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Zachariah Berry  
*Bethel University*

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The Role of Memory in Forgiveness:  
A Post-Forgiveness Investigation

Zachariah Berry

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Bethel University

Author Note

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taught by Dr. Paul Reasoner.

There is a fundamental importance and value in maintaining a memory of wrongs done in the past. What do we do, however, when we think that we have forgiven someone, but aspects from the past wrong continue to manifest in our conscious awareness? Some may argue that the victim ought to suppress the memory of the wrong. Yet, as I maintain, doing so causes the victim to lose the moral value associated with the memory of the wrong. Maintaining the memory of a past wrong, however, may cause the victim to re-experience the negative emotions corresponding to a past wrong subsequent to the delivery of forgiveness. How ought the victim respond to the re-experiencing of negative emotions after they have already forgiven the wrongdoer? Though there are various philosophical models of forgiveness, most share two primary issues raised by remembering a past wrong, its negative corresponding emotions, or the re-experiencing of negative emotions corresponding to a past wrong. In this paper I shall suggest that given the nature of memory, the mere remembering of a past wrong and its corresponding negative emotions is not a sufficient condition for believing that one has not offered legitimate forgiveness to the wrongdoer when legitimate forgiveness was delivered at time  $x$  in the past.<sup>1</sup> Further, I shall suggest that the re-experiencing of negative emotions that correspond to a past wrong are not indicative of whether or not the forgiveness delivered was legitimate. In the end I shall put forth a position of the process of forgiveness that conceives of the delivery of forgiveness while considering the memory-related issues respectively.

### **Memory of a past wrong and the corresponding negative emotions**

There are a variety of models of forgiveness that have been advanced by philosophers working to construct and refine conceptions of forgiveness. Jeffrie Murphy puts forth a model suggesting that forgiveness consists in the forswearing of vindictive passions associated with the wrong.<sup>2</sup> Charles Griswold argues that both the victim and the wrongdoer must meet certain conditions to fulfill what he calls paradigmatic forgiveness viz., the perfect fulfillment and delivery of forgiveness.<sup>3</sup> In Murphy, Griswold's and other prevailing philosophical models of forgiveness, two issues persist: how do we respond to the consistent remembering of a past wrong and the corresponding negative emotions?

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<sup>1</sup> I do not intend on putting forward a standard by which every instance of forgiveness must meet. Rather, my aim is to show that if one did forgive in the past, the persistence of the memory of the past wrong is not indicative of the legitimacy of the forgiveness delivered.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Getting even: forgiveness and its limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: a philosophical exploration* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

When a wrong is done to a person, reactive feelings manifest automatically as a result of the wrong. These reactive feelings may include anger, resentment, hatred, and the desire for revenge; and are called vindictive passions by Jeffrie Murphy.<sup>4</sup> According to Margaret Walker, however, there may exist a multiplicity of emotional states either in place of or alongside the vindictive passions that manifest as a result of being wronged. Such emotional states, she claims, may include “disappointment, hurt, heartbreak, sadness, despair, pessimism, mistrust, helplessness, and hopelessness; also disgust, anguish, shame, guilt, humiliation, fear, or terror.”<sup>5</sup> Both vindictive passions and non-vindictive emotions are negative emotions that react to wrongdoing. For the sake of this paper, I will refer to Walkers list of emotional states as non-vindictive emotions and shall use the term “negative emotions” when referring to the range of emotions that a victim may experience in response to wrongdoing.<sup>6</sup>

Victims do not choose how to react to an event. Rather, they choose what to do with the emotions that arise as a result of the event. These reactive emotions that correspond to an event in the past are remembered alongside the memory of the event. As a result, the memory of a past wrong may be painful for a victim as it brings about the corresponding negative emotions. Remembering an event after forgiveness has been delivered may therefore cause the victim to speculate on the meaningfulness and validity of the forgiveness. This speculation may make the victim less apt to reconstruct the moral relationship that was damaged as a result of the wrongdoing.<sup>7</sup> Even though the victim may remember forgiving the person, they may bring into question the legitimacy of their forgiveness as a result of the constant remembering of the past wrong due to the plethora of negative emotions that are attached to the memory of the wrong.

Some may argue that suppressing the event will avoid memory-related issues altogether. I argue against this idea, however, because there is value in maintaining a memory of past wrongs. Jeffrey Blustein

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Getting even: forgiveness and its limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral repair: reconstructing moral relations after wrongdoing*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> This will include vindictive passions and non-vindictive emotions.

