

## Moral Travel and the Narrative Work of Forgiveness

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**ABSTRACT** What is forgiveness? How is it differentiated from other forms of ‘moving on’ – e.g. overcoming the debilitating effects of past injuries by somehow diminishing them in memory? Philosophers have generally approached this problem by focussing on a specific type of outcome, holding certain key elements in their analyses fixed: the victim, the wrongdoer, the injury, and (hence) ‘justified’ resentment that the victim ‘appropriately’ overcomes. This paper takes a different tack, focussing instead of the emotional praxis or work of forgiveness – the kind of work that potentially eventuates in so-called genuine forgiveness. This work is helpfully construed as a narratively mediated species of ‘moral travel’. It often requires victims to open the points held fixed in standard philosophical analyses to potential negotiation and reconceptualization so as not to remain stuck in telling repetitive and debilitating stories of resentful victimization. Such work is inherently open-ended, taking victims towards a resolution that cannot be predicted in advance. This means there is no determinately right outcome to such work; paradoxically, it may even culminate in what many would say is not forgiveness at all. I present just such a case drawn from Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, not simply to ‘normalize’ such outcomes, but to highlight the frame-shifting, developmental challenges inherent in the emotional work of forgiveness. Such challenges are not always so visible on standard philosophical approaches.

### 0. Introduction

*Stability [in emotional responsiveness] is not necessarily an advantage or a virtue. On the contrary, too much fixity, like too little, can impede development and prevent natural chaotic processes from finding a new point of equilibrium. Given the informational function of emotion, this is not surprising, since too much fixity is clearly a disadvantage in the search for knowledge, as in much of life’*

—Ronald de Sousa

In her Carus lectures, *The Commons of the Mind*, Annette Baier uses the phrase ‘moral travel’ to talk about one of the ways in which we develop as reflective moral beings – namely, by ‘comparing and contrasting different [moral] cultures’:

‘Some will be more unwilling than others to enter imaginatively and experimentally into the mores of other cultures, to listen to their spokespersons, to do any moral travel before settling in some voluntarily accepted homeland, some set of values they are content to live by. But as we all first learned from others what is deemed morally acceptable, and what is not, so we all need others to test, confirm, challenge and amend any moral innovations we may ourselves propose along the way (Baier, 1997, 55).

I mean to adapt this notion of moral travel to my own use, since it is so nicely suggestive of a more widespread developmental phenomenon than Baier here describes once we acknowledge two further aspects of our moral and affective lives: first, that the sort of development she envisions is potentially on-going, in the sense that even quite radical revisions in how we evaluate and understand the world can – and, for many, do – occur throughout life (there is no assured settling in a final ‘homeland’); and, secondly, that the developmental work leading to such revisions can be instigated as much by a traumatic breach with familiar others, as it can by the challenge of understanding unfamiliar others. Indeed, it is the ever-present possibility of traumatic breach that accounts for my concern with moral travel in this paper. For it is this kind of injuring experience that so destabilizes our assumed relations of understanding and trust that we are faced with the challenge of moral travel whether or not we choose to take it up.

Moral travel is never easy, of course; but engaging in it under the burden of injury does much to exacerbate the vulnerabilities such a process involves. In this paper, I want to explore the specifically developmental and affective challenges involved in moral travel to help illuminate what makes the work of forgiveness, on the one hand, morally attractive, yet on the other hand, psychologically extremely demanding. This may help explain why philosophers sometimes talk of forgiveness of having a kind of paradoxical moral status, involving elements of both gift and obligation.

There is a second thesis I want to defend in this paper. Forgiveness, understood most generally as the forgoing of resentment towards another for a culpable injury, has drawn a fair amount of attention from moral theorists. But there are so many contradictory conclusions drawn by those who discuss it that it seems to defy systematic philosophical analysis. I will suggest there is a good reason for this.<sup>1</sup> Insightful as many of these

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<sup>1</sup> But cf. Miranda Fricker for a different, ‘paradigm based’ approach to addressing this plurality in an insightful way Miranda Fricker, "Forgiveness—An Ordered Pluralism," *Australasian Philosophical Review* 3, no. 3

discussions have been, they are limited by what philosophers insist must be held constant in isolating a phenomenon of what they call ‘genuine forgiveness’ as the locus of conceptual attention – viz., that there be a victim, a wrongdoer, a serious moral offence, and hence justified resentment on the part of the victim that is ‘appropriately’ overcome. But I will argue that, in so far as the work of forgiveness involves a developmental struggle individuals must undergo if they are not to remain stuck in telling repetitive and sometimes increasingly debilitating stories of resentful victimization, they are giving themselves into a space of uncertainty in which the various fixed points of their narratives of injury are opened to negotiation. Accepting this space of uncertainty, dwelling in it in order to reassess the configuration of people and events that give the victim’s story narrative coherence, is a crucial part of the work of forgiveness.

