The Alteration Thesis: Forgiveness as a Normative Power

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ABSTRACT

What goes on when one person forgives another? In this paper I argue for The Alteration Thesis. According to the Alteration Thesis, it is an essential feature of forgiveness that it alters the normative situation created by the wrongdoing by means of an act undertaken with the intention of bringing this alteration about. In this paper, I will explain this thesis, defend it against counter-arguments and consider some of its implications. Thinking of forgiveness along the lines suggested by the Alteration Thesis means going against the tide of much recent writing on forgiveness, which has seen forgiveness as consisting essentially in a change of heart towards the wrongdoer. But I will argue that the Alteration Thesis has a number of explanatory advantages over the change of heart approach.

What goes on when one person forgives another? In this paper I argue for The Alteration Thesis. According to the Alteration Thesis, it is an essential feature of forgiveness that it alters the normative situation created by the wrongdoing. In this paper, I will explain this thesis, defend it against counter-arguments and consider some of its implications.

A theory of forgiveness should be able to explain the ways in which it matters to us to forgive and be forgiven. One way in which it matters to us to be forgiven is shown by the familiarity of the fact that repentant wrongdoers will sometimes seek out their victims and look for their forgiveness, often going to great lengths
to do so. An illustration is found in the following scenario from Simon Wiesenthal's memoir, *The Sunflower*. An SS officer, Karl, who participated in an atrocity in which Jewish men, women and children were massacred is seriously injured and approaching death. He is now an inmate in a field hospital in which Simon, the narrator, is working. Karl is apparently overcome with remorse when he thinks about what he did, and, as death grows near, he feels impelled to look for a Jewish victim of the Nazi *Endlösung* in which he took part, and ask for forgiveness.

This scenario is complex in part because Simon is not a direct victim of Karl's actions; nevertheless, it seems as though Karl's asking for a Jewish victim of the Nazi project is not accidental – there is a connection to Simon that makes it morally intelligible to ask him for a kind of forgiveness that could not come from e.g. a German civilian. I take it, therefore, that the scenario illustrates one key point: the comprehensibility of a person feeling an urgent need, before he dies, to be forgiven by a person who can intelligibly be thought of as a victim of his wrongdoing. One sceptical character later in Wiesenthal's narrative suggests that the SS officer would have been better to approach a priest if what he wanted was to gain absolution. Nevertheless, it seems that for many of us, perhaps including Karl himself, such absolution is not enough, and that the relation to the victim is central. What we want is not simply an authoritative verdict on our wrongs, but a particular relation to the people we have wronged.

The way the Alteration Thesis explains this is to say that we want forgiveness because we want the normative situation to be altered in ways that only the victim can alter it. In order to make that compelling, we need to say something more about what the Alteration Thesis involves.

1.

According to the Alteration Thesis, it is essential to forgiveness that it alters the normative situation created by wrongdoing. Thus my claim is that nothing counts as forgiveness unless it has some special role in altering the normative situation created by wrongdoing. To understand this, we need to get clearer
about ‘the normative situation created by wrongdoing’ and the way in which forgiveness can ‘alter’ such a situation. I will understand this as the claim that new obligations arise as a result of wrongdoing, and that the role of forgiveness comes in altering the situation of a person or a number of persons in relation to these new obligations.

First of all, let us make it clear what we mean by ‘the normative situation created by wrongdoing;’ once we have an idea of what is meant by that we can look at the way in which that situation may be altered. To avoid confusion, I will introduce the terminology of primary and secondary obligations. We can think of the initial act of wrongdoing as a violation of certain primary obligations – for instance, if I make an inappropriate sexual advance to a junior colleague in my workplace it violates the primary obligations I am under to maintain respectful relations with my colleagues, to contribute to a culture in which junior colleagues can develop professionally and to resist a culture in which sexual harassment is treated as normal. As a result of that violation, however, new secondary obligations arise: for instance, an obligation to apologise; perhaps also an obligation to cultivate proportionate feelings of guilt or remorse about the offence, and to take steps not to (be tempted to) do it again; and an obligation to make proportionate amends by seeking to undo the damage my remarks might have caused, both to that individual and to the workplace culture more generally, and to reinforce a culture in which such actions are discouraged and the confidence of colleagues in their freedom from such behaviour reinforced.

