

The Risky Business of Forgiveness
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1. Introduction

Consider the following independently plausible, but jointly inconsistent, claims:

(R) Forgiveness is *reasoned*: it is something that agents do for reasons.

(E) Forgiveness is *elective*: it is not something that agents can be required to do or refrain from doing.

(O) If something is done for reasons, then it will be possible for those reasons to generate a requirement for an agent to either do or refrain from doing that thing. (Milam 2018)

Many theorists want to defend the view that forgiveness is both reasoned and elective, but doing so requires the rejection of a very intuitive claim about the nature of reasons. As Per-Erik Milam (2018) argues, moral reasons are typically able to generate requirements, so one who takes reasons to forgive to be non-requiring faces the difficult task of explaining why these reasons are unique amongst moral reasons.¹

I think this is an interesting challenge, and one that can be overcome by reflecting on the value that forgiveness has, not just at the moment forgiveness is offered, but over time. Instead of thinking about forgiveness as an end state, we can conceive of forgiveness as a step in a longer process. Reflecting on the reasons we have to take this step can provide the resources to explain not only how forgiveness can be both reasoned and elective, but also why forgiveness is not so unlike other aspects of our moral lives, contrary to Milam's (2018) claims.

My plan for this paper is as follows. In section 2, I examine extant accounts of forgiveness, their commitments to forgiveness being both reasoned and elective, and the tension that arises

¹ Milam notes that this claim is compatible with the distinction between justifying and requiring reasons, since it is typically argued that these are two different roles that reasons can play, and not two different kinds of reasons (2018: 577). So, if reasons to forgive were relevantly similar to other moral reasons, then they might typically be justifying, but it should also be possible for them to require forgiveness in at least some contexts.

between these attributes. In section 3, I lay the groundwork for an account of forgiveness by outlining my views of blame and blameworthiness over time, which inform who and when it is possible to forgive. In section 4, I present the Risky Forgiveness View and explain how the riskiness of forgiveness renders it both reasoned and elective. In section 5, I explore some interesting implications of the view with respect to electivity, and I conclude in section 6.

2. Reasoned and Elective Forgiveness

According to one prominent view, genuine forgiveness requires agents to overcome their blame of a wrongdoer for performing some action while maintaining the following three judgments, as articulated by Pamela Hieronymi:

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

The maintenance of these judgments is important because it sets forgiveness apart from other ways of overcoming blame. When an agent ceases to blame another because they realize the action in question was not in fact wrong, this is an instance of justification, not forgiveness. And ceasing to blame those who are not blameworthy for their wrongs is a form of excuse rather than forgiveness.

Many theorists further distinguish forgiveness from other ways of overcoming blame of culpable agents by emphasizing the ways in which forgiveness is an active, *intentional* process, and one that agents engage in *for reasons*.² If an agent comes to discover that they no longer blame someone who culpably wronged them, but they never intended to overcome their blame, nor did they do so for any reason, then many theorists argue that the agent has not forgiven. These accounts are committed

² Not all theorists agree. While Dana Nelkin (2013) takes forgiveness to be an active process, she also argues that agents needn't act on a reason in order to forgive. And Luke Russell's Peaceful Endpoint View of forgiveness does not require agents to act for reasons or to engage in an active process in order to forgive (2023: 165).

to (R): forgiveness is something that agents do for reasons. Those who take forgiveness to be reasoned also typically argue that only some reasons count as the right kinds of reasons to forgive. This allows these theorists to further distinguish forgiveness from other ways of actively and intentionally overcoming blame while maintaining the judgement that they have been culpably wronged by another agent. Many views identify offenders' remorse as a (if not the) right kind of reason to forgive, because it indicates that the offender's wrongdoing is no longer a threat (Hieronymi 2001), the offender and victim have aligned their moral understandings (Fricker 2016, 2021), and/or the offender has had a change of heart (Milam 2019). On these views, an agent's ceasing to blame a culpable wrongdoer will count as forgiveness only if they do so in response to the wrongdoer's remorse. If they cease to blame for any other reason, perhaps because it is too exhausting or painful to continue to blame, or simply no longer worth it, then they will not have forgiven.

In addition to (R), it is also often thought that (E) is true: forgiveness is not something that agents can be required to do or refrain from doing. There are two sources of intuitive support for this claim that are often cited: (1) the gift-like and gracious nature of forgiveness, and (2) the fact that it is objectionable for wrongdoers to demand to be forgiven. While these claims offer partial support for the view that forgiveness is elective, they are both ultimately compatible with this view being false. It is possible to be required to provide someone with a gift (Attie-Picker 2023), and even if a wrongdoer cannot permissibly demand that they be forgiven, an agent may still be required to forgive them (Hieronymi 2001; Walker 2006). So, offering an account of why forgiveness is gift-like and cannot be demanded is insufficient for establishing electivity. Those who wish to defend this stronger claim must explain why forgiveness can *never* be required or prohibited.