So understood, the work of forgiveness is helpfully conceptualized as a process of narratively mediated, and narratively enabled, moral and affective development. It is distinguishable not so much in terms of its culminating in one particular resolution or other, as standard philosophical analyses often insist, but rather in terms of the kind of process undergone. This process involves both risking and recovering oneself in the manner of moral travel. The upshot of this process may include one of the various resolutions analytically described in the philosophical literature as ‘genuine forgiveness’. But once forgiveness is understood first and foremost as involving a process of giving oneself into this negotiable space, there is no need to view the varieties of resolution philosophers identify with ‘forgiveness proper’ as competing with one another; hence, no need to choose amongst alternatives that seem individually persuasive each on its own terms. Indeed, if this approach is on the right track, the work of forgiveness may culminate, paradoxically, in what many philosophers would not call ‘forgiveness’ at all. And yet, as I will argue by focussing on a fictional, though compelling example of just such a case, the protagonist only gets to this outcome through embarking on what seems justly characterized as the hard work of forgiveness.

This remainder of this paper proceeds in three sections. In the first, I expand on the concept of ‘moral travel’ as a developmental process we are generally bound to undergo, wherein our own ways of feeling and thinking about the world are put to the test through confronting others’ ways of thinking and feeling – ways that unsettle us emotionally and

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(2019).. My own approach can be regarded as adding an additional layer to this discussion, one that is distinctively process oriented rather than outcome oriented.

thereby elicit a variety of responses (positive and negative), but also rarely leave us unchanged in how we make sense of the world around us. In the next section, I discuss how this developmental process is narratively mediated – i.e., it is enabled, and sometimes distressingly disabled, by the stories we tell, not simply to others but especially to ourselves, as we try to make sense of others’ attitudes and behaviour, especially in relation to ourselves. Finally, in the last section, I turn explicitly to the topic of forgiveness to see what philosophical insights we can derive by viewing the work involved as a narratively mediated species of moral travel.

### 1. Moral travel as an emotionally challenging developmental process

*Acquiring genuinely novel emotions, like coming to understand novel concepts, is like building a cantilevered platform: standing on a firm old section, you reach out to set up and consolidate the new. We learn to feel new emotions much as we learn to appreciate new art: by our welcoming of small modifications to familiar patterns, our expectations are nudged or shocked into change’*

—Ronald de Sousa

I begin by discussing, not the work of forgiveness itself, but the more general phenomenon, ‘moral travel’, which I have suggested involves the same kind of work, though less specifically motivated and perhaps less defensively encountered. Baier, as I said, introduced the expression to talk about our capacity and/or willingness as socially embedded and sympathetic creatures to ‘enter imaginatively or experimentally into the mores of other cultures...’, a process that very often leads to our own moral and affective development. But why engage in moral travel at all? Why put ourselves at risk by unsettling our views of how to live well in community with others? And in what sense does this put *ourselves* at risk?

The answer that Baier gives, and which I endorse here, is indebted to David Hume, deriving from his insight that our capacity to live well – that is, peacefully, respectfully, and even productively, in community with others – is not something that comes easily or naturally to us. For on Hume’s view (and Baier’s) it depends on our coming to share with other people a range of ‘moral sentiments’ – that is, the taking of ‘pleasure in certain human

traits and displeasure in others'. But such commonality of sentiment is neither given by nature, nor assured (once and for all) by socialization. It is something we need to continually work at; always, as Baier describes, '... an *intended and contrived* commonality, to some extent one that goes against the grain...':

It is a bit like many jury verdicts, where it takes contrivance, time and effort to get a verdict. Precisely because moral agreement is not easy, and is not automatic, given morality's passional sources, must the goal of such agreement be explicitly recognized, and fussed about. Rationalists might think that it went without saying that we could all reach agreeing moral judgements if we all used our reason. Sentimentalists [like Hume] could not let it go without saying' .