However, it is not only the wrongdoer who incurs secondary obligations as a result of the wrongdoing: third parties who are relevantly connected to the circumstances of the offence can also acquire obligations to condemn or denounce it or ‘call it out,’ to support its victim, or at the very least not to condone it or acquiesce in it by treating the wrongdoer as if everything were, morally speaking, business as usual. We can be vague about what exactly it means to be ‘relevantly connected,’ but the thought is that sometimes a failure to take action against harassment to which others are being subjected can amount to complicity in that harassment.
These secondary obligations, it should be noted, are pro tanto or defeasible; thus a person who is a relevantly connected third party may be under a pro tanto obligation to call out sexual harassers, and to distance themselves from such behaviour; but it may be that any form that such behaviour would take would be too costly to other social goods that they have a duty to protect. However, although they are in this way defeasible and hence exhibit some context-sensitivity, they are not normally merely instrumentally justified. Although their justifying grounds may be various, I take it that these secondary obligations have a basically backward-looking role in addressing or doing justice to the violation, independently of the tendency of our behaving in that way to promote other social goods. At the level of detail, secondary obligations are specific to the circumstances of the offence – for instance, if I have inappropriately sexualised our relationship what I have to do to make amends is different from what I have to do if I have taken your book without asking when you needed it, or if in anger at your betrayal I have run over your cat. However, they can be thought of at a more abstract level as a generic form of ‘appropriate response’ to the wrongdoing. Thus the view of secondary obligations being put forward here is that wrongdoers in varying situations gain non-instrumental obligations simply in virtue of their offence, to do recognisably similar sorts of things – such as combating the harms or risks of harm created by their wrongdoing – by way of making up for their initial transgression; and those ‘relevantly connected’ to the offence gain obligations not to treat the wrongdoer as if everything were normal until there is evidence that the wrongdoer is making significant efforts to discharge their secondary obligations.

The Alteration Thesis says that forgiveness alters this normative situation: that is, it alters something about these secondary obligations. However, forgiveness is a distinctive way of altering these secondary obligations. To see this, we can consider the fact that one way to alter one’s secondary obligations is to discharge them. Once discharged – assuming that they can be discharged – the obligations no longer apply to one, and hence one has altered the secondary obligations one is under. However, the act of discharging one’s secondary obligations is not the
same as an act of forgiveness. Therefore forgiveness is a distinctive way of altering one's secondary obligations.

The Alteration Thesis holds that forgiveness is a distinctive way of altering secondary obligations because it involves a power to alter obligations by means of one's voluntary acts. This is to assimilate forgiveness to the case of promising, consenting and ordering, where a person creates, waives or otherwise alters obligations of themselves or others by means of specific voluntary acts carried out with the intention of so altering the normative situation. This language of 'powers' is often traced back to Hohfeld in his analysis of the range of things that might be meant by 'having a right' in a legal context, though as Hart points out Bentham also attempts a systematic analysis.¹ For instance, it is part of the way that the legal role of Prime Minister is constructed in the United Kingdom that whoever occupies the role has the power to appoint other persons to become ministers in the Government; this power is the ability to confer or bestow legal rights (and legal responsibilities) on particular persons by giving them the legal status that goes along with that ministerial role. No one can become a minister in this parliamentary system without having been so appointed. Appointment is therefore a voluntary act by which the legal situation is altered in such a way as to alter legal rights and responsibilities by means of specific acts carried out by a person with the authority or power to do so. This idea of 'power' has long been recognised as an aspect of the legal order, but recently it has also been found illuminating to talk about 'normative powers' ranging in a similar way over non-legal rights and obligations. To have a normative power is to have the ability, through one's voluntary action, to alter normative rights, duties and obligations. One example of a normative power in this sense could be thought of as the ability to make promises. Here one alters one's own obligations and gives another person new rights, simply by saying that one is doing so. By promising one places oneself under an obligation to another person by voluntarily undertaking that obligation; and gives that other person a corresponding right to one's performance.

