

Forgiveness and Letting Go: Ways of Changing the Normative Landscape*

Dana Kay Nelkin

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Abstract | Forgiveness is often distinguished from other ways of eliminating (or reducing) blame, such as letting go. In this paper, I focus on a conception of forgiveness as normative landscape change (alteration of the rights and obligations of relevant parties), and explore the distinction between forgiveness—understood in this way—and letting go. I highlight the explanatory power of this approach for distinguishing forgiveness and letting go, and contrast it with an alternative way, in which the focus is instead primarily on a kind of attitude change. I conclude by comparing the implications of both forgiveness and letting go for other phenomena we care about, such as reconciliation.

Keywords | blame; forgiveness; letting go; normative landscape; responsibility

Perdón y dejar ir: formas de cambiar el entorno normativo

Resumen | Con frecuencia, el perdón se distingue de otras formas de eliminar (o disminuir) la culpa, por ejemplo, el dejar ir. En este artículo me centro en una concepción del perdón como un cambio en el entorno normativo (la alteración de los derechos y de las obligaciones de las partes involucradas), y exploro la distinción entre el perdón—entendido de esta manera— y el dejar ir. Destaco el poder explicativo de este enfoque para distinguir el perdón y el dejar ir, y lo contrasto con una forma alternativa en la que el foco se centra, principalmente, en un tipo de cambio de actitud. Concluyo comparando las implicaciones que tienen el perdón y el dejar ir en otros fenómenos importantes, como la reconciliación.

Palabras clave | culpa; dejar ir; entorno normativo; perdón; responsabilidad

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Perdão e deixar ir: maneiras de mudar o ambiente normativo

Resumo | O perdão é muitas vezes diferenciado de outras formas de remoção (ou diminuição) da culpa, como, por exemplo, o deixar ir. Neste artigo, concentro-me em uma concepção do perdão como uma mudança no ambiente normativo (a alteração dos direitos e obrigações das partes envolvidas) e exploro a distinção entre o perdão — entendido dessa forma — e o deixar ir. Destaco o poder explicativo dessa abordagem para diferenciar o perdão e o deixar ir, e a contraste com uma forma alternativa em que o foco está principalmente em um tipo de mudança de atitude. Concluo comparando as consequências do perdão e do deixar ir para outros fenômenos importantes, como a reconciliação.

Palavras-chave | ambiente normativo; culpa; deixar ir; perdão; responsabilidade

Introduction

There is a huge body of philosophical literature on forgiveness, its nature, and its norms. Even among theorists with very different accounts of the nature of forgiveness, it is nearly universally accepted that while forgiveness is one way to cease (or reduce) blame, it is distinct from other ways such as coming to see an offense as excused or justified. In contrast to these other ways of reducing blame, when one forgives, one continues to see the offense forgiven as one for which the offender was culpable or responsible. It is also often noted as a *desideratum* on any plausible account that forgiveness must be distinguished from still *other* ways of ceasing to blame that, like forgiveness, are consistent with the victim continuing to see the offender as culpable for the wrongdoing, such as letting go or moving on, and from simply forgetting about the offense altogether.

In distinguishing forgiveness from letting go, theorists often highlight a particular *kind* of letting go (e.g., an activity aimed at some “therapeutic end”). For example, Lucy Allais (2008) writes that “my aim is to exclude therapeutic dispelling of retributive emotions where this is understood as processes the victim undergoes to get rid of negative emotions for her own sake, and that do not involve a changed view of the wrongdoer” (43-44). But though this kind of case often serves as a paradigm, therapeutic considerations need not exhaust the reasons for which someone might let go of blame.

Per-Erik Milam and Luke Brunning (2022) have recently offered the most detailed and systematic philosophical account of a distinction between forgiveness and letting go, together with the first in-depth account of letting go in its own right. Where others take for granted some intuitive understanding of what it is to “let go”, Milam and Brunning attempt to explicate it in some detail and begin to identify norms of the practice. This sets their work apart, and they make a compelling case for attending to letting go as a source of value in our interpersonal practices. In this paper, I follow them in sharing these general aims, but I come at the inquiry from a somewhat different angle.

In particular, I aim to explore the distinction between forgiveness and letting go by using a framework in which forgiveness is, at least in part, a matter of changing the normative landscape. On this approach, what is central to forgiving others is that we change the patterns of obligations and rights distributed among relevant parties in certain ways.¹ On the version of this kind of account I am drawn to, in forgiving we release offenders from obligations to make up for (or continue to make up for) the offense in question.

¹ See David Owens (2012) for what I believe is the inspiration for the widespread use of the term, “normative landscape.” One might use the term in a somewhat broader way, namely, as any way of changing the reasons people have for acting, but I here use it in the narrower way that refers to changes in obligations and rights in particular. For a sampling of views that adopt this framework of forgiveness, see Swinburne (1989), Pettigrove (2012), Nelkin (2013), Warmke (2016), and Bennett (2018).

In section 1, I put this approach in context, and offer a selective overview of the debate about forgiveness. In section 2, I lay out the landscape changing account of forgiveness, and in section 3 I elaborate what I see as the best way of understanding the distinction between forgiveness and letting go when we adopt a landscape changing account of forgiveness. Section 4 compares the account to that of Milam and Brunning. In the last section, I conclude by focusing on the ways in which forgiving and letting go are related to other phenomena with which they are often compared, including forgetting and reconciliation.

