

1 Forgiveness: Not a Power¹

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3

4 *Abstract*

5 Some understand forgiveness as a normative power. Here we raise an objection to such views.
6 They cannot explain certain instances when forgiveness is beyond our grasp. A victim of a
7 wrong, despite thinking forgiveness is the right thing to do, and wishing that she could forgive,
8 may find herself unable to do so. No good explanation of this impossibility, consistent with
9 forgiveness being a normative power, is available.

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11 *Keywords:* Forgiveness, Resentment, Normative Power, Declarative.

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4 *I.* In the television series *Succession*, an aging patriarch, Logan Roy, pits his children
5 against one another. He was, without doubt, an abusive father. Over four seasons, we see his
6 children tear themselves apart while fighting over who among them will succeed Logan as
7 head of his worldwide conglomerate, Waystar Royco. Then, one day—spoiler alert!—Logan
8 has a heart attack. It cripples him. In his dying moments, he gets on a call with his children.
9 One of them, Kendall, tells him the painful truth: ‘I can’t forgive you. But it’s okay. And I
10 love you’.

11 Sometimes we are able to forgive those who wrong us. Other times—as Kendall
12 understood—we cannot. On those occasions forgiveness is simply beyond our grasp. We claim
13 no novelty for observing this phenomenon (Russell 2023: 46-47).² But here we show it is
14 incompatible with forgiveness being a normative power.³ For if it were, forgiveness would be
15 available in circumstances when we know it is not. Consider:

16 *Cheating.* Jamal cheats on Gemma just weeks before their wedding is meant to occur. So Jamal
17 seriously wrongs Gemma. This unravels the relationship. They break up. Jamal apologises
18 profusely and begs for forgiveness. Gemma says she wishes she could, and that she bears him

² Relatedly, Milam (2022: 603) and Russell (2023: 142-43) suggest it can be harder to forgive than the power conception of forgiveness supposes. Here we press a neighbouring challenge: forgiveness is sometimes impossible in a way which is inexplicable if it were a normative power.

³ Those who say forgiveness is a normative power include: Pettigrove 2012, Nelkin 2013, Swinburne 2016, Warmke 2016a and 2016b, Cornell 2017, Bennett 2018.

1 no ill will. Yet she tells him, with regret, that she can't forgive him. She wishes things were
2 different. But forgiveness is, at present, beyond her grasp.

3 What Gemma says is entirely intelligible. It reflects a familiar feature of our normative
4 experience. We may wish to let go of some grievance, but it clings on regardless. So,

5 (1) In *Cheating*, Gemma lacks the option of forgiving Jamal.⁴

6 How does (1) bear on a normative powers account of forgiveness? By normative power
7 we mean a volitional capacity to change, absent an explanatory intermediary, our normative
8 situation.⁵ The change occurs because the power is exercised, period. Some say forgiveness is
9 a normative power. 'In forgiving, we relinquish certain rights ... and we release others from
10 certain personal obligations' (Warmke 2016b: 690-91). Given that, those who can forgive have
11 it in their gift, simply by virtue of their willing, to release wrongdoers from the duties they
12 owe to victims (Bennett 2023: 276).⁶

13 A common motivation for the power conception of forgiveness is an analogy to the
14 waiver of monetary debts (Warmke 2016a: 572; Nelkin 2013: 176). An analogy along similar
15 lines might be to consent, since it, too, is commonly understood as a normative power (eg
16 Hurd 1996). On a power conception of consent, we consent by communicating an intention to
17 waive a right we otherwise possess. Doing so, simply in virtue of the act of communicating

⁴ To be clear, we do not mean that Gemma lacks the option in the normative sense, that is, lacking the permission to forgive. Rather we mean to say that Gemma cannot forgive in a non-normative sense. We will discuss this distinction in more detail later.

⁵ See Owens 2012 and Raz 1975.

⁶ Forgivers may also take on an obligation themselves to not hold the wrong against the wrongdoer. See Warmke 2016a: 575, Cornell 2017: 245, and Bennett 2018: 229.

1 the relevant intention, renders permissible what was previously forbidden. No explanatory
2 intermediaries, like the conduct fitting the consenter's preferences, are necessary.

3 Hence a normative powers account is committed to the thought that, at least in ordinary
4 circumstances, forgiveness is a *choice* available to the victim. She should be able to say 'I
5 forgive you' with the relevant intention and thereby achieve the intended normative change.