While many take both (R) and (E) to be true, they are in tension with one another. According to Milam, this tension arises because of the nature of reasons:

Essentially elective forgiveness is in tension with a natural understanding of forgiveness as a reason-guided practice. In order to forgive, one must have the right

kind of reasons. One can have reasons for or against forgiving, or both. And these reasons can add up, giving one more or less reason to forgive, all things considered. But, if reasons for and against forgiving can add up, then sometimes the weight of one's reasons can generate a requirement either to forgive or not. This is how reasons, especially moral reasons, typically work. (2018: 575)

This leads to (O): If something is done for reasons, then it will be possible for those reasons to generate a requirement for an agent to either do or refrain from doing that thing. And if forgiveness must be performed for reasons, then it will be possible for those reasons to require, or prohibit, forgiveness. But this is incompatible with forgiveness being elective.

So, (O) must be rejected in order to maintain the view that forgiveness is both reasoned and elective. And to do this successfully, one must offer a satisfying explanation of why reasons to forgive are essentially non-requiring, which Milam argues no extant view of forgiveness has been able to provide.

3. Who and When to Forgive

In order to develop a positive view of forgiveness, it will be useful to first introduce my reparative accounts of blameworthiness over time and blame, which will inform who and when it is possible to forgive.

3.a. Reparative Accounts of Blameworthiness and Blame

Traditionally, being blameworthy for a past action simply requires having culpably performed that past action. On this view, once an agent is blameworthy, they remain blameworthy forever. But recently, there has been a push to distinguish synchronic blameworthiness—the set of conditions under which an agent is blameworthy for an action *at the time of the action*—from diachronic blameworthiness—the set of conditions under which an agent is blameworthy for an action *at some later time* (Khoury 2013, 2022; Matheson 2014, 2025; Khoury & Matheson 2018).³ While accounts of synchronic blameworthiness feature typical conditions for culpable wrongdoing, like control and

³ These views, while gaining popularity, are not without their detractors (Clarke 2022, 2025; Howard 2023).

epistemic conditions, accounts of diachronic blameworthiness take there to be more to blameworthiness over time than mere culpability.⁴

In recent work (Tierney 2022, 2023), I've defended an account of diachronic blameworthiness according to which agents, in virtue of culpably performing wrong actions, have reparative obligations to those they've wronged, and agents remain diachronically blameworthy, and the fitting target of blame, for their past actions until they fulfill all of their reparative obligations.

Reparative Account of Diachronic Blameworthiness: If a person A at t_1 is blameworthy for act X which occurs at t_1 , then A at t_2 is blameworthy for X if and only if, and to the degree that, A continues to possess reparative obligations in virtue of being blameworthy for X at t_1 .

To understand the nature of culpable agents' reparative obligations, I build on Linda Radzik's (2009) work on atonement. According to Radzik, wrongdoers are obligated to fulfill three goals:

First, the wrongdoer must morally improve herself. It is not enough to convince herself or others that she is trustworthy. She must actually become trustworthy. Second, the wrongdoer must communicate with the victim and in some cases the community in a way that withdraws the insult and the threat that the wrongful act expressed. Third, the wrongdoer must make reparation for the various sorts of harms she created. (2009: 85)

For Radzik, in order to fulfill our reparative duties, we must undergo moral improvement, which requires the experience self-censoring emotions like guilt, communicate our change of heart, and make

⁴ Alternative approaches to diachronic blameworthiness include moral improvement accounts, according to which agents must psychologically change and morally improve in order to become less diachronically blameworthy (Khoury and Matheson 2018; Khoury 2013, 2022) and guilt-based accounts, according to which feeling deservedly guilty reduces diachronic blameworthiness (Carlsson 2022; Portmore 2022). For the purposes of this paper, I simply adopt my reparative account, though I offer a more complete defense in other work (2022, 2023).

reparations for the harm we've done. Reparations can take many forms (material, physical, psychological, relational, etc.), but they all involve providing victims with special forms of moral attention and concern and cannot be accomplished merely by morally improving and/or experiencing guilt.

What is involved in blaming diachronically blameworthy agents? While there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, significant disagreement regarding the nature of blame, many recent accounts analyze blame in terms of its function, as opposed to a particular attitude or emotion. Most theorists who adopt functional accounts of blame argue that blame functions, at least paradigmatically, to communicate something to others, though they disagree about what, and how, blame communicates. According to some views, blame communicates a message of moral disapproval (McKenna 2012; Fricker 2016) or a call for the target to respond in some way (Macnamara 2015; Walker 2006).

The reparative account of blameworthiness pairs well with these approaches to blame's function. If blameworthy agents possess reparative obligations to those they've wronged, then blame can be understood as a call, or demand, for these reparative obligations to be met.

Reparative Account of Blame: Blame functions as a call, or demand, for wrongdoers to fulfill their reparative obligations.

On this view, though blame is not constituted by a particular attitude or emotion, it is paradigmatically experienced and expressed via the reactive attitudes, like resentment, indignation, and in the case of self-blame, guilt.⁵

3.b. Who and When to Forgive

Given the distinction between diachronic and synchronic blameworthiness, I propose that the proper targets of forgiveness are those who are diachronically blameworthy for past wrongs, and not those who are merely synchronically blameworthy. Recall that genuine forgiveness requires agents to

⁵ For a more thorough defense of this view, see (Tierney 2021a, 2021b).

overcome their blame of a wrongdoer for their action while maintaining the judgments, roughly, that (1) the act in question was wrong, (2) the wrongdoer is blameworthy for the wrong, and (3) the wronged agent should not have been treated that way. Once an agent is no longer diachronically blameworthy, (2) is no longer true, at least not in the relevant sense. An agent, once they cease to be diachronically blameworthy, is not someone who is “worth being upset by” (Hieronymi 2001: 530). Those who are no longer diachronically blameworthy for their past wrongs are not the fitting targets of blame—it would be inappropriate to blame them. And overcoming one’s blame of an agent who it would be objectionable to blame does not strike me as an instance of forgiveness.

