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Forgiveness and Love of Human Beings: A Kantian Two-Aspect Account of Forgiveness

The aim of this paper is to outline a Kantian notion of forgiveness. In particular, I argue that a full concept of forgiveness has an action-related and an emotional aspect. Many accounts understand forgiveness as an *overcoming of resentment* (or similar negative feelings) toward the wrongdoer.¹ By contrast, in a recent article, Kate Moran argues that “Kant cannot define forgiveness as the revision of one’s feelings toward an offender. Rather, forgiveness can only consist of revising the kinds of actions we take toward our offender”². First, I will motivate the view that a change of feeling or affective attitude toward the offender is a central element of forgiveness in the Kantian sense. Second, I will suggest that we take love of human beings as a model for understanding forgiveness. Third, I discuss Moran’s objections to understanding forgiveness as a change of feeling. Finally, I will show that Kantian forgiveness is best understood not only *by analogy* with love but also *as a kind of love*.

1

In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant characterizes forgiveness in terms of actions (or rather omissions), describing it as “the remission of compensation or payment”³. However, one reason to doubt that a *full* conception of forgiveness can do without reference to feelings is the phenomenology of forgiveness: If a person does not demand compensation, but continues to feel strong resentment toward the offender, we would hesitate to say that she has really forgiven him. Similarly,

¹ In this respect, they follow Joseph Butler’s account (*Upon Resentment and Forgiveness of Injuries*. In: *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*. London 1774). As we will see, Butler understands forgiveness as the overcoming of *excessive* resentment (such as the desire for revenge), whereas most contemporary accounts focus on “appropriate” resentment.

² Moran, Kate A.: *For Community’s Sake. A (Self-Respecting) Kantian Account of Forgiveness*. In: *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. Akten des XI. Kant-Kongresses*. Hg. v. Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca and Margit Ruffing. Berlin 2013, 433–444, 436.

³ V-MS/Vigil, AA 27: 689.26–27. English translations from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Ethics*. Transl. Peter Heath. Ed. J.B. Schneewind. New York 1997.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110467888-005>

it makes sense to say that I have *tried* to forgive someone but have not been completely successful because I cannot overcome my resentment. This cannot be accounted for if forgiveness is understood only in terms of action.

Furthermore, Kant himself ties forgiveness to overcoming hatred in the *Doctrine of Virtue*:

It is, therefore, a duty of virtue [...] to refrain from repaying another's enmity with hatred out of mere revenge [...] because a human being has enough guilt of his own to be greatly in need of [forgiveness]⁴ [...]. – It is therefore a duty of human beings to be forgiving.⁵

In this passage, Kant characterizes forgiveness in terms of refraining from “repaying another’s enmity with hatred out of mere revenge”. It is possible to interpret Kant as saying that we should not *act* with hatred toward the offender. But the more natural reading is that we should withdraw any hatred we might *feel*. Hatred is an *affective* phenomenon. More precisely, according to Kant, hatred is a *passion* – that is, “a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination”⁶.

In sum, Kant characterizes forgiveness as an offer of remission both at the level of *action* (in the *Lectures on Ethics*) and at the level of *passion* (in the *Doctrine of Virtue*). The former is an action-related characterization of forgiveness, the latter an affective one. How do the two accounts fit together?

2

Let us explore the idea that the structure of love helps to clarify the structure of forgiveness. As with forgiveness, Kant describes love as both emotional and action related in the *Groundwork*. “Pathological love”, or “love as an inclination”, belongs to feeling and cannot be commanded, because we cannot produce it at will.⁷ By contrast, “practical” love can be willed and therefore morally commanded. In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, under the heading “love of human beings”, Kant takes up the same distinction:

⁴ Original: ‘Verzeihung’. Gregor translates this as “pardon”, but I want to distinguish excusing from forgiving.

⁵ Kant: MS, AA 06: 460.34–461.03. English translations from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*. Transl. Mary Gregor, Cambridge 1996.

⁶ Kant: MS, AA 06: 408.07f.

⁷ Kant: GMS, AA 04: 399.31f. English translations from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*. Transl. Mary Gregor, Cambridge 1996.

Love is a matter of feeling, not of willing, and I cannot love because I will to, still less because I ought to [...]; so a duty to love is an absurdity. But benevolence [...], as conduct, can be subject to a law of duty. However, unselfish benevolence toward human beings is often (though very inappropriately) also called love.⁸

In this passage, Kant suggests that the two are not equally apt conceptions of love: What Kant called “practical love” in the *Groundwork* is really “benevolence”, and only “inappropriately” called love. This means that, on the one hand, practical love is more relevant to moral philosophy than pathological love is because it can be commanded. On the other hand, pathological love is better able to account for the phenomenon of love.