<sup>7</sup> While the victim may doubt the legitimacy of their forgiveness they may also doubt the possibility that the wrongdoer is actually forgivable. I will address the doubts of the legitimacy of the delivery of forgiveness that the victim experiences, but I will not address the speculation that the wrongdoer is potentially unforgivable in this paper.

suggests that there is a fundamental importance in committing to memory negative emotions and the wrongs that they correspond to.<sup>8</sup> He states that there may be moral reasons for a victim to remember the wrong committed against them or others, and there may also be moral value in not forgetting the wrong. For example, commemoration serves a society or aggregate of a population in helping to sustain the memory of the victims of a wrong while bringing about moral awareness of the past abuses that were carried out. Remembering past abuses is important because the memory allows a person or community to continue to protest against the wrongs committed when negative emotions that correspond to a wrong arise.

Blustein states:

Memories of wrongdoing, when sustained, provide the basis for the pursuit of other worthwhile goals, one of which is helping present and future generations avoid a repetition of the earlier violence and injustice. Another is that remembering the victims who did not survive is one way of giving them the honor that they deserve and that we, as individuals or members of families or communities, owe them.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, I would argue that this importance extends to the individual level. At the individual level, maintaining a memory of past wrongs committed against ones self and the corresponding non-vindictive emotions is important for purposes of future self-protection, wise decision-making among other things. For example, say a woman is beaten by her boyfriend of five years. He was drunk when he hit her and it was the first time such an event had ever occurred. Given the dynamic between the two (the five year build of intimacy and friendship), it is in her best interest to remember the wrong and the non-vindictive emotions that correspond to the wrong for the sake of wise future decision-making. This may include avoiding him when he drinks alcohol or leaving him altogether despite the overwhelming positive emotions stemming from their five years together. Not doing so may lead the positive emotions to overshadow the non-vindictive emotions attached to the memory of the wrong thereby causing her to make unwise decisions making her vulnerable to further harm. Understanding what memory is and how it functions will bring us closer to understanding the continual remembering of a past wrong and the corresponding negative emotions.

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<sup>8</sup> Blustein is not lumping vindictive passions as I am in this paper. He is using the term “negative emotions” to account for the non-vindictive emotions that are experienced. See Jeffrey Blustein, “Forgiveness, commemoration, and restorative justice: The role of moral emotions,” *Metaphilosophy* 41, (2010): 582-617.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Blustein, “Forgiveness, commemoration, and restorative justice: The role of moral emotions,” *Metaphilosophy* 41, (2010): 582-617.

## Memory: What is it?

Contrary to popular conceptions of memory, memory is not a large vault within our minds that is sifted through when voluntarily looking for facts or information from past experiences. Rather, memory refers to the variety of cognitive processes by which individual's retain information and reconstruct past experiences.<sup>10</sup> It can be thought about as the reconstruction of information from elements that exist in different areas of our brain.<sup>11</sup> One such process is short-term memory (STM), the memory for an event or stimulus that is maintained for a short period of time by means of the working memory, which holds information to the extent that we need it. For example, where one parks their car in a parking garage will be entered into the STM, sustained by the working memory until it has been exhausted, and then let go upon arriving at the vehicle. Another process is long-term memory (LTM), which is the process of consolidating short-term memories to make them permanently accessible. Information (e.g. past events or facts) is encoded into the LTM through the hippocampal formation, which ensures that neurons firing together to produce a specific experience will fire together again to reconstruct the original experience.<sup>12</sup> Information that is encoded in terms of its meaning or implication will be remembered better.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, memories of emotional events, particularly those that elicited a stronger emotional response, will persist longer than emotionally neutral events.<sup>14</sup>

Long-term memories are typically categorized into two distinct types of remembering.<sup>15</sup> First, there is *declarative memory*, in which the rememberer seeks out information or past experiences that are explicitly available to the individual. There are two distinct types of memories within declarative memory

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<sup>10</sup> John Sutton, "Memory," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2012).

<sup>11</sup> Endel Tulving, "Memory: An overview," in *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. by Alan Kazdin vol. 5 160 (American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000).

<sup>12</sup> "The Principles of Memory," in *The Brain Book: An Illustrated Guide to Its Structure, Function and Disorders*, (London: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, Inc., 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Scott C. Brown and I. M. Fergus Craik, "Coding processes," in *Encyclopedia of psychology*, ed. by Alan Kazdin vol. 5 163 (American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000)

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Blustein, "Forgiveness, commemoration, and restorative justice: The role of moral emotions," *Metaphilosophy* 41, (2010): 582-617; Gordon H. Bower, "How might emotions affect learning?," in *Sven-Åke Christianson*, 3-31 (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 1992).

