

## ***Forgiving the Unrepentant (1)***

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### ***Abstract***

Forgiveness is one possible response by a 'victim' to a specific act of wrongdoing, especially when the 'wrongdoer' apologises and invites joint condemnation of the act ("I'm sorry, that was really stupid of me"), perhaps explaining the source of misjudgement or ignorance that brought it about. In this paper, however, I will ask what the victim can do when faced with an *unrepentant* wrongdoer, perhaps some-one who even refuses to acknowledge that a wrong act was committed or that the victim 'really' suffered ("stop complaining, I didn't hurt you!"). Importantly, I will ask if it is possible to forgive some-one just for being who they are - for example, estranged parents - without necessarily implying an attempt to resume a broken relationship. This will involve a conceptual analysis of the term as used in the situation, in parallel to a phenomenological analysis of how the victim is to come to *see* the wrongdoer and her act in order to forgive her. My account will stress two aspects of the 'wrongdoing situation' in order to relocate the problem rather than attempt to solve it - first, the wrongdoer's unique narrative history, and the more or less intelligible role played by the wrong act within such a self-understanding; second, the fundamental uncertainty of motive that lies at the heart of all human action and thus impedes one's ability to ever fully understand a wrong act, whether committed by others or by oneself.

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### ***Introduction***

Michael Frayn's 1998 play *Copenhagen* describes the relationship between two atomic physicists, the Dane Niels Bohr and the German Werner Heisenberg. They first met in the 1920s and became close friends. The Second World War and the occupation of Denmark separated the two men not only geographically but ideologically as well. They met briefly when Heisenberg visited Copenhagen in 1941, and then again in 1947, but this marked the definite end of the relationship. As Frayn and other biographers have revealed, the relationship was a complicated one, and it would be simplistic to say simply that Heisenberg was seeking to renew their closeness on his two visits and that Bohr chose to rebuff him. What is certain, however, is that Bohr was indignant about Heisenberg's support for Nazi Germany and especially for the German atomic weaponry programme, and hurt by his implied attitudes to Bohr as a Dane and half-Jew. At some stage, then, Bohr must have undergone an extensive thought process about whether and how to forgive his former friend.

It is this thought process I wish to examine in this essay, and if possible to find some general conclusions about the nature of forgiveness and the conceptual difficulties involved. My approach will differ from most accounts of forgiveness in three important ways:

1. I will *not* be interested in an isolated *act* of direct wrongdoing against the victim, an act for which the wrongdoer may then apologise to and beg forgiveness from the victim; rather, I will be interested in a hurtful attitude – perhaps as manifest in a series of representative acts – maintained through time, within a context of the wrongdoer's concrete life history and set of projects and commitments extending into the future.
2. Heisenberg's attitude is not aimed at Bohr, and his hurting Bohr is not directly intended, but an indirectly intended 'double-effect' (to some extent foreseen) of his allegiance to a separate and incompatible value.

3. For whatever reason (about which I shall speculate near the end of this paper), Heisenberg is unrepentant, even after the war. There is no invitation to a joint condemnation of what is to be henceforth deemed a wrong but aberrant act, nor any desire to renew a (modified) friendship. Such joint condemnation and attempt at reconciliation are often considered necessary conditions for forgiveness (e.g. by Haber, Murphy and Roberts). In my chosen example, however, any protracted decision-making on Bohr's part about whether and how to forgive will be strictly *unilateral*, as if Heisenberg had effectively died. It would involve somehow accepting the sort of person Heisenberg was at heart, in the sense of his settled dispositions, preferences, commitments and self-understanding, rather than on the basis of what either of the two men desired him to become.

As should now be clear, therefore, the purpose of this essay will not be to develop a comprehensive search for necessary and sufficient conditions for the objective ascription of the concept, as if by an idealised third party observer, and corresponding as closely as possible to our intuitions in the different cases. Rather, I will be more interested in the men's particular points of view, each of himself and of the other, and as such my goal will be more to relocate the conceptual problem, and especially to reveal some of the systemic *uncertainty* that is endemic at every level of the participants' thinking. (2)

A mutual friend of the two men, like Bohr's wife Margrethe (the third character in Frayn's play), might approach Bohr after the war with the suggestion that Bohr 'ought' to forgive him and reconcile himself with him, or that Heisenberg 'deserves' it, and Margrethe might offer different sorts of reasons: "for old time's sake," for the mutual professional and private advantages of future co-operation, or simply on compassionate grounds e.g. because Heisenberg has already suffered enough (through international academic ostracism, not to mention the destruction of much of what he valued) for his misguided political views. Importantly, she might also attempt to *excuse* (that he wasn't himself) (3) or *justify* (that he was thus better placed to sabotage the atomic programme) his continued allegiance to Germany. However, Bohr could have replied that such 'deserved' or obligatory forgiveness would lose its essential gift-giving, elective status; all the more so since Margrethe's reasons are instrumental, *overlooking* the hurt rather than forgiving Heisenberg *for* the hurt. All the work would have been done by Heisenberg in such a case, and any ensuing forgiveness would be either too easy or merely superfluous.