Unlike the legal powers we illustrated above, the power to promise seems to be something that one needs no special position to possess: anyone can bind themselves to another by promising them something. However, not all normative powers are universally held. Another example of a normative power would be practical authority. If one has practical authority over others, one can place them under an obligation by commanding them to do something, or one can invest them with new powers by appointing them to a position, etc. If one has authority then one is wronged when those over whom one’s authority is exercised fail to comply with it; hence authority is the power to create new obligations applying to subjects that are owed to the bearer of authority. However, practical authority usually comes with particular social positions, such as a particular role in a hierarchical relationship, or division of labour, or a family, or a relationship such as that between teacher and student, or an institution. It seems quite possible that other normative powers might be like this: tied to particular social or relational positions.

Once we have the idea of secondary obligation and normative power on the table we can better see how the Alteration Thesis might be interpreted. Forgiveness can be seen, like promising, ordering, consenting, to consist most fundamentally in the voluntary act of granting forgiveness, which is the exercise of a normative power to alter secondary obligations arising from wrongdoing. One interpretation of the Alteration Thesis (though there may be others), and the one that we are interested in here, is therefore the Normative Power Thesis: that forgiveness is the exercise of a power to create, waive or alter secondary obligations related to the wrongdoing.

From what we have said so far it looks as though at least some of the powers that comprise forgiveness are held only by the victim, and hence victimhood can be seen as the special position that gives one the right and the power to forgive. We can deploy this understanding to explain see why Karl may have desperately wanted to be forgiven before he died. Part of his becoming remorseful involved coming to see himself as under powerful undischarged obligations to his victims. He had come to a point at which the idea of dying without having discharged
those obligations was intolerable to him. Yet he could not expect to be able to make up for his wrongs in the short time he had left. He therefore sought the only way in which he could be rid of these obligations, which is by having them forgiven by someone who has the power to do so. This suggests that for Karl, and for those readers for whom his situation is at least comprehensible, forgiveness can be a power by which the victim of an offence, or someone closely related enough to count as a victim, waives at least some of one's secondary obligations.

We will have more to say below about which obligations can be altered by forgiveness, and by whom. Before we finish this section, however, let me forestall a concern some readers may have that my talk of obligation is too formalistic a way to talk about forgiveness. Does it suggest more of a concern for doing one's duty over a concern for one's actual victims (a worry that we might have about Karl in particular)? On my view, talk of obligations is really a vehicle by which we can talk about standards for adequate human relations, or at least a subset of such standards (perhaps those that one can alter at will, or that one can be blamed for violating, or the violation of which requires others to engage in acts of dissociation from what one has done). Talk of 'obligation' might suggest that these standards are amenable to being captured in a pithy proposition or general rule; but in fact we need not accept that suggestion. At any rate, the fundamental normative feature of an obligation is the form of relation to which any formulation of the obligation points. When thought of in this light, it becomes clear that there is no worrying formalism involved in talk of obligation as such, or opposition between concern for one's victim and concern for one's obligations. Of course, there are corrupt ways of responding to one's obligations – as when one does think of the obligation as a rule, and fixates on compliance with that rule itself rather than the person to whom one owes the obligation. But the possibility of corruption does not deprive this way of speaking of its usefulness.

2.
Thinking of forgiveness along the lines suggested by the Alteration Thesis means going against the tide of much recent writing on forgiveness, which has seen
forgiveness as consisting essentially in a change of heart towards the wrongdoer. But I will argue that our approach has a number of explanatory advantages over this mainstream approach.