<sup>15</sup> The following categories of memory are often referred to as involuntary/voluntary memories, explicit/implicit memories among other names.

viz., *semantic memory*, which is the recollection of facts that underlie our general knowledge of the world irrespective of context; and *episodic memory*, the memory of experienced events and episodes that occurred in time.<sup>16</sup> The second type of memory is known as *non-declarative memory*, which includes perceptions, responses to stimuli, and motor learning not at the conscious level of awareness. This type of remembering involves things done by habit, such as riding a bicycle or typing. Typically, we have learned these sorts of activities and have encoded them in a way that requires little conscious energy to execute them.<sup>17</sup> Upon understanding the types of memory, their function and process, it is important to also address what a memory is.

Within the study of memory, there have remained two competing views concerning the nature of a memory. One view is the representative theory of memory (RTM), which claims that all memories are representations of things in the past. According to the RTM view, the memory of a past event is the present existence of a representation of that past event. This view opposes the idea that memories are direct experiences of past events, as it seems impossible to directly experience an event that no longer exists in the present. When an event occurs, a “trace” is left somewhere in a particular area of the brain that is representative of that experience. This trace allows the rememberer to reconstruct and remember the event. When one remembers an event, the object of that memory is the images or representations of the event that is brought to immediate awareness, allowing one to recall the event being remembered (e.g. bringing about the image of the birthday cake from ones birthday three years ago).<sup>18</sup> The other dominant view in the work of memory is the direct theory of memory (DTM)<sup>19</sup>, which states that a memory is the immediate knowledge of things past. Thomas Reid, the pioneer of this view, claimed that we remember a thing as it has been directly perceived by the senses. He contends that information would never be remembered if it was not directly committed to memory at the time of perception. Therefore, memory consists in the direct

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<sup>16</sup> The words “episodic” and “semantic” used to define the two types of memory are interchangeable with a variety of other words denoting the exact same thing. John Sutton, “Memory,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2012).

<sup>17</sup> Neil R. Carlson, “Learning and memory,” in *Physiology of behavior*, ed. by Jessica Mosher 11th ed. (Pearson Education, Inc., 2013).

<sup>18</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739); Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind* (London: Allen & Unwin Limited, 1921).

<sup>19</sup> Sometimes referred to as *Naïve Realism* (see Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

experience of events that occurred in the past.<sup>20</sup> A representative view of memory is the most widely accepted position within contemporary cognitive science of memory and philosophical thought on memory.<sup>21</sup> For the sake of this paper, I will maintain that memories of past wrongs are representations of the event that occurred in the past.

### **Nature of the memory of past wrongs and the corresponding negative emotions**

Emotional experiences may cause the memory of the experience to persist longer than other types of memories. Memory encoding and consolidation of events occurs without our conscious effort. When we experience an emotional event, the event will be encoded automatically and the emotions corresponding to that event will attach to the memory. For example, my high school graduation was a joyous occasion. Therefore, happiness has been encoded with the memory of my graduation and will be remembered when I remember the event. In the same way, when a wrong is committed against an individual the emotions manifesting in response to the wrong will be remembered alongside the event. The remembered event can be recalled in a variety of ways.

On the one hand, the victim may remember facts of the wrong from the past, such as the series of events that led up to and were a key part of the wrong. They may also remember the negative emotions that correspond to the past wrong; such as sadness, anger, or disappointment that manifested in response to the wrong committed against them. Both the facts and emotions of past wrongs are encoded together and can be remembered voluntarily or involuntarily. For example, the victim may choose to remember the wrong at a certain point in time in order to better understand the series of events that led up to the wrong committed against them. On the other hand, however, the victim may involuntarily remember the event through cues in their environment. For instance, driving past the restaurant where one was physically abused may automatically bring about the memory of the wrong committed against them. This type of remembering occurs outside of the victim's control, as the memory was brought to fruition by the cues in their environment, which mapped onto their memory of the event.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785); Thomas D. Senor, "Epistemological Problems of Memory," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2014).

<sup>21</sup> John Sutton, "Memory," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2012).

<sup>22</sup> Søren R. Staugaard and Dorthe Berntsen, 2014. "Involuntary memories of emotional scenes: The effects of cue discriminability and emotion over time." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143, (2014): 1939-57.



