3-2017

A Narrative Approach to Forgiveness Amidst Disagreement

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PHI499: Senior Seminar

Bethel University

December 15, 2016

Introduction

While not always the case, there are instances where parties involved disagree on the nature of a particular offense. Personal conflict can lead to rifts in personal relationships or moral trust of the larger community;[1] disagreement over the nature of the offense can lead to greater conflict and prevent forgiveness. The goal of this paper is to examine the reasons disagreement over the nature of offenses occurs, how to resolve these disagreements, and how this affects the process of forgiveness. In order to do so effectively, first a survey of models of forgiveness will be given to establish a clear definition and working model of what is meant by forgiveness. Following this, I will examine why disagreement in accounts of the offense can prevent forgiveness from taking place. Finally, through examining narrative theory and discourse ethics, a model for resolving disputes over the nature of the offense will be constructed. From this, I will show that in order for forgiveness to take place, the parties involved must reach an agreement as to what the nature of wrongdoing was, which can be done through the *communicative action* of narrative sharing.

Defining Forgiveness

Much of the philosophical debate on forgiveness stems from Bishop Butler's sermon on resentment, revenge, and forgiveness. Butler defines forgiveness as the forswearing of revenge,[2] which has been a model taken up by others, including Bishop Desmond Tutu.[3] Jeffrie Murphy, who has written extensively on forgiveness, worked to

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[1] Margaret U. Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 89-90.
[2] Joseph Butler, "Sermon IX," in *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1827), 61-62. Accessed November 1, 2016. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/butler/sermons.html.
[3] Jeffrie Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and its Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.

expand this model by defining forgiveness as the forswearing of *vindictive passions*.[4] More than a few authors have brought up the limits of these models, as they do not seem to capture the full scope of what is meant by forgiveness.

Margaret Urban Walker introduces the concept of forgiveness as moral repair, which she describes as "the task of restoring or stabilizing… the basic elements that sustain human beings in a recognizably moral relationship."[5] This is done through helping the victim regain: confidence in shared standards, ability to establish trust, and hopefulness in being worthy of trust.[6] While I find this notion of moral repair useful in defining the *teleological* function of forgiveness, Walker's model is less clear on what each party involved must do for forgiveness to occur.

In this sense, one of the most robust models of forgiveness is the one offered by Charles Griswold in *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration.* Griswold describes forgiveness in terms of a conditional model that takes the form of a transaction, in which each party involved must meet particular conditions in order for forgiveness to take place.[7] In forgiveness, the wrongdoer must: (1) claim responsibility for the deeds, (2) repudiate the deeds, (3) express regret for "having caused that *particular* injury to that *particular* person" (my own emphasis), (4) commit to not inflict further injury, (5) show understanding of the degree of damage done, and (6) provide an account for why the wrong was committed.[8] The wronged must, in turn: (i) forswear revenge, (ii) moderate resentment, (iii) commit to letting resentment go completely, (iv) reframe the injurer with reference to change that is promised for the future, (v) reframe the self in a new light by

[4] These include: anger, resentment, and hatred. Ibid, 16.
[5] Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing* 23.
[6] Ibid, 24.
[7] Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47.
[8] Ibid, 49-51. Direct quote from p. 50.

recognizing a shared humanity in both parties, and (vi) address the victim with the statement that forgiveness is granted.[9]

With these conditions in mind, forgiveness is best accomplished when the parties involved are present and willing to engage in the process of forgiveness by meeting the conditions that have been laid out. In situations where certain parties are not present or not willing to take part, forgiveness becomes limited. Since Griswold treats many of these cases with great consideration and detail, I will not go into further explanation of these scenarios here. My base assumptions in examining cases where there are discrepancies in the accounts given by the parties concerning the nature of the offense will be that: both parties acknowledge there was some form of wrongdoing that occurred, are present, and willing to work toward forgiveness. In addition, since I believe Griswold's model moves toward the most clear and full definition of forgiveness, I will use his model to explore the particular situation that is the focus of this paper. Now that a working model and definition of forgiveness, for the sake of this paper, has been established, I will turn my attention to why a discrepancy in accounts can prevent forgiveness from occurring.

Does Disagreement Prevent Forgiveness?

A survey of the conditions provided above will help illuminate why a disagreement of accounts of wrongdoing can prevent forgiveness from occurring. The requirements of the wrongdoer focus particularly on a *particular* offense and the degree of damage caused by the *particular* offense. Griswold's conditions 1-3 and 5 cannot be fulfilled if the address is not made to the *particular* offense suffered by the wronged

[9] Ibid, 54-58.

party. Without agreement about the particular offense, conditions of forgiveness cannot be fulfilled, and the wrongdoer becomes *conditionally unforgiveable*.[10] It follows that since the wrongdoer is unforgiveable, forgiveness as defined by Griswold's model, should not be offered. An impasse results, as one party seeks forgiveness, but the other party is unable to grant it.