Interestingly, Andrew Khoury, who introduced the distinction between synchronic and diachronic blameworthiness (2013), argues that ceasing or mitigating blame of agents in virtue of acknowledging their diminished diachronic blameworthiness amounts to forgiveness (2022: 713). But on such a view, forgiveness would function as the mere recognition that blame is no longer fitting. On most understandings of forgiveness, when we forgive an agent, we are not simply registering that they are less or no longer blameworthy.⁶ This is at least part of what distinguishes forgiveness from excuse and exculpation. Forgiveness is thought to be many things—gift-like (Allais 2008), supererogatory (Heyd 1982), virtuous (Radzik 2010)—but it is not thought to be trivial. Taking merely synchronically blameworthy agents to be the proper targets of forgiveness renders forgiveness “pointless” (Kolnai 1973: 99), and we ought to reserve forgiveness for those who remain diachronically blameworthy for their past wrongs.

4. Risky Forgiveness

⁶ Randolph Clarke (2025) makes a similar objection to Benjamin Matheson (2025), who also suggests that forgiveness amounts to the recognition that an agent is no longer diachronically blameworthy. While Clarke takes this objection to undermine the view that blameworthiness can be terminable, it’s possible to adopt an account of diachronic blameworthiness without committing to Khoury and Matheson’s view of forgiveness.

If overcoming blame in order to forgive involves something other than mere recognition that the wrongdoer in question is no longer diachronically blameworthy, what does it involve? Given the views discussed above, here is one possibility: forgiveness requires agents to commit to ceasing to call on, or demand that, diachronically blameworthy agents fulfill their reparative obligations via blame. On this view, forgiveness doesn't eliminate wrongdoers' reparative obligations; it isn't a debt cancellation or normative powers view (Nelkin 2013; Warmke 2015; Cornell 2017; Bennett 2018), although it does change the normative landscape. On this approach, forgiveness entrusts wrongdoers to do the reparative work necessary to address their wrong, which can be a powerful show of respect and generosity, grounding the often-discussed gift-like nature of forgiveness. This process also places the victim in a vulnerable position, for in committing to cease blaming those who have wronged them, victims are forswearing a particularly effective tool at communicating what it is they are owed. The vulnerability that comes from forswearing blame also grounds the value of forgiveness. It can explain why forgiveness is a potentially courageous act, and why forgiveness can contribute to rich and meaningful interpersonal relationships.

While overcoming blame of diachronically blameworthy agents can be valuable, it can also be costly, for it is always possible that these agents will fail to fulfill their reparative obligations after being forgiven. This renders forgiveness *risky*.⁷ So, when agents choose to forgive, they are taking a risk that diachronically blameworthy agents will go on to fulfill their reparative obligations without being called upon, or demanded, to fulfill them via blame. We can formalize this view in the following way:

⁷ On this view, while forgiveness always involves taking a risk, not all instances of forgiveness are equally risky. Similarly, not all instances of forgiveness are equally valuable and sometimes the choice to forgive may even be regrettable. Forgiving some agents can be much riskier than forgiving others, and some instances of forgiveness will be more generous, gift-like, and vulnerable than others. And these risks do not always pay off. In some cases, the consequences of forgiving might be so disastrous that a victim could choose to un-forgive (Wonderly 2021, 2022). Developing an account of un-forgiveness is beyond the scope of this paper, but it's important to note that the possibility of un-forgiveness does not eliminate the riskiness of forgiveness. Thanks to Kyle Kirby and Sam Ridge for discussion on this point.

Risky Forgiveness: A forgives B for act ϕ when A takes a risk that B will go on to fulfill the reparative obligations they possess in virtue of being blameworthy for ϕ by committing to cease calling upon, or demanding, that B fulfill these obligations via blame while maintaining the following three judgments:

- (1) ϕ was wrong,
- (2) B is diachronically blameworthy for ϕ , and
- (3) A should not have been treated that way.⁸

Reflecting on the riskiness of forgiveness can provide an account of why forgiveness is both reasoned and elective along with the right kind of reasons to forgive.

3.a. Reasoned Forgiveness and the Right Kind of Reasons to Forgive

Because Risky Forgiveness involves taking a risk, it must be reasoned, since taking risks requires agents to act on reasons. If an agent is not able to recognize or respond to the potential positive and negative outcomes of their acts, then they are engaging in risky behavior, not risk taking. Risk taking is rationally evaluable. While one needn't have full knowledge of the likelihoods and relative values of all potential outcomes of a particular act and then explicitly take these facts to justify one's action, one must be sensitive and responsive to these factors in order to count as taking a risk. The same is true of Risky Forgiveness since it involves risk taking. Thus, Risky Forgiveness is committed to (R): forgiveness is something that agents do for reasons.