6 So,

7 (2) If forgiveness were a normative power, then, in *Cheating*, Gemma has the option of
8 forgiving Jamal.

9 But from (1) and (2) we can infer,

10 (3) Forgiveness is not a normative power.

11 We shall now rule out various attempts to deny (1) and (2).

12

13 2. Start with (1). The worry is that, contrary to initial appearances, Gemma is actually able to
14 forgive Jamal. For this to be plausible, an explanation is needed for why Gemma *seems* to lack
15 the option, or why it might be sensible for her to *say* she 'cannot' forgive Jamal. Here we
16 consider, and reject, two possibilities.

17 The first possible explanation is that we sometimes use the language of inability to refer
18 to something other than the genuine lack of options. Say a friend asks you to drive her to the
19 airport at 4AM tomorrow. This is burdensome. So you tell her you cannot. But suppose your
20 friend were to respond, however awkward or rude it might be: 'Really? Is it actually
21 *impossible* for you to take me to the airport?' The response, if we are being honest, is to admit
22 it is possible. You are simply electing to decline. This is an instance of prioritising self-interest
23 over the other-regarding considerations to help the friend. But this cannot explain *Cheating*.

1 Gemma says she wishes to forgive. Surely she could be telling the truth. Perhaps she even
2 believes she would be better off if she were to forgive Jamal. Yet she says she cannot forgive
3 him.

4 Apart from this, the language of inability could concern a pre-existing obligation. Having
5 already promised to help one friend move into her new home, we may need to tell our other
6 friend that we cannot promise to drive him to the airport the very same morning. Our reasons
7 to keep a promise, on this occasion, defeat the reasons to make a new promise. This allows
8 for an alternative explanation. We sometimes say we *cannot* ϕ to refer, not to impossibility,
9 but the lack of a normative permission to ϕ (Edwards 2024: 205).⁷ This, however, isn't enough
10 to rule out (1). In *Cheating*, Gemma may correctly believe she has all-things-considered
11 reason to forgive. Suppose Jamal showed remorse, apologised, committed to behaving better
12 in the future, and so on. By Gemma's lights, it may be better—for both her and Jamal—if she
13 could bring herself to forgive. It is just that she cannot.

14 The second possible explanation is that forgiveness is disjunctive. You may suppose
15 ordinary talk of 'forgiveness' is polysemous. In one sense, forgiveness could consist of a
16 certain change in a victim's affective state, such as the release of resentment. In another sense,
17 it may concern the exercise of a volitional power to change our rights and duties.⁸ Could
18 forgiveness, correctly understood, be a disjunct of these senses? If so, this would explain why
19 Gemma thinks she cannot forgive. Being unable to let go of resentment makes it impossible

⁷ Cf Milam (2018), who argues forgiveness is not always *normatively* elective, in the sense of lacking a duty to either forgive or refrain from forgiving. See also Russell (2023: ch 5) for an extensive discussion of whether forgiveness is necessarily permissible when possible.

⁸ Cf Cornell 2017: 224-45 and Norlock 2009: 97.

1 to forgive in the affective sense, even if the ability to forgive in the power sense remains
2 untouched.

3 Here's the problem. The theorists who defend the power conception of forgiveness see
4 themselves in direct competition with affective accounts. That is, they seek a competing theory
5 of the same sense of forgiveness (eg Bennett 2018: 224-26). If 'forgiveness' refers to one
6 phenomenon when understood in the affective sense, and another when understood in the
7 power sense, then there is no real disagreement to be had. The two sides would simply be
8 speaking past each other. This would be a costly admission for those who conceive of
9 forgiveness as a normative power. For the debate, as they understand it—and on this point we
10 agree—is between competing accounts of the same core phenomenon.

11 One way to go disjunctive yet retain a genuine debate is to say, while there are multiple
12 senses of forgiveness, there is one which is paradigmatic or central.⁹ Take forgiving privately
13 or forgiving the dead. Such cases do not look like ways to alter what we owe to each other. A
14 common response is to extend forgiveness to cover them, but to deny they form part of the
15 central case.¹⁰

16 This response faces special difficulties with *Cheating*.¹¹ What Gemma says *seems* true.
17 Yet if it were only true in a peripheral sense we might expect her statement to initially seem

⁹ Russell (2023: 71-72) calls this a 'Wittgensteinian family resemblance theory of forgiveness'. But he treats this as a unitary, rather than pluralist or disjunctive, theory of forgiveness because it still tries to 'latch onto a single target' (72).

