

**FORGIVENESS AS ABSOLUTION:
A NEW MODEL OF FORGIVENESS**
by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

In this work I examine contemporary philosophical accounts of forgiveness and then develop an alternative account in which forgiveness is considered an act of absolution which alters the relation of moral debt between wrongdoer and victim. This model differs from the traditional model which focuses on the victim's forswearing and overcoming resentment towards the wrongdoer. My model has several advantages over the traditional model: it explains the victim's special ability to forgive, it explains the relationship of resentment to injury, it avoids a number of problems which plague the traditional models including Kolnai's Paradox, it helps our understanding of why forgiveness is morally good, and yet why it is supererogatory.

The traditional model focuses primarily on the change of heart in the victim. According to that model forgiveness is just the forswearing of resentment. On this model forgiveness is something which goes on entirely within the forgiver. That forgiveness is said to be *bestowed upon*, or *granted to* the wrongdoer, as if a gift, is taken to be mere metaphor. By contrast, my model of forgiveness describes it as a remission of a kind of moral debt, what I call *onus*. When a person injures or wrongs another, he owes something to the victim. That debt is what explains and justifies resentment. This debt, or *onus*, is a relation which cannot easily be changed except through the forgiveness of the victim. Just as financial debts can, in most cases, be forgiven by the creditor, an action which releases the debtor from the relation and obligations arising from the debt, a victim can absolve a wrongdoer of the moral debt. If the moral debt is absolved, any resentment felt by the victim is no longer justified, and can disappear. Since forgiveness releases the wrongdoer from debt, it is clearly desirable for the repentant wrongdoer's perspective.

Unlike the traditional models, my model focuses on the importantly relative quality of resentment and debt. When one injures another, that person alone, the injured party has the power to resent the wrongdoer, or to offer forgiveness. It focuses in this relation to explain key features of forgiveness, and to rescue forgiveness from moral problems by placing it in its proper place, that of personal relations. My model solves the major problems vexing the understanding of forgiveness, it explains a number of the features we routinely ascribe to the concept, and it paves the way to explain why forgiving is morally good, and yet supererogatory.