⁸ In presenting this account, I am not claiming that all forms of blame cessation typically referred to as forgiveness meet the conditions of the Risky Forgiveness View. In addition to differing from "debt cancellation" views of forgiveness, Risky Forgiveness also comes apart from "earned respite" views (Russell 2023: 110), according to which perpetrators are owed forgiveness in virtue of being sufficiently repentant and morally reformed (Griswold 2007; Khoury 2022). It is also unclear how we could forgive the dead on this view, since the dead, even if they remain diachronically blameworthy after death, cannot fulfill their reparative obligations. While I think Risky Forgiveness represents a paradigmatic way we forgive, and can ground many of the distinctive virtues of forgiveness, it is ultimately compatible with a pluralist approach, according to which there are several different ways to forgive, only one of which involves taking a risk that the wrongdoer will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations. On this view, while not all forms of forgiveness are both elective and reasoned, there is at least one variant that possesses these features.

What is the right kind of reason to forgive according to Risky Forgiveness? Again, reflecting on the kind of risk involved can help us answer this question. Because Risky Forgiveness involves taking a chance on the wrongdoer going on to fulfill all their reparative obligations, evidence that the wrongdoer will do exactly this constitutes a reason to forgive. And when a wrongdoer fulfills one or more of their reparative obligations—by apologizing, showing remorse, morally reforming, etc.—this typically offers us evidence that they will go on to fulfill others. So, an agent fulfilling a reparative obligation typically constitutes a reason to take the risk of forgiveness. This coheres with the popular view that reparative acts and expressions of remorse generate reasons to forgive (Hieronymi 2001; Bell 2010; Milam 2019), though Risky Forgiveness offers a distinct explanation of why this is so. On this view, a wrongdoer fulfilling a reparative obligation typically gives their victims a reason to forgive because fulfilling one reparative obligation is often evidence that they will fulfill others. When a wrongdoer expresses remorse for a past action, this typically gives us reason to think that they won't perform such actions in the future and/or that they'll express the necessary care and concern to those they've wronged in order to make amends. The same is true for wrongdoers who attempt to make amends or begin to morally improve: this typically gives us reason to think that they will come to fully understand the wrongness of their past behavior and/or feel remorse in response to their moral failings.

Importantly, not all reparative acts will provide a reason to forgive. Consider a colleague, Tom,⁹ who is perpetually late to meetings. Though Tom is genuinely remorseful when he leaves others waiting, he also has no intention of becoming less culpably careless when managing his time. Whenever Tom is confronted about this behavior, he offers a sincere apology, but because he values honesty, is also upfront about the fact that he will inevitably be late in the future. In this case, though Tom fulfills one of his reparative obligations to make amends by apologizing, his apologies do not

⁹ Names have been changed to protect the tardy.

provide evidence that he will go on to fulfill all of his obligations, since his apologies also reveal that he has no intention to morally improve. Given this, Tom's apologies do not constitute a right kind of reason to forgive. We may blame Tom less given his attempts at repair than if he were entirely unrepentant. We may also choose to let go of our blame given Tom's (many) other positive qualities and simply accept that being stood up is a live possibility when it comes to making plans with him. But lessening and letting go of blame are not equivalent to forgiveness. According to Risky Forgiveness, one must have reason to think that the potential target of forgiveness will eventually go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations in order to take the risk of forgiveness, and Tom's apologies provide no such reason.

There may still be reasons to forgive Tom even if they are not constituted by his apologies. Just as not all reparative acts generate reasons to forgive, not all reasons to forgive are generated by reparative acts. There are sources of evidence that agents will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations beyond the fulfilment of some of these obligations. Perhaps Tom has morally improved in other respects in the past, despite his insistence that he would not. If true, this could be evidence that Tom will go on to morally improve with respect to managing his time, and could thus constitute a reason to forgive Tom for being late. More broadly, it's possible that all moral agents possess the capacity and motivation to repair their wrongs. If this were true, then it would constitute a reason to forgive all diachronically blameworthy agents, including Tom.¹⁰ The increasingly-discussed proleptic function of forgiveness (e.g., Fricker 2021) could also generate a reason of the right kind to forgive. If one has reliable information that forgiving a diachronically blameworthy agent will prompt them to go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations, then one has evidence that this agent will go on to

¹⁰ This claim is akin to claims that others have made in defending what Luke Russell (2023: 109) calls "Benevolent Unilateral" accounts of forgiveness. On these views, there are ever-present reasons to forgive in virtue of wrongdoers' humanity (Garrard and McNaughton 2002) or their rational personhood (Govier 2002; Ware 2014).

fulfill all of their reparative obligations and thus possesses the right kind of reason to forgive.¹¹ Finally, there may be other far-fetched sources of evidence that agents will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations: reliable fortune tellers, body language experts, advanced brain scanning technology, etc.¹² According to Risky Forgiveness, any evidence that a diachronically blameworthy agent will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations counts as the right kind of reason to forgive.¹³