Alternatively, Margrethe might tell Bohr to reject all thoughts of forgiveness: former friend or not, the man supported a clearly evil regime throughout the war, indirectly supported the occupation of Denmark, hurting you in the process, and has shown no indications of contrition; your forgiveness will amount to no more than unjust condonation of his misdeeds and an abject lack of self-respect.

### ***Kolnai's logical paradox of forgiveness***

Bohr's type of conflict is well captured by Cheshire Calhoun, to whom we shall be returning at length. For the moment this conflict should be carefully but usefully *distinguished* from the paradox [sic] of forgiveness described by Aurel Kolnai. Kolnai takes the example of the repentant wrongdoer to generate one side of the paradox:

"Suppose [the wrongdoer] has clearly undergone a change of heart. He has revoked and disavowed the offence in point and effected a rupture with his past in the given context' he has credibly 'mended his ways', apologised in a manner unmistakably manifesting or firmly presaging such a turn, in an appropriate case has made restitution, and so on. [...]. Forgiveness has now lost its *raison d'être*: there is no room for it, seeing that *there is nothing to be forgiven*." (Kolnai 1973, p. 98, italics original)

However, says Kolnai, forgiveness might also entail a risk of (i) condonation of the wrong act and (ii) self-denigration in the face of a clearly insulting message about the victim's perceived relative worth; both such entailments would be wrong. The paradox, says Kolnai, is that "forgiveness is either unjustified or pointless" (99).

Now, like Kolnai's victim, Bohr's conflict does not involve the justice of acknowledging excuses and justifications, since they have already been factored into the description before Heisenberg's attitude is perceived *as* wrong and hurtful. Importantly, however, Bohr's conflict does not involve Kolnai's 'pointlessness' of forgiveness after genuine repentance, since Heisenberg, we have said, is effectively unrepentant and estranged. However, Kolnai's warning about the risk of forgiveness entailing self-denigration and an acquiescence in evil are certainly one side of Bohr's conflict. On the other, we may ask what the *point* would be of forgiving the unrepentant Heisenberg, beyond overcoming the corrosive resentment that Bohr might justifiably feel toward him (4). In trying to answer these questions, I shall only go part-way toward a full conceptual analysis, whereupon I prefer to rely more on a phenomenological account. This will be an account of how Bohr must come to *see* Heisenberg *in order to forgive him*, and come to understand Heisenberg's attempts to make sense of his ostensibly wrong attitudes within the context of his (Heisenberg's) own 'maximally-integrated narrative history'. Importantly, Heisenberg as a choice-making person will not be directly involved in this phenomenological process of forgiveness, even though his attempts to conceive of his own life will be essential to the process.

My approach may also be usefully contrasted with two other 'unilateral' views, the first being that of Bishop Butler. Butler's account is very subtle and I cannot do it justice here, but one of his claims is that forgiveness could be unilateral, and indeed, need be nothing more than the forswearing of resentment on religious or moral grounds. The *status* of the wrongdoer is taken into account *qua* fellow-child of God (5), but the determinate, particular nature of the wrongdoer and *her* act (note the emphasis), perhaps even including her possible repentance, does not seem to be directly relevant. I will agree that many forms of forgiveness do not require the wrongdoer's participation or interest, but I do not believe that the priority given to mere group membership can yield a sufficiently 'full-blooded' (Calhoun's term) forgiveness for those of us without the lonely destiny of a Socrates or Jesus or Nietzsche, whose self-respect is not grounded in the regard of other people.

The second type of unilateral forgiveness could be merely instrumental. Indeed, some see forgiveness as essentially instrumental (6), deriving its value – to those with the forgiving disposition, as well as to those forgiven and to society in general by maintaining smooth cohesive relations – from certain qualities or facts that follow, or tend to follow, from the widespread act of forgiveness. I do not believe, however, that this accords with how we actually *use* the concept, in the same way that utilitarianism has a hard time accounting for our use of concepts such as altruism and integrity (7). An attenuated form of forgiveness, if cultivated as a disposition, will obviously have instrumental utility in easing complicated relationships, but then it will again cease to be 'full-blooded'. Let me therefore postpone this point until we reach Calhoun's discussion below.

### ***Distinction from some cognate concepts (8).***

To continue this initial analysis, I propose distinguishing forgiveness from other similar concepts. First, however, we need to understand some of the conceptual presuppositions of these concepts, and to adumbrate just how my account will differ in the assumptions it will have to make. Typically, an act of wrongdoing, committed *knowingly, freely* and *deliberately* by an agent, gives the victim an entitlement to resent that agent for the act itself as well as for the implied demeaning message accompanying the act. These three psychologically inter-related

adverbs ('knowingly', 'freely' and 'deliberately') are crucial to my account, since I aim to question the idealised rationality they presuppose. As a starting point, let me put forward the following claims, which concern the way the putative wrongdoer sees herself, her own biographical history, and her developing relationships with those around her:

