

The Heart of the Matter: Forgiveness as an Aesthetic Process

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In Joseph Butler's second sermon on resentment and forgiveness, the good bishop stresses the importance of proper judgment for sensible living, arguing that although the experience of ill-will towards another can be provoked by all manner of wrongs and confusions, the first necessary step to forgive requires the recognition that the "false light" of self-prejudice is indeed a false way of seeing the world (Butler 1792, 141). By defining forgiveness relative to resentment grounded in self-love, Butler argues that both virtuous and vicious people can forgive others, for the process equates to a cognitive reorientation of attitudes dependent on the volitional choice of the agent to perceive reality properly, regardless of his or her character (1792, 141). Following a common misreading of Butler that defines forgiveness simply as the "overcoming of resentment,"³⁰ much of the literature in the philosophy of forgiveness has therefore focused on either epistemic questions (surrounding the possibility, effectiveness, and process of forgiving another, as well as its connection to forgetfulness) or on related moral concerns (such as forgiveness' potential status as a virtue and its possible obligatoriness in given situations).

Rembrandt's 1668 oil painting *Return of the Prodigal Son* begins a case for a different focus in the philosophy of forgiveness: one grounded on procedural aesthetic concerns and virtue-based emotional states—and one that Butler himself would likely appreciate. No stranger to bringing together both light and darkness on his canvases, Rembrandt wields both in his adaptation of the biblical parable of the Prodigal to create a dyadic focus circulating around the contrasted forgiving spirit of the penitent's father and the oppositional disbelief of the returned son's brother.³¹ By highlighting both the tender father-son embrace on the left of the scene and the disapproving gaze of the figure on the right, Rembrandt communicates the complicated mess of emotions displayed in Luke 15:11-32, thereby demonstrating the difficulty of recognizing Butler's "false light" for what it is (Proimos 2011, 297). Despite seeing the change in his brother's character that might warrant the generous forgiveness extended by their father, the brother's emotions prevent him from being able—at the point depicted by Rembrandt—to achieve Butler's cognitive reorientation and see through his resentment to forgive.

Therefore, rather than demonstrating a triumphal conquering of resentment in his display of forgiveness, Rembrandt indicates that such a painful emotion often will, instead, exist in tension with the choice to forgive.



The Return of the Prodigal Son, Rembrandt van Rijn

Indeed, by equally portraying both a forgiving father and unforgiving brother responding to the same experience, Rembrandt's painting subtly comments on the nature of reconciliation judgments and their disconnect from the reconciled individuals' emotional states. *Return of the Prodigal Son* is a powerful scene of forgiveness, despite its conflicting set of emotions—including the strongly resentful figure—that it contains. Contra the Butler-tradition, Rembrandt's painting demonstrates the aesthetic component of the experience of forgiveness itself—that is to say, the phenomenological process that accompanies an agent's cognitive judgments and understanding with the forgiver's emotional affective states; this has been largely resigned to the periphery of the philosophical conversation, despite its locus at the core of any real-world impulse for forgiveness. In short, Rembrandt's painting comments on how it *feels* to forgive.

For the forgiver, the cathartic relief that accompanies the release of grudges and associated tensions is a powerful motivation for engaging in the process of forgiveness altogether, but the simple definition of forgiveness as resentment-overcoming hamstringing a philosopher's ability to consider this key affective product. If forgiveness does not obtain unless emotional states are squashed, then genuine forgiveness will be a bird so rare as to defy counting as a relevant element of conversation. The real experience of forgiveness is far more messy and, I contend (following thinkers like Marilyn McCord Adams [1991, 297] and Aurel Kolnai [1973-1974, 95]), something which precedes emotional catharsis as its prerequisite, not as its definition. In short, a choice to forgive *results* in the peacefulness of overcome resentment; it is not identical with that emotional state. Consequently, forgiveness is a virtue insofar as it contributes to the creation of a

more beautiful world than that which would obtain in its absence.