4.b. Elective Forgiveness

Just as reflecting on the riskiness of forgiveness can shed light on why forgiveness is reasoned, and the right kind of reasons to forgive, it can also illuminate why forgiveness is elective. According to Risky Forgiveness, when we forgive, we take a risk. And taking risks involves making risk assessments—we must determine if the chance of the wrongdoer eventually fulfilling all of their reparative obligations without being called on, or demanded, to do so via blame is worth the risk of them failing.¹⁴ Risk assessments like this are personal; they don't only depend on the likelihood of the desired outcome, they also depend on how valued that outcome is, and on how devastating it would be if it didn't occur. And I don't think morality or rationality can impose constraints on the degree to which victims should value wrongdoers fulfilling all their reparative obligations without being called upon to fulfill them via blame or disvalue this outcome not occurring—the degree to which we value

¹¹ Thanks to Mark Colyvan and Mark Alfano for encouraging me to consider proleptic reasons to forgive.

¹² What about conclusive evidence of this kind? Imagine an infallible fortune teller, who informs a victim that the person who wronged them will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations in exactly 5 years. In such a case, it isn't possible for the victim to take a risk that the wrongdoer will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations, since it is guaranteed that they will do so in 5 years and impossible that they would do so earlier. So, forgiveness wouldn't be possible according to Risky Forgiveness. Of course, one might have good reason to cease blaming an agent who is assured to repair their past wrongs in exactly 5 years, even if they do not have reason to forgive. Thanks to Shaun Nichols for raising this case.

¹³ Are there ways that victims themselves can generate such evidence, and if so, can this evidence serve as right kind of reason to forgive? A full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, but briefly: I think there are at least some cases where victims can genuinely help wrongdoers fulfill their reparative obligations and offering such help can constitute a right kind of reason to forgive. Consider a case in which a victim offers \$100 to a wrongdoer to pay for the therapy necessary for moral improvement. The fact that the wrongdoer now has the means necessary to fulfill their reparative obligations provides evidence that they will go on to do so, and can thus serve as a reason to forgive. Furthermore, it doesn't seem counterintuitive to me that the victim could forgive on the basis of providing this help. They could plausibly think to themselves: "Now that I've given them \$100, the wrongdoer can fulfill all of their reparative obligations. I'll let them to take it from here." Thanks to Caleb Perl for discussion on this point.

¹⁴ Daphne Brandenburg focuses on a similar feature of forgiveness in "Forgiveness in the Real World" (in prep).

these outcomes is in an important sense up to us.¹⁵ No matter how likely or unlikely it is that a wrongdoer will go on to fulfill their reparative obligations, there is a permissible degree to which a victim could value this outcome occurring (or disvalue it not occurring) that would make it permissible to forgive (or permissible to refrain from forgiving). If this is right, then we have a defense of (E): forgiveness is not something that agents can be required to do or refrain from doing.¹⁶

Of course, a person's values dictate whether it is rational to forgive or refrain from forgiving. If a victim highly disvalues wrongdoers failing to fulfill their reparative obligations without being blamed, it might be irrational for them to forgive wrongdoers who they have very little reason to think will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations, just as it could be rational for a victim who highly values wrongdoers fulfilling their reparative obligations without being blamed to forgive the very same wrongdoers. But I take this sense of rational requirement to be compatible with electivity, since what determines whether agents should forgive or not is dependent on their personal values, which are entirely up to them. And as Milam notes, "the core commitment [of electivity] is that it's up to the potential forgiver whether or not to forgive" (2018: 572).

4.c. Resolving the trilemma

Recall Milam's (2018) trilemma:

(R) Forgiveness is *reasoned*: it is something that agents do for reasons.

¹⁵ One might argue that we can be required to take the risk of forgiveness when it comes to certain parties, like our children, for example. While many parents aspire to be quick to forgive their children, I don't think we're morally or rationally required to do so. Some parents highly value their children independently addressing their wrongs, while others highly disvalue their children failing to see the error in their ways while their parents stand by. Both value assessments strike me as permissible, and each grounds a permissible stance on whether and when to forgive one's children. Thanks to Sarah McGrath and Helen Frowe for raising this issue.

¹⁶ What if 100 lives could be saved if a victim forgives? Isn't the victim morally required to forgive in this case? On my view, such a fact constitutes the wrong kind of reason to forgive, just as it would on most accounts of forgiveness that take there to be a right kind of reason to forgive. Such a reason cannot generate a requirement to forgive, though it could require the victim to cease blaming the wrongdoer, to mend their relationship with them, and perhaps to convincingly pretend to have forgiven them.

(E) Forgiveness is *elective*: it is not something that agents can be required to do or refrain from doing.

(O) If something is done for reasons, then it will be possible for those reasons to generate a requirement for an agent to either do or refrain from doing that thing.

While Risky Forgiveness can account for (R) and (E), it must offer a principled rejection of (O) in order to resolve the trilemma. Once again, reflecting on the risk involved in forgiveness will aid in this endeavor.