It follows, therefore, that Griswold's model of forgiveness requires an additional condition. There must be agreement on the nature of the offense that was committed. This additional condition, applies to both the wrongdoer and the wronged party. It is worth noting that in many cases, this condition will not require explicit acknowledgement. Many cases of forgiveness involve situations where both parties agree to what the nature of the offense was, which will allow them to bypass this condition. However, in cases where there is disagreement, this condition will need to be addressed explicitly, so that the other conditions of forgiveness can be fulfilled.

Now that I have examined how a disagreement on the nature of an offense can complicate forgiveness and how Griswold's model should be modified to accommodate for situations such as these, I turn my attention to the larger issue of how such a dispute can be settled. In order to properly propose a method for resolving the issue at hand, first I will need to examine why such disagreements occur. It is helpful at this point to introduce the concept of narrative and how it relates to forgiveness.

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[10] This phrasing is borrowed from Trudy Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1999): 59, accessed November 5, 2016, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/stable/20009953.

Usefulness of Narrative to Forgiveness

The usefulness of narrative accounts in the context of forgiveness is given significant attention by Griswold. He discusses how narrative accounts are useful in helping reframe both the self and the wrongdoer, helping the wronged move toward forgiveness.[11] In that forgiveness deals with a series of events, it is useful to frame it using a narrative context. In *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, Walker further expands on why moral thinking primarily takes the form of narrative:

> To say moral thinking is narrative in pattern is, first, a way of seeing how morally relevant information is selected and organized *within* particular episodes of deliberation. The idea is that a story is the basic form of representation for moral problems. We need to know who the parties are, how they understand themselves and each other, what terms of relationship obtain, and perhaps what social or institutional frames shape their options. We need to know how they have gotten to the situation that requires moral attention, for this tells us something about the kinds of attention and response that are within moral consideration here.[12]

Since forgiveness is primarily concerned with addressing wrongdoing, it fits well within the realm of *moral thinking.* Thus, Walker's assertion that moral thinking is narrative in pattern can be applied directly to situations of forgiveness, as well. Using narrative to examine forgiveness will be both useful in identifying the cause of disputes over the nature of an offense and in proscribing a possible solution. An examination into how individuals construct narratives for the self and others will prove fruitful at this point.

Paul Ricoeur and Narrative

Paul Ricoeur has written extensively on narrative, introducing two ideas that are useful for purpose of this discussion. First experiences in time are narrated. Second

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[11] Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration,* 103.
[12] Margaret U. Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics,* 2nd ed, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75.

narrative is organized and constructed with a plot, which allows it to be followed.[13] The two elements will be examined in conjunction below.

Ricoeur states that for a narrative to *be* a narrative, it must have a plot. A plot is that which allows a story to be followed, giving it a beginning, middle and end. The linear form that a narrative takes makes it temporally bound. In the same sense, our experiences take on a linear form in that they are temporally bound. We are birthed into the world, have a series of experiences, and eventually die. Human life takes on a distinctly narrative quality, as it is comprised of a beginning, middle, and end, and involves drawing out meaning from the linear succession of events.[14] In proposing this, Ricoeur asserts a narrative conception of self, which has been given significant examination in philosophical and psychological literature. The view of the narrative self asserts that since all our experiences are narrated, the unity of self rests in the unity of the individual's narrative.[15] This has significant appeal as people often discuss their lives in terms of stories, not merely a sequence of events. According to Ricoeur, what separates a narrative from a sequence of events is the plot.[16]

Ricoeur uses the term *emplotment* to describe how diverse elements and events are organized to form the plot of a narrative. He writes:

> [Plot] is a mediation between the individual events or incidents and a story taken as a whole. In this respect, we may say equivalently that it draws a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents… or that it transforms the events or incidents into a story… An event must be more than just a singular occurrence. It gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot. A story, too, must be more than just an enumeration of events in serial order; it must organize them into an

[13] David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 60; Paul Ricouer, *Time and Narrative: Volume I,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1984), 65.
[14] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* page 65-67.
[15] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 205.
[16] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* 65.