First of all, the Alteration Thesis explains the way in which forgiveness might be said to ‘restore relationships’ or ‘set relationships right’. There are ways of construing these claims about forgiveness that are problematic, but, I claim, the Alteration Thesis can explain what is right about them. For instance, whatever is right about this idea, it has to be construed in such a way that one can restore a relationship with a person who is dead, or with whom one never had, and never will have, a relationship in the sense of any ongoing personal interaction. Furthermore, the claim that forgiveness restores relationships suggests that there is some barrier to the normal functioning of the relationship and that forgiveness removes this barrier – but this raises the question of what this barrier is, and in particular whether it is psychological or normative, and how forgiveness can be the sort of thing that removes it. One way to go in tackling this question would be to take the psychological route, arguing that wrongdoing tends to cause hurt feelings, and that forgiveness is simply a psychological change that enables us to get over these hurt feelings and achieve a kind of emotional stability. However, this is to see forgiveness as a potentially dispensable psychological tool – for instance, a Forgiveness Pill might do just as well (Hieronymi). According to the Alteration Thesis, by contrast, the metaphor of restoring relationships is really a way of talking about the normative situation arising from wrongdoing, and which situation may persist even when the two people are strangers, or one of them is dead. This normative situation is a barrier to normal interaction (where normal interaction might simply be normal interaction between complete strangers) in the sense that one party may have an undischarged obligation to the other, or one party may have a continuing obligation not to acquiesce in or condone the wrongdoing by acting as though nothing had happened. Forgiveness takes this barrier away in the sense that it can alter the obligations that stand in the way of normal interaction.
Secondly, an advantage of the Alteration Thesis approach is that it can explain why forgiveness should consist in a change of heart, and specifically which kinds of change of heart should be considered to be forgiveness. Taking its inspiration from Murphy and Hampton’s rediscovery of Bishop Butler’s writings, the change of heart approach takes forgiveness to consist in a process by which some negative attitudes towards the offender that have arisen as a result of the offence are overcome or relinquished. On a simple view of these emotions, the claim that forgiveness is a distinctive kind of emotional change makes it a purely psychological phenomenon (like the idea above, that hurt feelings can stand in the way of normal relations). Forgiveness involves overcoming certain unpleasant, negatively valenced affects, and restoring psychological harmony. However, as Allais has argued, the emotions that are characteristic of situations of wrongdoing have a greater complexity than this simple view would allow. They have valence, no doubt, but so do basic pains and pleasures. Emotions are unlike pure affects in that they are directed towards certain objects – they are feelings about those things. As such we can say that these emotions have intentional content in the sense that they involve a certain attitude towards their object, and where that attitude involves characterising (‘construing’ in Roberts’ terms) the object of the emotion in distinctive ways. If the intentional content of the emotion is propositional then we can characterise the emotions as making certain claims about those objects; because these claims can be assessed for their adequacy as characterisations of those objects, we can assess emotions for their adequacy or fittingness.

If we reject this simple view of the emotions, and adopt the view that emotions respond to features of their intentional objects, we would expect to find that a change in emotions, such as might constitute forgiveness, would have to occasioned either a) by a realisation that the original emotion was unfitting, or b) by a realisation that there has been some change in the object such that the fittingness conditions of the original emotion no longer held. However, a) is ruled out as long as we want to distinguish forgiveness from justification or excuse: these latter may also lead to a change of heart, but forgiveness differs from them because it insists that the action was wrong and that the wrongdoer was
responsible for it (Murphy, Hieronymi, Allais). If we take 2), however, the natural way to understand this will be that the wrongdoer must have changed as a result of metanoia or repentance; but this leaves the problem – to which much recent writing about forgiveness has been devoted – of how to accommodate the intuition that forgiveness can involve some forms of discretion, including forgiving those who have not repented. The Alteration Thesis presents a neat solution to these problems: the change in the situation to which the change of heart responds is an alteration of the normative situation. The intentional content of the emotions is not the wrongdoer per se; it is the wrongdoer-in-relation-to-certain-obligations. Forgiveness consists in an act of altering obligations, but it thereby enables a change of heart: rather than having the emotions of a person who sees the wrongdoer as standing under certain obligations, one now has the emotions of one who sees them as free of those obligations. Repentance can also bring about a change of heart. But forgiveness can enable a change of heart to come about in the absence of repentance if it is possible for the act of forgiveness to remove certain obligations in the absence of repentance.