1. A Selective Overview of the Debate About Forgiveness

Theorists writing about the nature of forgiveness are often divided into two broad camps. As I will explain, I think this is a serious oversimplification, but it captures something.² One camp consists of “attitudinal” or “emotion” views. On views of this kind, forgiveness is centrally a matter of changing one’s attitudes toward the offender. Many citing Bishop Butler as inspiration take forgiveness to be the overcoming of resentment.³ While all of the members of this camp share the view that forgiveness amounts to some change involving negative attitudes, theorists differ over which emotions and/or attitudes are targeted in forgiveness (e.g., resentment, a broader set of negative attitudes that includes hostility or contempt or an attitude of protest) and over exactly what response to such attitudes constitutes forgiving (e.g., overcoming, forswearing, or tracking reasons). Most theorists in this camp take forgiveness to be a reason-sensitive change in attitude, although there are significant differences among them on the question of exactly what the relevant reasons can include. For example, some consider restricting forgiveness to cases of apology or a change of heart on the part of the offender (see, e.g., Milam [2019], Wonderly [2021, 4], and Pereboom [2021, 94-95] for further discussion), while others accept the idea that forgiveness can be done for a host of moral reasons that can include the offender’s past suffering, or even the history of a relationship (see, e.g., Murphy and Hampton [1988, 24]). Despite these differences, members of this camp are united in taking attitude and emotion change as central.

In contrast, in the normative landscape changing camp, theorists identify the central feature of forgiveness as an alteration in various participants’ obligations and rights. Instances of this kind of view sometimes take inspiration from a religious picture of God’s forgiveness as a kind of release of a debt (e.g., see Swinburne [1989 and 2021] and Adams [1991]), though most contemporary members of this camp aim to offer a secular and interpersonal version of it. Here, too, there is some disagreement among the camp’s members. For example, some take it that what is central is a release of obligations on the part of the offender to apologize and/or make up for the wrong (e.g., Nelkin [2013], Warmke [2016]). Others propose that forgiving involves the taking on of obligations on the part of the victim (and others who might forgive), whether in the form of something like a promise or commitment to reduce one’s negative emotions and adopt positive ones (e.g., Pettigrove [2012]) or the assumption of an obligation not to treat the offender’s relevant obligations (e.g., Bennett [2018]). What unites all members of this camp is that they see as central the alteration of the obligations and rights of various parties.

2 See Nelkin (2013); Warmke, Nelkin, and McKenna (2021); and Wonderly (2021a) for related ways of dividing up the terrain.

3 While Butler (1827) wrote about forgiveness in terms of overcoming resentment, it is important to note that he took the command to forgive to be a command to prevent resentment from becoming “excessive”, thereby destroying our “natural benevolence toward our offenders” (Sermon IX, paragraph 12). Interestingly, many theorists have left out the reference to “excessive”. Murphy and Hampton (1988) may be the source of much subsequent mischaracterization of Butler. More recent work on Butler has aimed to correct this widespread misconception. See Newberry (2001), Garcia (2011), and Nelkin (unpublished) for discussion.

Now, it can seem that the proponents of views in each of the two camps are really trying to get at two distinct sets of phenomena. I think that there is something to this: it does seem as if we have multiple overlapping notions that all aptly go by the label “forgiveness”. But I also think that the appearance of a stark division between two kinds of camps is potentially misleading for a variety of reasons, whether one thinks they are competitors trying to capture the same phenomena or, more radically, that they have two quite different goals. One reason for this is that theorists of both kinds tend to share a wide swath of paradigmatic examples of forgiveness, offering some evidence that they are ultimately interested in the same phenomena.

Perhaps the most common sort of example (for better or worse) that is put forward as a paradigm is that of a spouse forgiving their spouse for instances of unfaithfulness that have violated the marriage vows, where their forgiveness leads to an eventual reconciliation. Proponents of views in different camps go on to point to alternative ways of filling out the story on which the spouse does not actually forgive, such as when they continue to manifest strong resentment and demand apology and penance.⁴ Other cases are frequently used to show that forgiveness need not result in reconciliation, such as an abused spouse who successfully forgives her abuser, but also leaves him. Though many paradigmatic cases feature people in close personal relationships, theorists often note that this is not a requirement. Among the most striking kinds of cases that feature in the discussion are those in which people seem to forgive the unforgiveable—e.g., parents forgiving the killers of their children. There is even widespread agreement on cases that resist easy classification and thus require more argument and discussion. For example, there has recently been an interesting debate about the possibility of third-party forgiveness (see, e.g., Norlock [2009], MacLachlan [2017], and Chaplin [2019]). We can ask whether a friend can forgive the person who was unfaithful to their own spouse. Although there are disagreements about whether such a thing is possible, and if so, how far its scope extends, it seems a relatively fixed point that forgiveness by victims is a central paradigm and that whether it extends to third parties is something that—at the least—needs defending and cannot be taken for granted. This convergence on cases that count as forgiveness as well as those that require further investigation and theorizing provides substantial support for the idea that there is a shared project among scholars in this field.