Therefore, following in Joram Haber's "common-sense" footsteps in this field, I aim to build a philosophical structure around the every-day experience of forgiveness as a peace-seeking enterprise by reintroducing an underrepresented concern in contemporary philosophy of forgiveness: the aesthetic process of forgiveness and the related role of the forgiver's experienced emotions. Rather than viewing the experience of forgiveness as a chiefly epistemic process (which can lead to paradoxical conclusions related to deservingness and memory),³² I adapt the long-standing binary model of aesthetic judgment and emotion put forth by Leder et al. to the process of forgiveness so as to better retain an appreciation of the phenomenology of forgiveness throughout the analytic process.

The beauty of virtue

Although the notion of applying an aesthetic framework to a process frequently defined in terms of normative properties might now appear strange, this approach finds its roots in Aristotelian virtue ethics that predate the aesthetic-ethical split of the European Enlightenment. Aristotle consistently structures his theory of ethical action in terms of the pursuit of the *kalon*: a word that has been translated variably as "beautiful," "noble," and "fine"—in each case, evoking a sense of completion as with a work of art to which nothing can either be added or removed without diminishing its beauty (Kraut 2014).³³ This sense of fitness or appropriateness to a given situation grounds the identification of Aristotelian virtues as features which contribute to the overall pursuit of *eudaimonia* in an agent's life; features which, as John Milliken has pointed out, are assessed primarily in aesthetic categories when "the virtuous agent steps back and sees, not the embodiment of a principle of reason, but an instance of aesthetic perfection. He is moved not by the reasonableness of an act, but by its beauty" (Milliken 2006, 327). Rather than analyze virtues simply in terms of functionality or rationality, Aristotle identifies them via their contribution to the beautiful *eudaimonia*, therefore "The noble [*kalon*] is fundamentally an aesthetic concept...it is a matter of perception and not one of calculation" (Milliken 2006, 327).³⁴

Notably, Aristotle did not see forgiveness as such a virtue. As Charles Griswold explains, Aristotle's characterization of the great-souled man (*megalopsuchos*) disqualifies any such virtuous person from the field of forgiveness-based exchanges altogether, both as the penitent (for the *megalopsuchos* would never wrong someone to consequently seek forgiveness) and as the forgiver (for the absolute self-sufficiency of the *megalopsuchos* would require nothing from "inferior" people—not even penance) (2007, 8-9). The truly magnanimous individual, instead, transcends the imperfect relationships of more common men and women—relationships that include wrongdoing and, therefore, forgiveness.

Being magnanimous is not easy, for as Aristotle himself says, “it is difficult to be truly magnanimous, since it is not possible without being fine and good” (*NE* 1124a3-5). Griswold’s comments on this passage may understate the matter when he observes that Aristotle’s “paradigm of moral virtue sets a *very* high standard” (2007, 9).

In describing the *megalopsuchos* as “fine and good,” Aristotle relies on another important Greek concept that spans the post-Kantian gap between aesthetics and ethics: *kalokagathia*. Comprised of the terms *kalos* and *agathos*—harmoniously beautiful and morally good, respectively—this rare word in antiquity was normally reserved for either deities or especially exemplary models of human beings who were, as Plato puts it in the *Lysis* (207a), “worthy to be called not just beautiful, but imbued with *kalokagathia*” (Weiler 2002, 11). These supreme exemplars of human behavior exhibit *kalokagathia* naturally, having cultivated every intellectual, moral, social, and economic virtue in their pursuit of the *kalon*. Therefore *kalokagathia* is simply “the character and conduct of *kalos kagathos*, that is, of the perfect and just man” (Petrochilos 2002, 604). So, the truly well-lived life of the perfect person (in the sense of *eudaimonia* achieved interchangeably by the *kalos kagathos* or the *megalopsuchos*)³⁵ is one where aesthetic and ethical concepts are inextricably intertwined; something Aristotle underlines in the *Politics* when he equates *kalokagathia* with *arête*, using this aesthetic-ethical notion of nobility interchangeably with virtue (Dover 1974, 44).³⁶

