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## **Forgiveness Exemplars and the Oppressed**

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In this essay, I reject the appeal to exemplars of forgiveness, on the part of those in positions of power, in order to persuade those with less (or members of minorities that can be muscled by majorities) to forgive. My concern is to focus on the ways that speakers (non-victim persuaders) use forgiveness exemplars to convince victims and not the ways in which victims use forgiveness exemplars to persuade themselves. I describe these speakers as making several rhetorical moves. I argue that in making such moves the speaker commits basic fallacies of reasoning. In using these moves, the speaker focuses on examples and not morality, does not respect the rationality of the victims, and can make victims dependent on exemplars and not their own reason. I also argue against appealing to exemplars when doing so avoids messy details and is insincere. Avoiding messy details is problematic for the following reasons. By avoiding the messy details, we rob victims of their autonomy and we do not engage them in practical reasoning. In avoiding messy details, we can also idealize forgiveness by painting a picture of forgiveness that omits the impact of the harms done and the often-difficult work required of both the offender and victim to overcome the harm. In being insincere in our use of exemplars, we do not use the exemplar as a moral example but rather as a device to get victims to fall in line with what we desire. As a result, I claim that these rhetorical moves disempower victims.

### **Exemplars and Us**

We admire moral exemplars. They embody the moral excellence we strive to achieve. In our philosophical discussions about certain virtues, philosophers often rely on the use of moral exemplars. Glen Pettigrove<sup>1</sup> uses Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi as examples of those whom we admire for their meekness. Martha Nussbaum<sup>2</sup> uses Nelson Mandela as an example of generosity and as an example of a non-angry revolutionary. Hannah Arendt<sup>3</sup> notes that forgiveness is a necessary corrective for damages and she makes the bold claim that Jesus of Nazareth not only embodied forgiveness but also invented it. The use of exemplars is not only present in philosophical texts but we often use them in our everyday conversations concerning moral matters.

A 2016 CBS news report entitled “Innocent man ends up pals with crooked cop that framed him” illustrates the practice of using exemplars to persuade and inspire.<sup>4</sup> Steve Hartman reports that in 2005, Officer Andre Collins arrested Jameel McGee in Michigan for dealing drugs. However, Officer Collins falsified the police report and by doing so, he put an innocent man behind bars. McGee did four years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Collins’ lies would eventually catch up with him and he ended up doing over a year in prison for falsifying reports among other crimes. Years later, Collins apologized and the article reports that that was all McGee needed to hear to forgive. McGee noted that he forgave Officer Collins for both their sakes. The two now give speeches on forgiveness. The article

ends by stating, “And clearly, if these two guys from the coffee shop can set aside their bitter grounds, what's our excuse?” Although Hartman seems to have written the article to motivate and challenge people to forgive, his use of moral exemplars is problematic because he uses the fact that McGee forgave as a decisive reason for readers to forgive. By doing so, the author not only idealizes the forgiveness process, but also seeks to convince us to make moral judgments based on examples alone. This, I will argue, does not respect the autonomy of victims. The article, however, is not alone in its misuse of forgiveness exemplars. The rhetoric the article employs is very common. It is this kind of exemplar case that I will focus on in this essay.

Immanuel Kant argues that exemplars are useful for moral education, inspiration, and emulation but he also recognizes that they are not sufficient. On my reading of Kant, following moral exemplars as our primary reason for action is problematic. By claiming that forgiveness exemplars are sufficient for practicing forgiveness, I argue, “speakers” do not use moral exemplars appropriately. Instead of inspiring those who hear their forgiveness arguments, this kind of rhetorical strategy disempowers victims. For example, Hartman omits important information that is needed for readers to fully deliberate by painting an idealized picture of forgiveness and by doing so, he avoids the messiness that is often involved when a victim is wronged and when they undergo the process of forgiveness. A speaker uses moral exemplars inappropriately when they claim that we should forgive because Collins and McGee or Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr. practiced forgiveness.

In this chapter, I argue that while moral exemplars are useful, we must be careful in our use of them. I focus on forgiveness exemplars as my paradigmatic case. I first describe forgiveness exemplars that are often used to persuade victims to forgive such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jesus of Nazareth. I also explain how, for Kant, highlighting these figures as moral exemplars can be useful. I then explain two kinds of rhetorical strategies that are used when attempting to convince victims to forgive. Last, I explain (a la Kant) how the use of these moral exemplars do not empower but instead disempowers victims. I do not claim that we ought not use forgiveness exemplars rather we should be careful how and why we employ exemplars in our forgiveness arguments. By “forgiveness arguments,” I do not mean the logical enterprise that is restricted to professional philosophers. I think that everyday people articulate forgiveness arguments in the public domain (e.g., in the media) as well as in the private domain (e.g., in intimate conversations) when they attempt to use reasons to persuade victims to forgive. Borrowing from Kant, I also offer suggestions for the appropriate use of forgiveness exemplars.