So what does all this tell us about the remembering of past wrongs? By understanding the process of memory recollection, we know that the remembering of past events, especially past events that are emotionally salient (e.g. the memory of being wronged in the past), is a natural product of our cognitive processes. Therefore, judging the validity of delivered forgiveness due to the continual remembering or persistent memory of a past wrong is untenable. Suppose the contrary to be true. If an individual continued to remember an aspect of a past vacation, they would have to question the actuality of that remembered occurrence. This would be a devastating way to live life given the amount of persistent memories that we have and thoroughly enjoy believing to be true.

Further, though research in the field of memory does indicate that some information can be encoded inaccurately,<sup>23</sup> we are justified believing what is remembered from past experiences to be true.<sup>24</sup> This is the case because in order to attain knowledge, there must be a general reliability of memory. We cannot successfully communicate or live productive lives if we are constantly testing every bit of knowledge that we remember.<sup>25</sup> In light of this, the remembering of a past wrong and the negative emotions that correspond to the wrong is an insufficient condition for asserting that the victim failed to offer valid forgiveness to the wrongdoer.<sup>26</sup>

### **Re-experiencing of vindictive passions that correspond to a past wrong**

Yet, the remembering of past wrong presents an additional issue. That is, maintaining a memory of a past wrong leaves the victim vulnerable to re-experiencing the negative emotions associated with the wrong. How ought an individual respond to the re-experiencing of negative emotions corresponding to a wrong done in the past? Re-experiencing the negative emotions may cause the victim to question the

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<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Loftus, "Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind: a 30-year investigation of the malleability of memory," *Learning and Memory* 12, (2005): 361-366.

<sup>24</sup> Sue Campbell, *Relational Remembering: rethinking the memory wars* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Amanda J. Barnier, John Sutton, Celia B. Harris, and Robert A. Wilson, "A Conceptual and Empirical Framework for the Social Distribution of Cognition: the case of memory," *Cognitive Systems Research* 9, (2008): 33-51.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas D. Senor, Thomas, "Epistemological Problems of Memory," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2014).

<sup>26</sup> That is, failed to meet certain conditions required for the delivery of forgiveness.

legitimacy of their asserted forgiveness and make them less apt to reconstruct the moral relationship that was damaged as a result of the wrongdoing.

First, given the value of remembering a past wrong and its corresponding non-vindictive emotions,<sup>27</sup> it is important to understand the negative emotions that correspond to a past wrong in order to properly maintain a memory of the wrong. In the same way, I argue that a victim should accept re-experiencing non-vindictive emotions. These emotions provide a basis for wise decision-making aimed at preventing future harm. But, the same shouldn't be said of the vindictive passions, as these emotions must be foresworn to fulfill forgiveness. The drudgery lies in properly committing to memory past wrongs in such a way that avoids the re-experiencing of vindictive passions while maintaining the memory of the non-vindictive emotions that correspond to a particular wrong.

Emotions are subjective feelings that manifest in response to events or pieces of information within ones frame of reference.<sup>28</sup> I contend that when a victim foreswears or lets go of the vindictive passions that correspond to a wrong, these emotions become latent. A problem arises, however, as these vindictive passions foresworn by the victim can manifest at time  $x$  in the future. The latent vindictive passions may be moved from a state of potentiality to an actual re-experiencing within the conscious awareness of the victim. This will occur from either the voluntary or involuntary remembering of a wrong, or from cues within ones environment that stimulate the re-experiencing.<sup>29</sup>

In the case of voluntarily remembering a wrong, a victim may seek to remember a past wrong for  $x$  reason, thereby causing the latent vindictive passions to involuntarily be brought from latency to actuality as the victim re-experiences the vindictive passions corresponding to the wrongdoing. On the other hand, the victim may voluntarily choose to remember the vindictive passions that correspond to the wrong thereby bringing about the state of mind they were in during that wrong. While the victim may remember being in the state of mind that she was in when experiencing the wrong being committed against her without actually being in that state of mind, the recollection of that memory has the potential to bring about

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<sup>27</sup> See p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> "Emotion," in *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> The remembering of a past wrong may occur either voluntarily or involuntarily.

the vindictive passions that she remembers experiencing.<sup>30</sup> A person may also re-experience a past emotional state from cues within their environment that are perceived either consciously or subliminally.<sup>31</sup>

These issues seem to arise even in models of forgiveness that require the forswearing of the vindictive passions arising as a result of being wronged. If a victim forswears or lets go of the reactive feelings brought about by a wrong, there still remains the potential for a vindictive passion to be re-experienced. Further, an individual can attempt to let go of the corresponding vindictive passions without offering forth forgiveness. This, however, creates problems given the way that memories are encoded and the potential to involuntarily experience vindictive passions that correspond to the encoded memory of the wrong.