However, perfectionistic ethical theories like Aristotle’s, based on heroic moral exemplars standing as objectively superior human beings over the common rabble of the less-perfect *hoi polloi*, necessitate a focus on the process of developing such perfect character (and not, as in calculative models, a formulaic application of a moral principle like the categorical imperative or the utilitarian calculus to a specific situation). Consider Aristotle’s famous definition of virtue as “a state issuing in decisions, consisting in a mean relative to us, determined by *logos* and by that by which the *phronimos* would determine it” (*NE* 1106b36-1107a2), where virtues are identifiable by the expert *phronimos* who possesses the practical wisdom to understand the right thing to do in a given scenario. If this “situational appreciation” is indeed as “anti-codifiable” as Rosalind Hursthouse (2011, 51) has dubbed it, then it would only be through many hours of practice that such skills would be developed (conversely, as Jessica Moss [2011, 205] puts it, we will come to pursue *eudaimonia* “through the non-rational habituation of the non-rational part of the soul” that is crafted through *phronesis*). Admittedly, morality is not often considered a skill—at least, not since Ancient Greece. Picking up on Aristotle’s consistent focus on the repetitive habituation of the virtues, Julie Annas (1995, 236-239) not only argues that “a virtue has an intellectual structure, and that it is at many points like the intellectual structure of a skill,” but that this

structure is what allows us to articulate anything about specific virtues whatsoever (as in the case of bravery, where it is identifiable only through the practices of the agent). All this is to say that if the nobility of the *kalos-kagathos* or the wisdom of *phronimos* is primarily performative,³⁷ then it is the virtues being demonstrated by those individuals in performance which ground their identities as performers.³⁸

In regards to forgiveness' status as a virtue, then, this sense of beautiful-nobility developing from artistic cultivation is well-demonstrated by Butler's actual perspective on forgiveness functioning not as the replacement of emotions, but as their proper refinement through the lens of both the particular situation and the overall project of human flourishing. Rather than suggest that forgiveness requires the foreswearing of resentment itself (as if such an emotion could simply be volitionally jettisoned from an agent's phenomenological stage), Butler recognizes that:

Resentment is of two kinds: Hasty and sudden, or settled and deliberate. The former is called anger, and often passion; which, though a general word, is frequently appropriated and confined to the particular feeling, sudden anger, as distinct from deliberate resentment, malice, and revenge. In all these words is usually implied somewhat vicious: somewhat unreasonable as to the occasion of the passion, or immoderate as to the degree or duration of it. But that the natural passion itself is indifferent, St Paul has asserted in that precept, "Be ye angry and sin not;" [Ephes. iv. 26.] which, though it is by no means to be understood as an encouragement to indulge ourselves in anger, the sense being certainly this, "Though ye be angry, sin not;" yet here is evidently a distinction made, between anger and sin, between the natural passion and sinful anger. (1792, 115)

He therefore calls for a moderated experience of resentment that is appropriately tuned to avoid "both its excess (malice and revenge) and its deficiency (insufficient regard for our well-being)"—in other words, he expects the virtuous agent to first exercise the appropriate skill of knowing how to respond, regardless of the agent's emotional state (Garcia 2011, 10). Insofar as this is accomplished, Butler describes a resultant "forgiving spirit" developing in the agent—a state of mind still possible while feeling the emotional weight of the hurtful experience. Ultimately, it is only that forgiving spirit which can offer, among other things, "hope for peace of mind in our dying moments" (Butler 1792, 145), for this practiced attitude of forgiveness leads to the cathartic release of emotional pain. Importantly, the skill of forgiveness is not identified with the emotional catharsis itself.

The emotion of forgiveness

Apart from the perfectionistic nature of his ethical system, Aristotle also deigned to recognize forgiveness' status as a virtue because of an unusual feature inherent to his conception of solicitude and the proper conditions under which the *megalopsuchos* would actually desire the good for another person. As such, Paul Ricoeur's development of Aristotelian concepts into a characterization of charitable alterity more strongly grounds Butler's view of forgiveness as a preferable character trait that positively contributes to a life well-lived. This not only resonates with the social characterization of aesthetic forgiveness seen in Rembrandt's painting, but is also along the lines of common sense that forgivers themselves typically assume.