## **Forgiveness Exemplars**

Several historical figures come to mind when we think of forgiveness. They include Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jesus of Nazareth. These figures were not only people who practiced forgiveness in private but their public practice and teachings helped to achieve radical change.

Former South African president Nelson Mandela is a symbol of forgiveness. Decades before his presidency, he was sentenced to hard labor for life for the charge of conspiracy to overthrow the government through violence. As leader of the African National Congress (ANC), Mandela had fought to end white minority rule in Apartheid South Africa. Having gone to prison as a man known to use violence, he arose as a symbol

of peace. Although he was locked away for decades, Mandela is believed to have emerged from prison without bitterness. Instead of seeking revenge on whites, he believed that reconciliation was the only thing that could solve the racial divide in South Africa. Several examples of Mandela's forgiveness have been publicly noted. Mandela invited one of his former guards to his inauguration ceremony. He invited his former jailer to the dinner that celebrated his 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of being released from prison. He also invited Percy Yutar, the state prosecutor who demanded Mandela get the death penalty, to a dinner. While dinners may seem insignificant, grassroots initiatives in post South Africa Apartheid such as Koinonia Southern Africa have used dining together as an opportunity for reconciliation. We can say that Mandela forgave jailers, lawyers, and a government that once hated and mistreated him and his fellow natives. It is believed that his public practice of forgiveness is responsible for reconciling a nation once stifled by the unfair, dehumanizing, and even deadly practices of apartheid.

Martha Nussbaum argues that Mandela never spoke about forgiveness at all but framed his efforts in different terms. On her view, Mandela embodied more of an unconditional generosity than an unconditional forgiveness. She claims that Mandela did not engage in payback but, instead, his treatment of others shows "generosity and forgetfulness of past wrongs."<sup>5</sup> However, I think that Nussbaum's reading of Mandela's actions, as a display of generosity and not forgiveness, is in error. Mandela actually displays Butlerian forgiveness. For British moralist Joseph Butler, forgiveness is a moderation of resentment and the refusal to engage in payback.<sup>6</sup> It entails compassion and seeing the offender as still part of humanity. Mandela displayed Butlerian forgiveness because he refused to payback the guards who mistreated him. He had compassion for them and other whites. He still considered whites as part of the moral community despite their complicity and participation in apartheid. While Nussbaum notes that Mandela never used the word "forgiveness",<sup>7</sup> it seems that based on a Butlerian view of forgiveness, forgiveness is something that Mandela practiced.

Another exemplar of forgiveness is Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King was a pastor and civil rights leader. As a leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Committee, he worked with others to end segregation laws in the South. Later in his life, he would fight for the rights of the poor. Unlike Mandela, King used the word "forgiveness." He repeatedly spoke about forgiveness in his sermons documented in "Strength to Love" and "Radical King." For King, to love our enemies required the capacity to forgive. Forgiveness creates an atmosphere for a new beginning. King notes that when we forgive, we forget, in the sense that the evil deed is no longer a mental block impeding a new relationship. King thought that the evil deed of an agent never expresses fully who they are.<sup>8</sup> This leads us from hate to love; for we are reminded that the offender is not beyond redemptive love. King admits that we "are tempted to become bitter and to retaliate with a corresponding hate" but that "the darkness of racial injustice will be dispelled only by the light of forgiving love."<sup>9</sup>

King not only preached forgiveness but he practiced it. In 1956, Izola Curry stabbed King. Roy James, a Lieutenant of the American Nazi Party, attacked King in 1962 at a rally in Alabama. He forgave them. Similar to Joseph Butler, King recognized that we should extend pity to the offender because in the offender hurting another, he also hurts himself. Butler states "no one ever did a designed injury to another but at the same time he did a much greater injury to himself, he [should be] an object of compassion."<sup>10</sup> If forgiveness is the

foreswearing of negative emotions, King surely forswore bitterness and resentment. If, according to Macalester Bell<sup>11</sup>, forgiveness is not only the forswearing of resentment but also contempt (she calls this Forgiveness-C), King also practiced forgiveness by refusing to exclude Curry and James from the moral community. In eulogizing Martin Luther King Jr., Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays stated, “here was a man who believed ... that violence is self-defeating; and that only love and forgiveness can break the vicious circle of revenge.”<sup>12</sup>