The vindictive passions are not standalone emotions. Given the nature of our cognitive processes, emotions experienced as a result of an event will be encoded alongside the memory of the event.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, anytime that a person re-experiences vindictive passions that correspond to a past wrong, the memory of the past wrong will be there as well.<sup>33</sup> Consistent with this principle, the assertion of forgiveness should be encoded in the memory alongside of the vindictive passions and the memory of the event. As we have been examining here, however, the re-experiencing of vindictive passions may not always bring about the remembering of forgiveness. This may be due to the high emotional salience of the vindictive passions in contrast to the lower emotional salience of the delivered forgiveness. As stated above, events that elicited a higher emotional response will persist in memory longer and manifest over and above the remembering of less emotional memories. I suggest that when an individual re-experiences corresponding vindictive passions they should reinterpret the emotional experience and the memory that corresponds to it in light of the forgiveness they have already offered. Empirically, this process is known as

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<sup>30</sup> E.J. Furlong, "Memory," *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Philosophy* 57, (1948): 16-44.

<sup>31</sup> For example, a person driving past the location where they were physically abused three months prior could cause a re-experience of the emotional state that they were in at that time.

<sup>32</sup> Endel Tulving and Donald M. Thomson, "Encoding specificity and retrieval processes in episodic memory," *Psychological Review* 80, (1973): 352-73.

<sup>33</sup> A fair response may ask how I can say that one can remember a past wrong without re-experiencing the negative emotions, but one cannot re-experience the negative emotions without remembering the past wrong. I understand the apparent contradiction of this point, but I believe that people are able to remember something from within the past without re-experiencing the emotional state that one was in at the time the event was occurring.

the process of reconsolidation, which allows us to modify established memories or connect them to newer memories.<sup>34</sup> As we reinterpret the past event and our emotions that relate to that event, we become able to connect the memory of a past wrong and its corresponding vindictive passions to the forgiveness offered.

I do not believe that reinterpreting an event will certainly be a one-time occurrence. There may be future instances where the victim continues to experience the vindictive passions that correspond to a wrong done in the past. In engaging in the process more than once, I argue that this is a positive step in satisfying emotional self-transformation.<sup>35</sup> Further, it will help the victim to maintain the memory of the wrong in order to reap the moral value of such memory retention.

### **Model of Forgiveness**

#### **A need for a new model**

In most models of forgiveness, negative emotions that correspond to a particular wrongdoing are addressed. Typically, models of forgiveness suggest that the forswearing of vindictive passions corresponding to a wrong is a necessary condition of forgiveness.<sup>36</sup> While I submit that this is right, the issues raised by remembering the wrong and the corresponding negative emotions with the potential of re-experiencing the negative emotions still remain even after forgiveness and the forswearing of the corresponding vindictive passions has occurred. While Blustein's model of forgiveness takes into account the issues brought about from the re-experiencing of negative emotions that correspond to a past wrong, his account fails to offer a position on how an individual ought to handle the re-experiencing of the negative emotions that correspond to the wrong. He suggests that some emotions that arise subsequent to the offering of forgiveness to a wrongdoing are quasi-protests against the wrongdoing. These protests, as are all protests, are communicative acts intended to help the wrongdoer understand the victim's response in hopes of eliciting an appropriate response from the wrongdoer viz., the seeking of forgiveness.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Neil R. Carlson, 2013. "Learning and memory," in *Physiology of behavior*, ed. by Jessica Mosher 11th ed. (Pearson Education, Inc., 2013).

<sup>35</sup> See p. 15–16 for an exposition of emotional self-transformation.

<sup>36</sup> For examples, see Margaret Walker's *Moral Repair*, Jeffrie Murphy's *Getting Even: Forgiveness and its Limits*, Charles Griswold's *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Investigation*, and Bishop Butler's sermon *On Forgiveness of Injuries*.

<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey Blustein, "Forgiveness, Commemoration, and Restorative Justice: The Role of Moral Emotions," *Metaphilosophy* 41, (2010): 582-617.

I suggest that this account of the emotions that arise in spite of the sincere verbal expression of forgiveness is incomplete as it fails to consider the power of forgiveness and current understandings of our cognitive processes such as the capacity of the mind to bring to awareness emotions and memories that may lead a person to believe something that is not true.<sup>38</sup> In light of the issues related to memory that effect most instances of forgiveness irrespective of the model maintained, I propose a model of forgiveness that better captures the process with respect to these issues.