Now, this is not to say typical human beings don't share a certain basic repertoire of 'natural' passions, what Hume called 'original existences': Our basic emotions of loving, hating, desiring, fearing, hoping, sorrowing, – and the things that typically cause them – are recognizable to us in one another precisely because they are part of our 'species' nature'. Indeed, it is our capacity for experiencing like emotions that grounds a further crucial capacity, in Hume's account, for the imaginative understanding and sympathetic sharing of others' emotions in supportive 'duplication'. Such duplication is not to be confused with emotional contagion – my feeling angry as a result of your feeling angry; rather, it is my feeling a sympathetic anger on your behalf – understanding your anger, and thereby reinforcing it, initially anyway, as a good or appropriate response you are having to your situation. Without the sympathetic support of another, your feelings are likely to fracture and dissipate, losing strength as a coherent response in your eyes through not being mirrored in mine or anyone else's .

Yet Baier (following Hume) cautions that we should not expect too much even from this natural capacity for understanding and sympathy: It may be required for our coming to develop moral sentiments that are roughly congruent, but the path to moral agreement is nevertheless long and arduous. A considerable amount of training must go into shaping our emotional responses (such as anger and resentment) to socially acceptable norms, norms that will vary from culture to culture and across generations (pp. 45-48). Agreement in moral matters – in judgements and in attitudes, in demands and expectations – is the result of long and repeated engagement of each of us with one another, and against the background of the very societal norms that our multifarious interactions produce, maintain, and modify.

Of course, some of these interactions will assume the shape of adult negotiations amongst relative equals. But this capacity for adult negotiation is one we grow into only gradually and, in any case, experience to varying degrees depending on a number of different factors that influence how we experience ourselves in relation to others. Such factors include similarities and differences of race, gender, education, class, and personal status, not to mention other, more randomly distributed contingencies like tragedy, good fortune, and the quality of our familial and extra-familial relationships.

But even putting such variability aside, our adult capacity to negotiate with others about how we should think and act, normatively speaking, is likely to be somewhat fragile given our developmental history. For, paradoxically, we only become the kind of selves that are able to enter into such negotiations by having a governing set of norms first imposed on us, by having the ‘rough corners’ of our passions rubbed off and our sentiments moulded to the norms of those who raised us. As Judith Butler observes, ‘no individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing ‘subjectivation’’. Subjectivation, though submission to others’ ways of being, is not in these primary moments a loss of self; it’s rather the beginning of a self – that is, the kind of self that is progressively empowered to express and enact its own ways of being within a normatively structured social space .

The psychologist, Jerome Bruner, offers a less brutalizing term for this process: he calls it ‘parental scaffolding’ . But whatever term we use, the key point is this: since we only become empowered as self-reflective, self-understanding selves through an original imposition of communal values, our capacity to negotiate with others over the appropriate shape of our moral sentiments will likely be inflected by two, often competing, imperatives: the first imperative is to defend whatever set of values we have internalized to date, values which perforce give us a sense of identity – we might call this the imperative to ‘stay at home’; and the second imperative – encouraging our sympathetic engagement with unfamiliar others (i.e., for ‘moral travel’) – is to validate our sense of self through sharing – or coming to share – our values in community with others .

We are now in a position to understand why the experience of moral travel constitutes an especially powerful resource for our own moral development – one that is practically inevitable given the rich variety of human social experience, though almost invariably somewhat fraught. As Baier says, ‘most of us end not quite where we began’; most of us will continue to develop in ways that leads to questioning, or departing from, the very norms or mores that give shape to our experience. Of course, intuitively this seems perfectly

understandable: Having begun to develop moral sentiments, i.e., ways of reacting to and so judging (our own and others') behaviour, it seems inevitable that we begin to turn our sentiments and judgements back on themselves, on the norms that have generated them, and in the process often to find them wanting. We are, after all, reasoning and reflective creatures, encouraged in the very process of parental scaffolding to think about how we should respond to the world, both emotionally and evaluatively. And, yet, left to our own devices, it's not clear how far such solo reflection would take us even in light of a range of new experiences. (I will return to this point in the next section). As Peter Goldie insightfully remarks, 'Though we are reflective creatures, it is only seldom that our gaze turns reflectively inwards towards our own psychology' – i.e., towards our own traits and dispositions that constitute our settled ways of responding to the world. We need the prompt of alien ways of thinking and feeling to unsettle the experienced appropriateness or inevitability of our own; hence, our sympathetic engagement with those alien ways of being provides a powerful resource for self-transformation.