A second reason for resisting too sharp a line between the two kinds of accounts is that landscape-altering accounts often bring with them recognition of built-in attitudinal changes of various kinds, and some attitude-change views might bring with them landscape alterations. For example, not only are very many commitments to change the landscape driven by attitudinal change based on reasons, such landscape changes on the part of forgivers necessarily change the way they see the offender too. At a minimum, and as I discuss in more detail below, someone who has forgiven simply will cease to see the offender as someone with continued obligations to make up for the wrong or as a person who makes it a good thing to demand fulfillment of such obligations. Other views center on a commitment to have or foster certain attitudes and emotions. Such views are landscape changing ones, but the intensional objects of the commitments that generate such change are emotions and attitudes. Pereboom (2021), in arguing that forgiveness consists in a kind of renunciation of future protest, for example, is explicit about this combination of aspects in a single account.⁵ Owens (2012) presents a view that also does not fall neatly into one or the other

4 See, for example, Garrard and McNaughton (2010) and Warmke (2016), attitudinal change theorists and a normative landscape change theorist, respectively.

5 See also Pettigrove (2012) and Scarre (2016) for accounts that differ in important details but similarly involve something like a commitment or promise to foster different attitudes.

camp, according to which forgiveness is not a matter of a decision, but involves a voluntary process whereby once one forgives, guilt and blame are no longer apt.⁶

Where does this leave us? I remain doubtful that any view will be able to fully capture *all* cases in which it seems that “forgiveness” is an appropriate label. So this is a reason to embrace a kind of pluralism in the special sense that there are overlapping phenomena that, somewhat inconveniently, go by the same name.⁷ It might be that, as I hope to explore in greater detail in the future, we should instead (or in addition) embrace a kind of core and syndrome account with landscape change at the core and emotion and relationship changes as part of the syndrome.⁸ For purposes of this paper, I try to remain agnostic for as long as possible about which way we should go here. Instead, I want to contribute to the discussion of the distinction between forgiveness and letting go—where, again, there is much agreement on which cases fall on each side of the distinction—by simply beginning with an account that places normative landscape change front and center.⁹ Even if this is one project among others, I believe that starting here can illuminate *an* important distinction and, at the same time, offer new reasons to think this kind of landscape change worthy of further exploration.

2. A Debt-Release Model of Forgiveness

It is a widely, though not universally, recognized *desideratum* on accounts of forgiveness that it does not *require* apology and penance on the part of the offender. While some accounts restrict the possible reasons for forgiveness to the recognition of apology and penance, even many accounts that take forgiveness to be a reasons-sensitive phenomenon accept a wider set of candidate reasons, such as that the offender has suffered enough or that one has a special history with the offender.¹⁰ This seems plausible when we think about certain cases. For example, many parents appear to genuinely forgive their children for a variety of transgressions, including failures of concern or respect, without their children ever apologizing or even recognizing the appropriateness of doing so.

At the same time, it is often taken as a given that forgiveness is in tension with any further demand for apology on the part of the forgiver. While various accounts offer explanations

6 Owens (2012, 52) appeals to an analogy with friendship and the special obligations that it involves. This is an intriguing account, and raises a number of questions about how exactly the analogy works, and how changes in the aptness of blame are connected to changes in rights and obligations. A potential worry for the account is that it is not obvious that being forgiven always and necessarily makes guilt and third party blame no longer apt. For example, it seems that one might be forgiven quickly by a generous victim, but it would still be appropriate for one to experience guilt and not inapt for others to continue to blame. Whether or not these questions can be answered, the insight that a plausible account of forgiveness might not be captured exclusively in one camp or the other is an important one. Despite these differences, my use of the label “landscape change” takes its inspiration to Owens’ 2012 book.

7 It is worth noting that nothing follows about whether we should adopt pluralism about blame. Further, even if we adopt pluralism about both forgiveness and blame, nothing follows from recognizing overlapping concepts of forgiveness about what the overlapping concepts of blame would be. Note, too, that Fricker (2019) has defended a particular kind of pluralism about forgiveness, distinguishing between forgiveness that is non-elective and forgiveness that is elective. See Milam (2019) for a response to this particular brand of pluralism. Amaya (2019) defends a different kind of pluralism according to which forgiveness has different features depending on which blaming attitude is implicated in the “emotional distance” that is forgiveness on his view. (See also Warmke, Nelkin, and McKenna [2021, 15-18], for a discussion of types of pluralism).

8 In work with David Brink on blame (Brink and Nelkin [2022]), I defend an account of this kind. I find appealing the idea that a release of obligations is at the core of forgiveness, and emotion changes part of the syndrome, but defending this kind of account is another project.

9 For ease of exposition, I will sometimes drop the “normative” and write of “landscape change”.

10 See, for example, Murphy and Hampton (1988, 24) for a list of reasons for which one might properly forgive, and Hieronymi (2001, 552) who, after taking apology to be a central case, goes on to sketch a way in which her account “might be extended to cases in which apologies are not offered”.

of this pair of features of forgiveness, one very natural explanation is that forgiveness is *constituted* (at least in part) by a special kind of release from a special kind of obligation the offender has to the victim.¹¹ In typical cases, the obligation might be fulfilled by apology, sincere remorse, penance, or related phenomena. In forgiving, one ceases to hold the offense against the offender, and this in turn means releasing them from a special kind of personal obligation incurred as the result of committing the wrong against one.