> intelligible whole, of a sort such that we can always ask what is the 'thought' of this story. In short, emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession.[17]

By *emplotting* the events of one's life, we create cohesive views of the self, in terms of narrative, and make sense of the succession of events that we experience.[18] Therefore, the narrative-self is a model that aids in deriving meaning from our experiences. Without plot, the story becomes *unfollowable* and no longer aids in making sense and meaning out of the succession of events. Therefore, as part of our continual existence (that is, until we cease to live), we are continuously engaged in constructing a narrative by way of *emplotment*, which involves placing events within the context of our own already-existing narrative, with the motivation of making sense of events and incorporating them into a *followable* story.[19]

It is worth noting that not all of our experiences may be fit into a cohesive narrative. There are experiences that seem to go beyond explanation or reason, or do not line up with the rest of the narrative we have constructed. At this point there are three options: one, to modify the narrative in question to accommodate the new information; two, to change the interpretation of the experience; or three, count the experience as an anomaly and dismiss its significance in light of the narrative in use.[20] Since a reference to the narrative is made in making these judgments, the *motivation* to make narrative sense of an event is present regardless of whether or not the experience is actually incorporated into the narrative.

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[17] Ibid.
[18] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 210.
[19] Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 97.
[20] Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, 100.

The exploration of Ricoeur's theory of narrative and time has provided significant insight into how people construct narratives and make sense of the experiences they have in time. With this firmly in mind, I will now shift my attention back to the questions of why disagreements over the nature of an offense take place. First, I will look at how other people become part of our narrative experience, and then I will explain how this causes discrepancies in how people interpret events that take place, of which the application to the present discussion will be most pertinent.

Narrating the Other

The concept of narrative extends beyond the self and involves others in two ways: one, other people become part of our narrative; and two, we make sense of other people by use of narrative. This assertion requires some further explanation. The first of the two ways is fairly straightforward. Since we are always in relation to other, our narratives will always include other people. Even those that live fairly secluded lives will have had some form of relation in terms of early family life, or the occasional encounter with a stranger. Other human beings are part of our existence and, therefore, part of our narratives. Similarly, we are part of other people's narratives, as well.[21] In addition, we interpret others' lives by use of narrative "because we all live out narratives in our lives and… understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out," which makes "the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others."[22]

It is the second sense of how narrative relates to others that is of great import to this discussion. Since we interpret the actions of others by use of narrative, we follow the principles of constructing narratives that I laid out earlier: we use *emplotment* to construct

[21] MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 213.
[22] Ibid, 212.

a *followable* story that attempts to make meaning out of the succession of events that occur in *another's* life. Therefore, we interpret others' lives using the narrative context we have available *with* motivation to create a cohesive narrative identity for use of interpreting their future behaviors, in the same way that our narrative self-identity allows us to interpret the events that occur to us in the future. Herein lies the crux of the problem and the reason why disagreements over the nature of offenses occur: the possibility of forgiveness is limited by discrepancies in the narrative explanations of the parties involved.

Some elaboration will be required to fully illustrate this point. Let us say there are two individuals involved and one commits an offense directed at the other. The offended party (*A*), first interprets the offense and how it relates to them by fitting it within their own narrative context. After this, they will attempt to fit the offense within the narrative context of the offender (*B*) and make sense of their action. From this, they will attempt to figure out what *B*'s intentions were to committing the particular wrong. However, in that *A* do not have full access to *B*'s narrative, *A* will have to make assumptions in order to place the event in *B'*s narrative in a manner that makes the narrative *followable*. Similarly, *B* without *A'*s narrative context, will see the event in light of their own narrative and fail to understand the fully *A*'s perspective on the matter, thus causing a discrepancy between how *A* and *B* view the particular offense.

This particular illustration raises a few points that are of merit to this discussion. First, it raises the notion that people create *followable* stories for other people, in order to make sense of their lives, and in doing so, may introduce incorrect assumptions about the other when all the information pertinent to the particular offense is unavailable. Second,

each person interprets the world using their own narrative context, but the more this narrative context diverges from another, the more likely it is for a discrepancy in accounts to occur. This point serves to help explain why differences in culture, age, gender, religion, education, or race cause misunderstandings.[23] In addition, this helps explain why close friends can often reach agreement better than complete strangers. This is because the narrative contexts that each party is using will be more similar if there are more shared experiences. These shared experiences in turn lead to similar assumptions being made about other people. This leads to the third and last point, which is that we tend to impose our own narrative context and structure onto other people, in attempting to understand them with regard to our own experiences, and not theirs.