A forgiveness exemplar for Martin Luther King Jr. was Jesus of Nazareth. King often used the example of Jesus in sermons such as “Love in Action,” “Love and Forgiveness,” and “Loving Your Enemies.” The Christian Gospels depict Jesus as one who practiced forgiveness. According to the Gospels, Jesus instructed his followers to model their forgiveness on divine forgiveness. He argued that if we forgive, then the father would forgive us (Luke 6:37-38, Luke 17:35). When asked how many times we should forgive each other, Jesus replied, “seven times seventy.” Christians believe that Jesus lived and then died on the cross to be a sacrifice for the forgiveness of their sins; for it was his dying on the cross that would allow them to be forgiven and redeemed. Jesus forgave the sins of the adulterous and paralyzed (Mark 2:1-12). While dying on the cross, he did not ask God to avenge those who were crucifying and mocking him; instead, Jesus asked God to forgive them “for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Jeffrie Murphy argues that the ignorance of offenders gives us reason to excuse them but not to forgive them. Thus, Jesus’s statement would go better as “Father, excuse them for they know not what they do.”<sup>13</sup> While Murphy and others claim that Jesus actually pardoned offenders instead of forgave offenders, I do not have space to take up this controversy here. The claim that Jesus was philosophically sloppy in his use of forgiveness does not negate from the fact that there are reasons why many still read him as preaching forgiveness. There is also textual evidence that lead many to conclude that he was an exemplar of forgiveness.

### **Moral Exemplars and Kant**

The forgiveness exemplars above do not just make for a good story in the practice of forgiveness. For philosophers including Kant, moral exemplars are helpful, and Kant has several things to say about what moral exemplars can do. A moral exemplar, according to Kant, is someone who lives his or her life according to the moral law. They strike down our pride, inspire respect, and are a source of encouragement. How are they able to do this? When we see someone as an example of the moral law, Kant notes in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that “[she] holds before me a law that strikes down my self-conceit when I compare it with my conduct, and I see observance of that law and hence its practicability proved before me in fact.”<sup>14</sup> For Kant, moral feeling (*Achtung*) is caused by the moral law and it is produced when we recognize the weight of the moral law and its power to overpower our inclinations. Interestingly, humans can arouse the feeling of *Achtung* just as the moral law arouses it. Richard Dean writes:

Given that the source of *Achtung* is the Categorical Imperative itself, and its power to overbalance inclinations, it is perhaps surprising that Kant maintains that humans can arouse this same feeling of *Achtung*. But Kant does repeatedly say this, and explains that the feature of a person that inspires *Achtung* is her commitment to the Categorical Imperative’s moral demands. In a famous passage from the *Critique of*

*Practical Reason* (5:77-78), Kant says that “before a humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself, my spirit bows,” because “*Achtung* is a tribute that we cannot refuse to pay to merit.” The source of *Achtung* for persons is the same as *Achtung* for moral law, namely, the power of morality to outweigh all of a person’s contrary inclinations ... Even the example of Jesus as an “ideal of moral perfection” (R 6:61) really serves only to direct our attention to an idea of possible moral perfection that “is present as model already in our own reason” (R 6:62). So, *Achtung* for people who provide good moral examples has the same source and serves the same purposes as *Achtung* for moral law itself.<sup>15</sup>

Moral exemplars strike down our pride because when we compare the conduct of exemplars to our own conduct, we are reminded of how far we may be from representing the moral law. We are humbled. However, moral exemplars also inspire respect for morality. Moral exemplars do not themselves inspire such respect, qua persons or personalities. Moral exemplars are not morality themselves; instead, they show or hold before us a law. For Kant this brings about a kind of respect. “Respect is a tribute that we cannot refuse to pay to merit, whether we want to or not; we may indeed withhold it outwardly but we still cannot help feel it inwardly.”<sup>16</sup> Our respect for moral exemplars is not an uncritical admiration; rather, it is a respect for the moral law that the exemplars represent. Moreover, the fact that they are able to live life according to the moral law, serves as encouragement that we too can do the same. As Dean notes, moral exemplars “elevat[e] us by demonstrating the possibility of acting morally despite contrary inclinations.”<sup>17</sup>

For Kant, moral exemplars are useful for moral education because they humble us, point us toward the moral law, and encourage us in being moral. We are not born as autonomous agents. We must develop our rational capacities. Young children, because of their youth, have not developed their rational capacities fully. So exposing them to examples can help develop their ability to control their inclinations. Kant writes in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, “the experimental means for cultivating virtue is [a] good example on the part of the teacher and [a] cautionary example in others, since, for a still undeveloped human being, imitation is the first determination of his will to accept maxims that he afterwards makes for himself.”<sup>18</sup> According to Kant, moral exemplars can serve as a good example as well as a cautionary example.