Be that as it may, moral travel is not for the faint of heart. To see why, we need to understand the conflicting mixture of emotions that confronting alien ways of being is bound to generate within us – a function of the two imperatives I mentioned above. On the one hand, it may be relieving, even exciting to break out of old patterns of thought and judgement, especially when alternative ways of experiencing the world receive the communal endorsement and support of others. On the other hand, since familiar patterns of thought and judgement are *literally* self-constituting, questioning their coherence and/or value in any deep way is tantamount to losing a sense of who we are; it is tantamount to reversing, rather than re-instantiating, the originary experience of developing a self-identity through the empowering process of 'subjectivation'. It is to confront what the sociologist, John Lofland calls, 'the horrors of identity nakedness'. If the alarm thereby induced is too intense, we may retreat from such questioning altogether, resisting the challenges that loom from others, shutting our ears and our hearts to their ways of being in defensive protection of our own. Or, at the other extreme, but with equal panic, we may throw ourselves into the exhilaration of repudiation, forcibly trying to remake ourselves by simply denying any authenticity or value to our past ways of being. But neither of these strategies is terribly happy.

Counting against the strategy of retreat, it's in our nature as social, and socially dependent, creatures to look beyond ourselves for the testing and reinforcement of values that we hold dear; indeed, without such social validation, we can begin to lose our faith that our

own attitudes and judgements constitute a coherent and meaningful response to the world. And with that we begin to lose a coherent sense of self. So, ironically, the strategy of shutting ourselves off from the challenging voices of others only threatens, in the long run, to undermine the very self that we are trying to protect.

Yet the strategy of simply repudiating the past – in particular, the meaning and value we found in and through a former community of significant others – is hardly much better. Genuine development surely involves, in the words of E.B. O'Reilly, 'a better understanding – an *improved* epistemology' – that is to say, an epistemology that can somehow assimilate, or reconceptualise, our past ways of valuing. As Baier sagely observes, 'we are not content just to disagree with our parents and grandparents who trained us – typically we do want to retain 'the love and approbation' of that small segment of mankind who trained us in the ways from which we have departed. Distancing is a temporary and unsatisfactory measure'. The unmetabolized past, no matter how much we try and distance ourselves from it, finds uncanny ways to haunt the present. So, in the end, repudiation is not a form of development; it is a way of remaining stuck.

So the ideal narrative of moral travel as a developmental phenomenon is one of discovery, self-risk, and revisionary return: return, that is, as something new and able to take in the past in a new way, a way that allows for new stories to be told of familiar things, new ways of being in the world that remakes one's past into a past that is part of a lived present and viable future. It is a narrative that involves many encounters with others, with trying to make sense of their actions and non-actions, and with trying in turn to make sense of oneself to them. For these are the kinds of encounters that provoke moral travel by revealing similarities and differences in expectations and the norms that govern them. Some differences are too acute to support much genuine exchange; some madden beyond what's tolerable, other intrigue and delight. But whenever there is some clash of attitude, sentiment, expectation, norm, we are provoked as sense-making creatures, to try and account for what, to us, is the other's untoward behaviour and/or perspective. And here, as Hume emphasized, understanding others involves a difficult, almost contradictory process of fellow-feeling under conditions of genuine difference. How is this possible?

## **2. Moral travel as a narratively mediated developmental process**

*'Our narratives should not become  
ossified, repeated and remembered almost by  
rote, as if nothing had changed'*

—Peter Goldie

Our narrative proclivities play a key role in allowing us to bridge the divide between self and other. As many psychologists and philosophers now emphasize, the way we live our lives – the way we interpret and respond to our experiences – is deeply structured in and through narrative practice. Narratives serve a number of functions: self-defining, memorial and interpretive. But, as Bruner remarks, they have a critical feature that makes them especially apt for instigating and supporting moral travel: they ‘specialize... in the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary’ (Bruner, 1990, p. 47). In particular, narratives help us make sense of puzzling others by embedding them in a hypothesized biographical context, where their own attitudes and activities become rationally and affectively comprehensible to us, even as they retain some measure of alienness.

Such narratives are avowedly interpretations told from our own point of view. Minimally, they make sense of others by attributing propositional attitudes. But our interpretive activities are generally much richer than this in so far as we often attribute a variety of moods and emotions, as well as background attitudes of what is normal, appropriate, or just. Our stories will often propose some account of how others came to be what they seem to be here and now, as well as how they might continue to be in the future; they are stories of character and character development. And yet because they are interpretations, the form of our sense-making stories is open-textured, revisable, never fully fixed, no matter how much we, as the tellers of these stories, assure ourselves that we have got the story right, that we have figured the other out. ‘To make a story good,’ Bruner observes, ‘it would seem you must make it somewhat uncertain, somewhat open to variant readings, rather subject to the vagaries of intentional states, undetermined’. This is, as he says, what makes stories particularly appropriate ‘tools for social negotiation’ (Bruner, 1990, pp. 54-55; see too Goldie 2012, ch. 7). They cannot pretend to deliver the final word. In so far as we tell our stories about others *to* others, we invariably invite revisionary pushback from their distinctive narrative perspectives – i.e., from those other ‘centre[s] of self’, as George Eliot says, ‘whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference’. Thus, in telling our stories, we are taking the risk that thanks to others’ counter-narrative persuasions, we may ‘end not quite where we began’; we are taking the risk of moral travel.