To Aristotle, goodwill towards others (*eunoia*) is a natural element of human interaction that comes about when one recognizes and appreciates the value of another person. When expressed reciprocally by two or more people, *eunoia* lays the groundwork for friendship (*NE* 1155b15-1156a6), but it "is not identical with friendship; for one may have goodwill both towards people whom one does not know, and without their knowing it" (*NE* 1166b29-1167a17). Kostas Kalimtzis (2000, 77) argues that *eunoia* is primarily a cognitive property, consisting of "intellectual admiration or the good regard that is aroused [that] is based on the judgment that some excellence has been observed" and that, therefore, it is a passive trait contributing to rational analysis, but not practical action. Kalimtzis (2000, 83) is right to differentiate between *eunoia* and the more engaged principle of *homonoia* that actually motivates public action for the common good, but Aristotle never seems to imply that *eunoia* (in this regard) is anything but a foundational principle on which the practical skills of *phronesis* and *arête* operate. Goodwill, Aristotle says, is "a beginning of friendship, as the pleasure of the eye is the beginning of love" (*NE* 1166b29-1167a17), but that goodwill must be activated through intentional (skillful) choices to develop into something deeper. Consequently, Aristotle sees *eunoia* not only as a necessary condition for friendship, but as one part of the general basis for public engagement *tout court*—a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for public interaction.³⁹ Given his perfect development of each skill set, the *megalopsuchos* will necessarily exemplify perfect *eunoia* as well.

At this point, Bishop Butler agrees with Aristotle: arguing that "mankind, i.e. a creature defective and faulty, is the proper object of good will, whatever his faults are." Butler (1792, 137) contends that solicitude for others is divinely obligated—even for one's enemies. Therefore, to Butler, forgiveness is "absolutely necessary, as ever we hope for pardon of our own sins, as ever we hope for peace of mind in our dying moments, or for the divine mercy at that day when we shall most stand in need of it"—virtuous character, properly developed, will not neglect to foreswear revenge once given the opportunity to do so (1792, 145). Given the

proper perspective, Butler insists that all persons would recognize similar faults in their own lives as in the life of their enemies; whether on pain of irrationality, unfairness, or inconsistency, forgiveness therefore cannot be avoided (regardless of the emotional pain one must endure while practicing it). This leads Butler (1792, 140) to conclude that self-love, the ultimate ground of any excuse to avoid forgiveness, “is a medium of a peculiar kind: in these cases it magnifies everything which is amiss in others, at the same time that it lessens everything amiss in ourselves.”

However, here Aristotle’s perfectionism diverges from Butler to argue that human beings, insofar as they are “defective and faulty,” do *not* warrant comprehensive expressions of *eunoia*. To Aristotle, self-love is no vice at all, if the agent does indeed deserve to be loved, that is, if the person in question is truly imbued with *kalokagathia*. And when the magnanimous man is focused on the continuous expression of his own virtue, he attains the state of absolute self-sufficiency wherein he “excels his subjects in all good things; and such a man needs nothing further; therefore he will not look to his own interests but to those of his subjects; for a king who is not like that would be a mere titular king” (NE 1160a30-1161a8). The optimal form of Aristotelian solicitude, expressed by the perfect example of a virtuous person, is therefore purely paternalistic (Petrochilos 2002, 607).