Even when we become autonomous moral agents, the fact that we have an image-dependent understanding will require the use of exemplars. Kant believes that to think abstractly we need images. Kant’s solution is that we represent moral concepts symbolically and analogically through images.<sup>19</sup> In the *Groundwork* he writes,

It is admittedly a limitation of human reason ... that we conceive of no considerable moral worth in the actions of a personal being without representing that person, or his manifestation in human guise. This is not to assert that such worth is in itself so conditioned, but merely that we must always resort to some analogy with natural beings in order to make supersensible qualities comprehensible to ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, moral exemplars are images that represent to us the moral law. Without these examples, it will be difficult for us to comprehend morality.

In *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*, Jeanine Greenberg argues that Kant thinks moral exemplars are useful because principles cannot guide our moral character. She claims that because “finite rational agents are not able to appreciate the full and perfect process of the internalization of these principles” we need examples.<sup>21</sup> She notes, “Although finite rational agents can derive from principles some basic guides to character, experience is too large to allow me to *deduce* my *entire* moral character from the terms of these principles.” On Greenberg’s reading of Kant, “finite rational agents seeking to internalize moral principles into their characters need, then, not just a regulative ideal in the sense of a guiding principle; they need also a regulative ideal in the sense of a guiding *person*.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, exemplars, unlike sole a priori principles, can show me contextual ways of putting in practice these principles. Therefore, we need not just the principles but examples that model these principles.

Moral exemplars are also useful for hope and inspiration. Exemplars give us hope and inspiration that what morality demands is humanly achievable.<sup>23</sup> Kant notes, “Examples put beyond doubt the feasibility of what the law demands.”<sup>24</sup> He also states that the example of a teacher serves as “proof of the feasibility of that which is in accordance with duty.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, exemplars give us inspiration because they show us that morality is achievable. This is not to say that we can only know the moral law through examples. From a logical point of view, we cannot know or prove moral principles through these empirical examples. However, from an anthropological point of view, examples give us hope that humans can act morally.<sup>26</sup> As Greenberg notes, “individual standard provides an image of perfection ... and it provides an image of possibilities.”<sup>27</sup> They point us to moral possibilities. Although it is the moral law that tells us that it is possible (ought implies can), “a mere principle to pursue self-perfection is not going to be sufficient to reveal the myriad ways and depths through which an individual person could – and should – pursue it.”<sup>28</sup> Moral principles tell us what is possible, and in the context of forgiveness, moral examples reveal to us the variety of contexts and situations we can respond to, the variety of objects we can forgive, and the many ways in which we can put forgiveness in practice.

Kant also believes that exemplars serve the purpose of emulation. Human examples give us a tangible ideal to aim for. These moral exemplars should be emulated but they should not be imitated. At first glance, emulation and imitation appear to be synonymous. However, there is a distinction for Kant. When a moral agent *imitates* another’s behavior, they are copying behavior but not thinking why they are a good moral example in the first place. That is why Kant states that “imitation has no place at all in matters of morality.”<sup>29</sup> However, when we *emulate*, we do not emulate the person per se, but rather the ideal of reason that the person represents and makes visible to us.<sup>30</sup> In other words, it is the moral law and not the person that we emulate.

### **When the Use of Forgiveness Exemplars Goes Wrong**

So far, I have provided a description of popular forgiveness exemplars. I have also described the ways in which these moral exemplars can aid in our moral education, serve as hope and inspiration, and represent to us the moral law. It will seem thus far that using these figures as forgiveness exemplars is not problematic at all; rather, they aid in helping us to live a moral life. In what follows, I will evaluate arguments that the fact that exemplars have

forgiven others or that the exemplars recommend that we should forgive is reason to forgive. I will also provide (a la Kant) reasons for why I think the use of the rhetoric disempowers victims.

Although Greenberg's focus in *Kant and the Ethics of Humility* is on moral affirmation of self-other comparisons, she does provide us with ways in which the use of exemplars can go wrong. She notes that moral exemplars can make us morally complacent. Instead of focusing on the first-person pursuit of moral development, we can rely on moral exemplars to do all the work for us. Of course, this can only happen because we *imagine* that they can actually do it for us and not because they actually can do the work of moral development for us. She also notes that we can look at moral exemplars with only aesthetic admiration. In this way, we only appreciate the ideal they present to us instead of doing the work of actually attending to our own character. We can also over-idealize moral exemplars and this can create feelings of inferiority and superiority. Greenberg thinks, by conceiving of exemplars as superior, it can lead us to become uncritical followers instead of moral agents. I imagine that we can also feel inferior by an exemplar and instead of being encouraged in the possibility of moral excellence, we could be so overwhelmed by the character of others in comparison to our own that we get discouraged from living a moral life.

