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Blame and Forgiveness

In what way is ceasing to blame a necessary condition for forgiveness? What initially interested me in the subject was the need to clarify what forgiveness requires as a change in the relationship with the offender. The result was rather that my attention was drawn to the complexity of blame and the need for an analysis that does not reduce it to one or the other of its dimensions.

I draw attention to the costs of confining philosophical discussion about blame to the sense of censure or reproach. Distinctions like that between angry and detached blame, between external and internal blame, between expressed and silent blame, are certainly useful but may be considered as approximations of a more crucial distinction between blame as a speech act with perlocutionary effects and blame as moral disapproval and attribution of moral responsibility, be it tacit or explicit. One of my claims is that a philosophical account of blame should not neglect the latter in favour of the former.

I will be arguing that:

a. Taken in the sense of moral disapproval and attribution of responsibility for a fault, as distinct from the second-personal expression of disapproval, ceasing to blame is not a necessary condition for forgiveness. On the contrary, as a specific response to wrongdoing, distinct from excuses and forgetting, forgiveness preserves the victims' judgement that a serious wrong has been inflicted to them and does not change the fact that they attribute responsibility for this wrong to the offender. It should be noted in passing that simply because the victim's judgement of culpability is directed at a wrong serious enough to warrant retribution, forgiveness is always elective, never mandatory. The one who forgives, while deciding not to retaliate in any way (or, if taking revenge is not an option, while 'overcoming' resentment in some other way), does not, however, waive the judgement of culpability. In this sense, it is not just that ceasing to blame is not a necessary condition for forgiveness, but also that continuing to blame is required for forgiveness to be distinct from other reactions to a wrong on the victim's part.

b. Taken in the sense of reproach, second-personal censure, ceasing to blame is a necessary condition for forgiveness. To those who offer their forgiveness and simultaneously reproach you for the same misconduct, you might legitimately point out a kind of contradiction or at least some inconsistency.

However my intention is not to suggest that semantic clarification would suffice to understand the relationship between forgiveness and blame. My claim is not that the problem rests upon a misunderstanding about blame and that all is needed is to specify in what sense the term is used. The semantic network of blame would benefit from being presented as a conceptual complex that goes from weaker to stronger forms, from the less personal to the more personal, from calm disapproval to angry censure.

My stance on the issue of the relationship between blame and forgiveness is not dependent

only on the form of blame considered, but also on whether 'forgiveness' stands for the commitment to forgive or for the subsequent process and the evolution of the forgiver's attitudes and possibly of the relationship (if any) with the offender.¹

Many philosophers do not see any disadvantage in considering the terms blame and resentment as almost interchangeable, so that it is possible for them to make this claim that to forgive is, roughly, to forswear blaming. For such a claim to appear somewhat plausible, blame must be understood in a way that emphasises its emotional and expressive aspects, its 'judgemental' dimension in the pejorative sense, to the detriment of its 'judgemental' structure in the logical sense (blame involving a judgement of blameworthiness).

Some have claimed not only that blame and forgiveness are psychologically difficult to combine, but also that their incompatibility is of a quasi-logical nature. According to such a view, the problem is just a version of Kolnai's paradox of forgiveness: In the event of a wrong, forgiveness is either unjustified and thus inappropriate, or irrelevant. For it is supposed to be a response to a wrong serious enough to justify retribution and to call for it. Then retribution is the appropriate reaction, not forgiveness. If a wrong is not serious enough to justify and call for retribution as the fitting response, it cannot be addressed by forgiveness either, for there is nothing to forgive. The apparent paradox is that forgiveness implies a condition, the gravity of the fault, which, if fulfilled, makes forgiveness inappropriate (Kolnai, 1974).

Here is a rewording of Kolnai's paradox in terms of blame: If the wrong is serious enough to deserve to be blamed, then it ought to be blamed, not to be forgiven. As John Kekes puts it: 'When blaming wrongdoers is reasonable, there is no reason to forgive them; and when blaming them is unreasonable, there is nothing to forgive.' (Kekes, 2009: 488) The argument takes for granted that blame is a form of retribution, as such incompatible with forgiveness because the latter implies forswearing retributive responses. In order to make the claim more plausible, Kekes needs to start from a most questionable premise, which he calls the 'corrected standard view', which he does not firmly establish: that the victim's fitting response to a wrong is not resentment, but blame, and thus that forgiveness should be understood as the overcoming of blame, not of resentment.

A major difference between the concept of blame and that of resentment is that the latter is exclusively that of a reactive attitude of an emotional nature (which is certainly not exclusively emotional in the sense that it would not involve any judgement). The point is that resentment is entirely and essentially reactive. In some aspects, especially that of an affective response to the perception of agency, blame is very similar to resentment. But blaming is also something we do (an action, not a reaction) in evaluative contexts that are not those of a response to direct interaction.

Plan of the full paper:

1. Blame and Kolnai's paradox of forgiveness
2. Blame between resentment and indignation
3. Against the reduction of blame to personal reproach
4. The role of blame in a dynamic account of forgiveness

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¹ On this, see my 'Forgiveness and Weak Agency':
<https://academic.oup.com/aristotelian/article/118/1/107/4944696/>

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