1. The Platonic claim. Starting with the idea that evil results only from ignorance of the good, I claim that putative wrongdoers are never completely aware *that* they are doing wrong and *of* the full extent and quality of the bad consequences of their wrong act. Much of this awareness is essentially psychological: the only way to generate the necessary confidence to commit an act which, upon impartial reflection and with maximal objectivity will appear wrong, is to have recourse to some temporary redescription of the act whereby it becomes excused or justified in the wrongdoer's own terms and perspective at the moment of commission. Notice that the Platonic claim is not normative: the wrongdoer may still be equally blameworthy for having neglected to make sufficient effort to *become* relevantly aware.
2. The Kantian claim: putative wrongdoers are never completely free (in the sense of being sufficiently informed of one's causal relationship with one's environment) to choose to do wrong, and cannot therefore fully intend to do wrong, since intention logically requires freedom and knowledge. As such we cannot conceive of a *rational* person deciding to choose a recognised evil. This claim is mutually dependent on the Platonic claim, in the non-viciously circular way many discussions of rationality become.

Now the Kantian claim is perhaps more plausible than the Platonic claim, but I do not plan to argue for either at this point. I shall return to both claims later on, if only to support the plausibility of the assumption rather than to provide a self-sufficient argument for which I do not have space. My discussion will aim to relocate the problem of forgiveness, given these assumptions.

Resentment should here be distinguished from anger or indignation, since anger is too broad a reaction and indignation need not be response to harm committed to the self but to moral wrongs merely witnessed (9). The victim may then choose to forgive the wrongdoer for the act and thereby attempt to resume the relationship, even if it will probably be different from what it was before the act. Forgiveness thus involves a decision to work against the resentment, at least by attempting to control the behavioural disposition that would normally have been the manifestation of such resentment, and by striving to suppress its deliberative priority. The resentment may well smoulder on, and to the extent that it does so, one may say that the victim has still not 'truly' forgiven. But this would be too much, especially since I do not want to get side-tracked into a debate about the status of such emotions – and their response to rational control – in our moral thinking. Finally, forgiveness, or rather, 'forgivingness' (Roberts's point), the disposition to forgive, is normally seen as a virtue, comprising moral demands that may not be satisfied by actions alone but which require certain motives and character traits.

*Mercy* differs from forgiveness in two principal ways: the person in a position to bestow mercy by reducing just punishment for the wrongdoing (for example, a judge) need not have been personally wronged and thus need feel no resentment; and second, mercy requires a direct public manifestation, including being publicly accepted, whereas forgiveness, if genuine, will only involve an indirect manifestation of the change of heart through the victim's subsequent behaviour, and need not be accepted by the wrongdoer (one of Butler's points). One striking example of the distinction would be a victim who forgives her wrongdoer and yet who nevertheless demands merciless punishment for consequentialist reasons.

Most importantly, forgiveness must be distinguished from *condonation* of or *indifference* to the

wrong act (10). Condonation involves a clear awareness of the wrongness (i.e. a disapproval) of the act, but the deliberate refraining from any retributive response or public condemnation of it with the implied acquiescence in evil. Forgiveness is steadfast in seeing the act as wrong, and in continuing to condemn it as such, while at the same time being more interested in the agent and one's relationship with her:

"Forgiveness is [...] the decision to see the wrongdoer in a new, more favourable light. Nor is this decision in any way a condonation of wrong. The forgiver never gives up her opposition to the wrongdoer's action, nor does she even give up her opposition to the wrongdoer's bad character traits. Instead, she revises her judgement of the person himself -- where the person is understood to be something other than or more than the character traits of which she does not approve." [Hampton (and Murphy) 1988, p. 84-5]

This is perhaps the most difficult part of forgiveness as commonly understood, and involves a misleading simplification of the phenomenology. Somehow we are supposed to divorce the act from the agent, to see it as an aberration on an otherwise admirable character. Augustine's dictum to 'hate the sin, but love the sinner' -- the metaphor of sin as illness -- becomes more plausible when the wrongdoer, as part of the apologies and declared intention to repent that are often seen as necessary conditions to forgiveness (11), effectively invites the victim to a joint condemnation of the act. Without such apologies and intended repentance, it is argued (by e.g. Kolnai and Murphy), forgiveness becomes little more than timorous condonation of evil and the associated lack of self-respect:

"a too ready tendency to forgive [...] may be sign that one lacks respect for oneself. [...] Not to have [...] the 'reactive attitude' of resentment when our rights are violated is to convey -- emotionally -- either that we do not think we have rights or that we do not take our rights very seriously. [...] To seek restoration [of relationships] at all cost -- even at the cost of one's very human dignity -- can hardly be a virtue. [...] If I count morally as much as anyone else (as I surely do), a failure to resent moral injuries done to me is a failure to care about the moral value incarnate in my own person [...] and this a failure to care about the very rules of morality" (Murphy 1988, p. 17ff.) (12).