This is a point is elaborated on by Seyla Benhabib in *The Generalized and Concrete Other*. When we assume the stance of the *generalized other*, we assume that the other person's needs, desires, and affects are similar to our own, which lends us to believe that "each is entitled to expect and to assume from us what we can expect and assume from him or her."[24] Benhabib asserts that we need to move away from the notion of the *general other* to the *concrete other*, which takes the other person's "concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution," essentially their *narrative self-identity*, into consideration.[25] Thus, the solution to the problem rests in bringing the two individuals' narratives together and filling in the gaps of missing and relevant information so that incorrect assumptions that are made about the other person's narrative and, by result, the offense in question can be corrected.

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[23] A non-exhaustive list.
[24] Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory," in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, ed. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 485.
[25] Ibid.

Modifying Griswold's Use of Narrative

Resolving a disagreement over the account of wrongdoing, which will then allow the parties to move toward forgiveness, requires that each party share both their interpretation of the event and the narrative elements relevant to the particular situation. Griswold touches upon this notion by describing how narrative can help in the process of forgiveness; however, his use does not pertain to the new condition that I introduced earlier.[26] Since I am introducing the sharing of narratives to fulfill a *new* condition and extend it beyond Griswold's use, some explanation and elaboration are required. First I will give a brief account of Griswold's use of narrative. This will aid in identifying ways that it must be adapted to suit our present purpose. Once this is accomplished, I will extend the notion of narrative sharing using ideas from a model of discourse ethics by Jürgen Habermas. The result will be a more robust use of narrative in forgiveness, which will aid in settling disagreement over the nature of an offense *and* fulfill other conditions, as well.

Griswold suggests that the use of narrative is helpful, in that it aids the wronged in reframing the wrongdoer by emphasizing common humanity, their willingness to meet conditions, and allowing to put the offense in context, and moves the wrongdoer to acknowledge, repudiate, take responsibility for the deeds, and make a commitment to not cause injury again.[27] By sharing their narrative, the wrongdoer places their offense in the larger context of their experiences, and gives explanation as to why the offense was committed.[28] The wronged shares their narrative as a way to communicate the wrong that

[26] Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration,* 99-110.
[27] Ibid, 103-104.
[28] Ibid, 104.

was done to them and the extent of injury that was caused.[29] By seeing the injury that they have caused, ideally, the wrongdoer would be moved to fulfilling their conditions of forgiveness.[30] By seeing the larger context, shared humanity (moral imperfection), and the wrongdoer's commitment to change, the wronged would also be aided in fulfilling the conditions of forgiveness, as they reframe the wrongdoer and reduce resentment as a result.[31] Griswold's use of narrative is primarily to encourage empathy through understanding and reframing. While this is helpful in fulfilling conditions of forgiveness, Griswold does not apply it to resolving disagreement over the nature of an offense. Narrative is useful in that moves parties involved to empathic consideration, but also in its *explanatory* strength, as it aids in a contextual understanding of the situation.

Since both parties will be giving a narrative account, the sharing of narratives that occurs in this situation will take the form of discourse. Both parties will exchange their narrative accounts for the common purpose of resolving the dispute and agreeing on the nature of the offense that was committed. It is here that I introduce Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics, as a way to fine-tune what the process of sharing narratives will look like and to avoid pratfalls and objections that may arise to this model of resolving disagreement.

Narrative Sharing as Discourse

The idea of narrative sharing as a form of discourse is useful, especially within Habermas' model of discourse ethics and in relation to the situation being examined in this paper. My goal here in introducing discourse ethics is not to show its validity as a

[29] Ibid, 107-108.
[30] Ibid, 51.
[31] Ibid, 103.

comprehensive ethical model, but rather because it is particularly useful in disagreements that arise from differing interpretations. Jean Keller provides a succinct definition and function of discourse within Habermas' model, "According to Habermas, discourses are reflective forms of communicative action in which problematic validity claims are subject to discursive examination."[32] *Communicative action* here is meant to signify "the everyday communicative practices through which we achieve the mutual understanding necessary to coordinate our action plans and create a shared form of life."[33]

In addition, Habermas states that *communicative actions* involve a claim to truth, a claim to rightness, and a claim to truthfulness. Each of these hold the party involved accountable for their *communicative action* with regards to what is observable, what governs social relationships, and to their own subjective experiences. Thus in order for something to be a *communicative action* within discourse, it must commit no error in relation to the individual's knowledge of a situation objectively, socially, and subjectively. It also cannot commit an error in which the motivation for the *communicative action* is something other than settling the dispute over the validity claim.[34] This distinction is important to make, as truthful narrative sharing is central to successfully resolving a dispute over what took place. Once one party becomes either untruthful or motivated in a way that does not pertain to resolving the dispute, the narrative accounts of one or both parties become unreliable, and the discrepancies in their accounts will persist. In framing narrative sharing as discourse through *communicative*

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[32] Jean Keller, "Dialogue among Friends: Toward a Discourse Ethic of Interpersonal Relationships," *Hypatia* 23, no. 4 (2008): 162, accessed November 27, 2016, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/stable/25483225.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,* trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry W. Nicholson (Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990), 58.

actions as defined by Habermas, it is possible to avoid this issue, as well as define its primary purpose as resolving the dispute over the nature of the offense.

