim cannot harm us does nothing to relieve this distress. And in so far as the victim's weakness is induced by our wrongdoing our sense of distress is even heightened.

## 2. *Failed-repair costs*

The smooth flow of social life is aided by redemption practices. People are engaged in various types of relationships and given our human frailty these relationships are often put under stress. Redemption practices are tools to fix relationships (Taylor 1985: 105). Opening up this tool kit is not costless. Nonetheless, it is sometimes efficient to do so considering that operational costs of relationships under stress are high, and relationships have high exit and start-up costs.

One might suggest that this accounts for offender's distress. Redemption practices are tools that require joint handling. If the offender invests the time and effort to open the toolbox and the victim refuses to cooperate then his investment is wasted and the opportunity costs may be substantial.

Again, we need to block an objection that focuses on the proper motivation for initiating a redemption practice. One might point out that the desire to minimize social costs is not a good reason to initiate a redemption practice. Indeed, but this is not an objection. The offender may well engage in redemption practices because he feels bad about what he did and yet, when the practice fails, he is distressed at the prospect of a relationship under stress or of the loss of the relationship.

But nonetheless, this appeal to failed-repair costs cannot provide a general account of offender's distress either. Consider a case of date rape.

Typically there is little expectation that the parties to a date rape will pick up their relationship as it was before the offence took place. The victim may do everything to avoid having to face the offender including leaving town never to look back again. This may be common knowledge between the victim and the offender. And yet the offender may find it important that the victim accepts his apology or grants him forgiveness. But why does he care? This is precisely our question and failed-repair costs do not provide an answer, because repair is simply not in the offing. Redemption practices also have a place when the relationship is beyond repair.

### 3. *Evidence for one's moral character*

A remorseful wrongdoer wishes to dissociate himself from his wrongdoing. His past agency constitutes a threat to his self-image. Though he acknowledges that he lied, broke a promise, or what have you, he cannot accept that he *is* a liar, a promise breaker. His offence does not define who or what he is. He now needs to substantiate this with evidence. In granting forgiveness or accepting apologies, the victim affirms that she no longer views the offence as constitutive of the wrongdoer's identity, that she no longer sees it as the kind of agency that defines him (Allais 2008: 59–63; Swinburne 1989: 84–85). And the offender takes the fact that even the victim no longer takes the offence to be constitutive of the offender's identity to be strong evidence that there is indeed a dissociation between his identity and his wrongdoing. This permits him to let go of his remorse – maybe not immediately, but the success of the redemption practice is instrumental in this respect (Hampton 1988: 86–87). If the redemption practice fails, then remorse will be more recalcitrant and this is what accounts for offender's distress.

However, this account is not satisfying either. The victim's acceptance of an apology is very poor evidence of whether the offence is constitutive of the offender's identity. It is bound to be rife with false positives and false negatives. There are false positives because redemption practices are so often ideologically motivated. Granting forgiveness is an injunction in many religions. Jesus says that even if your brother 'wrongs you seven times in one day and turns to you and says "I am sorry" seven times, you must forgive him' (Luke 17: 3–5). So if I have doubts about my moral character, then the forgiveness of a person who takes this passage to heart would be very weak evidence for my moral character indeed. There are false negatives because wrongdoings with minimal turpitude may cause much harm or hurt to the victim. These are cases of moral (bad) luck. The victim may not find it in her heart to forgive, even though the wrongdoing was minimal and clearly atypical for the agent. Offender's distress is not the distress of a person who is not able to acquire the requisite evidence for a proposition whose truth matters to him a great deal. If this is what the wrongdoer cares about, he would do much better to turn to the village sage. A village sage

worthy of her name should be a much more reliable source of evidence concerning the offender's moral character than the victim.

#### 4. *The restoration of moral stature*

So then why *do* we care that a redemption practice succeeds, if not to stave off the threat of revenge, to heal a relationship or to acquire evidence about our moral character? The following account incorporates elements from Allais (2008: 38), Bovens (2008a), Darwall (1977: 39–41), Griswold (2007: 52; 67–9), Hampton (1988: 36–7), Murphy (1988: 22–5) and Taylor (1985: 89–97).

We start with the familiar claim that people are owed respect as members of a community of moral equals. The offender violates this respect. He treats the victim with less respect than is due to her. To view oneself as a member of a community of moral equals is to view oneself as someone to whom respect is owed and who owes respect to others. Now in treating the victim with less respect than is due to her, the offender acts as a person who places himself outside of the community of moral equals. He thereby incurs a loss of moral stature – he foregoes certain claims to respect. The offender turns to the victim and asks her to restore his moral stature, to accept him again as a full member in the community of moral equals so as to regain all claims to respect. But why does he turn to the victim – why not to the village sage? By offending the victim, the offender has disturbed the balance of respect that holds in a community of moral equals. He apologizes or asks for forgiveness in a spirit of humility. He offers the victim the power of being the judge over his moral stature and thereby restores the balance of respect between victim and offender.

If this analysis is correct then it is clear why the offender cares about the redemption practice succeeding. He cares about his moral stature, his membership to a community of moral equals and the concomitant claims to respect.

So what can be said in support of this account? Let us carefully address each element.

What does it mean to say that the offender experiences a loss of moral stature due to his wrongdoing? Consider Zidane's head butt against Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final. Zidane apologized to his fans, but also made it clear that his apology did not extend to Materazzi because his action was provoked by Materazzi's insults. Materazzi has squandered his claim to respect by his own agency and hence the head butt was not a violation of a claim to respect owed to Materazzi.