In passing, the following asymmetry should be noted: I am assuming that the victim is able to recognise the wrongness of the act committed against her (and hence is worried about condoning it), while the wrongdoer, according to the Platonic claim above, is not fully aware of such wrongness. This is because of the *place* held by the act in the wrongdoer's and the victim's respective narrative self-understandings. The very intimacy of the wrongdoer's agency requires psychological redescription if the act is to be committed at all *by her*, whereas the victim's passivity means that her awareness of the wrongness becomes much more immediate and reliably objective: it is the victim's projects and commitments that are disrupted by the act and that have to be adjusted with more or less difficulty to deal with such disruption. Again, I do not have space to argue for this as an independent claim beyond the reader's indulgence, although I will add to it later on (13).

Finally, two more cognate terms which will be relevant later on: *reconciliation* and *exculpation*. As Kolnai puts it (1973, p. 94), reconciliation "is likely to be largely based on forgiveness but it emphasises the *result*, not the essence, of forgiveness; and is a reciprocal return [...] to friendly relations, not a one-sided change of [...] attitude" (14). This is important because of its symmetry: both parties need to consider the relationship *worth* salvaging or resuming, even if the wrong was only committed 'one way'. As such, not only does the victim have to choose to forgive, but the wrongdoer has to choose to ask for forgiveness. Either party may refuse, the former because of the severity of the offence or the insufficient apology, the latter because she denies the victim's entitlement to resentment, or to such a degree of resentment.

Exculpation, as its etymology suggests, is the discovery of sufficient justification or excuse to release the wrongdoer from guilt, at least in part. This is based on the legal paradigm, where excuses (e.g. insanity) and justification (e.g. self-defence) can be recognised as mitigating circumstances when ascribing a penalty. However, just as in law a just verdict will require taking the particular circumstances into account, so one cannot properly forgive an act of *prima facie* wrongdoing on the basis of excuses or justifications, since the act then ceases to be wrong and moves outside the scope of forgiveness. This is again Calhoun's argument, to which we shall be returning. In acknowledging excuses and justifications and thereby 'forgiving' the wrongdoer, we are doing no more than exculpating her, and giving her *her due*. Rather, forgiveness comes into play once all the exculpating factors have been taken into account and the act *still* found wrong.

Haber (1991, p. 102) offers one interpretation to preserve the virtuous electivity of forgiveness while still maintaining the intelligibility of statements like 'you ought to forgive her'. In Haber's view, forgivingness is an *imperfect* virtue like charity. One is expected to be charitable *some* of the time and in some form, even if not here and now; one is liable to criticism for not being charitable enough or for being too charitable (e.g. at the expense of others who may have a valid claim to your attention and resources) *over the long run*. The disposition to be charitable does not generate any obligation once a set of necessary and sufficient conditions is met, nor does it rule out the demonstration of charity in the face of specifically prohibitive circumstances; an uncharitable person can perform acts of charity, and a charitable person can fail to do so. The 'ought' in the above admonition is not a perfect 'ought' or even a supererogatory 'ought', but an 'ought' that, if regularly and reliably unheeded over a lifetime, would be cause for censure (15). This is an important part of coming to see the process of forgiveness as extended, rather than as an isolated response to an isolated act of wrongdoing; as such it is much more dependent on character than on some idealised rationality. However, as I shall below, it is only half the story.

What about the phenomenological aspect of such a virtue? There must surely be a more complicated thought process than merely aiming for statistical praiseworthiness over a lifetime; how does it affect the way I *see* the wrongdoer? The most obvious way, argues Haber, is in an increased willingness to give the benefit of the doubt when desert questions cannot be decisively answered for lack of circumstantial or motivational information, the victim simply does not know whether the wrong was serious enough to merit resentment (whatever her 'natural' reaction, which may well be over-dramatised), or whether the excuses offered or discovered were sufficient (in-itself or for-me), or whether the declared repentance will be subsequently borne out in deed (good intentions sabotaged by *akrasia* or unforeseeable temptations and obstacles).

### ***Calhoun I: aspirational forgiveness***

This essay has no intention to exhaustively survey the discussion of forgiveness in the recent literature, some of the main points of which I have adduced above. Rather, I will jump right into a more detailed examination of a rather atypical piece by Cheshire Calhoun, whose approach and conclusions I found initially very appealing. Calhoun agrees that we often speak of 'sufficient reasons' to forgive, of independent values to be promoted by forgiving, and Margrethe might well give Bohr such reasons to forgive Heisenberg, if not for the latter's repentance, than at least because of other facts or as a means to achieving other desirable goals (forgiveness as an essentially instrumental virtue). We are tempted to start one's deliberations with the question "Is there anything for the sake of which I ought to forgive even though I am clearly entitled to resentment?" (Calhoun 1992, p. 78). Calhoun accepts Haber's 'imperfect duty' interpretation: if I forgive for the sake of the cherished memory of a friendship, for example, then this is indeed more than is due, it is generous and charitable, therefore not perfectly obligatory. But importantly, argues Calhoun, the injury itself is unaddressed and ignored, and may therefore continue to threaten the friendship indirectly; and "because it is unaddressed, there is a real

danger that efforts not to dwell on it will ultimately fail" (*ibid.*). Such forgiveness is only 'minimalist'. This, however, is not what one would normally *aspire* to grant or obtain: 'aspirational' forgiveness must involve the entire person, including the act of wrongdoing as an irreducible and unignorable manifestation of the wrongdoer's character. On this view, all freely-willed acts will reveal something about their agent, and acts with more serious consequences to others will reveal more. To use the language of the Augustinian dictum, if the sin still remains after the excuses and justifications come in, and if the sinner was free and knew what she was doing, then the sin cannot be separated from the sinner.