Note that Greenberg's examples of when the use of moral exemplars can go wrong is connected more to the ways in which a moral agent uses moral exemplars and not the ways in which speakers employ moral exemplars in their moral arguments. "Nelson Mandela forgave," "Martin Luther King Jr. practiced forgiveness," and "What would Jesus Do?" are familiar claims and rhetorical questions used when attempting to convince others – often victims of oppression – to forgive. The speaker's strategy is to use moral exemplars to convince the victim to forgive. I think this rhetorical strategy can make two kinds of moves: (a) *the authority move* and (b) the "*their suffering is worse than yours*" move. The speaker utilizes the *authority move* when they provide as a forgiveness exemplar someone for whom the victim looks to as an authority figure and as a result, are inclined to follow them unquestioningly. By doing so, the speaker utilizes the exemplar as a model, recognizing that one is more likely to be inspired to become like those who have a certain type of authority in the moral community. While Kant believes that we could come to respect moral exemplars as representations of the moral law, the speaker's strategy in the *authority move* is to convince the victim to follow the authority figure uncritically. The speaker argues that the victim should model the moral exemplar not because they necessarily represent the moral law, but because they are an authority figure. The exemplars are usually leaders of social causes such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mandela. The speaker argues that forgiveness exemplars are suppose to serve as a reminder that if one is committed to the cause (e.g., justice, equality, and love), one will do as their leader of the cause has done or as their leader instructs them to do; forgive.

The strategy in the "*their suffering is worse than yours*" move is to provide a forgiveness exemplar that suffered more than the victim did. It implies that if the moral exemplar suffered more than a victim – who is assumed to have suffered less – they should forgive for that reason alone. The move is made to convince the victim not merely that it is possible to forgive but that the victim's circumstances warrant forgiveness by the fact that the circumstances are less extreme than the circumstances of the moral exemplar.

My first set of criticisms of this kind of rhetoric focuses on argumentation and fallacious reasoning. I am not arguing that examples have no place in moral arguments. In general, examples fulfill the job of illustrating principles. They make reasons clearer. Examples make it easier to understand the general rule. For example, for the conclusion, “for the good of the moral community, members of the moral community should forgive,” I may use as a premise the proposition that “forgiveness reconciles the offender and the victim.” As an example to illustrate this point, I may highlight Nelson Mandela’s efforts, challenges, and results to show *how* and *that* forgiveness can reconcile offenders and victims. The example illustrates the proposition and aids in its understanding. The example itself (“Nelson Mandela forgave”) is not a premise; rather it is only an example that illustrates a particular premise.

My main criticism of the forgiveness rhetoric explained above is that the rhetorical appeal does not make this kind of argument. Instead, the forgiveness exemplar is held up to persuade the victim motivationally to act in a certain way, rather than illustrating a general principle that the victim may or may not accept as applying to his/her case. The exemplars become reasons to accept the normative claim that the victim should forgive instead of just illustrating the moral law. This is an improper use of examples in moral argumentation, if we aim to avoid fallacious reasoning. There is also other fallacious reasoning committed using this rhetoric.

The *authority move* is a classic appeal to authority. Appeal to authority is fallacious reasoning that claims that we should accept the truth of a conclusion simply because an authority figure said we should. We should forgive simply because Jesus said we should forgive or we should forgive because King also forgave. It takes no consideration of what the moral law requires. In certain ways, these moves contain the adage that victims should “follow their leaders” instead of follow the moral law. This kind of rhetoric does not empower victims but instead it disempowers them. Instead of arguing that victims should forgive for rational reasons, it assumes that they have more reason to follow a leader than to follow their own reasoning. The move advocates an uncritical and irrational respect for authority while Kant argues for a rational respect for authority. In the former, for Kant, we are immature. In the latter, we are mature. Kant notes in “What is Enlightenment?” that when we have an uncritical respect for authority, it shows that we do not have the courage to use our own understanding. We lack the resolution to use our own understanding without the guidance of another. It is the dogmas of the exemplars and not our understanding of the moral principles that guide us. In doing so, the authority figures’ dogmas become the ball and chain of “our permanent immaturity.”<sup>31</sup> However, when we have a rational respect for an exemplar, we follow their example *because* we recognize that it mirrors the moral law. Instead of inviting victims to be autonomous, these arguments invite victims to be heteronomous. I will say more later about how this rhetoric disempowers victims but I think criticisms of student protests against racism across U.S. college campuses provide us with an example of this move. In 2016, Clemson University students protested for diversity on their campus by staging a 9-day outdoor sit-in. In an open letter criticizing students, Dr. David Woodard wrote: “The main difference between the 'See the Stripes' [student protestors] beliefs and Martin Luther King, Jr. is that the latter had a moral premise for his actions ... The only pastor to have a national holiday named after him emphasized forgiveness, not retribution ... Their words and actions have none of the markings of Martin Luther King, Jr.”<sup>32</sup> The professor is suggesting that the protestors have reasons to forgive because Martin



Luther King, Jr. forgave. Woodard uses King as an authority figure to appeal to and he implicitly suggests that King would agree with his criticisms of the protestors.