This characterization of *eunoia* runs contrary to many common-sense interpretations of goodwill’s moral obligatoriness being grounded in equality and love, not condescension, with moral agents continually deferring to others out of the recognition of the value of the other, not that of the agent themselves. With his consistent focus on the nature of the truly magnanimous human being, Aristotle passes over any significant consideration of lower-order interpersonal relationships between people who do not exemplify *kalokagathia*—relationships that will frequently be plagued by mistakes and require the exercise of forgiveness to continue. Instead, Aristotle spends a significant amount of ink analyzing the nature of the political obligations of individuals in community (through the *polis*)—but not on private expressions of *eunoia* between specific citizens. Moreover, Aristotle’s description of the *megalopsuchos* indicates that such a state is only achievable by the select few who are already ontologically predisposed to being better individuals in the first place.⁴⁰ Consequently, *eunoia* is only obligatory towards those select few who genuinely deserve it and forgiveness, therefore, simply falls out of any meaningful conversation.

Contra Aristotle (but in line with Butler), Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical existentialism maintains a powerful space for forgiveness-as-virtue when it locates personal identity (selfhood) as inextricable from social networks and relationships with others. Arguing that selfhood and alterity are necessary opposites, Ricoeur (1992, 190) insists that an agent cannot come to understand the former without

likewise considering the latter, and that, therefore, any endeavor towards self-knowledge will require solicitude's "benevolent spontaneity, intimately related to self-esteem within the framework of the aim of the "good" life."⁴¹ Whereas Aristotle could only discuss social relationships for the perfectly virtuous in terms of civic or political engagement, Ricoeur's assumption of *eunoia* as the simple recognition of another human being's value is basic to Ricoeur's definition of *eudaimonia* as incoherent apart from a communal context.⁴² Therefore, despite basing his ethical theory on Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, Ricoeur's notion of alterity fundamentally alters how the skillful practice of Aristotelian virtues plays out.

On that basis, understanding forgiveness as an Aristotelian virtue (or disposition for behavior) becomes easier to develop; overall, the impetus for engaging in the process of forgiveness is best understood narratively as the pursuit of a life well-lived in community.⁴³ To Ricoeur, a narrational perspective is always to be preferred for temporally-bound agents like human beings, who cannot help but view events individually and then later make sense of them in a process Ricoeur dubbed "emplotment." As he says, emplotment consists of "eliciting a pattern from a succession," creating a structured and coherent picture of one's experience through reflection and analysis (Ricoeur 1983, 153). This is particularly important for an agent in the process of analyzing her own actions, for this "emplotment of [one's own] character" is what allows someone to comprehend her own identity (Ricoeur 1995, 309).⁴⁴ Crucial to his conception of this "configurational act of emplotment" is its ability to explain a weakness Ricoeur identified in Aristotle's system: "*Phronesis* tells us that happiness is the coronation of excellence in life and in praxis, but it does not tell us in which ways this state of affairs can be made to reign...it is through our acquaintance with types of emplotment that we *learn* how to link excellence and happiness [*eudaimonia*]" (Ricoeur 1995, 239-240). And forgiveness, insofar as it positively reconfigures a person's relationship with others in his community, is precisely one of the tools that allows an agent to decisively re-work his emplotted narrative to better connect *phronesis* with *eudaimonia* in his own experience.

Consequently, because forgiveness contributes to the personal development of the forgiver and, in some cases, the forgiven (when it promotes a general peacefulness among the group), and because it is unavoidably grounded in self-giving Butlerian-love or Ricoeurian-solicitude, forgiveness is therefore revealed as a technique for developing both an optimal personal and public character (in both moral and aesthetic terms insofar as it creates peace). Therefore, the cathartic emotional release that comes as a product of the forgiveness process cannot be identified with forgiveness itself. Instead, rationally desiring the good for another, via a *eunoia*-motivated cognitive recognition that the other simply should be