And Haber's 'benefit of the doubt' argument for electivity will not do: Calhoun rejects it by calling it elective "only in a weak sense" -- and such elective forgiveness again minimalist -- since it presupposes that if we had sufficient knowledge we would know what to do. No, says Calhoun, there is no room for doubt in aspirational forgiveness, and it can only concern the unrepentant:

"Unlike minimalist forgiveness, the forgiveness we aspire to get (and give) is forgiveness for culpable, unrepentant, unpunished, and unrestituted wrongdoing whose existence is not dismissed by refusing to think about it. Or, more weakly stated, we want forgiveness for the culpability that remains after all excuses, justification, restitution and repentant reforms have been made and accepted -- a culpability that warrants our continuing to be resented. When I ask aspiringly for forgiveness, I ask you to forgive me for something that renders me undeserving and entitles you to hard feelings toward me" (Calhoun 1992, p. 80) (16).

The key point about aspirational forgiveness is that I have moral choice, and choice of a specific kind (Calhoun 1992, p. 81). Under minimalist forgiving using Haber's benefit-based electivity, because of insufficient data or vague standards we must 'choose' whom to count as deserving. Under aspirational forgiveness, the choice is about how to respond to the decidedly undeserving.

On the other side of Kolnai's paradox -- the threat of condonation and self-denigration -- Calhoun argues rightly that the situation is not conclusive; a refusal to forgive may show a hidebound rule-worship and a lack of magnanimity, while, in purely consequentialist terms it might indeed be forgiveness which is most likely to prevent future wrongdoing by the same agent or any witnesses. "As a point about human moral psychology, the idea that resentment, protest, and punishment best effect moral improvement is surely misguided. The last thing some need is yet more resentment and punishment" (Calhoun 1992, p. 85) (17). This is a narrower point than what I am discussing, however. What interests me is the moral phenomenology of the situation, and the irreducible distinctiveness of different cases, and the fundamental uncertainty that lies at the heart of such a phenomenology.

### ***Calhoun II: a narrative understanding of the wrongdoer***

So if the wrongdoing cannot be excused or justified away or jointly condemned for aspirational forgiveness, its residual wrongness must be faced squarely. But here Calhoun describes a further problem, that of making sense of a *person* freely choosing a wrong act. We are no longer afraid of condonation or self-denigration, but of losing intelligibility, which is what is ultimately so hurtful in trying to deal with a close friend's unexpected wrongdoing. Daniel Dennett, inspired by Strawson (1974) claims that:

"our assumption that an entity is a person is shaken precisely in those cases where it matters: when wrong has been done and the question of responsibility arises. For in these cases the grounds for saying that the person is culpable (the evidence that he did wrong, was aware he was doing wrong, and did wrong of his own free will) are in themselves

grounds for doubting that it is a person we are dealing with at all" (18).

The first resentment, as a 'reactive attitude' (Strawson's term) of the agent for the act presupposed commission by a rational agent -- rather than, say, a volcano or a honeybee -- and the possibility of establishing or maintaining an interpersonal relationship with that person. But if we persist in believing the act to be wrong, we find ourselves adopting an 'objective attitude' (again, Strawson's term) to the agent, beginning to lose our resentment and see her as a case of treatment and social policy. However, argues Calhoun, the presupposition of general personhood, guided by rational and moral principles as we are, does not go far enough; it stops short of the specificity of the act and of the particular person's life into which it fits. So while the agent's metaphysical personal status is threatened by an increasing awareness of the willed wrongness of the act, the integrity of the agent's particular biography need not be, especially since the act play quite a different role -- and no less fundamental a role -- in that biography. And it is in *this* context that the act can and must make sense. I quote Calhoun at length:

"Normal persons also live through time, serially confronting different configurations of events, obstacles, unasked-for responsibilities, internal needs and motivations, others' sometimes irrational demands and needs, etc. In living through time, normal persons need to make the sorts of choices that will add up to and sustain an integrated, rather than fragmented, biography. They need their actions to make sense within, or to make sense of, their past and projected future lives. What I will suggest is that aspirational forgiveness is achieved by seeing that, although an agent's wrongdoing fails to make moral sense, it does make biographical sense. I will also suggest that a commitment to going beyond a merely minimalist forgiveness is also a commitment to deprioritising the moral and to seeing that there may be equally important ways that normal persons of good will need to make sense of their lives" (p. 92) (19).