Forgiving a debt, it is often noted, is different from forgiving a person for an offense. But I think it is no coincidence that these two phenomena share the same label. People owe each other a variety of things for all kinds of reasons. We incur obligations all the time on the basis of voluntary actions for which we are not blameworthy. But when we wrongfully and culpably harm others, we incur at least two sorts of obligations: the obligation to make restitution for the loss or harm suffered (if we stole a bicycle, then we owe a bicycle or as close to the equivalent as we can provide), and the obligation to somehow make up for or in some way address the wrong itself. The content of this second kind of obligation might be made more precise by saying that one has the obligation to apologize, repent, do penance and otherwise “make up for it”, possibly by giving more of one’s time, energy, or possessions in charitable ways.¹² It is the release from this second kind of obligation that forgiveness confers. And it is notable that even after forgiveness, offenders might continue to have obligations of various kinds, including restitution. It might also be the case that an apology would still be appropriate, but that it is not owed to the victim as something that the victim can continue to claim.

One might at this point wonder whether the model must include a communicative act, or uptake on the part of the offender for forgiveness to be accomplished, as landscape changing accounts often do (see, e.g., Warmke [2016]). While I agree that there may be a special kind of value that attaches to such cases and while communication might be typical of forgiveness, it is neither essential to the model nor essential for changing the normative landscape. One need not know that one’s obligations have been erased for them to actually be erased. Here it is helpful to consider the treatment of consent by Renzo (2022) by way of analogy. As he argues, consent can alter the normative landscape by changing whether a person wrongs you, or at least by making it the case that they do not wrong you *in the way that they would have had they acted in the same way without your consent*. (He offers a case of watching his son about to steal his money, and silently giving consent so that when his son takes the money, he is not stealing it). Consent so conceived is a power one can exercise even without communicating it (see also Owens [2011]).¹³ In a similar way, it is plausible that one can forgive, thereby altering others’ obligations, without having communicated that fact.

11 The particular account elaborated here is based on the more detailed defense in Nelkin (2011, 44-50) and (2013).

12 An important question is whether the obligations in question are set by the victim or are in some way simply determined by the wrong itself in the circumstances. The former is counter-intuitive: surely some victims, especially of minor wrongs, can be irrational in demanding offenders do more to make up for wrongs when intuitively they seem to have done all that is required and more. But the latter leaves us with a puzzle: if the offender makes up for the wrong, fulfills all obligations, what is there for forgiveness to do? Bennett (2018) offers as a solution that forgiveness requires not only recognition of obligations fulfilled or release from them, but also the undertaking of a further obligation: namely, an obligation to treat the offender as “off the hook” and no longer obligated on account of the offense. While this suggestion provides a solution to the problem, there is something unappealing in adding to the forgiving victim’s burden a further obligation. In earlier work, hoping to avoid recognizing such a burden, I offered a different solution, suggesting an analogy with a person who has served her sentence but has not been formally released from prison yet. On this view, what remains to be done on this picture is analogous to the “official release”. A complete defense would require not only an unpacking of the analogy, but also an argument that no additional obligations are entailed.

13 Renzo (2022) goes on to suggest that uncommunicated consent is defective rather than ideal consent (relative to the functions of the practice of consent), but it is consent, nevertheless. He takes it that forgiveness works in a similar way. I am not sure that forgiveness that is not communicated and received is best described as defective, but what is most important here is the shared conclusion that rights and obligations can be changed even when there is no communication or uptake.

This model has explanatory power along several dimensions. In addition to fitting well with a number of intuitive cases, including those just discussed in which we see tension in the idea of the forgiver continuing to ask for an apology or other demonstrations of making up for the wrong, it can also explain why forgiveness is associated with changes of judgment of various kinds.¹⁴ In identifying what constitutes the required change of judgment, I believe we should be guided by two sorts of constraints. The first is that the change of judgment should be related in an appropriate way to the forgiver's ceasing to hold the offense against the offender. The second is that the change of judgment should be related appropriately to the kinds of reasons for which we think people can forgive (when they do forgive for reasons). Though one might choose not to hold an offense against someone, and thereby release her from her personal debt, for all sorts of reasons, including for one's own psychological health, I think that there are systematic reasons why such cases would be rare.

Although this is somewhat speculative, I believe that it would be psychologically difficult to forgive for some of these reasons; it would seem more likely that if one were concerned about one's own health, for example, that one would let go or move on, rather than forgive. In section 3, I explain why this is itself an explanatory virtue of the account that reinforces the idea of a unified phenomenon worthy of attention.

Given the wide variety of possible reasons for forgiving, it may seem as if there is no single change of judgment that must take place in order to forgive. But as mentioned earlier, there is a kind of minimal unifying judgment that is offender-directed when one forgives on this model, namely, that it is a good thing, or something to be pursued, to cease to hold the offense against him. Insofar as forgiving is intentional, one must have a positive attitude toward the end state; one must see it as a good thing or at least a reason that the offender is not in your debt for the culpable offense, despite their having committed it. (Importantly, this is consistent with holding the offender to the first kind of obligation: compensation.) In many cases, this will take a more specific form, depending on the reasons for forgiving. Often, it will include one's thinking that there is something about the offender that makes it fitting or appropriate to release him or her. Post-forgiveness, there is of course a change, as well: the forgiver no longer sees the offender as in his or her debt, as owing anything.