According to Risky Forgiveness, forgiveness requires agents to take a risk that diachronically blameworthy agents will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations without being blamed. Taking such a risk requires agents to make a risk assessment, which depends not only on the likelihood of the relevant outcomes, but the degree to which the agent values and disvalues these outcomes obtaining. The right kind of reasons to forgive are relevant to determining the *likelihood* of the relevant outcomes, since they are constituted by evidence that wrongdoers will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations. But these reasons are not relevant to the degree to which agents *value* these outcomes. So, the right kind of reasons to forgive alone could never generate a requirement to forgive or a prohibition against it. And, the degree to which agents value the outcomes relevant to forgiveness is personal—morality and rationality cannot dictate how much agents should care about others fulfilling (or failing to fulfill) their reparative obligations without being blamed. Thus, according to Risky Forgiveness, there is no tension between forgiveness being elective and reasoned.

What's more, forgiveness is not unique in having this structure. Many forms of risk taking are both elective and reasoned.¹⁷ Any time there is a maximally wide range of degrees to which agents can

¹⁷ In addition to risk taking, some have argued that attitudes like hope (Blöser 2023) and gratitude (Horgan and Timmons 2022) are both reasoned and elective as well. In fact, Blöser argues that one can defend a reasoned and elective account of forgiveness by taking reasons to forgive to be reasons to hope, since reasons to hope cannot generate requirements (2023: 361, endnote 28). I am sympathetic to Blöser's argument, though I think it's possible to secure the reasoned and elective nature of forgiveness without taking hope to be a constitutive feature of forgiveness. In defending the electivity of

value the possible outcomes relevant to a risk, taking these risks will never be required (or prohibited). Consider how pregnant people navigate risk of miscarriage early in pregnancy. I take it that there is no floor or ceiling on the degree to which a pregnant person should value/disvalue avoiding a miscarriage or experiencing one in the early stages of pregnancy. There is also no floor or ceiling on the degree to which people should value consuming caffeine. Thus, a pregnant person's choice to consume or abstain from caffeine is up to them—morality and rationality cannot require or prohibit taking such a risk.¹⁸ A pregnant person can permissibly maximally disvalue experiencing a miscarriage, and can thus permissibly avoid caffeine even if it is incredibly unlikely that consuming caffeine would cause a miscarriage. There is also nothing objectionable about a pregnant person's choice to consume caffeine who doesn't feel very strongly about avoiding a miscarriage, even if there is a robust causal connection between caffeine consumption and miscarriage. Thus, contrary to Milam's claims, forgiveness is not unique in being both elective and reasoned. Many instances of risk taking have these features.

5. Implications for Electivity

Above, I've presented an account of forgiveness that is both reasoned and elective. But one might be skeptical of such a goal, especially when it comes to electivity. Many find the claim that forgiveness can never be required or prohibited counterintuitive, and argue that views that adopt this feature fail to capture what we care about when it comes to forgiveness. However, Risky Forgiveness has the

gratitude, Horgan and Timmons argue that in addition to the deontic categories of wrong, obligatory, and optional, there are also the categories of the morally offensive and morally expected (2022: 142). On their view, morally expected expressions of gratitude are owed but not obligatory (2022: 148), cannot be demanded (2022: 149), and self-blame would be appropriate if an agent failed to express morally expected gratitude (2022: 151). I think Horgan and Timmons are right that expressions of gratitude can be morally expected but not obligatory or wrong, and this serves as an independent reason to reject (O). But I suspect that forgiveness is best understood as optional, rather than morally expected, since we don't experience ourselves as owing others our forgiveness or blame ourselves if we choose not to forgive.

¹⁸ I am assuming that caffeine consumption during pregnancy poses no risks to future infants, since morality could constrain the degree to which people should value these outcomes.

resources to make electivity much more palatable than has previously been recognized. In this section, I illustrate how Risky Business can defuse two prominent objections to electivity.

5.a. Can't forgiveness sometimes be required?

Consider a case in which an agent culpably performed a minor wrong, and then works hard to fulfill the reparative obligations associated with their culpable wrongdoing. However, their victim remains entirely unmoved by the wrongdoer's efforts and continues to blame the wrongdoer just as harshly as they did moments after the wrong occurred. Surely, one might argue, the victim is being unreasonable—they ought to forgive the wrongdoer. If this is right, then it appears that forgiveness can be required in at least some cases.

One can agree that the victim is being unreasonable in the above case without agreeing that she ought to forgive. While Risky Forgiveness cannot accommodate the intuition that victims can be required to forgive, it is compatible with victims being required to cease or reduce blame. According to the reparative account of diachronic blameworthiness, as a wrongdoer fulfills the reparative obligations they possess in virtue of culpably performing a past wrong, they become less diachronically blameworthy for that action, and once they fulfill all of their reparative obligations they cease being blameworthy altogether. We can be required to cease blaming agents who are no longer diachronically blameworthy, just as we are required to refrain from blaming innocent, excused, and exempted agents. Similarly, we can be required to reduce our blame of agents who have become less diachronically blameworthy in virtue of fulfilling some of their reparative obligations, just as we are required to meet other proportionality constraints on blame. But ceasing or moderating our blame of agents who are no longer or less diachronically blameworthy is not the same thing as forgiving them. It isn't possible to forgive agents who are no longer diachronically blameworthy—they are not the appropriate targets of this practice.