Later in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant repeats the distinction between love as a feeling and practical love.⁹ Two differences between this and the earlier section are worth highlighting. First, in the later section, benevolence is not only “inappropriately” called love, but also called “practical love” without qualification. Second, practical love is characterized as the *maxim* of benevolence, not benevolence “as conduct”.

Forgiveness might be understood as having the same structure as love, such that we can distinguish a practical from a pathological notion of forgiveness. If we understand practical forgiveness as a maxim, we might understand cases of “remission of compensation and payment”¹⁰ as examples of actions or omissions that result from this maxim. The pathological notion of forgiveness would refer to the affective dimension. The passage from the *Doctrine of Virtue* suggests that pathological forgiveness consists in overcoming hatred.

As with love, both concepts fulfil important roles: Practical forgiveness is a candidate for a moral command, since actions are subject to voluntary control. Pathological forgiveness cannot be directly commanded but might still be an appropriate conception of forgiveness, capturing an important aspect of what it means to forgive.

This leads to the question of how pathological and practical forgiveness are related. Let us first ask whether the practical kind of love or forgiveness can exist without the pathological kind. In the case of love, Kant explicitly considers be-

⁸ Kant: MS, AA 06: 401.24–29.

⁹ “In this context [On the Duty of Love to Other Human Beings], however, love is not to be understood as feeling, that is, as pleasure in the perfection of others; love is not to be understood as delight in them (since others cannot put one under obligation to have feelings). It must rather be thought as the maxim of benevolence (practical love), which results in beneficence.” (Kant: MS, AA 06: 449.17–22).

¹⁰ V-MS/Vigil, AA 27: 689.26 f.

nevolence toward other human beings – that is, love in the practical sense, “whether one loves them or not” (in the pathological sense).¹¹ Likewise, it seems possible to forgive an offender in the practical sense (to refrain from demanding compensation) without forgiving in the pathological sense (withdrawing anger or hatred).

Even though the practical sense of love or forgiveness can occur in the absence of the affective side, Kant draws attention to a connection. Practical love can *further* pathological love. If someone practices beneficence often, “he eventually comes actually to love the person he has helped”¹². Likewise, actions expressing practical forgiveness could further pathological forgiveness. But is it plausible to assume that refraining from demanding compensation will have an effect on negative feelings toward the offender? To be sure, refraining from pursuing compensation may not be enough. Yet there might be other actions or omissions that can influence one’s emotions, such as refraining from making accusations or from brooding over the wrong. Thus if we view practical forgiveness as encompassing a broader range of actions, we can retain the analogy with love: Exercising practical forgiveness can encourage pathological forgiveness.

Let us now ask whether the pathological kind of love or forgiveness can exist without the practical. Kant characterizes pathological love as “a pleasure joined immediately to the representation of an object’s existence”¹³. It seems conceptually possible to love a person in this sense without acting in ways that benefit her. But this is surely not typically the case. This seems to point to a disanalogy between love and forgiveness, for one might overcome hatred and nonetheless demand compensation. Indeed, compensation is typically located at the juridical level and can be demanded without feeling hatred. In discussing forgiveness, however, Kant is concerned with the ethical, not the juridical.¹⁴ That is, he seems to have in mind an ethical notion of compensation (e.g. apology).¹⁵ Still, overcoming hatred while continuing to demand an apology seems conceivable. The idea that overcoming hatred might involve change at the level of action is more plausible if we consider not simply the remission of compensation but a

11 Kant: MS, AA 06: 402.02.

12 Kant: MS, AA 06: 402.15 f.

13 Kant: MS AA 06: 402.23 f.

14 Cf. Kant: MS AA 06: 460.32; V-MS/Vigil, AA 27: 689.05 f.

15 In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant says that there is a “moral sense” of opposition to the violation of rights, which consists in demanding compensation (V-MS/Vigil, AA 27: 689.05 f.). Apology might be an example of this, but so might material compensation that is not obligatory in a legal sense.

broader class of actions and omissions, such as refraining from reproaching the wrongdoer.

To sum up: In analogy with love, pathological and practical forgiveness can be conceptually distinguished (the former is emotional, the latter action related), but they are closely linked and typically occur together. I therefore prefer to speak of *two aspects* of one full concept of forgiveness rather than two separate concepts.