While the Alteration Thesis approach can explain the change of heart, someone who makes the change of heart the fundamental thing about forgiveness will not thereby be able to explain the Alteration Thesis. In other words, if forgiveness is a change of heart, it is hard to see how the fact that someone has had a change of heart could alter the normative situation arising from wrongdoing (Warmke). Yet it seems as though there is such a change in normative situation; therefore it looks as though the Alteration Thesis approach has an important explanatory advantage.

Thirdly, the Alteration Thesis can explain another issue with which the change of heart approach has had difficulty, the question of whether one needs some special standing in order to forgive. Some writers treat this idea as too obvious to need defence. After all, it seems as though one can only apologise to those who

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2 Refs to unilateral or unconditional forgiveness.
3 Ref to Downie, Benn, others?
are victims of one's offence, and there is at least some connection between apologising and asking for forgiveness. However, on the change of heart view it is not at all obvious that only those who are victims of the offence should have negative attitudes towards the offender – indeed, one might hope solidarity with the victim would mean a wider, shared response to serious wrongdoing – and therefore it is hard to see why only the victim’s change of heart, when these negative attitudes are overcome, should be labelled forgiveness. One response might be to say that forgiveness is specifically the overcoming of a ‘second-personal’ attitude such as resentment, rather than ‘vicarious’ or ‘third personal’ attitudes such as blame or indignation. However, this claim would not be grounded in a faithful interpretation of the way these terms are used in moral practice, and would therefore risk looking ad hoc. By contrast the Alteration Thesis explains that only those who have specific normative powers can engage in the act of forgiveness; if only the victim holds those powers then only the victim will be able to forgive. Nevertheless, it will remain quite true that third parties can and should change their hearts towards the offender when the normative situation of the offender changes, whether this comes about through repentance or forgiveness.

3.

The Alteration Thesis has some explanatory advantages over the alternative change of heart approach. However, is the Alteration Thesis vulnerable to problems of its own? Some might reject the Alteration thesis because they think it inappropriately models forgiveness on economic relations. For instance, on the picture put forward by Twambley, and recently defended by Brandon Warmke, we can think of a person’s moral self as a ledger-like record of credit and debt. Forgiveness, on this view, is akin to waiving a debt. This view might be claimed to be vitiated on the grounds that it assumes a model of wrongdoing and obligation that can be characterised as analogous to credit and debt; it might be criticised as another example of the way in which economic thinking is allowed to encroach into spheres in which it is not at home, thereby impoverishing and

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hollowing out our moral ideas. I am sympathetic to this critique; however, the view that it rules out the Alteration Thesis rests on the false assumption that the Alteration Thesis is grounded in the economic model. That would be the case if the our understanding of the possibility of altering the normative situation by our voluntary acts – and the whole realm of normative powers – is grounded in our understanding of economic transactions. On the contrary, however, the situation is if anything the other way around: the case of forgiving a monetary debt is a subset of the wider realm of normative power, and can perhaps only make sense against the background of that wider realm. There is no reason to think that the economic model is anything other than an imaginative illustration of the way the Alteration Thesis takes forgiveness to work.

Another criticism of the Alteration Thesis is that it would be to confuse forgiving with pardoning, whereas the two actions seem different: ‘One may pardon without forgiving and forgive without pardoning,’ as Pettigrove puts it.\(^5\) Now it is certainly true that what the Alteration Thesis claims to be true of forgiveness – that it is essential to it that it alters the normative situation created by wrongdoing – is also true of pardoning. And it is also true that pardoning requires a certain kind of authority or standing. However, one clear difference comes in the way one acquires standing to forgive as against standing to pardon. Whereas the latter normally comes with some defined institutional authoritative role, it is the victim of an offence who holds distinctive powers of forgiveness held by those who are victims of an offence. There are also important differences in the scope of forgiveness and pardon. Pardon is most obviously thought of as altering desert of (formal) punishment that would be carried out by the authority. We will say more below about what obligations forgiveness alters, but Warmke seems right to say that forgiveness ranges over personal obligations owed to the victim by the offender – such as obligations to apologise and repair – rather than desert of punishment. Finally, forgiveness may also differ from pardon by virtue of what it takes to exercise the normative power in question. The common understanding of normative powers is as performatives, where communicating the intention to alter the normative situation through some