Note that this process is "sufficiently burdensome that it would be unreasonable to require that we do this for everyone" (p. 95). But at the same time we jeopardise their status in our eyes as persons. Here, says Calhoun, we have to make the radical choice of whether or not to forgive, with all the difficulties that this entails for the future, or to "disengage, removing ourselves from harm's way." As such our relationship with the agent involves continuous discovery. With minor slights, we may ignore them and merely add that behavioural disposition to our stock of inductive knowledge of that person, in parallel to the process of discovering what aspects of our behaviour irritate others. With more serious shortcomings, the sort that will be inevitable in even the most harmonious relationships, the limit is approached where the Heisenberg, *if he is to be entirely frank* (or if Bohr is to be entirely frank with himself in Heisenberg's absence), can only say to Bohr: "this is simply what I do; I know it bothers you but I cannot guarantee that it will not happen again. You must decide whether to accept me -- and if necessary forgive me -- for being the sort of person I am."

### ***Criticism of Calhoun***

Calhoun's approach and conclusions are very appealing, but if I have understood him correctly he is vulnerable to three main criticisms which will occupy us for the remainder of this paper. Rather than a setp-by-step attack of Calhoun's argumentation, however, these three criticisms represent problems for any account of forgiveness, and so Calhoun's piece is more of a springboard to provide a distinctive framework for understanding these problems. As such, my aim is not to refute Calhoun in order to provide a better explanation of the same phenomena, but rather to *relocate the problem* away from the questions at the centre of Calhoun's and others' interest, and to expose the essential limitations of philosophical enquiry in coming to grips with the concept of forgiveness. The three problems may be called the problem of relevant timeframe; the threat of radical subjectivism; and the ineliminable uncertainty of motive.

(i) the relevant timeframe

Like other writers, both Kolnai and Calhoun see forgiveness as primarily an act based on a decision in response to another act, in other words, as a process confined to a small slice of time. This is certainly the case for a large class of acts of forgiveness. However, I would argue that all such instances can only be minimalist, and therefore not the sort that should be of interest to Calhoun; real aspirational forgiveness is a process rather than an act, and takes time, perhaps months or years, and it will often be difficult to mark a completion date or even a steady progression. One aspect of this process will be a decline in resentment, but again, this will be hard to measure subjectively since certain events could trigger a smouldering, obscure resentment to burst into flame.

"The decision to forgive is normally only the beginning of a process of forgiveness that may take a considerable time to complete. Indeed there are cases in which it is never completed even though one is committed to completing it once the decision to forgive has been made. [...] the process of forgiveness is not completed until one has entirely rid oneself of the sense of injury. But it cannot be carried to fruition immediately by some act of will" (Horsbrugh 1974, p. 271).

I can imagine that most people go to their deathbed with a whole string of past relationships that included injurious acts and attitudes that have never been properly forgiven -- even though the relationship has continued and developed. And this fact works both ways -- we on our deathbeds may never be aware of the full scale of hurt that we have clumsily foisted on others, or of their efforts to forgive us while adapting the relationship. Calhoun is right to suggest that the starting point for aspirational forgiveness is the effort to understand the significance of the act in the other person's narrative history and in her own attempts at making sense of their lives; by he underestimates just how complicated this can be, how vague this can be, and how long it can take.

And often the relationship between the original wrongdoer and victim will itself continue to evolve, hindering the possibility of the sort of accurate observations Calhoun thinks would be required to justify any decisions about whether to forgive. Even when the relationship has been broken off, when the wrongdoer is dead or estranged, one's own memories of both the injurious act or attitude, as well as its context, one's knowledge of the wrongdoer at the time etc. are all subject to change. Indeed, so much depends on the other relationships and projects in which the wrongdoer and victim find themselves at the time, that one party may simply not feel the *need* to repent, or the other party to forgive. As such, considerations about the value of the relationship (and therefore about the effort one could justify in trying to preserve it) will differ when either side is thinking about whether and how best to apologise or forgive respectively.

(ii) the threat of radical subjectivism

It is hard to tell whether Calhoun intends his conclusions to be taken seriously as a counterbalance to other types of discussion or as a replacement. If the latter, he threatens to throw the moral baby out with the minimalist bathwater. When we make negative moral judgements about somebody's actions, we presuppose that there is a point to expressing such judgements. Calhoun seems to be flirting with a radical subjectivism that would sacrifice the possibility of justified censure to a highly contingent compatibility between different concrete personalities with less than perfect knowledge of each other. It is hard to imagine any friendship lasting long enough for real intimacy to develop when one can effectively say "like it or lump it" as if all preferences had been settled once and for all.

And while scepticism about finding a general conclusion to cover all cases might be in order,

looking for a quasi-objective narrative context may also be wishful thinking; first, there are doubts about how much one can ever know another human being. Younger people have simpler views of the world and fewer defining experiences, which might suggest they are easier to get to know. On the other hand, their preferences and self-understandings are far from settled, and so any knowledge of them has to struggle to keep up with the changes, some of which will result from your knowledge. Part of the way that a young person finds her way around the world is to bump into things. Moral principles are first learned as restraints without further explanations, and one important manifestation of such principles is the censure of close friends.