3

Let us turn to three objections to understanding forgiveness as a change of feelings – objections that have led Kate Moran to conclude that “Kant cannot define forgiveness as the revision of one’s feelings toward an offender”¹⁶. I want to show that these objections do not speak against attributing an affective aspect to forgiveness.

The first objection is that we have “little or no control over these feelings”¹⁷. Kant claims that forgiveness is sometimes a duty.¹⁸ However, feelings cannot be commanded, because they cannot be controlled; thus, the objection goes, forgiveness cannot consist in overcoming feelings. The analogy with love points to two approaches to solving this problem. First, we might understand Kant as referring only to the *practical* aspect of forgiveness when he calls it a duty. As with pathological love, pathological forgiveness cannot be commanded. However, as with love, this does not mean that the affective aspect is not central to forgiveness.

Second, Kant allows that there is an *indirect* duty to cultivate certain feelings. With respect to compassion, he calls this “a duty to sympathize actively in [another’s] fate; and to this end it is [...] an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us”¹⁹. The way to fulfil this indirect duty is to perform actions that promote the relevant feelings, for example seeking out

16 Moran, Kate A.: *For Community’s Sake. A (Self-Respecting) Kantian Account of Forgiveness*. In: *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. Akten des XI. Kant-Kongresses*. Hg. v. Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca and Margit Ruffing. Berlin 2013, 433–444, 436.

17 Moran, Kate A.: *For Community’s Sake. A (Self-Respecting) Kantian Account of Forgiveness*. In: *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. Akten des XI. Kant-Kongresses*. Hg. v. Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca and Margit Ruffing. Berlin 2013, 433–444, 436.

18 Kant: MS, AA 06: 461.03.

19 Kant: MS, AA 06: 457.25–28.

“the places where the poor [...] are to be found”²⁰. Because certain actions help to bring about certain feelings, we can have at least indirect control over them. As indicated above, this might also be true in the case of pathological forgiveness: By performing certain actions (e. g. refraining from reproaching the wrongdoer) we can work toward overcoming hatred.²¹

A second objection is directed against a particular conception of pathological forgiveness. If we understand it as the cessation of hatred or vengeance, we face the consequence that we “have a duty to forgive all the time, or as much as possible”, as Moran points out, because “Kantian agents actually have an obligation to avoid these feelings”. This seems problematic because it precludes an understanding of forgiveness as being “gift-like”²². Indeed, Kant confines the feelings overcome in forgiveness to hatred. In this respect, he follows Joseph Butler, who says that “excessive” resentment “becomes malice or revenge” and that to “forgive injuries” is to “prevent” resentment’s “having this effect”²³. The consequence of Kant and Butler’s view is that forgiveness amounts to correcting a mistake on the part of the resenting person, who entertains unwarranted negative feelings. I agree with Moran that this is problematic on systematic grounds. What we learn from this is that *if* we want to retain a sense of forgiveness as being gift-like,²⁴ we must conceive of the feelings overcome by forgiveness as ~~as permitted~~. If we understand forgiveness as an overcoming of *legitimate* resentment, overcoming resentment is not obligatory.

This leads to the third objection. Moran points out that resentment (or rather indignation) is, like respect, “a feeling brought about by recognition of the moral law”; in particular, resentment stems from “the knowledge that someone has violated this law”²⁵. Overcoming resentment or indignation seems to come at the “cost of revising one’s judgment that a wrong has been committed” and therefore

²⁰ Kant: MS, AA 06: 457.31.

²¹ Moran concedes this point in a slightly different context when she points out that we can form our moral character (minimizing negative emotions that prevent us from adopting others’ ends as our own) by ceasing to seek compensation, i. e. by forgiving.

²² Moran, Kate A.: *For Community’s Sake. A (Self-Respecting) Kantian Account of Forgiveness*. In: *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. Akten des XI. Kant-Kongresses*. Hg. v. Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca and Margit Ruffing. Berlin 2013, 433–444, 435.

²³ Butler, Joseph: *Upon Resentment and Forgiveness of Injuries*. In: *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, London 1774, 106.

²⁴ Cf. e. g. Gamlund, Espen: *Supererogatory Forgiveness*. In: *Inquiry. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 53/6 (2010), 540–564.