The *authority move* argues that the fact that exemplars forgave is reason for the victim to forgive. Instead of the following argument:

- P1: Forgiveness reconciles the offender to the victim (e.g., Mandela post apartheid)
- P2: Forgiveness aids in the psychological health of the victim (e.g., Civil rights activists)
- C: Therefore, we should forgive *at least* for prudential reasons

The speaker employs the *authority move* by arguing:

- P1: Jesus forgave
- P2: Whatever Jesus did, we should do.
- C: Therefore, we should forgive

We need P2 for the argument to work. However, it is precisely this premise that causes the problem. When using the *authority move*, the speaker disempowers the victim by inviting them to ignore, dismiss, or be unaware of morality. For Kant, exemplars do not *alone* show that we can do it and that therefore we ought to do it. They do not prove morality is possible. It is the moral law (i.e., ought) that informs us of what we can do. Empirical examples are not enough to prove a priori propositions. An overreliance on moral exemplars can lead us to commit the *authority move* to the point that exemplars become our only reason for acting and we no longer have the ability to make moral judgments. Kant refers to this idea through his use of the go-cart analogy. He notes that the overuse of examples can “weaken the effort of the understanding to gain sufficient insight into the rules in the universal and independently of the particular circumstances of experience.”<sup>33</sup> A go-cart is like a walker. Go-carts were used to teach babies how to walk with the hope that they will eventually no longer depend on the go-cart. However, an overreliance on a go-cart could in turn weaken the baby’s ability to walk just as an overreliance on crutches could weaken an injured teenager’s ability to recover. We could eventually get so deeply invested in the *authority move* that none of our premises consists of rational reasons but only forgiveness exemplars. By doing so, moral exemplars become the proper criteria for morality instead of morality itself. Speakers who invite victims to give in to the *authority move* can disempower victims to the point that they are unable to make moral judgments absent moral examples.

In addition, the appeal to authority can be insincere and not in good faith. It is possible that Woodard and others do not really know what King actually said about forgiveness. It is also possible that Woodward and others have not consulted enough resources to adequately predict what King would say about the students’ perceived lack of forgiveness. The speaker’s only use of the forgiveness exemplar is to get the victim to behave, as the speaker would want them to. In the authority move, the speaker could use the exemplar as another way to criticize and to punish victims. The speaker can do this while also ignoring that in particular cases King might advise protestors not to forgive for decisive reasons.

The *their suffering is worse than yours move* commits the fallacy of appeal to emotion. In the coffee shop employees’ case, the writer seemed to be asking, “If someone who was wrongfully imprisoned can forgive, then shouldn’t we who suffer less than four years of wrongful imprisonment follow their example?” By participating in the *their suffering is worse*

*than yours move*, the speaker may characterize the suffering that the forgiveness exemplars underwent (e.g., Mandela's imprisonment, King's assaults, and Jesus' death). The speaker highlights the exemplar's decision to forgive in spite of the pain, in order to elicit emotions in victims to get them to accept the truth of the speaker's conclusion. In both the appeal to authority and appeal to emotions, the speaker does not present arguments to victims as rational beings but rather as irrational beings who are not responsive to rational reasons but are only emotionally vulnerable. Kant is notorious for his criticism of the use of emotions as reasons for acting. Kant argues that reason should be our guide not emotions. We should act morally because the moral law commands it, not because we feel like it. Barbara Herman<sup>34</sup> thinks that Kant is not dismissing emotions all together. On her view, we can have inclinations, but reason ought to be our primary motive. While I have previously disagreed with Kant on his dismissal of emotions, Herman helps me to see that Kant and I have more in common than I thought. Like Aristotle, I believe that emotions should be directed to the right object, at the right time, and to the right degree. I also believe in emotional cognition; I think emotions have objects and they are judgments.<sup>35</sup> I do not see emotions detached from reason and if they were, I would not argue for or defend them as I do. While our projects, aims, and conceptions are different, Kant and I agree that reason and emotion have or should have a relationship in morality. For this reason, any attempt at using emotion outside of the bounds of reason is something we both disagree with.

I agree with Kant that our exercise of reason is true freedom. Any use of emotions that disempower victims by inviting them to be less free should be challenged. The above rhetoric does disempower victims in this way. When anyone uses emotionally manipulative means to move us to act, we are not responding in the freedom that reason leads us to. Instead, we are manipulated with the emotions of guilt, pity, or sadness. In some ways, we are no longer ends at this point but means; for our emotions are used to get us to respond in ways that the speaker desires. Once again, the speaker – with our emotions – does not assume that we are autonomous agents who are able to figure out what is the right thing to do within ourselves. Rather they assume that we require a heteronomous source (sources outside of ourselves such as people or actions). The speaker assumes that victims are only able to understand what to do because others tell them what to do or because the exemplars have done it themselves. The speaker may also think that the victim will be better moved by emotions than by reason.