¹⁰ See Warmke 2016b: 291, Cornell 2017: 264, and Bennett 2018: 212.

¹¹ For more general objections to this strategy, see Russell 2023: 145-49. We largely agree with the objections, but lack the space to discuss them here.

1 false, even if on reflection we would change our minds. Further, the scenario in *Cheating*—a
2 request to forgive a marital infidelity—is a familiar way for forgiveness to feature in our
3 normative life. Our account of forgiveness should centrally encompass whatever is asked of
4 Gemma in *Cheating*.

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6 3. Now consider (2). The worry is that a power account of forgiveness need not say
7 Gemma lacks the option to forgive. After all, we cannot always exercise a normative power.
8 Such powers are not, in this respect, entirely within our volitional control. Can this explain
9 *Cheating*? No, since the conditions under which we cannot exercise powers do not apply.

10 Which conditions? First, we may be unable to exercise a power because we do not
11 possess it. We lack ‘standing’. Those without standing cannot forgive in virtue of being the
12 wrong sort of person (Pettigrove 2009; Fritz and Miller 2022). This is why third parties cannot
13 typically forgive. But Gemma is Jamal’s victim; he wronged *her*. So, on any view, she has
14 standing (cf Bennett 2023: 276).

15 Second, even when we generally possess a power, certain circumstances may prevent its
16 exercise. Call them disablers. But no disablers can explain the inability to forgive in *Cheating*
17 consistent with forgiveness being a normative power.

18 Certain disablers concern a particular subject matter. Consider how a ‘promise’ to murder
19 might not generate any duties given its subject matter being seriously wrong. We can say the
20 words, but the normative change that standardly follows will not obtain. Along similar lines,
21 several subject matter disablers could arise in the context of forgiveness. First, we may be
22 unable to forgive certain grave wrongs (cf Garrard and McNaughton 2021). Second,
23 forgiveness may be inappropriate if the wrongdoer fails to act toward amelioration (Griswold

1 2007: 276). Third, a victim may be disabled from forgiving when it would wrong the self.
2 Perhaps it would be degrading or otherwise contrary to the victim's self-respect (Holmgren
3 1993; Novitz 1998). Alternatively, the withholding of forgiveness may be the only way to
4 maintain a valuable separation from the wrongdoer (Russell 2023: 117-18). The risk is of
5 forgiveness reigniting a relationship the victim ought to avoid.

6 Whatever their merits, none of these disablers apply to *Cheating*. Infidelity is the sort of
7 wrong which is, in principle, forgivable. And we could fill out the details in *Cheating* to
8 address the other subject matter disablers. Stipulate that Jamal has taken steps to make
9 amends. And that forgiveness is, in this scenario, strictly separable from any further
10 reconciliation. Gemma will not, let's say, get back with Jamal.

11 Other disablers concern a fact about the forgiver. For instance, victims may be unable to
12 forgive when they fail to evince 'awareness of the gravity of the normative changes being
13 made' (Bennett 2023: 281). The thought is that forgiveness, like vows, may only be valid if
14 performed with the requisite solemnity. This, too, need not apply to *Cheating*. Gemma could
15 know what occurred, and appreciate fully its significance. Indeed, that appreciation may partly
16 explain why she finds it impossible to forgive.

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18 4. Another way to reject (2) is to explain the inability to forgive in *Cheating*, not by a
19 disabler, but by the failure of a necessary precursor to obtain. On a standard view, a normative
20 power operates as a declarative (Warmke 2016b: 697). The communication of an intention to
21 'alter the normative situation through some specified action is sufficient ... so as to alter the
22 normative situation' (Bennett 2018: 223). The need to specify a relevant action gets at the
23 thought that, when we exercise forgiveness, we do not simply intend to change our rights and

1 duties. We intend to do so *by* doing something in particular—typically some mental,
2 expressive, or communicative act.

3 Say the specified action is a commitment not to hold the wrongdoer to the normative
4 consequences of their action. (We take this to be a plausible option, but you should be able to
5 plug in your preferred formulation in what follows.) To put things together, forgivers, on this
6 view, intend to alter the normative situation by communicating their commitment to not hold
7 the wrongdoer to the relevant normative consequences.