It is also possible to see how forgiveness on this model is associated in systematic ways with the reduction (but not elimination) of resentment and other negative attitudes. It is true that such attitudes might be consistent with some recurring bouts of resentment, but this is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, it is notable that even some of those like Butler who emphasize changes in emotion do not require the *elimination* of resentment for forgiveness.

It is a fraught question just what resentment is, and various theorists have understood it in different ways.¹⁵ What is crucial for present purposes is that depending on how we conceive it, the account can explain either why there is an outright tension with resentment (e.g., in the case in which it entails a desire for a power differential, which seems to be fostered by continuing asymmetrical obligations which are eliminated in forgiveness on this model) or why there is a contingent, albeit systematic tension with resentment (e.g., in the case in which resentment involves ill will). In still other cases (e.g., where it involves protest of a wrong), forgiveness is not obviously inconsistent with resentment on this

14 Shoemaker (2021) takes the assumption that there must be judgment change to be misguided. But even Shoemaker is correct, the appeal of the assumption is something that itself requires explanation.

15 See Shoemaker (2021, 30), for a very helpful summary of different ways people have understood resentment. He ultimately concludes that resentment is the wrong blaming emotion to focus on in the first place, and that this can be seen by starting with a "back-end" exploration of blame via forgiveness.

account, but this seems to me to be an advantage, not a disadvantage, of the model.¹⁶ The model can also explain a tension between forgiveness and what Shoemaker (2021) calls “agential anger” that involves a demand for remorse on the part of the victim. Remorse (or its expression) might itself be a way of making up for a wrong, but it might also be a condition of sincere apology which is itself a paradigmatic way of making up for a wrong. Thus, in forgiving and releasing from obligations to apologize, one might also typically release others from the obligation to cultivate remorse (see Helmreich 2015).

Now we come to the most important explanatory virtues for present purposes. This account easily distinguishes forgiveness from other phenomena also associated with the reduction of blame. First, forgiveness is distinct from excuse, because a release from a personal obligation does not imply, as excuse does, that the person was not blameworthy. Second, when forgiving is conceived as a kind of personal release, we can understand immediately how it is different from forgetting or not thinking about the offense. The former, but not the latter, requires a kind of activity, a special kind of intention formation. This does not mean that forgiving requires a conscious decision, but it does require an intentional process. (Just as we can act without having first consciously decided to, so we can forgive.) In the next section, I explain how forgiveness, on this picture, is best distinguished from letting go in particular.

3. Letting Go, Forgiveness and Their Places in the Changing Normative Landscape

Letting go is itself to be distinguished from other related phenomena; it is not the same as forgetting or simply not thinking about the wrong. Like forgiveness, letting go also seems to be something that it is possible to do for reasons, and it is associated with a reduction in resentment and other negative attitudes. As others have suggested, it might seem that the key to this distinction is a difference in the kinds of reasons for doing each of these things. So, for example, forgiveness is a matter of releasing from obligations for reasons of kind A (say, moral reasons related to the offender) whereas letting go is a releasing from obligations for reasons of kind B (say, therapeutic or other reasons). But I do not think this is the most fruitful way to draw a distinction here. As I have argued elsewhere, I believe that we can forgive in a genuine sense for all kinds of reasons, and similarly, that there are also all kinds of reasons we might let go. At the limit, perhaps we might be able to forgive or let go for no reason at all. In addition, we often do things for a mix of reasons, and these might cross-cut kinds.¹⁷ (It is interesting that this point is not often mentioned, even among those who take the key distinction to be related to kinds of reasons.) Suppose no reasons are sufficiently motivating on their own, but together they push one over the edge, one releases an offender from obligations, relinquishes the right to press them to do anything in the way of apology, and so on, and no longer sees the offender as the sort of person who owes

16 Much depends here on what protest involves. For example, if it involves the continued expression of annoyance to the offender, then perhaps it will not be consistent with forgiveness (see Pereboom [2021, 92]). Importantly, Pereboom treats protest on its own, independently of resentment.

17 This description in a recent newspaper article of a family opposing the execution of the killer of their mother is a very moving example of how forgiveness can be based on multiple reasons, including therapeutic and altruistic ones: “Hall’s two daughters, who were three and six when their mother was killed, said recently they would rather James serve life in prison. ‘I just feel like we can’t play God. We can’t take a life. And it’s not going to bring my mom back,’ Terryln Hall said. ‘We thought about it and prayed about it, and we found it in ourselves to forgive him for what he did. We really wish there was something that we could do to stop it,’ Hall said, adding the road to forgiveness was long. ‘I did hate him. I did. And I know hate is such a strong-feeling word, but I really did have hate in my heart. As I got older and realized, you can’t walk around with hate in your heart. You still got to live. And once I had kids of my own, you know, I can’t pass it down to my kids and have them walk around with hate in their hearts’” (Associated Press 2022). Of course, it is possible to say that this is not genuine forgiveness in the sense that concerns us here, but making this move is less plausible than foregoing a strict association of specific kinds of reasons with forgiveness.

them something. I doubt that this is an unusual kind of case; mixed cases might even be the most frequent.¹⁸ It seems to me that the most natural thing to say about such a mixed case is that it is a genuine case of forgiveness, especially since there is an alternative way to understand letting go.