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\(^5\) Pettigrove; also Owens
specified type of action is sufficient so to alter the normative situation. This seems true of pardoning, where going through the pardoning procedure in the right context is sufficient to bring it about that the person is no longer to be punished (unless the pardon is revoked at a later date). However, it seems less clear that saying that one has forgiven is always sufficient to have forgiven.⁶ Some evidence against the performative reading is that one might say, 'I thought I had forgiven him, but now I realise that I had not.' Against this, it might be argued that, as long as a person has performed the voluntary act of granting forgiveness, they have altered the offender's normative situation, and cannot without unfairness go back to treating them as though they had not been forgiven – for instance, insisting on an apology and reparation when they had previously freed the offender of these obligations. What the person in this example would be better to say, perhaps, would be, 'I forgive him, but now I wish I hadn’t.' It might even be a source of resentment in the victim that they now feel they had forgiven too easily, and let the offender off the hook. Although I think that there can be such cases – and that it can sometimes be unfair of victims to forgive and yet treat the offender as though they are still owed something – I think there can also be cases where we may doubt that forgiveness has really been given even though the victim says that it has. In this connection we may think of the extraordinary example of Gordon Wilson.⁷ Wilson had only hours before lost his daughters in an IRA terrorist attack, and yet said on television that he forgave the perpetrators. But could Wilson have been in a sufficiently considered frame of mind to forgive? The perpetrators would not necessarily be justified in taking themselves as having been forgiven. This might suggest that certain subjective conditions beyond simply saying-so have to be met before genuine forgiveness should take place.

A third criticism is suggested by the possibility that Wilson had indeed genuinely forgiven. If he had, it might be said that the intuitive reaction would be to see this action as admirable, and admirable in part because it is an expression of a loving character, but also a character that is capable of some very difficult things. The

⁶ Owens; Bennett?
⁷ Cited by Garrard and MacNaughton.
Alteration Thesis is problematic, however, because it makes forgiveness look too easy. One of the things that we admire about those who forgive, however, is some sense in which they sacrifice themselves or place themselves under a burden – a sense that is not well-captured by saying that they forego their natural right to revenge. I agree that this is an apt criticism of the Alteration Thesis as we have considered it so far. However, so far we have only considered that the exercise of normative power involved in forgiveness might be that of waiving certain obligations that the wrongdoer is under. This criticism suggests that we need to elaborate on this picture. However, there is independent reason for thinking that this is so. Consider the case of someone who accepts an apology from a person who wrongs them, and indicates that they are prepared to consider the matter closed for all practical purposes, but who nevertheless insists that they have not thereby forgiven.8 This seems quite intelligible – but what is it that the forgiver is refusing to do, and why would they refuse to do it? As well as waiving some of the offender’s secondary obligations, the exercise of forgiveness might be thought of as putting the forgiver herself under an obligation.9 Forgiveness is difficult and an admirable achievement because it involves in part the undertaking of an obligation, owed to the offender, not to see him as a person who stands under certain undischarged obligations to the forgiver. That is, the act of forgiveness involves committing oneself to the hard work of changing one’s view of the offender. This change of view is not, as in Hampton’s view, to no longer see them as ‘rotten.’10 As Allais says, the problem with this is that it makes the object of forgiveness the victim’s attitude to the offender as a whole and doesn’t tie forgiveness specifically enough to the offence in question.11 Rather the victim undertakes to change her way of seeing the offender so that she no longer sees him as owing her an apology or reparation. This undertaking is part of the exercise of normative power in which, as the Alteration Thesis has it, forgiveness consists.