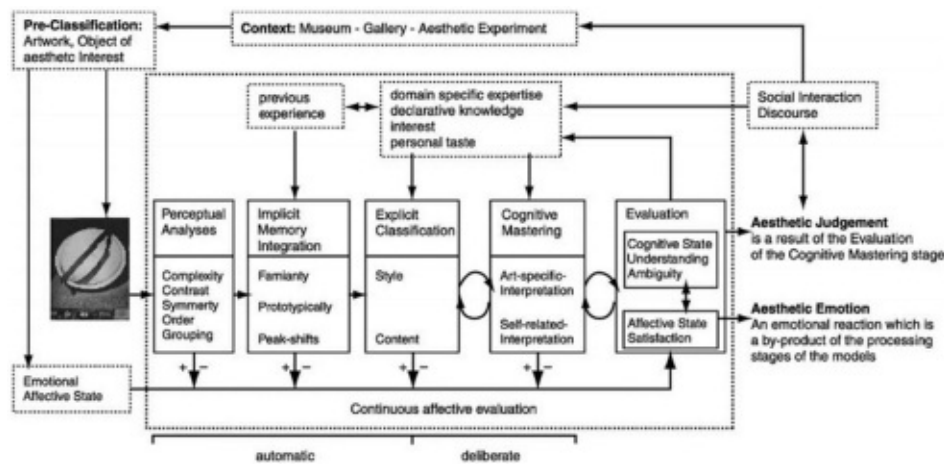
forgiven, is sufficient to motivate the process. Forgiveness can lead to the beautiful emotional release of “overcoming resentment” in the life of the forgiver, but it in no way requires this feeling as a precondition.

Indeed, when Ricoeur justifies his use of the term solicitude on the grounds of the “intimate union between the ethical aim of solicitude and the affective flesh of feelings” he concurs with Aristotle’s connection of *eunoia* and different emotional states (Ricoeur 1992, 192).⁴⁵ The categorization of forgiveness as a virtue, then, becomes a way to maintain a heuristic emphasis on the subjective emotional state of the forgiver when still considering forgiveness as a cognitive process.

The adapted aesthetic model of forgiveness

In order to map this view of forgiveness-as-judgment alongside the equally important process of forgiveness-towards-emotional-catharsis, the danger of confusing one for the other must first be made clear. In the existing literature on the philosophy of forgiveness, emotions tend to be considered primarily negatively in terms of their distracting capacity to irrationally affect cognitive decisions (such as the locutionary act of forgiving).⁴⁶ While variant interpretations of Butler’s definition have provoked a flurry of debate, both his supporters and detractors tend to agree (along with Aristotle) that emotions must be conquered in order to forgive.

Instead, to maintain a neutral attitude towards emotional states throughout the experience of the forgiveness process, a foundational model of aesthetic appreciation *tout court* developed by Leder et al. can be adapted to map the phenomenon of forgiveness; thereby allowing a simultaneous assessment of forgiveness-as-judgment and forgiveness-towards-emotional-catharsis that both unite under the helm of forgiveness-as-virtue.



A Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Judgments (Leder et al. 2004, 492)

In brief, the model of aesthetic appreciation put forth by Helmut Leder, Benno

Belke, Andries Oeberst, and Dorothee Augustin seeks to provide a psychological explanation for an observer's aesthetic experience of a work of art by analyzing the stages of cognitive processing that result in both an aesthetic judgment and an aesthetic emotional response to the piece in question (2004, 491). Because it seeks to consider both cognitive and affective processes as related, though distinct, elements of aesthetic experiences, this model broke new ground in the field of psychological aesthetics and has motivated neuroscientific research into aesthetics since its initial publication in 2004 (Leder and Nadal 2014, 446). Importantly, the Leder model situates an aesthetic experience within a particular context such that "aesthetic experience begins before the actual perception: with the social discourse that configures expectations, anticipations, and an aesthetic orientation, and in the context, which shapes those expectations and orientation, and creates an environment that can contribute to heightening the artistic status of an object" (Leder and Nadal 2014, 445).