In fact, I believe that we can account for a host of cases and mark an important theoretical line if we draw the distinction as follows: where forgiveness is a release of obligations, a consequent relinquishing of the right to press for their fulfillment, letting go is, in contrast, the formation of an intention not to press for their fulfillment, together with some success in following through. Drawing the distinction in this way allows us to make sense of the idea that sometimes in letting go we are guided by the idea that “it just isn’t worth it” (Brunner and Milam 2022). Letting go is also consistent with our thinking that other people will deal with the issue so that we don’t have to, and with thinking that the offender is likely to come around to fulfilling whatever obligations there are on their own eventually. Crucially, however, each of these scenarios is consistent with idea that the victim retains the right, corresponding to the offender’s continued obligation, to make the claim to which they are entitled.

Note that drawing the distinction in this way explains the systematic, albeit contingent and imperfect, association of certain reasons with forgiveness and others with letting go. Take the most common sort of reasons that have been associated with letting go as opposed to forgiveness: therapeutic ones. Though it seems possible to release from obligations and, correlatively, relinquish rights to press for such making up of wrongs, it would seem that if one had one’s own mental health in view, one would be more likely to respond to wrongdoing by “letting go” or by deciding not to dwell on the offense or allow it to affect one’s behavior in certain ways.

There are important ways in which the two phenomena are more similar to each other than to other ways of reducing blame such as forgetting, and this might explain cases in which it is difficult to discern whether someone has forgiven or merely let go. Both are active and potentially reasons-responsive in a way that forgetting is not, for example. Whether one has relinquished a right or simply formed an intention not to pursue it, it is often the case that others can make similar bets on one’s future behavior.¹⁹ For purposes of continuing in relationships, much might remain the same whether one has forgiven or let go. But of course, the difference in the normative landscape looms large, and this highlights why often we care very much about being forgiven and not just about not being blamed. Though we happily undertake certain obligations, including ones that are on-going, sometimes over a lifetime, it is plausible that being in possession of continuing obligations to make up for wrongs for which we are culpable is not among them. In such a case, given our finitude, doing what we ought to do detracts from fulfilling other obligations and doing other things that enhance our own and others’ lives. And the alternative is worse: failing to fulfill them.

The account also seems to explain why “unforgiving” is if not impossible, rare, whereas it seems less odd that someone might have let go but then changed their minds.²⁰ Once

18 One study in Darby *et al.* (unpublished manuscript) found that people often see cases as mixed in even more radical ways, such as involving both excuse and forgiveness. (Of course, it is consistent that someone would partially excuse and then forgive an offender for the remaining culpability. A case in which one initially thinks a harm was intentional, but then comes to see it as merely negligently caused could fit this model).

19 This point gains support from Bratman’s account of intentions as partial plans (1999).

20 See Wonderly (2021a, 2021b) for a rich exploration of unforgiveness and its implications for the nature of forgiveness. Interestingly, Wonderly sees unforgiveness as relatively less rare and problematic than it might seem at first, and also fits this view into a framework of forgiveness as a reasons-responsive attitude change. In contrast, Scarre (2016) sees unforgiveness as quite rare (if even possible), and as might be expected, seems to rely on a landscape change model. See also Owens (2012).

a victim has released someone from an obligation, it is typically no longer in the victim's authority to impose that same obligation again (an exception could be, by analogy with voiding a contract, that the other party originally acted under false pretenses). In contrast, although changing one's mind all the time would make for an unproductive and perhaps incoherent life, doing so is—at least in principle—among one's morally permissible options when one has let go.

At the same time, under particular circumstances, making an intention known *can* create expectations and that in turn can also change the normative landscape. The general point is nicely illustrated by Samuel Rickless (1997) with a different example: if every day one brings fuel for heating to one's elderly neighbor, one might acquire an obligation to continue.²¹ Likewise, if a victim announces to the offender that she intends to let the offense go, and acts accordingly, then over time this *might* create an obligation to continue in this way—or at least to explain why there might be a change in the future. In this way, letting go can, together with other actions on the part of the victim, change the normative landscape in a way similar to forgiveness.²² But there is nothing essential about letting go that makes this the case.

4. An Attitude Change Account Compared

Working within an attitude change framework, a number of theorists have drawn the distinction between forgiveness and letting go primarily on the basis that each is done for different reasons (see, for example, Wonderly [2021a, 4], Allais [2008], Wallace [2019], Murphy and Hampton [1988] for distinctions of this kind). In this section, I focus on Brunning and Milam's account because it is the most comprehensive. According to Brunning and Milam, forgiveness is to be understood as follows:

F: For X to forgive Y for A is for X to overcome their blame toward Y for A *for the right kinds of reasons* (R1, R2, R3, etc.), while still viewing Y as having been blameworthy for A.