8 Perhaps Gemma is unable to forgive because she cannot form the intention necessary to
9 exercise the power? If so, this would explain, consistent with the power conception, why
10 Gemma cannot forgive. It is because she cannot stop herself from holding the wrong against
11 the wrongdoer. So she cannot, you might suppose, intend to alter the normative situation (like
12 release the wrongdoer from certain duties) by making that commitment.

13 This effort to deny (2) fails, for two reasons. First, it isn't clear why Gemma cannot
14 possess the requisite intention. Gemma may well believe she will keep holding the wrong
15 against Jamal. We can, however, *intend* to release someone from an obligation while knowing
16 that, in the future, we will likely have trouble accepting the change. Sure, it might be wrong
17 to hold someone to an obligation which, by hypothesis (if forgiveness does its normative
18 work), the wrongdoer no longer possesses. But this is entirely consistent with Gemma being
19 able to forgive—indeed, it assumes she already has.

20 Still, suppose we were to grant that Gemma is unable to form the relevant intention.
21 There is a further problem: other normative powers do not work in the way the objection
22 supposes. For their exercise is not predicated on the actual possession of the relevant intention.
23 The performance of an act which *represents* the presence of the intention will suffice. Sincerity

1 isn't required. Suppose you tell your friend that you promise to go to the movies with him,
2 knowing full well you cannot. Or suppose you tell your doctor you consent to the surgery,
3 while in your mind privately insisting the operation should not go ahead. In each case, the
4 representation of the intention is enough. There is now a promissory duty to go to the movies,
5 and the operation is now permissible for the surgeon to perform. That you *secretly* lacked the
6 intention is irrelevant. If forgiveness were a normative power, we might expect it to operate
7 in similar fashion. Stipulate, to avoid complications, that Gemma is a great actress. There is
8 no evidence to doubt Gemma's sincerity. She should be able to represent herself as having the
9 relevant intention and, by virtue of that communication, release Jamal from his obligations.

10 Now consider a final possibility. Could forgiveness consist of a conjunction of both a
11 declarative and the genuine expression of an affective state?¹² Such a view would explain why
12 Gemma is unable to forgive. It is because she cannot, say, be at peace with Jamal's wrong
13 when that feeling of calm is necessary to forgive.

14 A preliminary issue with a conjunctive approach is the relation between the declarative
15 and affective state. A natural thought is to condition the exercise of the power, and therefore
16 the change in normative situation paradigmatic of forgiveness, on the affective state. One
17 problem with this approach, as Russell (2023: 145) notes, is that this sets forgiveness apart
18 from many normative powers, like making a promise or cancelling a debt. This worry is
19 compounded if we are right that normative powers do not require those who exercise them to
20 actually have the intention they represent. Similarly, we might expect an adequately plausible
21 representation of the affective state, rather than its actual presence, to suffice. But if the
22 affective state limb of the conjunct is weakened in this way, it cannot explain *Cheating*.

¹² See, for example, Scarre 2016: 936 and Bennett 2018: 224.

1 Gemma could be able to impeccably represent an insincere change in her affective state yet
2 be unable to forgive.

3 Setting this aside, an additional concern is that adding an affective component to a power
4 account of forgiveness threatens its explanatory potential. To be a normative power, it does
5 not suffice for its exercise to alter the normative situation. This comes too cheap. Injuring
6 someone may bring us under duties to the victim, yet there is no normative power to injure
7 (Tadros 2020: 302).¹³ Nor is it enough to insist that there be an intention to bring about the
8 change. Those who, perversely, injure others *to* bring themselves under duties to the victim
9 do not thereby exercise a normative power. What makes normative powers special is the direct
10 explanatory link between the intention and the intended normative effect (Tadros 2020). One
11 intends to alter the rights and duties that obtain and, in virtue of that intention being
12 communicated, that change occurs by fiat.