²⁵ Moran, Kate A.: *For Community’s Sake. A (Self-Respecting) Kantian Account of Forgiveness*. In: *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. Akten des XI. Kant-Kongresses*. Hg. v. Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca and Margit Ruffing. Berlin 2013, 433–444, 434.

seems to amount to excusing, not to forgiving.²⁶ Unlike respect, however, resentment does not seem to be *necessarily* connected to the recognition of the moral law. At least Kant does not give an account of this connection. It is compatible with his theory that we just *tend to answer* to wrongdoing with resentment but can overcome it without changing our judgement about the wrongdoing. ~~Indeed, Kant is committed to this possibility; otherwise, he could not claim that forgiveness “must not be confused with meek toleration of wrongs”²⁷. It must therefore be possible on a Kantian account to overcome resentment and still acknowledge the act as a wrong that should not be tolerated.~~²⁸

4

If these thoughts are correct, a Kantian notion of forgiveness can be understood, in analogy with love, as having an affective aspect in addition to a practical one. The context of Kant’s discussion of forgiveness suggests an even stronger link between forgiveness and love: Forgiveness seems *to be* a kind of love of human beings. We find the discussion of forgiveness in the section “On the Vices of Hatred for Human Beings, Directly [...] Opposed to Love of Them”²⁹. Here, Kant presents forgiveness as opposition to a vice, which is itself opposed to love of human beings. Since it stands in opposition to what is opposed to love, we can understand forgiveness as an expression of love.³⁰

Closer attention to the context reveals that the goodness of forgiveness results from the duty of sympathy, which is a duty of love. Kant places forgiveness in opposition to “malice” in its “sweetest form”: “the desire for revenge”³¹. Since malice is “the direct opposite of sympathy”, and since Kant describes forgiveness

26 Moran, Kate A.: *For Community’s Sake. A (Self-Respecting) Kantian Account of Forgiveness*. In: *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. Akten des XI. Kant-Kongresses*. Hg. v. Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca and Margit Ruffing. Berlin 2013, 433–444, 434.

27 Kant: MS, AA 06: 461.04.

28 For example, by taking “rigorous means [...] for preventing the recurrence of wrongs by others”. Kant seems to think that forgiving is compatible with trying to prevent (to the extent possible) the recurrence of the wrong.

29 Kant: MS, AA 06: 458.20f.

30 Again, this is in agreement with Butler’s account: “The command to [...] forgive injuries, is the same as to love our enemies; because that love is always supposed, unless destroyed by resentment” (*Upon Resentment and Forgiveness of Injuries*. In: *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*. London 1774, 106).

31 Kant: MS, AA 06: 460.19–22.

as the counterpart to a kind of malice, forgiveness is closely connected to sympathy.

Kant provides a hint as to how forgiveness relates to sympathy. The “principle of sympathy” states “I am a human being; whatever befalls a human being concerns me too”³². Why should we be concerned in a sympathetic way when a person acts morally badly? And why is forgiveness a way to express sympathetic concern? Kant seems to refer to both questions in his justification of a wide duty of forgiveness. He claims that every “human being has enough guilt of his own to be greatly in need of [forgiveness]”³³. The thought that “a human being has enough guilt of his own” points to a ground for sympathy because it expresses a commonality between victim and offender: Both are morally fallible and guilty of *something*. And the idea that forgiveness answers to a “need” shared by all helps to explain why forgiveness is a way of expressing sympathy. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an account of the sources of the need for forgiveness. However, on the assumption that we all share a need for forgiveness, we can understand Kant’s justification of a wide duty of forgiveness in analogy to his justification of the duty of benevolence: Both refer to one’s own “need” (in the case of benevolence, the “need to be loved”) which can only be binding “through its qualification as a universal law”³⁴.

5

Kantian forgiveness can be understood as having a two-aspect structure, just as love of human beings has a practical and a pathological (or affective) aspect. Kant suggests that the practical aspect consists in “the remission of compensation or payment”³⁵, the affective aspect in refraining “from repaying another’s enmity with hatred out of mere revenge”³⁶. Kant’s focus on morally objectionable emotions such as hatred yields a narrow conception of forgiveness that precludes an understanding of forgiveness as being gift-like. However, we might allow for the involvement of a broader range of negative emotions, including non-excessive resentment, and still retain what I take to be Kant’s two main insights on the topic: the interplay between the practical and the affective, and the

³² Kant: MS, AA 06: 460.17 f.

³³ Kant: MS, AA 06: 460.37–461.01.

³⁴ Kant: MS, AA 06: 393.17–21.

³⁵ V-MS/Vigil, AA 27: 689.26 f.

³⁶ Kant: MS, AA 06: 460.34 f.

deep connection between forgiveness and sympathy, grounded in the awareness of shared moral fallibility, on the basis of which forgiveness is conceivable as an expression of love for human beings.³⁷

³⁷ I would like to thank Matthé Scholten and Owen Ware for valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.