### **Framework of the model**

Forgiveness is a reparative process that is both a matter of heart and external actions. In light of this, it is rare to find the process of forgiveness satisfied immediately following the wrong, as there are necessary steps to take that require careful assessment.<sup>39</sup> The following steps, though variable to change depending upon the nature of the victim and that of the situation, include initial assessment of the wrong and the wrongdoer, the heartfelt verbal expression of forgiveness, emotional self-transformation, and relational reconstruction. The ordering of the steps are intentional, as it seems to me *prima facie* that there is a natural progression to them.

In the preliminary step, one must carefully assess the nature of the wrong and the nature of the wrongdoer to get a better understanding for what, if possible, needs to be forgiven of the wrongdoer. The first step in the process of forgiveness is the heartfelt verbal expression of forgiveness, which is done by the victim in order to acknowledge their intention to complete the process and their refusal to hold the wrong against them. In light of this, it seems necessary to be the first step that is taken subsequent to the initial assessment. The final two steps that the victim must take in working towards completing the process of forgiveness are the two most interchangeable, and will be switched depending upon the nature of the victim. My model suggests, however, that following the assessment and the subsequent assertion of forgiveness, emotional self-transformation is likely to be the next step.

Given the implications that follow from the reactive feelings stemming from a particular event, modification of how one sees these feelings is *prima facie* necessary prior to the relational reconstruction.

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<sup>38</sup> Such as, what they are experiencing indicates that their asserted forgiveness failed to meet certain conditions of forgiveness or that the forgiveness that has not yet been asserted ought not be asserted.

<sup>39</sup> Though not impossible; For example the Bishop in *Les Misérables* depicts forgiveness void of this process.

The reactive feelings can often cloud a person's judgment concerning the nature of the wrong and that of the wrongdoer. Clouded judgment can negatively impact a person's intention and decision with respect to the relationship reconstruction viz., the final step in the forgiveness process. Furthermore, these reactive feelings, or memory of these feelings when not properly dealt with, can manifest in a way that causes the victim to re-experience the emotions tied to the wrong. This may lead them to believe that they have not forgiven the wrongdoer in spite of their verbal assertion. Therefore, it is imperative to properly let go of the emotions tied to the wrong while maintaining a modified memory of the wrong intended to reduce the likelihood of re-experiencing the negative emotions corresponding to the past wrong. The final step in my model of forgiveness is the reconstruction of the relationship. This step is contingent upon the results of the preceding steps and the initial assessment. Once the moral relationship has been reconstructed, forgiveness has been asserted and emotional self-transformation has taken place, I argue that forgiveness has been fulfilled.

#### **Preliminary step: Assessment**

The initial assessment may include reflection of the event or the wrongdoer. Our ability to jump easily to conclusions that render our judgment inaccurate is the main cause for the necessity of assessment prior to forgiveness. Assessing the wrong prior to the initial delivery of forgiveness also allows the victim to arrive at a conclusion through proper cognitive faculties.<sup>40</sup> The victim must carefully assess the nature of the wrong in relation to the nature and intention of the wrongdoer in order to assess whether or not the offender is humanly forgivable.<sup>41</sup> Isolating either the nature of the wrong or the nature of the offender in assessing the forgivableness of the situation is inadequate as a judgment may be made with insufficient information. For example, a victim could isolate the assessment of the wrong and find its offense so horrific

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<sup>40</sup> By proper cognitive faculties, I am drawing on the research done on attributional complexity. Those that are more attributionally complex are typically able to make better and more accurate judgments concerning a situation or event. See Carly Johnco, Viviana M. Wuthrich, & Ron M. Rapee, "The role of cognitive flexibility in cognitive restructuring skill acquisition among older adults," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 27, (2013).

<sup>41</sup> I am not attempting to offer an opinion on whether there are instances where someone is humanly unforgivable. Rather, given that some people interpret certain wrongdoers to be humanly unforgivable, I am allowing for the ability to maintain that position within this model of forgiveness. Determining a wrongdoer to be humanly unforgivable will require something external to this model.

that they conclude the offender is unforgivable.<sup>42</sup> The nature of the offender, however, could be such that their actions are physically out of their control due either to mental retardation or a severe deterioration of judgment and control brought about by a growing tumor in their medial prefrontal cortex.<sup>43</sup>

In such cases, understanding the nature of the offender may prompt the victim to see the situation differently, potentially allowing the victim to forgive the offense committed against her. Once it has been determined by the victim that the offender is humanly forgivable, the delivery of forgiveness is variable to the victim. The victim chooses how they will begin the process and whether or not forgiveness will be asserted and procedurally satisfied. Therefore, I contend that careful assessment of the nature of the offense and the nature of the wrongdoer is a necessary precedent to forgiveness.