This is not to say that we will always tell ‘good’ stories when we encounter challenging others – stories that open the way to, even if they do not always end in, reshaping the attitudes and values that constitute our own sense of agency, moral or otherwise. For, as we have seen, no matter how desirable moral travel may be in some abstract sense, it is invariably unsettling and sometimes deeply threatening. Hence, we may be inclined to adopt defensive strategies in telling our stories – strategies that minimize self-risk while still preserving the apparent sense-making benefits we gain from weaving plausible narratives around the situations in which we are enmeshed.

Naturally, these strategies will come in a variety of forms. For instance, we may fabricate details or, alternatively skimp on them, depending on our audience and their relationship to the events we are narrating. Are they mere bystanders or are they implicated in the stories themselves? Are they in a position to challenge our version of events? More importantly, can they be depended on to share our world view, operating more as a reliable and reassuring echo chamber than a potential check on the narratives we are weaving?

More interesting still is the strategy of soliloquy. How best to ensure an audience that feels and thinks as we do, who will support our current version of things than to make that audience ourselves? Of course, this is not entirely to deny the virtue of soliloquy in ruminating on events that affect us and, for a time at least, excluding other voices. After all we sometimes have very good reason to resist the narrative persuasions of others. If we grant them too much influence, we risk evacuating our own powers of agency, our own powers of judgement and discernment, our own abilities to make sense of the world and how to respond to it emotionally and evaluatively. In a word, we risk our own ‘authenticity’, whereby we achieve a phenomenologically acceptable ‘fit’ between our own ways of being and whatever actions we think we ought to take or avoid . Thus, it seems clear that cultivating solo practices of reflective inquiry, often narratively structured and informed, is vital for developing our own moral sensibility, where such sensibility is marked not only by a better understanding of self and other, but also by a more secure sense of the principles we endorse and their context-sensitive conditions of application.

And yet defensive and uninterrupted soliloquy – soliloquy that persistently shuns the narrative influences of others on certain questions or topics – is bound to be counter-productive, if not downright dangerous. For while soliloquy can be a discursive mode in which we break through impasses and reach new levels of understanding and confidence, it can also dramatically limit our understanding and destroy our confidence in so far as it

becomes repetitive, self-insulating, distorting of self and others, and obsessively over-fixated on what are to us emotionally salient events or features of the world.

Consider, for instance, the sobering case of Hamlet, whose taste for soliloquy as a means for arriving at sound judgement and unwavering resolution is a significant factor in his eventual undoing. Determined to hold his own council, he effectively distances himself from the narrative influences of others, either by withholding confidence from those he ‘trusts’ or by feigning madness in the presence of those he discounts or distrusts. Once left to his own narrative devices, however, he soon becomes mired in a mental thicket of doubts and worries, eventually driving himself into a kind of real madness in which conflicting passions, loyalties, plans and ambitions chase through his mind in ever more tortuous cycles of pointless reflection. Indeed, so preoccupied does Hamlet become with an array of obsessive thoughts – by turns, reminding, admonishing, encouraging, angering, blaming, excusing, and so on – he loses his moral balance, acting out his internal conflicts in increasingly impulsive and even criminal ways (e.g., murdering Polonius and contributing to Ophelia’s descent into madness). Moreover, his sense of responsibility for these ill-judged acts is fleeting and fractured, the real-life consequences seemingly not integrated into a world in which avenging his own father’s murder assumes disproportionate moral value through reinforcing soliloquy. It is as if Hamlet becomes morally deaf and blind to what he does himself except as it relates to this one task. Hence, when confronted at play’s end by Laertes, the vengeful son (and brother), he willingly acknowledges his role in bringing about Polonius’ death (and Ophelia’s madness), but denies any moral culpability. Left to himself, he confesses at last, he was not really himself at all:

Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet:  
 If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
 And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,  
 Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.

Of course, Hamlet is an extreme case of soliloquizing run amok. Yet, for those inclined to valorize the importance of ‘listening only to the voice within’, it points up the ways in which that voice is open to a mix of influences of which we’re seldom aware, or, if aware, seldom able to judge objectively as constituting authentic concerns with which we’re right to be concerned. Hence, our reflections can be dramatically limited, and sometimes

unhelpfully reinforced, by the projections we make and often mistake for well-balanced judgements of how things are or ought to be.