Older people tend to have more settled preferences, but have hidden depths that can never be properly fathomed. In such a case it really should be a question of giving the benefit of the doubt, which, *pace* Calhoun, does not presuppose greater certainty of what to do were one hypothetically to have sufficiently intimate knowledge. For such intimacy is impossible. But every individual is older and younger in different ways, and therefore requires corrective censure and the benefit of the doubt in different contexts in order to grow and for the relationship in question to develop. The act and the alleged harm will appear quite different to different agents of different ages, in terms of fitting -- comfortably or not -- into her remembered biographical network of choices, her character as formed by these choices and situational luck, and her long and short-term intentions at the moment of committing the act. In the same way, then, excuses and justifications may look quite different to the agent. And she might find herself unable to accept the 'objective' account which the observer is throwing at her. But this is not in itself a reason to refrain from throwing the objective account at her.

This is probably unfair to demand of Calhoun, since a comprehensive account of the limits to subjectivism would be too large and convoluted to be of much use. Nevertheless, it will remain a constant point of vulnerability in any particularist justification. Particularly in Heisenberg's case, where we know that certain historical deeds to which he lent his indirect support strike most as truly unforgivable.

(iii) The irreducible and ineliminable uncertainty of motive

The second criticism represented a set of forces that threaten to pull Calhoun's account apart. This third criticism would threaten to dissolve it. He seems to assume that every act, if it does not make moral sense and if it threatens our presupposition in the agent's essential personhood, must therefore make biographical sense as a regulative ideal of self-reflection (i.e. rather than a source of action). And this seems plausible. It was a particular person who generated the act, they did so freely, knowingly, and deliberately, and in their right mind, and so they *must* have had their own reasons. If such reasons cannot be ascertained even within a relationship of great intimacy, the story goes, they must nevertheless be assumed to be there. The wrong act, for example, might have been a lesser evil within a context that allowed only a limited number of viable options to be conceived by an agent with a distinctive way of understanding the world and the viable options within it. Calhoun might argue that any alternative conception would again threaten either the agent-person's moral responsibility for the act, or the agent's status as a person.

However, as always, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. For Calhoun's analysis is an extension of a conceptual framework into which everything is designed to fit, a framework based on what Williams (1995, p. 221) calls two "metaphysically special units": an action and an agent, linked by an unmediated relationship, which together generated a certain "purified conception of blame," based on the "seeming requirement of justice that the agent should be blamed for no more and no less than what was in his power." And the justification of blame -- in accordance with this purified conception of the conditions for blame -- also yields conditions for considering forgiveness as an option. And yet, the agent chooses (and will may be liable to blame) and is not herself *entirely* sure why she chooses. In saying this I am not simply shifting

the assumption of intelligibility one stage into the subconscious, where all sorts of childhood traumas await to explain each and every deed. Rather, I am suggesting a certain amount of irreducible uncertainty at the core of every person, an uncertainty whose nature will be different from person to person and from case to case: different gaps, different causal strings, different ultimate ends. When a given action, blameworthy under Williams's pure conception, becomes serious enough to distort or destroy a hitherto intimate relationship, then the chances are that it concerns something so fundamental that no intelligibility can be found, even in good faith, by the agent or a knowledgeable observer.

It is for this reason that every wise person will acknowledge a need for censure from what they consider as better-placed observers. Calhoun's aspirational forgiveness means that "one stops demanding that the person be different from what she is. [...] One may still put the person on moral trial and find her wanting. But aspirational forgiveness is the choice not to demand that she improve. It is the choice to place respecting another's way of making sense of her life before resentfully enforcing moral standards." (Calhoun 1992, p. 95). This is certainly part of the truth, but Calhoun seems to imply that every person has a *successful* and comprehensive way of 'making sense of their life' and that this should be respected. I would argue, however, that some attempts at making sense are merely a stab in the dark, and that the person concerned for her integrity will welcome censure in those areas where she is simply uncertain.

The most typical example of this fundamental uncertainty are decisions of great import that have to be made quickly, and where the consequences have to be embraced because of the associated impossibility of openly adhering to the principles one was forced to reject. As Frayn's Heisenberg puts it: "decisions make themselves when you're coming downhill at seventy kilometres an hour," which is shortly after he tells Bohr: "I always knew you'd be picking your way step by step down the slope behind me, digging all the capsized meanings and implications out of the snow" (Frayn 1998, p. 25). And this often means guessing at the narrative, often by forcing square pegs into round holes, a narrative that Calhoun is asking us to respect. Rationalisation is the name of the beast; I quote from Frayn's play again, where Bohr's wife Margrethe attacks Heisenberg for trying to rationalise what she sees as baser ambition:

"When you tell the story, yes, it all falls into place, it all has a beginning and a middle and an end. But I was there, and when I remember what it was like I'm there still, and I look around me and what I see isn't a story! It's confusion and rage and jealousy and tears and no one knowing what things mean or which way they're going to go." (Frayn 1998, p. 75)

And this is the reason, suggests Frayn, for Heisenberg's mysterious visit to Copenhagen in 1941. He found himself unable to integrate his continuing support for Nazi Germany into his partly contrived narrative understanding of who he was, and he was going to see Bohr, not for forgiveness or for condemnation, but for help in putting it all together as an intelligible background against which to make meaningful future choices.

*Heisenberg*: All at once the clear purposes inside my head lose all definite shape. The light falls on them and they scatter [...]