13 Where, then, does the affective component slot into the story? One option is that it
14 operates as an intermediary between the intention and the normative change. The victim
15 intends to alter the normative situation by overcoming her resentment, succeeds in
16 overcoming that resentment, then communicates that fact to the forgiven. But this would no

¹³ We would, instead, describe it as a simple case of what Enoch (2011) calls triggering reason-giving. But we don't wish to press this point. For, as Raz (2022) suggests, there is a possible 'wide' sense in which the ability to give ourselves duties to help our victims is a normative power. A power, in this wide sense, is merely the ability to change the normative landscape. But this is not plausibly the sense of normative power invoked in the context of forgiveness. For the power conception of forgiveness seeks to explain, in a manner distinctive to its being a power, how the change in the normative situation comes about. See Bennett 2018; Warmke (2015: 503, 2016a, and 2016b: 698).

1 longer be a conjunctive account. It is, instead, an affective account which holds, very
2 plausibly, that certain emotional changes—namely, those done intentionally, and perhaps for
3 a certain set of reasons—have special normative significance.¹⁴

4 Another option is that the affective component plays the role of a co-cause. Here we have
5 something akin to how a heat source and oxygen (or other oxidizer) both contribute to a fire.
6 The conjunctive account may similarly say the relevant intention and the affective change are
7 constitutive of a process necessary to change the normative situation. The question is why.
8 Creating a fire requires a particular sort of oxidizing chemical reaction in which heat and
9 oxygen interact. Fire emerges from this interaction. There is no fire without it. By contrast,
10 certain affective changes, like a loss of resentment,¹⁵ can plausibly alter the normative
11 situation on their own.¹⁶ For instance, a person who loses resentment might give herself
12 reasons not to revisit the matter, even if she does not intend to give herself a duty. Similarly,

¹⁴ See eg Milam 2019.

¹⁵ Another possibility is the loss of a disposition to remain at odds with the wrongdoer. See Russell 2023: 144.

¹⁶ A loss of resentment does not, of course, *always* result in a normative change. You may then worry that, absent the intention characteristic of the power conception, we cannot explain the full array of cases in which forgiveness alters the normative situation. We have two responses. First, a change in affective state, alone, may not suffice. The affective change may need to be undertaken intentionally. But this is distinct from an intention to directly change the normative situation. Second, for this to support the conjunctive account we must presuppose that forgiveness always (at least in central cases) involves a normative change. Warmke (2016a: 576) calls this the ‘Post-Forgiveness Fact’. But, like Russell (2023: 131-40), we doubt forgiveness always has this normative significance.

1 a victim who loses resentment out of a sense of grace to the wrongdoer might alter what the
2 wrongdoer must do, even if she lacks the concept of a power to waive obligations.

3 In response, you may wonder whether we can water down the affective component. The
4 challenge is to hit the Goldilocks zone. On one hand, the affective state must be somewhat
5 thick. It must be something which a victim, in circumstances like *Cheating*, is plausibly unable
6 to get herself to feel. On the other hand, the affective state cannot be too thick. Otherwise,
7 requiring a victim to feel it prior to forgiveness raises the explanatory challenge we pressed
8 above. Can the power conception thread the needle?

9 We doubt it. An initially plausible option is to require that the victim come to terms with
10 the wrong. Alternatively, forgiveness might require victims to feel some determination to erase
11 or otherwise leave behind one's negative emotions associated with the wrong (cf Russell 2023:
12 50). But this blurs the line between forgiving and promising. The determinations are future
13 tensed; they are to do something, like eliminate resentment, *in the future*. We agree the
14 expression of such commitments can potentially alter the normative situation. Any such
15 change, however, occurs as a promise. It is, we would say, a promise to forgive (cf Russell
16 2023: 133-34). But this, of course, supposes forgiveness has yet to occur.¹⁷

17 To be clear, our objection is not just that, were Gemma to say 'I forgive' absent an
18 affective change, she would fail to forgive. Here, intuitions differ. In this respect it may be
19 that, like an insincere promise, Gemma comes under a duty to not resent Jamal. Rather our
20 concern is with the scenario in which Gemma refuses to forgive. Suppose Gemma, having *not*
21 said 'I forgive you', tells Jamal 'I'm sorry but I cannot forgive you'. Our point is that, if

¹⁷ This point, to be fair, depends on the exact content of the commitment undertaken in forgiving. There is a discussion of the various options in Russell 2023: 128-31.

1 forgiveness were a normative power, we must say Gemma is being disingenuous. This is
2 costly, for the opposite seems true; Gemma is being admirably forthright. The power
3 conception must explain why Gemma cannot forgive.

4 No such explanation, we conclude, is available.¹⁸

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