This discussion highlights the distinction between reasons to reduce or refrain from blame and reasons to forgive. These reasons are importantly different, even though they are often constituted by the same facts. When a wrongdoer fulfills all or some of their reparative obligations, this renders the agent no longer or less diachronically blameworthy, and thus generates a reason to reduce or refrain from blame. These reasons can generate requirements and demands to reduce or refrain from blame, since it is typically impermissible to blame agents to a greater degree than they deserve. Reparative acts can also give us reasons to forgive, not because they render agents less blameworthy, but because they typically offer evidence that the wrongdoer will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations. And, as argued above, these reasons cannot generate a requirement to forgive. So, reparative acts can generate requiring reasons to reduce or refrain from blame without generating requiring reasons to forgive. Thus, defending the view that forgiveness can never be required does not commit one to the counterintuitive claim that we can never be required to reduce or refrain from blame.

5.b. Can't forgiveness sometimes be prohibited?

Consider Milam's (2018) case of Peggy and Al:

Peggy's coworker Al often acts disrespectfully toward her; on the worst occasions he belittles and humiliates her...Peggy is always upset by Al's mistreatment. Often this takes the form of anxiety and sadness, other times contempt, and sometimes anger and retaliation. Al usually apologises and she has always forgiven him in the past, but the pattern of abuse has not changed. Moreover, Peggy has begun to realise that these apologies are the only reason she has to forgive him, while the rest of his behaviour speaks against forgiving. None of his other actions show remorse and they are often accompanied by veiled threats, signs that he feels entitled to treat her this way, and suggestions that he will reward her professionally if she puts up with his harassment. At best he appears to have convinced himself that his abuse doesn't reflect his true feelings. Peggy has also begun to worry that, by forgiving, she is encouraging further mistreatment and implying to others that she condones his behaviour. Finally, she knows from speaking with others in the office that they share her concerns and believe that her willingness to forgive is reckless. (Milam 2018: 574-575)

According to Milam, cases like this one can generate the intuition that forgiveness can be prohibited, and is thus not always elective. But what features of this case are responsible for eliciting the judgment

that it would be wrong for Peggy to forgive Al? I'll consider several possible sources, and argue that each of them can be accommodated by Risky Forgiveness without requiring the rejection of electivity.

First, there is at least one reading of the case where Risky Forgiveness can capture the intuition that it would be inappropriate for Peggy to forgive Al, although not because it would be wrong to do so but because it simply wouldn't be possible. Milam writes: "Peggy has begun to realise that these apologies are the only reason she has to forgive him, while the rest of his behaviour speaks against forgiving" (2018: 574-575). But apologies do not always generate reasons to forgive according to Risky Forgiveness. If an apology does not provide a victim with any evidence that the wrongdoer will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations, then it does not count as a reason to forgive. And in this case, it's possible that Al's apologies are insincere and empty—they don't give Peggy any reason to think he'll morally improve or fulfill any of his other reparative obligations. If this is right, then Peggy has *no* reason to forgive Al. And because forgiveness is reasoned according to Risky Forgiveness, it won't be possible for Peggy to forgive. But this response only gets us so far, since it is easy to think of versions of the case where Al's apologies indicate some motivation to morally improve and thus offer Peggy a genuine, if weak, reason to forgive. On this version of the case, it will be possible, and permissible, for Peggy to forgive according to Risky Forgiveness. But, one could argue, this is counterintuitive: Peggy has much stronger reasons *not* to forgive Al, such that it would be wrong for Peggy to forgive.

One potential reason not to forgive Al that plagues Peggy is the possibility that in forgiving Al, she condones his objectionable behavior and encourages him to continue his pattern of mistreatment. Peggy is not alone—many theorists have also worried about forgiveness's capacity to condone (Kolnai 1974; Murphy and Hampton 1988; Hieronymi 2001; Russell 2023). While forgiveness might be capable of condonation on some accounts, I don't think forgiveness can reasonably be interpreted as condoning wrongdoing according to Risky Business. Forgiveness does

not eliminate wrongdoers' reparative obligations on this view. In fact, in forgiving a wrongdoer, the victim acknowledges not only that the wrongdoer culpably did wrong but also that they continue to be diachronically blameworthy and possess reparative obligations in virtue of their culpable wrongdoing.

But what about the possibility that in forgiving Al, Peggy encourages further mistreatment? An agent can resist condoning a wrong while still making it more likely that this kind of wrongdoing will occur in the future. And many theorists worry that forgiveness has the capacity to do exactly this. In his recent book, Luke Russell defends a claim I call *Obligatory Continued Conflict*.

Obligatory Continued Conflict: Victims are sometimes morally obligated to stay in conflict with perpetrators when doing so is the only way to protect themselves and others from dangerous unrepentant wrongdoers. (2023: 88)

Because Russell takes forgiveness to end conflict between victim and perpetrator, he argues that it will be impermissible to forgive in cases where one has a moral obligation to prevent future wrongdoing by remaining in conflict with wrongdoers.