Additionally, the rhetoric also assumes that victims are immature. Immaturity, for Kant, is allowing others to do the thinking for us. He defines immaturity as the “inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another.”<sup>36</sup> It may be convenient to be immature for I need not make any efforts at all. If I am to think that I ought to forgive because a particular exemplar told me I should or because they forgave, there is little effort that I need to take to understand why forgiveness is something I should practice. Immaturity is not something we inherit because we are human or because we lack understanding. It is only self-incurred when we lack the resolution and courage to think for ourselves. By encouraging immaturity by using the above rhetoric, a speaker disempowers victims by inviting them to remain in their self-incurred immaturity instead of entering into enlightenment.

My second set of criticisms of this kind of rhetoric focuses on the insufficiency of exemplars. Here I would like to go into further detail about examples and elaborate on

claims I have presented earlier but only briefly discussed. For Kant, morality is an unconditional command that tells us to act lawfully, period. We discover what this “ought” is through our rational capacity. If we ought to do it, that means we can do it. I have argued that the use of King, Mandela, Jesus and other forgiveness exemplars can go wrong when they are used, not as examples of a premise, but when the fact that the exemplars have forgiven others becomes a reason itself.

Forgiveness exemplars also lack a certain kind of qualification to serve as reasons to forgive. Examples are not enough to serve as reasons themselves, for even examples must be judged to be a fitting example by morality. Kant writes, “every example of it represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model; it can by no means authoritatively provide the concept of morality.”<sup>37</sup> If forgiveness exemplars should be judged according to a moral standard itself, then the fact that they forgave others or they recommend that we should forgive cannot be a reason to forgive. This is so because the exemplars presuppose the presence and primacy of a moral law by which they should be judged.

Earlier, I introduced the “follow your leader” assumption that is embedded in the *authority* and *their-suffering-is-worse-than-yours* moves. I will now apply that assumption in making the distinction between imitation and emulation. When a speaker makes the *authority move* by using only forgiveness exemplars as premises, they may assume two things: (1) the power of the exemplar alone to convince victims or (2) the powerlessness of the victim to follow moral laws instead of moral examples alone. In assuming that victims will “follow their leader” by accepting the *authority move* argument, the speaker invites victims to imitate and not emulate. Someone who imitates another looks at an exemplar’s life in order to model it. They are unaware of the reasons for doing it. On the other hand, to emulate forgiveness exemplars is to adopt their practice of forgiveness *and* also understand and accept the moral reasons for doing so. An empowered victim does not merely follow the leader when making moral decisions. Instead, they follow the moral law and only take moral exemplars to be a representation of the law as well as a source of hope and inspiration.

### **Possible Objections**

One possible objection to my argument is that the rhetoric that I speak of is not something that philosophers would engage in. My interlocutor may claim that people may talk in sloppy ways, but no one thinks this is how we should reason. Philosophers are careful with argumentation and will never use exemplars as reasons to forgive. This objection makes several assumptions. It assumes that philosophers are always more careful than ordinary people in their arguments. It does not take into account that philosophers often find themselves in unreflective movements as reactive human beings often do. In our interpersonal conversations, we are not always as careful as we should be. Beyond the philosophical literature, as I indicated above, there are media outlets that do commit these mistakes (e.g., news articles and television and video web programming) and they are very influential. My argument aims to convince everyone in the moral community to be careful with the use of forgiveness exemplars.

Another objection may be that the speaker – in using the above moves – is not intending to disempower victims but rather is intending to persuade them to stretch their moral capacities – to forgive where we might think it is impossible to forgive – rather than to pressure victims. This objection follows a Kantian framework; for if what matters for Kant is not our actions but our motives, then surely we can not say that a speaker disempowers others when their only intention is to convince victims, on moral grounds, to practice forgiveness. I do not think this is an accurate reading of Kant. Kant thinks that we cannot always be sure what our true intentions are. He writes in the *Groundwork*, “Though much may be done in conformity with what duty commands, still it is always doubtful whether it is really done from duty and therefore has moral worth.”<sup>38</sup> He continues, “It is absolutely impossible ... to make out with complete certainty [in which a moral action] rested simply on moral grounds.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it is possible to think that I intend to encourage others to forgive for “forgiveness sake” but I could actually be intending to take their power away from coming to that decision through their own rational means. In addition, I think that our words (including our arguments) can have an effect on others despite our best intentions. For example, a racist joke that was told to be funny can still be racist – even if the speaker did not intend the joke to be racist. Likewise, a speaker could still make the above rhetorical moves and in doing so disempower victims, although their intentions were to inspire victims to forgive.