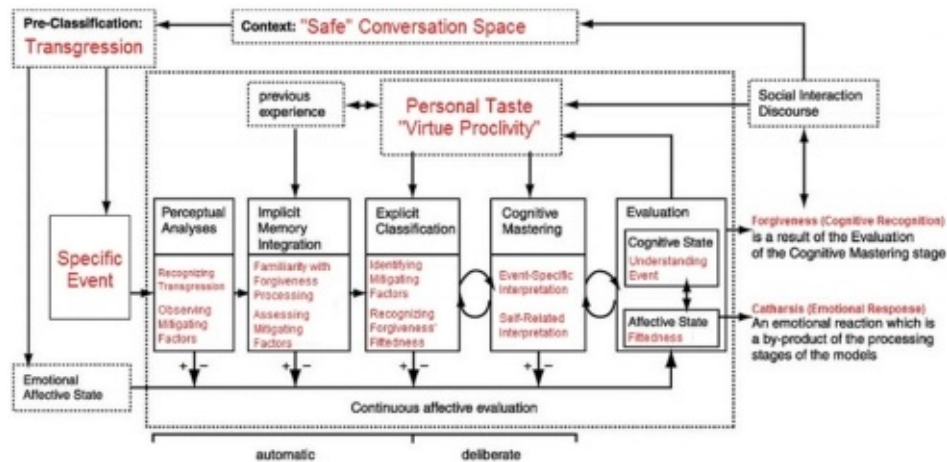
For an observer in the proper context (such as a museum gallery), the Leder model takes a work of art as its input and processes it through five distinct cognitive stages that eventually lead to a pair of outputs: a cognitive judgment about the aesthetic merits of the work of art and a subjective emotional response to that artwork. Firstly, the artwork is Analyzed Perceptually for how it appears to the observer (based particularly on several key features of artistic method like contrast and symmetry). This appearance is affected by the observer's past experiences with similar works of art in the second stage of Memory Integration—a stage which often functions implicitly, "because the results of this processing do not have to become conscious in order to affect aesthetic processing" (Leder et al. 2004, 495). Following this initial perception, Explicit Classification labels the experience of the artwork based on the observer's level of knowledge about the subject matter: greater expertise will naturally lead to a more nuanced and informed product of this stage, though even amateurs will be able to accomplish some form of classification based on their limited experience. Importantly, this sort of Classification is grounded firmly on matters of the style evident in the artwork (Ibid. 2004, 498).

With this groundwork laid, the observer then moves into the final two stages which are closely related and deliberately considered: Cognitive Mastering and Evaluation. Functioning in a feedback-loop, the intellectual understanding garnered in the fourth stage is continually and intentionally re-evaluated in the fifth stage to ensure that the overall processing method of the artwork in question has succeeded. As Leder et al. (Ibid., 499) explain, "when the evaluation is not subjectively experienced as successful, the information processing can be redirected to the previous stages," allowing the observer to continue to ponder the artwork until she reaches a satisfactory conclusion about it in her own mind; in short, aesthetic experience is not a single-shot gambit, but can be continued for as

long as is necessary to achieve the desired results.

Notable here is the role of the observer's affective state throughout the five cognitive stages; not only do Leder et al. (Ibid., 501-2) "propose that the result of every processing stage in our model can increase or decrease the affective state" of the observer, but also that it is this fluctuating emotional state that regulates the overall aesthetic processing experience such that "the perceiver somehow evaluates his affective state and uses this information to stop the processing once a satisfactory state is achieved." Consequently, the Leder model produces two "relatively independent" outputs: aesthetic emotion (grounded in the subjective pleasure felt as a consequence of the aesthetic experience) and an aesthetic judgment (a cognitive appraisal of the artwork) (Ibid.).

And since the process of forgiveness is similarly involved with both cognitive appraisals and subjective emotional states, this model is not only fruitful for questions of aesthetic experience, but can be adapted to describe the interpersonal experience of forgiveness.