Now this is not to say that an offender becomes an outlaw. First, the claim to respect that is foregone is local – it only concerns a particular range of social interactions and in this particular case one might even question whether Materazzi's claim to respect for his physical integrity was

squandered by his verbal insults. The case would have been clearer if Zidane has reciprocated Materazzi's insults in like manner. And second, there are still moral reasons not to reciprocate Materazzi's insults, which Zidane recognises, but these reasons are not grounded in a claim to respect owed to Materazzi.

One might object that human rights are inalienable. The worst offender retains the right not to be tortured – even a ruthless torturer himself. The inalienability of the right to life is somewhat more contentious considering disagreements about the death penalty, but the same reasoning applies. Indeed, there is a core of claims to respect that are inalienable or that are at least strongly resistant to loss. But nonetheless, there are claims to respect that are less central – such as a claim to (complete) physical integrity, a claim not to be lied to, a claim not to be deceived, etc. Such claims are contingent on one's own agency and can be squandered. It is with regard to these claims to respect that one can lose one's moral stature. An unredeemed offender is no longer worthy of certain types of respect proper to a community of moral equals.

How is it that the victim restores the wrongdoer's moral stature by accepting her apology or granting forgiveness? What sort of commitment does the victim thereby incur? Clearly not the commitment to pick up the relationship where they left off before the wrongdoing, as the date rape case made plain. But what the victim cannot do is to go around saying that the offender is a schmuck or continue to treat him as a schmuck. This is a colloquial way of saying that the victim restores the offender's moral stature, that she commits herself to treating him as a moral equal with the concomitant claims to respect. If she cannot bring herself to do this, then she should simply not accept his apology or grant forgiveness. In the date rape case, this does not mean that she is willing to engage in a social relationship with him in any form or shape. But insulting him would no longer be warranted. Once she has accepted his apology or granted forgiveness, she has committed herself to respecting his claim to respect as a moral equal and any form of resentment-driven agency would be uncalled for.

How does a redemption practice restore the balance of respect between victim and offender? In initiating a redemption practice, the offender makes himself vulnerable – he grants the victim the power to determine his moral stature. He is thereby treating her with a special kind of respect by subjecting himself to the victim's judgement. This restores the balance of respect between victim and offender. If the victim refuses to accept the offender's apology or refuses to forgive, then the offender loses the wager – his moral stature is in jeopardy.

Notice the use of the verbs 'offering' one's apology, 'begging' for forgiveness, and 'granting' forgiveness – all verbs that have their home in contexts of servility. We do not *demand* or *insist* that the victim forgive or accept apologies. This is interesting because for minor transgressions and in the presence of genuine remorse it might be plainly immoral for the victim not to forgive

or not to accept apologies. And yet the offender does not have a claim right on the victim's forgiveness or acceptance of apologies. Such a claim right would be inconsistent with the restoration of the balance of respect.

### 5. Error theories

In good philosophical fashion, we should now present error theories. That is, given the account that I have offered, can we understand how one would be misled into believing the accounts I have dismissed earlier?

The restoration of the offender's moral stature is a sufficient condition for any form of revenge to become morally unacceptable. But this is not to say that it is the fear of revenge that drives offender's distress when the redemption practice has failed. A weak victim may not be able to take revenge, but what distresses the offender is her refusal to restore his moral stature.

A relationship of mutual respect between moral equals is a necessary condition for the smooth operation of social life. Master–slave relationships are notoriously unstable and beset with internal contradictions (Hampton 1988: 60–79). So if the offender wishes to continue the social relationship in a meaningful way, then a restoration of the relationship through a redemption practice is required. But this is not to say that offender's distress comes about because it hampers the opportunity for the continuation of a social relationship. Even if the further continuation of a social relationship is not in the offing, a remorseful offender will be distressed that his moral stature is not restored.

The relation between the victim's forgiveness and the offender's moral stature is not an evidential relation, but rather a causal relation. The victim's forgiveness does not provide the offender with evidence for his moral stature, of the fact that she is worthy of the respect that is due to her on grounds of her personhood. Accepting apologies and granting forgiveness are performative acts. They bring it about that the agent's moral stature is raised and that she becomes worthy of the respect that is due between moral equals.

So what went wrong in the accounts I dismissed is that they confuse raising the offender's moral stature with necessary and sufficient conditions for doing so or misconstrue the relation between the victim's forgiveness and the offender's moral stature as an evidential rather than as a causal relation.<sup>1</sup>

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1 I am grateful for discussion and comments by Lucy Allais, Foad Dizadji-Bahmani, Alice Obrecht, Michael Otsuka, Christoph Schickhardt and Alex Voorhoeve. The central question of this article was inspired by a novel entitled *Het Been (The Leg)* written by the Flemish author Willem Elsschot (2004 and 1965, originally published in 1938). I have discussed the novel (in Dutch) in Bovens (2008b).

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*Does truth equal provability in the maximal theory?*

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According to the received view, formalism – interpreted as the thesis that mathematical truth does not outrun the consequences of our maximal mathematical theory – has been refuted by Gödel's theorem. For the theorem seems to show that for any putative maximal theory there is at least one sentence – its Gödel sentence – which we can recognize as true and yet is not provable in it. In support of this claim, proponents of the received view usually invoke an informal argument for the truth of the Gödel sentence, an argument which is supposed to reconstruct our reasoning in seeing its truth. Against this, Field (1994, 1998a, 1998b) has argued in a series of papers that the principles involved in this argument – when applied to our maximal mathematical theory – are unsound. In what follows, I shall defend