They then offer a parallel account of letting go:

LG: For X to let go is for X to overcome their blame toward Y for A *for the right kinds of reasons* (R4, R5, and R6, etc.), while still viewing Y as having been blameworthy for A. (2022, 14)

The right kinds of reasons to forgive, on their view, have to do with features of the offender (e.g., that they are remorseful or have apologized). The right kinds of reasons to let go span a range: "Some are prudential and others moral; some are narrowly focused on the responsibility practice of which blame is a part, while others are about other features of the situation [...] At the simplest level, the reason to let go of blame is because it isn't worth it" (2022, 15). At a slightly more complex level, there are many more fundamental

21 Rickless here analyzes an example of Warren Quinn's (1989) originally used to make a different point.

22 An analog in the law may be estoppel, or the doctrine that "...where a person (A) has caused another (B) to act on the basis of a particular state of affairs, A is prevented from going back on the words or conduct which led B to act on that basis, if certain conditions are satisfied. In such cases A is estopped (i.e., 'stopped') from resiling from, or denying, the existence of that particular state of affairs" (LexisNexis). In addition, certain rationales for statutes of limitations also make for intriguing parallels. For example, a standard summary highlighted in Ochoa and Wistrich (1997, 456) describes the rationales as follows: "The statute of limitations is a statute of repose, enacted as a matter of public policy to fix a limit within which an action must be brought, or the obligation is presumed to have been paid, and is intended to run against those who are neglectful of their rights, and who fail to use reasonable and proper diligence in the enforcement thereof [...] The underlying purpose of statutes of limitation is to prevent the unexpected enforcement of stale claims concerning which persons interested have been thrown off their guard by want of prosecution" (quoted from *Pashley v. Pacific Elec. Co.*, 25 Cal. 2d 226, 228-29. 153 P.2d 325, 326 [1944]).

reasons why it is not worth it to continue to blame and these include benefits for oneself or others that override reasons to blame (“overriding reasons”), features of the situation that make it ineffective (“resignation reasons”), and features of the situation that support a prediction that the offender will come around to the right frame of mind anyway (“re-alignment reasons”).

Interestingly, Brunning and Milam also put forward a second dimension on which the two phenomena are distinguished, albeit more tentatively: there are two different “mechanisms” at work. On their view, when it comes to forgiveness, “the disposition to blame disappears or substantially weakens,” but when it comes to letting go, “this disposition is masked rather than eliminated or diminished—in the same way that a sugar crystal coated in plastic remains disposed to dissolve in water, but is not actually likely to dissolve” (2022, 24).

There is no doubt that the reasons on which we act can matter greatly, and Brunning and Milam are no doubt marking an important distinction here between two varieties of overcoming blame.²³ It is less clear, however, that the distinction between the elimination of a disposition on the one hand, and the masking of a disposition on the other hangs together with this one. Why should a change of attitude, embarked on for one set of reasons nevertheless co-exist with a disposition for the original attitude, whereas a change is made for a different reason eliminates the original disposition? And when we think about the specific reasons, it does not seem like there would be any necessary connection here. For example, it seems that reducing resentment on therapeutic grounds could go equally with either the elimination of a disposition or its masking.²⁴

It is true that there is an intuitive reason for including this second dimension, and this takes us back to the idea that in ordinary ways of thinking, forgiveness seems hard to un-do, whereas letting go can be more easily reversed. As we saw earlier, it is easy to imagine that one has let go, but something happens that makes one “latch on” again. Someone might have genuinely let it go in reaction to her friend who was always rescheduling with her at the last minute; yet when it happens again on an important occasion, such as an immigration appointment, she is back to holding it against her friend and back to thinking she is owed an apology for all of the rescheduling, not just what happened on this one occasion. There does not seem to be any legitimate complaint on the part of the unreliable friend in this case. But had the friend forgiven her for the other occasions and for being unreliable in general, they might now legitimately resist the demand for apology, or at least be puzzled by it. To take another kind of case, it seems possible to let go for a period of time. One might think along these lines: I’m going to let this go, at least for now while I finish this important work project or care for a sick child. But, whether one comes back to it, so to speak, might be left entirely open. In contrast, it would be odd, to say the least, to say that one was going to forgive temporarily. Without considering this second dimension

23 Though in one way the proposal is stronger when there is no commitment to the particular kinds of reasons that the variables represent in the schema, in another way it is less strong. The reason for this is that the continued disagreement among proponents of such views about just which kinds of reasons attach to forgiveness and which to letting go is some evidence in itself that appealing to reasons may not be the best way to draw the distinction. But Brunning and Milam’s more suggestive comments on this point offer a good starting point.

24 A friendly suggestion is to argue for a defeasible psychological connection between the two dimensions, rather than to see them both as essential.

of the attitude change account, it seems difficult to accommodate this apparent difference between forgiveness and letting go.²⁵

All of this suggests that while the change in attitude framework captures something important, it does not capture all that is important when it comes to forgiveness. Further, thinking about forgiveness in contrast to letting go brings this out. Of course, I think the key here is to recognize that we care about a special change in the normative landscape that distinguishes forgiveness from letting go.