The moral, of course, is not to embrace the other extreme, but something more reasonably moderate: namely, a recognition that even though some soliloquy is essential for developing and supporting our own sense of agency, a healthy conversational diet must finally include a variety of real interlocutors admitted on equal terms. It's only when we're able to let others back into our conversations, without fear of being narratively undone by them, that we can bring the multiple points of view that have significance for our lives into the kind of reflective equilibrium that signifies genuine moral development. In Baier's words,

... as we all first learned from others what is deemed morally acceptable, and what is not, so we all need others to test, confirm, challenge and amend any moral innovations we may ourselves propose along the way. It is vital that our moral evaluations be done in conversation in which the listening is as important as the speaking, rather than in soliloquy accompanied by overconfidence in one's ability to imagine oneself in others' shoes .

A final illustrative example of the dangers of soliloquy will head us towards an explicit discussion of forgiveness. In her novel *Persuasion*, Jane Austen deftly and instructively handles the contrast between a hampered experience of development cut off from the narrative influences of others, versus the real and inevitably risky work of development in reflective engagement with those who matter to us.<sup>2</sup> The novel begins with the return of Frederick Wentworth to Kellynch Hall, home of Anne Elliot to whom he was engaged some years previously. However, despite her love for him, Anne was persuaded by those 'most dear to her' that for practical reasons their marriage would not prosper; that their engagement was, therefore, 'indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it' (*P*, 48). Anne ended the engagement, and Wentworth, 'feeling himself ill-used by so forced a relinquishment ... had left the country in consequence' (*P*, 48).

Our initial impression, as the novel begins, is that Wentworth is the one who has prospered. He has voyaged out to foreign climes, 'full of life and ardour', of 'sanguine temper' and 'fearlessness of mind', needing no one to guide his decisions or his plans. Anne, meanwhile, has stayed at home, gentle, modest and much imposed upon by her relations. She

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<sup>2</sup> All page references to *Persuasion* are to the signet classic edition Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, Signet Classic ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1818/ 1996)., hereafter cited as *P*.

remained continually in contact with the persuasive Lady Russell who, despite being the main instigator of her break with Wentworth, is also her one support, the one ‘she had always loved and relied on’, and who stood to her ‘in the place of a parent’. Now, eight years later, Wentworth has returned having achieved much by way of rank and fortune. Yet for all that, as we are told by Anne, ‘he was not altered, or not for the worse’. Rather it is Anne, according to Wentworth, who is ‘so altered’, so ‘wretchedly altered’, that he insists he would not have known her.

How are we to understand these changes that have and have not taken place at the outset of Austen’s novel? Anne, we know, has lost the ‘bloom of youth’. Wentworth, by contrast, has come back handsome and rich enough to win even the admiration of Anne’s father, the irredeemably vain and superficial Sir Walter. Indeed, Wentworth-returned is as vibrantly resolute as the Wentworth-of-yore, much like the ‘glossy nut’ he later admires to Louisa Musgrove: ‘blessed with original strength, ...[having] outlived all the storms of autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot anywhere’ (*P*, 108).

Yet these surface impressions soon give way to something deeper. Anne, we discover, has lost more than the bloom of youth, bearing in her person the hard work of development. Although she has maintained a loving and respectful relationship with Lady Russell through the years, still seeking her advice, she has also come increasingly to trust her own judgement, refusing an advantageous offer of marriage that was promoted by Lady Russell and altering her views of her own prior actions significantly, though not resentfully:

Anne at seven-and-twenty thought very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen. – She did not blame Lady Russell, she did not blame herself for having been guided by her; but she felt that were any young person to apply to her for counsel, they would never receive any of such certain immediate wretchedness, such uncertain future good. – She was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession..., she should have yet been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement than she had been in the sacrifice of it (*P*, 49).

That Wentworth had not put himself in a position to discern this alteration by writing to or approaching Anne again since the initial break, he comes eventually to attribute to his own angry pride, a pride that kept him not just in isolation from her but in developmental limbo: ‘I was proud, too proud to ask again. I did not understand you. I shut my eyes and

would not understand you, or do you justice' (*P*, 277). The change in him is worked only when he returns to the community from which he has estranged himself because of her. There, and by degrees, through numerous encounters and reencounters with Anne and with others in their shared social circle, especially the 'so eager and so resolute' Louisa Musgrove, he can begin at last to engage in real moral travel, coming to reassess his own character and behaviour in the light of reassessing hers.