### **Part 1: Verbal heartfelt expression**

Forgiveness is a matter of external action. This action is two-fold as it requires a heartfelt verbal expression from the victim to the wrongdoer and a reconstruction of the relationship that has been compromised by the wrongdoer's actions towards the victim. I will first address the verbal expression that is necessary for the process of forgiveness, and then address the reconstruction of the relationship at a later point in the paper.

The sincere verbal expression of forgiveness from the victim to the wrongdoer is a primary component to the delivery of forgiveness, as it serves as a stake-in-the-ground for a person to encode in their memory the point forgiveness was asserted. In so doing, our established memory of the past wrong can be connected to this new memory viz., the stake-in-the-ground that is forgiveness at time  $x$ . It is of course necessary that this expression be heartfelt and sincere. A mere verbal expression will not suffice in delivering forgiveness as it creates an unjustifiable, subsequent wrong from the hand of the victim. Rather, a sincere expression serves as a marker to the victim indicating that at this point in time forgiveness has been sought.

This expression serves as a necessary starting point to the process of forgiveness. If in the future at time  $x$  the victim remembers the wrong and the corresponding negative emotions or re-experiences the

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<sup>42</sup> As stated in the preceding footnote, whether or not all wrongdoers are forgivable is a separate investigation that will not be discussed in this paper.

<sup>43</sup> See case of murderer, [Charles Whitman](#), whose actions may have been influenced by a tumor in his brain.

negative emotions corresponding to the wrong, their memory will be attached to the verbal expression, “I forgive you”, thereby reassuring the victim that they have forgiven the wrongdoer. The issues stemming from the remembering of a wrong and the corresponding negative emotions and the potential re-experiencing of the negative emotions corresponding to the wrong are separate matters that will be addressed in the next section. Despite the issues of memory that exist following the verbal expression, the sincere, “I forgive you” initiates the process of forgiveness.

## **Part 2: Emotional self-transformation**

Forgiveness is also a matter of the heart. This emotional aspect of forgiveness is concerned with the reactive feelings victims experience in response to the wrongs committed against them. A victim may feel vindictive passions—anger, resentment, hatred, and a desire to seek revenge—or they may experience non-vindictive emotions such as sadness, disappointment, or fear.<sup>44</sup> Part of the process of forgiveness is knowing what to do with the reactive emotions associated with the wrong.

As stated in the preceding step, forgiveness may be asserted by the victim as a token of their willingness to work towards repairing the broken state. But, feelings may often exist long after the process begins. Merely asserting forgiveness to the wrongdoer does not forego the reactive feelings experienced. Once these reactive feelings have manifested, victims are subject to potentially re-experiencing these negative emotions in the future despite asserting forgiveness. Though it is important to accept the non-vindictive emotions re-experienced, one must know how to address corresponding vindictive passions at the outset to avoid re-experiencing these vindictive passions at a future date.

Negative feelings are reactive and come about naturally in response to an event. As stated in the first section, victims do not choose how to emotionally react to an event; rather, they must choose what to do with the reactive feelings. A victim might try to suppress the emotions corresponding to the event as an easy way to cope. The victim may also try to suppress the continual resurfacing of a thought or past emotional state that exists outside of their conscious control, and try to suppress its occurrence. Researchers suggest, however, that the suppressing of a thought or emotional state typically increases the frequency and

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<sup>44</sup> Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Getting even: forgiveness and its limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral repair: reconstructing moral relations after wrongdoing*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



persistence of the thought or emotion.<sup>45</sup> In order to completely satisfy the process of forgiveness, the victim must engage in emotional self-transformation rather than suppression. Emotional self-transformation is carried out to restructure emotions in an attempt to feel differently about the situation than when first experiencing the reactive feelings.<sup>46</sup>

I assert that emotional self-transformation is a bipartite engagement requiring the letting go of the vindictive passions and the transforming of the thoughts surrounding the event and the emotions experienced as a result. Yet, if a person re-experiences negative emotions that correspond to a past wrong, it is important to recognize that this occurrence is a fundamental part of their cognitive process.<sup>47</sup>