Does forgiveness end the kind of conflict necessary to protect people from dangerous unrepentant wrongdoers according to Risky Forgiveness? I don't think so. While forgiveness requires victims to cease calling on, or demanding, that wrongdoers fulfill their reparative obligations via blame, it doesn't preclude victims from protecting themselves and others from poor treatment. Unlike other views of forgiveness, Risky Forgiveness doesn't require that victims mend their relationships with wrongdoers or even spend time together. The view also does not require victims to cease discussing the past wrongs, either with the wrongdoer or others, or taking other measures to prevent future harm. On Risky Forgiveness, when victims forgive, they leave it up to wrongdoers to fulfill their reparative obligations. This does not require victims to put themselves, or others, in harm's way. Thus, while forgiveness might be incompatible with the kinds of conflict necessary to protect people from

dangerous unrepentant wrongdoers on some views of forgiveness, there is no such tension according to Risky Forgiveness. Reasons to stay in conflict with wrongdoers do not constitute reasons to withhold forgiveness on this view.

To recap, while Peggy might have weighty reasons to refrain from condoning Al's wrongdoing and protect herself and others from his mistreatment, these are not reasons to refrain from forgiving Al. According to Risky Forgiveness, so long as Peggy has some reason, however weak, to think that Al will go on to fulfill all of his reparative obligations, it is possible and permissible for Peggy to forgive. One might still worry that Peggy is being irrational in forgiving Al even if she is not doing anything morally impermissible. Indeed, Peggy's coworkers think her forgiveness is reckless. This kind of disagreement is common in discussions regarding forgiveness, both intra and interpersonally. We often vacillate about whether to forgive, regret our past choices to forgive or not, and vow to make better decisions about forgiveness in the future. This same kind of tension arises in discussions with others. In some cases, we encourage others to forgive, and accuse them of being too cautious if they do not. In other cases, we are disappointed in those we judge to forgive too quickly and urge them to be more careful in the future. Don't these criticisms amount to accusations of irrationality? If so, how can Risky Forgiveness account for this very common and seemingly sensible way of thinking and talking about forgiveness?

Risky Forgiveness will not be able to make sense of accusations of irrational forgiveness, since the view is committed to forgiveness being elective.¹⁹ However, adopting this view can help us get clearer about, and ultimately improve, our disagreements about whether to forgive. According to Risky Forgiveness, forgiving involves taking a risk. So, we can gain insight into how to effectively disagree about forgiveness by thinking about how to effectively disagree about other relevantly similar risks.

¹⁹ Strictly speaking, Risky Forgiveness is compatible with accusations of irrationality when victims' choices to forgive don't align with their values and preferences. But as argued above, I take this form of irrationality to be compatible with electivity, since what renders these instances of forgiveness irrational are the victims' own values.

Take caffeine consumption during pregnancy. Disagreement on this topic is common and fraught. Pregnant people are often advised not to consume caffeine during pregnancy, and they are sometimes criticized quite harshly if they decide to do so. But even if caffeine consumption increases the risk of miscarriage, this should not settle whether any particular pregnant person should or shouldn't consume caffeine. That decision depends on the degree to which the individual values and disvalues the relevant outcomes (i.e., how much they value/disvalue consuming caffeine and how much they value/disvalue experiencing a miscarriage). Because people value these outcomes differently, they will come to different conclusions about caffeine consumption during pregnancy, all of which can be rationally permissible.

Importantly, we can have useful discussions about consuming caffeine during pregnancy with people who make very different decisions on the matter. We can come to value the relevant outcomes differently based on these discussions, revise our assessments of the likelihoods of these events, and offer helpful guidance once we know others' values. Thus, disagreement and discussion of this kind of risk shouldn't be avoided, even if accusations of irrationality, recklessness, and over caution should. The same can be said for forgiveness. Disagreeing about forgiveness can be useful. Perhaps Peggy will come to value standing up for herself via blame more than she did previously after talking with her concerned coworkers. But these revisions are not corrections and they do not render Peggy more rational than she was before. It's also possible that Peggy will ultimately decide to forgive Al again, despite her coworkers' reservations. This kind of variance in risk taking, while sometimes frustrating and disappointing, should be tolerated. People have different values, and we can have meaningful disagreements about these matters without one party being in the wrong. Thus, while Risky Forgiveness cannot account for the intuition that decisions to forgive can be irrational, the view does make room for discussion and disagreement about forgiveness and offers us a way to better engage in these discussions.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I've presented the Risky Forgiveness View, according to which forgiveness, in virtue of involving a kind of risk taking, is both reasoned and elective. In addition to resolving the tension between the reasoned and elective nature of forgiveness, the view also accounts for several distinctive values associated with forgiveness. Risky Forgiveness can explain why forgiveness can be gift-like, courageous, and vulnerable. This view also provides a way to distinguish forgiveness from other ways of overcoming blame. In addition to distinguishing forgiveness from excuse, exemption, and justification, it can explain why forgiveness is distinct from letting go of blame: overcoming blame for the good of the victim (Brunning & Milam 2023), rising above: overcoming blame without caring whether the wrongdoer fulfills their reparative obligations, and letting off the hook: overcoming blame by revising what reparations are owed. While this view cannot give us everything we may want from an account of forgiveness, I hope to have established that taking a risk that wrongdoers will go on to fulfill all of their reparative obligations without being called on to do so via blame constitutes a promising candidate for at least one way we can forgive.

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