With this model in mind, narrative sharing as discourse through *communicative actions* will take the following form. First both parties will address the wrongdoing from their perspective by providing their interpretation of the account. If the accounts are differing to a degree that precludes Griswold's conditions from occurring, then narrative sharing as framed above must take place. If not, the situation will fall within the broader category of cases where the condition introduced–parties must reach an agreement as to what the nature of the offense–does not need explicit addressing. These situations, as mentioned earlier, will bypass this step, as the condition will already have been fulfilled. Once it becomes clear that there are significant differences in the accounts of wrongdoing, it will become necessary for both parties to share the narrative context within which the offense took place. This involves sharing both the interpretation of what the offense meant to them *and* the interpretation of what they saw as the others' intentions. Naturally, this will look different for the wronged and the wrongdoer; however, both parties should fully describe how the situation was interpreted with response to the self and the other. In addition, both parties must share the larger context in which this event took place. Omitting relevant narrative information will cause the instance of narrative sharing to no longer take the form of discourse through *communicative action*, which will hinder the process greatly by introducing the possibility for inaccurate accounts or ulterior motives. Once all of this has been communicated, the narrative context of the other and the action will become clear to both parties, and a resolution of the disagreement should follow.

Limitations to the Model

Of course, it is conceivable that there will be situations where the model provided will not resolve the dispute and forgiveness will continue to evade the individuals involved. While the possibility for untruth or ulterior motives has been dealt with by applying Habermas' definition of *discourse* and *communicative action,* there still enters a possibility of untruth that arises from self-deception. While a full examination into this topic is well beyond the scope of this paper, if both parties are committed to engage in discourse, I believe that enough of a bridge will be created so that a compromise can be reached. Obviously complete agreement is ideal, but with limitations to human understanding, possible self-deception, and each party's subjective worldviews entering into the picture (especially when the individuals involved exist in largely different social environments), this is unlikely in all instances. The main goal of the condition of agreement on the nature of the offense, however, is not to reach complete agreement as to what happened, but rather to overcome the obstacles that this poses to the other conditions of forgiveness given by Griswold. Thus, if the two parties can reach a compromise in terms of how they perceive the offense, the conditions for forgiveness can be fulfilled and a situation where the wrongdoer becomes *conditionally unforgiveable* are largely avoided.

Conclusion

I began my exploration on the topic of forgiveness and disagreement over the nature of an offense by examining how this can prevent forgiveness from taking place. I then demonstrated how agreement could be reached to a sufficient degree by use of narrative sharing as discourse through *communicative action*. In addition to resolving the

disagreement (to a sufficient degree) and thus fulfilling the new condition introduced, I have also demonstrated how narrative sharing can aid greatly in working toward forgiveness by encouraging empathy.

One final point is to be made that the *communicative action* of narrative sharing *encourages* empathy, but is different from empathy in that it aims to settle dispute over validity of truth claims. The model described above is mainly used for sake of *explanation* and *clarification*, which I have argued aid in the process of forgiveness, especially if there are disputes over the nature of the offense involved. While a full investigation as to the nature of empathy is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be said that empathy involves more *intrapersonal* work than *interpersonal* work. In that it involves certain *imaginative* elements,[35] it is still prone to create misunderstandings. While its use is helpful in moving parties toward a more forgiving stance, as Griswold argues, it is not *explanatory* in nature. Since narrative sharing has significant *explanatory* strength, it can aid in forgiveness by overcoming some of the deficiencies involved in empathy, promoting empathy through increased understanding of the other person, and help resolve disagreement over the nature of an offense.

While use of Habermas' definitions allows for avoiding of some deception and divergence from truth that is bound to occur, the issues of self-deception, motivation, and the difficulty involved in truth telling still complicate the issue and will require further exploration for a more complete model of resolving disputes through narrative sharing. Nonetheless, framed as discourse through *communicative action*, narrative sharing has significant strength in resolving the disputes over the nature of wrongdoing and aiding in the fulfillment of the conditions of forgiveness.

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[35] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 144-146.

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