The Adapted Aesthetic Model of Forgiveness

Like the Leder model's assumption of an observer's location in a gallery, the overall context of the forgiveness process is a crucial prerequisite for a genuine experience to unfold. Following both Griswold (2007, 51) and Haber (1991, 40-41), real forgiveness is possible once the wrong in question has ceased.⁴⁷ Rather than a work of art, this adapted model takes a transgression as its input; without a wrong to be forgiven, forgiveness is unnecessary. Notably, the input is not an act of contrition from the guilty party, although the offender's repudiation of their actions and some expression of regret can help to further justify the forgiveness process once it is undertaken.⁴⁸

Just as in the original model, the input must be analyzed from within the proper context; it is within this "Safe" Conversation Space that both the cessation of the transgression and the consideration of the transgressor's penitence can obtain so

that they can be Analyzed Perceptually in the first step of the adapted model.⁴⁹ This initial perception is where what David Konstan (2010, 3) calls the “wrongdoing” (as opposed to the “harm”), which will be identified and whatever mitigating factors of the wrongdoing (such as apologies or acts of contrition on the part of the wrongdoer) will be noticed. Secondly, the forgiver automatically moves to recognize these elements of the transgressive event as relevant through the implicit application of her personal facility with the process of forgiveness and her assessment of the mitigating factors; if the agent determines that forgiveness is indeed warranted, based on the Integration of her Memory into the specifics of the event, then the situation will be Explicitly Classified as a transgression that befits forgiveness.

Following this, the most important element of the model is reached: the repetitive feedback loop where the forgiver repeatedly re-assesses her Evaluation of her continually shifting emotional experience to deliberately Cognitively Master both her thoughts and feelings on the matter—what Griswold (2007, 57) dubs “seeing the offender in a new light.” This requires the forgiver to not only continually process the difficult emotional states that inevitably fluctuate throughout the cognitive assessment of the penitent’s deserving forgiveness in the previous stages (in order to make the shift from automatic to deliberate evaluation), but will simultaneously require the forgiver to navigate his or her proclivity for cultivating the life of virtue. Whereas the original model considered this facet as something involving one’s “personal taste,” the aesthetic model of forgiveness will return to Aristotle’s concept of *kalokagathia* to argue that the proper kind of person will make overall better judgments about the interpersonal situations that warrant forgiveness versus those that do not.

In the end, unlike the models of Haber,⁵⁰ Jeffrie Murphy,⁵¹ or others, the adapted aesthetic model of forgiveness continually tracks the emotional experience of the forgiver as she considers the whole of the situation from transgression to cessation to apology and beyond, all the while calibrating the painful emotional fluctuations that shift as the process continues. And like the Leder model, it is precisely the emotional state of the forgiver that delimits the end of the process (once the forgiver is not only cognitively but emotionally satisfied that forgiveness does befit the situation) to allow for two simultaneous outputs: the intellectual result of the Evaluative and Cognitive Mastering that comes to recognize the propriety of forgiveness’ extension, as well as the final emotional reaction to the overall process that manifests as some form of catharsis. Again, just as Bishop Butler argued nearly three centuries ago, this peaceful product comes only as a result of the cognitive-affective processing method as explained here—it is not a prerequisite.

The heart of the matter

Consequently, rather than require the forgiver to jettison his emotional experience in order to cognitively process the situation in question, this model allows those affective states to “ride along” throughout the intellectual analysis of the situation itself. As the forgiver comes to perceive an apology from within the “Safe” context of a ceased transgression and as this penance is implicitly recognized and then explicitly categorized as genuine, the tagged emotional states will be in continual flux, but will consistently interact with the cognitive elements of the process as a whole. Whatever the end result of the mastery-evaluative feedback loop, the twin outputs of a rational determination and an emotional response to that description will have been considered and affected at each step of the process.

And this difficult tension between the rational desert of forgiveness and the emotional difficulty of baring one’s heart by extending said forgiveness is not only what Rembrandt captured in his masterful scene of the Prodigal, but is also a familiar experience to anyone who has had cause to forgive another. As Ernesto Garcia (August 2011, 7) observes about Butler’s repeated choice of an epigram for his sermons on the topic, forgiving our enemies is not easy precisely because, at the time our forgiveness process engages, our enemies they remain.⁵² Forgiveness is, however, a key process that can allow us to move beyond such resentment, promote Ricoeurian sollicitude, achieve Aristotelian *kalokagathia*, and thereby contribute to an overall more beautiful world.

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