8 I am grateful for a discussion on this issue with Bill Wringe, Oliver Hallich and Glen Pettigrove.
9 We could call this a ‘tertiary’ obligation, but for simplicity I will stick with ‘secondary.’
10 Ref to Hampton. The other main problem with Hampton’s view is (as with the change of heart view of which it is a variant) that it identifies forgiveness with the change in ‘way of seeing’ the offender rather than the normative process by which one undertakes a commitment to change one’s way of seeing the offender.
11 Ref to Allais
4. However, I now want to look at how not to defend the Alteration Thesis. I will
turn to some criticisms of David Owens’s account. Owens also argues for
something like the Alteration Thesis. According to Owens, forgiveness requires a
certain standing or authority that one acquires only by being a victim of some
wrongdoing. In contrast to what he calls ‘mere wrongs’ – that is acts of
wrongdoing that wrong no one – the fact of having been subjected to a wrong
gives one a right to forgive over the exercise of which one has some discretion.
As he puts it: ‘The wronged party has a right to forgive a wrong committed
against them that bystanders lack and which no one has with respect to mere
wrongs.’

12 Furthermore, he identifies the act of forgiving with the ability to alter
the normative situation. Through forgiveness the victim alters the normative
situation of the wrongdoer, but also that of any third parties who had been
previously disposed to blame the wrongdoer. In Owens’s view, the change that
forgiveness brings about is to make it no longer fitting to experience blame and
guilt in regard to this wrongdoing.

‘Once the wrongdoer has been forgiven in the relevant sense, it is no
longer apt for them to feel guilty and it is positively inapt for others to
blame them; both resentment and indignation are now out of place.’
(Owens, p. 51)

For Owens, therefore, forgiveness alters the normative situation by altering the
fittingness of guilt and blame. In Owens’s view, then, forgiveness is something
like the exercise of a normative power – though he recognises the possibility that
one might not be able to forgive at will, and that one might say one has forgiven
without actually having forgiven. However, this understanding of the scope of
the power of forgiveness is problematic, for it leaves Owens committed to the
claim that it would be unfitting for a wrongdoer who has never experienced guilt
prior to having been forgiven to feel it once they have been forgiven. This strikes
me as implausible since the wrongdoer has a continuing obligation to reform of

which the victim’s forgiveness cannot relieve him; and if we take the view that emotions such as guilt are not mere feelings but have a cognitive component, we might well think that guilt is essential to moral understanding and redemption. For instance, we might be sceptical of one who claimed to have fully understood and to care about their having done wrong, but who did not in any way feel bad about it. Guilt is the feeling of self-disapproval or self-blame, and it is hard to see how someone could experience their situation as one in which they merited blame without feeling guilty about it. But if this is correct, and if seeing themselves as the proper object of blame is an advance in their understanding of their situation, it is hard to see how they can make that advance without feeling guilty about it. In which case we should conclude that feeling guilty is an essential part of understanding their situation properly, and that the obligation to feel guilty, or to cultivate such feelings, is one of which the victim’s discretionary forgiveness cannot relieve them. This is an obligation that can be removed only by discharging it; not by having it waived by the victim.

What we learn from this is that some of the wrongdoer’s secondary obligations, such as the obligation to cultivate repentance and to make such amends as would express those repentant attitudes, cannot be cancelled by the victim. Nevertheless, the secondary obligations to repent and make amends are also implicated in forgiveness, in the sense that their removal is relevant to being forgiven. However, given that the only way to rid oneself of these obligations is to discharge them rather than having them waived by the victim, we should conclude that with respect to these obligations the wrongdoer must earn forgiveness by discharging the obligations. Nevertheless, there is room for the victim to relieve the wrongdoer of obligations, even though it is still appropriate for the wrongdoer to feel guilty and for others to blame her: the victim can relieve the wrongdoer of obligations she owes specifically to him, for instance the obligation to apologise to her and to repair the harm done to him specifically. This does not relieve the wrongdoer of obligations that we might regard as more impersonal or expiatory: penitential amends that express or do justice to her own sense of her guilt. The victim cannot make these responses inapt or unfitting; but he can waive the right to demand an apology or compensation. The
scope of the normative power of forgiveness is not, as Owens thinks, the aptness of blame or guilt, but rather that of demanding the fulfilment of the right that was violated.\footnote{Cf. Steiner/Hart on powers associated with having a right: note?}