My interlocutor may also object to my argument on the basis that only a Kantian will be convinced of my argument. While I have used Kant as a resource in communicating the uses and dangers of forgiveness exemplars, one does not need to be a Kantian to accept my argument. By utilizing Kant, I have not argued that one ought to follow the universal law or that only intentions matter in morality. I have argued that anyone concerned with rationality, respect for reasons, reasonableness, and respect for victims will have reason to be convinced of my argument.

## **Moving Forward**

The specific examples I have provided in this paper highlight the inappropriate ways in which a reporter and a critic employ exemplars. Each speaker uses different rhetorical moves and they have different motives for doing so. However, in the end they achieve the same result: they disempower victims. So how should we make use of forgiveness exemplars in our arguments? While I do not think making use of forgiveness exemplars is a moral sin, when we do make use of them we should do it with sincerity and great care. This includes recognizing that forgiveness exemplars can represent morality, inspire and give hope to others, be something to emulate, and can aid in moral education. While they can do the aforementioned things, as well as illustrate and provide clarity to the premises of our forgiveness arguments, their actions and recommendations should not be used as decisive reasons to forgive. Any use of forgiveness exemplars in this way can disempower victims and thus it is inappropriate. When those in positions of power attempt to persuade the powerless to forgive by using exemplars, we have reasons to view their arguments as extremely dubious.

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<sup>1</sup> Glen Pettigrove, “Meekness and 'Moral' Anger,” *Ethics* 122 (2012): 341.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, and Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt & Margaret Canovan, *The Human Condition: Second Edition*. Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Hartman, “Innocent man ends up pals with crooked cop that framed him,” *CBS News*, April 15, 2016, accessed September 8, 2016. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/on-the-road-innocent-michigan-man-ends-up-working-alongside-crooked-cop-that-locked-him/?ftag=YHF4eb9d17>.

<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum, “Anger and Forgiveness,” 235.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Butler & David White. *The Works of Bishop Butler*. New York: University of Rochester Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum notes in “Anger and Forgiveness,” 10, 12 that “an unsurprising but unfortunate aspect of the many memorial of Nelson Mandela—who... did not use that concept [forgiveness], and framed his efforts in different terms.” Here I take it that Nussbaum is not referring to Mandela’s private use but instead his public use of the term that is evident in speeches, interviews, and books.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. *Strength to Love*. (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1963), 43-52.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. and Cornel West. *The Radical King*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 62.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Butler & David White. *The Works of Bishop Butler*. (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2006) 101.

<sup>11</sup> Macalester Bell. *Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin E. Mays. *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography by Benjamin E. Mays*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton. *Forgiveness and Mercy*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Practical Reason*. ed. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 5:77.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Dean. "A Plausible Kantian Argument against Moralism," *Social Theory and Practice*. 38 (4) (2012): 590.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," 5:77.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, "A Plausible Kantian Argument against Moralism," 590.

<sup>18</sup> Immanuel Kant. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). 6:479.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Louden, 2009. "Making the law visible: the role of examples in Kant's ethics." in ed. Jens Timmermann, *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A Critical Guide*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 71.

<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 6:64-65n.

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- <sup>21</sup> Jeanine Grenberg, *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 207.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.
- <sup>23</sup> Louden, "Making the law visible: the role of examples in Kant's ethics", 97.
- <sup>24</sup> Kant, "Groundwork," 4:409.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:480.
- <sup>26</sup> Louden, "Making the law visible: the role of examples in Kant's ethics", 98-99.
- <sup>27</sup> Greenberg, "Kant and the Ethics of Humility," 208.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*,
- <sup>29</sup> Kant, "Groundwork," 4:409.
- <sup>30</sup> Louden, "Making the law visible: the role of examples in Kant's ethics," 100.
- <sup>31</sup> Immanuel Kant. "What is Enlightenment" in *Kant: Political Writings*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 55.
- <sup>32</sup> [Zachariah Talley](http://www.campusreform.org/?ID=7524). "Clemson prof to protesters: MLK 'emphasized forgiveness, not retribution," *The Tiger Town Observer*, April 26, 2016, Accessed September 13, 2016. <http://www.campusreform.org/?ID=7524> Campus reform.org".
- <sup>33</sup> Louden, "Making the law visible: the role of examples in Kant's ethics," 104.
- <sup>34</sup> Barbara Herman. "On the value of acting from the motive of duty." *Philosophical Review* 90 (3): 359-382.
- <sup>35</sup> Martha Nussbaum. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- <sup>36</sup> Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 54.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>38</sup> Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," 4:406.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 4:407.