When it comes to speculating the legitimacy of forgiveness already delivered, it is important to understand that some thoughts manifest outside of our conscious control. If a victim has already asserted forgiveness, they ought not to assume that it indicates illegitimate forgiveness. Rather, when this occurs, the victim should engage in the “letting pass” of the manifesting emotions. Kelly McGonigal suggests that when a thought manifests into conscious awareness that contradicts what we thought we knew (e.g. thinking I didn’t forgive when I certainly did), we might try to picture it as a cloud and our breath as the wind, blowing until we picture the cloud moving away from our mind.<sup>48</sup> When a thought or emotion comes forth that makes us think that we have not forgiven a wrongdoer for what was done in the past, we might try picturing it as a cloud moving away from us by the force of our breath. This may help to deter speculation of the legitimacy of the delivered forgiveness.

### **Part 3: Reconstruction of the moral relationship**

The final step of the forgiveness process is the reconstruction of the moral relationship.<sup>49</sup> The fundamental question one needs to ask themselves is, “what ought I to do now?”<sup>50</sup> There exists a

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<sup>45</sup> Jennifer L. S. Borton, Lee J. Markowitz, and John Dieterich, “Effects of suppressing negative self-referent thoughts on mood and self-esteem,” *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology* 24 (2005): 172-90.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Blustein, “Forgiveness, Commemoration, and Restorative Justice: The Role of Moral Emotions,” *Metaphilosophy* 41, (2010): 582-617.

<sup>47</sup> See p. 8–11 for more on this point.

<sup>48</sup> Kelly McGonigal, *The willpower instinct: How self-control works, why it matters, and what you can do to get more of it* (New York, NY: Avery/Penguin Group USA, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> The second part to the external aspect of forgiveness.

fundamental moral relationship between two existing human beings. This relationship exists on the basis of trust that for some two-persons is deep and intimate, while for others is a mere default necessary for the function of society. Whenever a wrong has been committed, the moral relationship that exists between two human beings becomes impaired.<sup>51</sup> Knowing how to reconstruct a damaged relationship is, generally speaking, the final step in the process of forgiveness. This final external action depends upon the assessment of the nature of the offense and the nature of the offender.

Following assessment, a careful judgment concerning the reconstruction of the relationship ought to be made. In some cases, a once blossoming relationship may be reduced to acquaintanceship, while in other cases it may be required that the victim avoid the wrongdoer altogether. As noted above, forgiveness is self-sacrificial. Examples of this self-sacrificial conception of forgiveness can be seen in everyday life. My experience in situations requiring forgiveness is such that a person forgives yet makes a necessary condition for this forgiveness.<sup>52</sup> The necessary reconstruction of the moral relationship attempts to ensure protection of the victim from the wrongdoer. While the moral relationship is re-established, it is done so in a way that defaults trust to individuals with the clear awareness of their potential harmful nature.

Attributional complexity, or the capacity to, and preference of, an individual to prefer complex explanations for behavior,<sup>53</sup> will help people better understand the complexity of decisions made by wrongdoers while also shedding light on the potential for further harm that would require a particular reconstruction of the moral relationship so as to avoid future harm. The necessary outcome does not dictate the forgivableness of the wrong; rather, it is the determined result necessary to reconstruct a moral relationship between the wronged and the wrongdoer.

The remembering of a past wrong, its corresponding negative emotions, and the re-experiencing of past negative emotions threaten those who have forgiven wrongdoers for the wrongs committed against

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<sup>50</sup> The victim, the wrongdoer and other parties that were also involved ask this question.

<sup>51</sup> Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral repair: reconstructing moral relations after wrongdoing*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> Such as forgiving someone but maintaining a particular distance from him or her in order to protect oneself from future harm.

<sup>53</sup> Garth J.O. Fletcher, Paula Danilovics, Guadalupe Fernandez, Dena Peterson, and Glenn D. Reeder, "Attributional complexity: An individual differences measure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51, (1986): 875-884.

them. Persistent remembering of the wrong or the re-experiencing of the corresponding negative emotions may make the victim speculate on the legitimacy of the forgiveness already delivered while also making them less apt to reconstruct the moral relationship. These memory-related issues effect most models of forgiveness. In light of this, it is important to understand the cognitive processes that account for memory construction. Persistent and frequent remembering of a past wrong and the re-experiencing of negative emotions that correspond to a past wrong are a natural part of our cognitive processes and as a result, are not indicative of the legitimacy of the forgiveness offered to the wrongdoer.

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