Owens holds to something like the Alteration Thesis, but his view is problematic in part because he wants to combine the Alteration Thesis with two other theses that are separate from it. One we can call the End of Blame Thesis: this is the view that forgiveness is appropriate just when it is appropriate no longer to blame. And the other we can call the Victim Only Thesis: this is the view that only the victim possesses the normative powers distinctive of forgiveness. These two theses are not so much false as only partly true. They are true but only true of different types of forgiveness. All forms of forgiveness have the feature noted by the Alteration Thesis: that they consist in a power to alter secondary obligations that arise because of the situation of wrongdoing. However, beyond that we should be pluralistic about the forms of forgiveness that can exhibit that general feature. In particular, we should distinguish between a form of forgiveness that is the domain only of the victim and a form of forgiveness that can be held by any moral agent who has the standing to blame.

Forgiveness, as the Alteration Thesis holds, is the exercise of a normative power through a specific voluntary action that aims at altering secondary obligations arising from wrongdoing. However, there are at least two types of forgiveness, one of which being a power that can only be held by a victim of the wrong, whereas the other can be held by third parties; and where the first of these is a power to waive certain obligations (though not all), whereas the second involves no power to waive but rather revolves around the recognition that the obligations in question have been discharged. However, both forms of forgiveness involve a normative power that involves not just waiving obligations of the wrongdoer but rather the undertaking of a commitment not to see the wrongdoer any longer as one who stands under those obligations that have now been altered (whether by waiving or discharging).
More formally, we can express the schema as follows: forgiveness as a normative power involves 1) either cancelling some of the wrongdoer’s secondary obligations (through the exercise of a normative power), or acknowledging that secondary obligations have been discharged (which acknowledgement does not in itself require any exercise of normative power), and 2) undertaking an obligation to treat the wrongdoer (in feeling, perception and action) as one who no longer stands under those secondary obligations.

On this account, any form of forgiveness involves 2), that is, it involves an exercise of normative power through which one undertakes an obligation to the wrongdoer not to treat and see them as one who stands under certain secondary obligations in relation to their wrongdoing. However, in some cases of forgiveness, for instance, when one does not have the special standing of being a victim of the offence, one can undertake this obligation towards the wrongdoer on the basis of an acknowledgement that they have now discharged their obligations. This would be what I have previously called redemptive forgiveness, since it recognises that a form of redemption has been achieved by the fulfilment of the secondary obligations. By contrast, there is also a form of pre-emptive victim’s forgiveness, which is a right-waiving forgiveness, where a victim can take away the obligation of a wrongdoer to apologise and give compensation for their violation of the victim’s right.

5.
In this paper, I have argued that in order to explain why forgiveness motivates actions such as Karl’s (and many more mundane versions of such quests to seek out the victim’s forgiveness), forgiveness has to be thought of as more than a simple change of heart, but rather as involving an alteration of the normative situation. The Alteration Thesis can explain this, since only the victim can waive the right to apology and compensation. Nevertheless, the Alteration Thesis as I have understood it here does not fall into the trap of taking victim’s forgiveness to be the only form of forgiveness, or attributing too wide a scope of forgiveness to the victim. I have argued that certain expiatory obligations of the wrongdoer cannot be taken away by the victim, but must rather be discharged by the
wrongdoer herself. However, forgiveness still adds something distinctive to the normative situation even in these redemptive cases: it involves binding oneself to the wrongdoer by undertaking an obligation to them not to regard them as still under the secondary obligations arising from their wrongdoing. In this sense forgiveness involves undertaking to keep the slate wiped clean.