When Anne and Wentworth finally meet again in Bath at the close of the novel, he has become a different man. Anne is 'fully sensible of his being less at ease than formerly... Time had changed him, or Louisa had changed him. There was consciousness of some sort or other. He looked very well, not as if he had been suffering in health or spirits ... but yet it was Captain Wentworth not comfortable, not easy, not able to feign that he was' (*P*, 203). And although Wentworth's transformation brings with it (in this story) the joy of reconciliation, it is accomplished only with great difficulty. For, as Wentworth finally confesses to Anne, even as he came to know his own heart, he had almost failed to approach her again in the trailing aftermath of his long-held resentment:

I could not derive the benefit from the late knowledge I had acquired of your character. I could not bring it into play; it was overwhelmed, buried, lost in those earlier feelings which I had been smarting under year after year. I could think of you only as the one who had yielded, who had given me up, who had been influenced by anyone rather than by me (*P*, 275).

That his own transformation was so much at issue, he acknowledges with pain – pain for how long it took to throw off the burden of his resentment and for so long resisting the 'unearned' help, as he calls it, that made such movement possible, viz., the gift of real narrative encounters with challenging others:

This is a recollection which ought to make me forgive everyone sooner than myself. Six years of separation and suffering might have been spared. It is a sort of pain, too, which is new to me. I have been used to the gratification of believing myself to earn every blessing that I enjoyed. I have valued myself on honourable toils and just rewards. Like other great men under reverses,' he added with a smile, 'I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve' (*P*, 277-78).

### 3. The work of forgiveness as a species of moral travel (1570)

*'I have come to find it odd to think of there  
being a single correct idea of forgiveness, in the  
way that there is a correct theory of the  
structure of DNA.'*

—Margaret Urban Walker

Earlier I raised the question of what makes us particularly prone to engage in strategies of narrative self-protection, such as telling ourselves stories about others – about who they are and what they have done – in reinforcing soliloquy? One obvious cause is injury, where we come face to face with our vulnerability to another in a particularly poignant way, by means of some pain they have caused us, and caused not unwittingly or innocently, but deliberately. In such cases, it is not just curiosity or puzzlement that triggers our need to make sense of the other by giving some account of her motives, intentions, desires, attitudes; it is to comprehend the enormity of someone who has acted, or is seen to have acted, in a way that deliberately discounts us as particular others, deserving of consideration and respect. This generates a conflict. On the one hand, the need to comprehend the other means narratively accounting for them in ways that, under conditions of genuine engagement, tend to promote sympathetic understanding; on the other hand, the need to repudiate them and the injury they have caused triggers the need for narrative distance, explicitly shunning their potential contributions and potentially locking ourselves into the kind of story that feeds resentment. This, of course, is Wentworth's situation in *Persuasion*. He returns to England after many years absence still smarting under the injury Anne Elliot had done him:

He had not forgiven [her]. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shown a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of overpersuasion. It had been weakness and timidity (*P*, 81).

Resentment is the natural, and appropriate, reaction to such injuries. It signifies a capacity to respect ourselves even as we feel that others do not, as well as a capacity to acknowledge that what we have suffered is the kind of destabilizing breach that requires us to exercise the virtue of forgiveness if we are to recover from it well (Novitz, 1998; Hieronymi 2001). But what do we mean by forgiveness? Minimally, it is to forgo anger and resentment

towards a wrongdoer. Yet we may forgo the anger and resentment we feel towards another in ways that do not seem to constitute ‘genuine’ forgiveness. Does Wentworth forgive Anne when he comes to realize that neither her action nor her character was what he angrily took it to be? It seems rather better to say that he has come to see that his forgiving her is neither appropriate, nor required. If anything, the reverse is true. Thus, his resentment towards her withers and reconciliation is possible without his having to engage in the real work of forgiveness.

This is what a philosophical analysis of forgiveness would tell us, at any rate. As I said earlier, genuine forgiveness seemingly requires these things to remain fixed: the victim, the wrongdoer, and the culpable injury the wrongdoer does the victim that grounds his justified resentment. As Cheshire Calhoun representatively explains,

Among changes of heart achieved by various routes, [only] some seem genuine cases of forgiveness, [that is, where] one manages to change one’s heart while retaining a clear sense of the other’s culpability and one’s own entitlement to resentment. Other changes of heart, though commonly called forgiveness, look on closer inspection like something else: excusings, or overlookings, or givings of what is due. Here one manages to change one’s heart only by losing clear sight of the other’s culpability and one’s continued entitlement to resentment. Because these latter are real changes of heart and because the linguistic use of ‘forgiveness’ is not as finely tuned as philosophers might like, I will call such changes of heart forgiveness, but of a minimalist variety .