*Bohr*: There's something about himself that he doesn't know. Something he sees for an instant out of the corner of his eye, that vanishes every time he turns to look. [Frayn 1998, p. 90-91]

In the postscript to the play, Frayn discusses the attempts by biographers to come to grips with Heisenberg's elusive personality. To this end they were unsure how much to take of Heisenberg's own explanations for his past actions, since they sensed lingering uncertainty about why he had

made some controversial choices. "But," argues Frayn,

"the uncertainty surely begins long before the point where Heisenberg might have offered an explanation. He was under at least as many contradictory pressures at the time to shape the actions he later failed to explain, and the uncertainty would still have existed, for us and for him, even if he had been as open, honest, and helpful as it is humanly possible to be." [Frayn 1998, p. 100]

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(1) I would like to thank Carolyn Wilde at the University of Bristol, UK, for her suggestions to a much earlier draft of this paper, as well as Pierpaolo Marrone of the Università di Trieste in Italy and two anonymous reviewers whose insightful commentary I have tried to accommodate.

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(2) The central conceit of Frayn's play was to compare the systemic uncertainty at the root of atomic physics (to the principle of which Heisenberg gave his name) to a similar uncertainty at the root of human knowledge of oneself and others. [back](#)

(3) As Murphy argued (1988), Jesus on the cross should have said "Father, *excuse* them, for they now not what they do." As an anticipation of my argument, let me mention here that an act can be committed in this sort of ignorance, and then excused. However, an act can also be

committed, without being quite certain why, such that *later*, reasons can be ascribed to it in an effort to fit it into the agent's narrative understanding of herself. [back](#)

(4) In speaking of the 'point', I want to highlight the first impulse of searching for appropriate ends. Later, however, I will reject this narrow instrumental reasoning and advocate the possible intrinsic value of forgiveness. [back](#)

(5) One could also imagine a relevant status as fellow-End in Kant's Kingdom, fellow-member of the biological species etc. [back](#)

(6) This is the view of one of my two anonymous reviewers. See n. 1. [back](#)

(7) See Bernard Williams's seminal discussion in Smart, J. and Williams, B. *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, OUP 1973. [back](#)

(8) In what follows, I have made use of Murphy, J. 'Forgiveness and Mercy' in Craig, J. *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Routledge 1998. [back](#)

(9) Roberts (1995, p. 291) argues that 'resentment' is too brooding, too passive to capture the typical reaction to injury. Above all, God is more likely to be angry than resentful. I shall stick to resentment for the same reason that Peter Strawson does, that it presupposes a *person* being resented (see discussion below), whereas anger is too undirected. [back](#)

(10) Other cognate terms would include remission, absolution and atonement, which tend to be restricted to religious discourse and are therefore outside the scope of this paper. [back](#)

(11) See e.g. Kolnai 1973, Murphy (and Hampton) 1988, p. 24 and Roberts 1995. The subject of what constitutes adequate repentance is itself complex, involving a change of heart and a new understanding of oneself, the act and the victim that parallels that comprising forgiveness. Much of what I have to say in this paper could be used to develop an analysis of repentance, although I shall not have space here. [back](#)

(12) McNaughton (1999) emphasises that forgiveness doled out too lightly may also clash with other duties to the community when the wrongdoing in question (bombing in Northern Ireland) is directed against the community as a whole:

"Does it put others (those unable or unwilling to forgive) in a poor light, indeed a disloyal act at a moment when common suffering and condemnation should be the priority? Might it not undermine the position of those committed to fighting against the common evil?"  
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(13) I am grateful to one of my two anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point. See n. 1. [back](#)

(14) Roberts (1995, p. 293) writes that forgiveness essentially "aims at reconciliation." Clearly such reconciliation will be impossible in the event of an estranged or dead wrongdoer. [back](#)

(15) This retributive, unforgiving attitude is well characterised by Martha Nussbaum: "she who notes and reacts to every injustice, and who is preoccupied with assigning just punishments becomes oddly similar to those against whom she reacts. Retributive anger hardens the spirit, turning it against the humanity it sees." Nussbaum, M. 'Equity and mercy' in: Simmons, Cohen, Cohen and Beitz (eds.) *Punishment*, Princeton UP 1995, p. 163. [back](#)

(16) Calhoun raises an interesting point about the symmetry of forgiveness, i.e. that both wrongdoer and victim crave the same type of forgiveness. This relates to a later point I shall

make about the both parties considering a relationship worth saving after a wrong, so that one asks for and the other gives forgiveness. [back](#)

(17) Hampton (and Murphy) (1988) offers a more comprehensive discussion of forgiveness within the framework of punitive justice. [back](#)

(18) Dennett, D. 'Conditions of Personhood' in: Rorty A. (ed.) *Identities of Persons*, U of Cal Press 1976), quoted in Calhoun 1992, p. 89. [back](#)

(19) The impetus for the 'deprioritising' of the moral is clearly Bernard Williams. See his 'Ethics, Character and Morality' in: *Moral Luck*, CUP 1981, and his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard UP 1985. [back](#)