Before concluding, it is worth examining a presupposition I have been making in considering accounts of the distinction, namely, that whatever framework we use to explicate forgiveness, we should use the same framework to explicate letting go.²⁶ But one might think that though one framework, such as the landscape change model, is most helpful when thinking about forgiveness, the other, such as the attitude change model, is most helpful when thinking about letting go (or vice versa). This is an intriguing idea. As before, pluralism supports the idea that different notions of forgiveness can be appropriately deployed in different contexts. There may be a notion of letting go that is captured by mere attitude change (just as there is for forgiveness). But I believe that there is also an important phenomenon that is active, that one can decide to do, and that is nevertheless importantly different from forgiveness and is best captured by the distinction that I have drawn, in which the contrast is found in the different ways in which normative landscape change can take place.

Conclusion and Further Directions

In this paper, I have argued that on the normative landscape changing framework of forgiveness, we can draw a fruitful distinction between cases of forgiveness and cases that are intuitively importantly different and that naturally fall under the label “letting go”. I believe that the insights gained in this way provide further support for taking the landscape change framework seriously in discussions of forgiveness and also for paying more attention to letting go, as it is understood here, in its own right.

In this latter regard, at least two issues call out for further exploration. The first is how we should think about third party forgiveness and its parallel, “third party letting go”. While it has been argued that emotion change views are best suited to accommodate the idea of third-party forgiveness (see, e.g., Chaplin [2019]), I believe that landscape changing accounts

25 One might respond, however, that rather than criticizing the inability of the attitude change account to accommodate the restricted scope of unforgiving, we ought, rather, to reject the claim that the scope of unforgiving is so restricted in the first place. In that case, the second dimension suggested by Brunning and Milam would be unnecessary. Wonderly (2021b) offers a defense of just such a move, deploying both cases of apparent unforgiving, as well as alternative explanations for why it *seems* that there is something wrong with unforgiving in general. While a full assessment of these arguments must await another occasion, I can sketch here the way I see the dialectic going. When it comes to cases, Wonderly makes a powerful argument that there are situations in which one seems to justifiably be taken back to an original and forgiven transgression, reinhabiting one’s original blaming stance (2021b, 5). I believe that while there are cases of justified blame related to previously forgiven transgressions, they are not best conceived as cases of unforgiving. In some of the relevant cases, one might think that one is really blaming for something else (e.g., a reversal of a positive change of heart). And it also might be the case that the victim has new reason to question the apparent sincerity of an original expression of remorse which would then place the case in the restricted scope of unforgiveness that even landscape change views would accept. Perhaps more importantly, however, the elimination of blame even for the original offense need not be perfectly correlated with forgiveness (such as on Butler’s own attitude change view). Finally, although there are alternative ways to explain our inclination to restrict the scope of forgiveness (see, e.g., Wonderly [2021a, 13]), I believe that the simplest explanation, and specifically one that fares better in accounting for the contrast with letting go, is to appeal to the nature of forgiveness. Ultimately, however, each kind of account will need to be judged on how well it explains the phenomena for which we seek an explanation, and how well it hangs together with other normative and non-normative commitments. Perhaps fortunately, for reasons given in section 1, we may not need to choose between the two kinds of accounts of forgiveness.

26 Thank you to one of the anonymous reviewers for raising this issue.

have resources to do so, albeit with more constraints than emotion change accounts. In parallel, letting go—understood as a kind of formation of intention not to hold wrongs against offenders or to press them to fulfill obligations—could also be something that third parties are able to accomplish. Whether the scope of would-be forgivers is the same as, or narrower than, would-be letters-go is an interesting question. One possibility that I believe to be worth pursuing is that third parties are often in a better position to let go than to forgive, and that what can look like third party forgiveness is often in fact letting go. At the same time, the norms of letting go, no less than those of forgiving, can provide serious constraints on when it is *appropriate* to do so.²⁷

A second issue is related. As we saw, there can be circumstances in which letting go comes to resemble forgiveness over time, even as it affects the normative landscape. If one communicates that one has let go, then over time one's offender might reasonably expect that one will not behave in certain ways, and having created such expectations, one might then lose the right to act in ways inconsistent with them. Though this is a contingent feature of cases of letting go, that does not make it unimportant. It might be that there are sometimes good reasons to reach the same foreseeable endpoint by choosing one route over another. Reconciliation, for example, might be achieved over time via both routes in certain kinds of cases. We are often led to think that it is always better for this to happen via forgiveness. But in some cases, there could be good reasons for landscape change to happen gradually as a result of continuing and renewed intentions not to exercise a right that foreseeably fades over time, rather than simply relinquishing the right and releasing one's offender from their obligations.

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²⁷ This work overlaps with important recent work on the aptness of anger. See, for example, Srinivasan (2018) and Hirji (2022).

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Dana Kay Nelkin

Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of California, Los Angeles (United States). Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of California, San Diego (United States). Her areas of research include free will and moral responsibility, and their connections to psychology, ethical theory, epistemology, and the law. Recent publications include: “Non-Consequentialist Principles Under Conditions of Uncertainty: A Framework” (coauthored), in *The Trolley Problem: Classic Philosophical Arguments*, edited by Hallvard Lillehammer, 59-100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); and *The Oxford Handbook on Moral Responsibility*, edited with Derk Pereboom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). dnelkin@ucsd.edu