However, the trouble with ‘genuine’ forgiveness in the philosophers’ more precise sense is that it seems to resist coherent analysis. That is, while philosophers all agree on what needs to remain fixed – victim, wrongdoer, culpable injury, and justified resentment that must be ‘appropriately’ overcome – they agree on little else. Some argue that real forgiveness absolutely requires the wrongdoer’s remorse and apology ; others insist such remorse and apology would undercut the need for real forgiveness ; still others claim that the wrongdoer’s attitude is completely irrelevant – genuine forgiveness is solely a matter of the victim’s working things through . Then, as far as the victim is concerned, some philosophers argue that genuine forgiveness requires overcoming resentment entirely and completely, so that it never returns ; others say that it can return (or persist), but that the victim’s attitude towards it must have changed to chagrin and self-disapproval . The list of conflicting properties goes on in ever more nuanced ways – and not without insight or convincing arguments and examples.

In the end, it seems, there are so many different conceptions of ‘genuine’ forgiveness, apparently pulling against one another, that we have to wonder if there isn’t some other perspective from which this apparent contradictoriness disappears.

Perhaps we can gain some insight by returning to *Persuasion*, a novel that certainly touches on the problem of forgiveness, even if it doesn’t involve any moments of genuine forgiveness in the philosophers’ sense. For Wentworth certainly meets the conditions that present to him a task of forgiveness even if he is still not able to undertake it when he returns to England eight years after his break with Anne. Indeed, he has become trapped in his resentment. It has, in Bishop Butler’s apt description, ‘taken possession of the temper and of the mind, and will not quit its hold’, leaving Wentworth ‘with a certain determination and a resolute bent of mind not to be set right’ . And Wentworth uses his resentment to good defensive purpose, keeping himself in protective isolation from Anne, the one person he will never readmit to his heart: ‘Now they were strangers, nay worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement’ (*P*, 84).

This ‘perpetual estrangement’ begins, as we know, slowly to unravel. Despite himself, Wentworth cannot encounter and reencounter Anne without paying attention to the real complexities of her person, destabilizes the story he has repetitively told himself at a safe remove. The fixed points of philosophical analysis – victim, wrongdoer, culpable injury – begin to come unglued as Wentworth opens his story to revision by speaking it to the various others who would speak it in a different way. His telling the story can thereby regain some of its narrative function of ‘elaboration and amelioration’ lost through repetitive soliloquy . Wentworth has thus involved himself in what I want to call the ‘narrative work of forgiveness’, even if, paradoxically, this does not conclude with his offering ‘forgiveness’ in the philosophically strict sense of that word. But how paradoxical is this really? Should genuine forgiveness really be understood in terms of only one kind of resolution to the narrative work of forgiveness? Or are many different kinds of forgiving resolution possible just in so far as they are held together conceptually by the nature of the work a person must undergo to resolve the pain occasioned by another’s injury, whether it be real or imagined or somewhere in between? This work is narrative work because it involves a story told again and again, but finally under conditions that it allow it to become a ‘good story’ once more, – that is, the kind of story where the narration of events is brought back into the ‘domain of negotiated meanings’. In this way it becomes no longer just a story of resentment and anger,

not just a story that has one fixed interpretation and one fixed affective tone with which it speaks.

Let me then close with suggesting that there is something wrong with standard philosophical account of forgiveness, penetrating as these may be. For all of them begin and end with certain parameters fixed. But undergoing the real work of forgiveness is precisely to cast oneself into a space of uncertainty, where one is being revised, or potentially revised, in ways that one can't anticipate. The risk of forgiveness is thus the risk of moral travel – the risk of losing and reconstituting oneself; to undergo something that in the end, if all goes well, allows for the resolution of one story and the beginning of another. But how this transformation is accomplished can't be fixed in advance; to stop telling one story and start telling another is to open the fixed points to revision. Paradoxically, as I've claimed, the work of forgiveness may end as it does in *Persuasion* with Wentworth's forgoing his role as victim, not least through recognizing that maintaining it was causing him to misunderstand Anne as well as himself. Of course, this is not to say that all stories of forgiveness can and should end in this way; it is rather to focus on the uncertainty that allows for our narratives of anger and resentment to be replaced – and fittingly so – by narratives in which those emotions have no proper role to play. As Trudy Govier remarks, there are many different kinds of forgiveness – and some of these, I want to suggest, are not even visible as such except from a narrative perspective.

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