

Moral Repair and the Moral Saints Problem

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This article explores the forms of moral repair that the wrongdoer has to perform in an attempt to make amends for her past wrongdoing, with a focus on the issues of interpersonal moral repair; that is, what a wrongdoer can do to merit her victim's forgiveness and achieve reconciliation with her community. The article argues against the very general demands of atonement that amount to an obligation to stop being someone who commits wrongs—to become a “moral saint”—and suggests a new form of atonement that is more practical and useful in our everyday life.

Keywords: Moral repair, moral saints, forgiveness, atonement.

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Following Margaret Urban Walker, we can use the term “moral repair” to refer to efforts that are made to respond in a morally appropriate way to wrongdoing (Walker 2007). One form of moral repair that has received a lot of attention in recent years is forgiveness.² Victims are often able to resolve the lingering effects of past conflicts by forgiving the people who have mistreated them. Others, who were bystanders or witnesses to a wrong, can also contribute to moral repair, as when the neighbors of a victim tend to his injuries or join in the call for justice. States and other authoritative bodies contribute to moral repair by punishing wrongdoers or compelling them to pay restitution. The forms of moral repair that I will explore here, however, are those that the wrongdoer herself performs in an attempt to correct her own misdeeds. I use the term “atonement” to stand for the transgressor's efforts to make amends for past wrongdoing. Atonement is discussed most frequently in specifically theological contexts, where the question is how a sinner is

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2. See, for example, Murphy and Hampton (1988), Hieronymi (2001), and Griswold (2007).

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to become reconciled with God. However, my attention will be restricted to issues of *interpersonal* moral repair. What can a wrongdoer do to merit her victim's forgiveness? How can she achieve reconciliation with her community?

In this essay, I will summarize the account of atonement that I have developed in more detail elsewhere (Radzik 2009). Then I will explain a worry I have about the account: the scope of the obligation to atone threatens to become unwieldy, such that it appears that we can atone for our past misdeeds only by becoming morally perfect people, or "moral saints." I do not have a solution to this problem as much as a general strategy for living with it. While I remain committed to the importance of the wrongdoer's contribution to moral repair, the problem of defining the scope of the obligation to atone indicates that moral repair requires the cooperation and good will of all the parties to a conflict—wrongdoers, victims, and sometimes communities as well.

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In atoning, then, the wrongdoer works to repair his wrongful actions. In this essay, my concern is not with the entire class of wrongful actions, but only those in which there is an identifiable human victim (i.e., in which one person or group has wronged another person or group).³ The intuition that the wrongdoer must do something to respond to his misdeed is strong. He should feel sorry about what he has done. He should apologize. He should try to make amends to his victim. These moral claims are familiar, and we feel quite confident in asserting them. The challenge for the philosopher is to explain why these sorts of responses are morally required of the wrongdoer and to explore more fully the appropriateness of particular forms of responses.

In my study of this topic, I found that accounts of the wrongdoer's obligation usually fit one of three basic patterns. Atonement is generally conceived of as either the repayment of a debt, a moral transformation of the wrongdoer, or the reconciliation of relationships. While proponents of these different perspectives often agree about the steps that wrongdoers should take (e.g., apologizing), they differ in their understandings of why such steps are necessary. These differences are rooted in even deeper disagreements about the nature of the problem that atonement must solve. In other words, proponents of these competing models of atonement have different views of what

3. Among the topics I am leaving out here are wrongs against God, wrongs against oneself, wrongs against animals, wrongs against future generations and violations of imperfect duties.

stands in need of repair. In this section, I will summarize the repayment and the moral transformation models of atonement and briefly indicate my worries about them. Section 3 will defend a reconciliation account of atonement.

The repayment model takes seriously the economic imagery that is so common in the language of morality. When I mistreat another person, I fail to pay her the respect that is her due. In damaging her dignity, her belongings, or her body, I place myself in her debt. The size of the debt corresponds to the severity of the wrong. Wrongdoing is conceived of as a kind of wrongful taking; it follows, then, that atonement is a matter of repaying that debt.

This conception of atonement as a form of repayment is usually developed in two distinct but related ways: as restitution or as retribution. Restitution requires a transfer to the victim of something of value that is intended to replace or compensate for what was lost.⁴ For example, if I wrongfully damaged my friend's computer, then I must repair or replace the computer. If I wrongfully caused her a bodily injury, then I may try to settle the debt by paying her doctor's bills, performing services that she can no longer perform for herself (such as housework), or offering a cash payment for her pain and suffering. On a restitution model, apologies are often interpreted as valuable gestures of respect offered in compensation for earlier harms.

The second way in which the repayment model of atonement is commonly developed is in terms of retribution or punishment.⁵ Whereas the language of restitution calls for the victim to receive something of value in compensation for what she lost, the language of retribution emphasizes the importance of the wrongdoer personally losing something of value in order to negate his wrongful taking. The wrongdoer must repay the debt with his own suffering, loss, or sacrifice. Atonement requires the wrongdoer to punish himself or submit to punishment at the hands of others. He might do this by suffering the pangs of guilt, by humbling himself through apology, or, in the case of crimes, by turning himself over to the authorities. The historical link between the concept of punishment and the concept of repayment appears in the etymology of the word "retribution"; "re" plus "tribuo" is Latin for "pay back" (Cottingham 1979).

I have described restitution and retribution as two ways in which the repayment model of atonement is made more precise. The

4. See Barnett (1977), Holmgren (1983), and Ellin (2000).

5. See Moore (1987) and Canterbury (1998).

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differences between them are worth noticing. For example, someone other than the wrongdoer can compensate a victim for a loss. The wrongdoer's friend could step in to pay medical bills. If what we really care about is just that the victim receive compensation, then it would appear that the work of moral repair could be completed without the wrongdoer's participation. Yet, surely the wrongdoer himself has an obligation to respond to the wrongful act. So, a major flaw in the restitution version of the repayment model is that it fails to explain why the wrongdoer's participation in moral repair is so important.

In response to this problem with the restitution model, defenders of retribution often draw a distinction between harms and wrongs. Restitution is owed as a response to the causing of harm, but not all harms are wrongful. Suppose I must break into your mountain cabin in order to take shelter from a life-threatening winter storm. My action is justified; I have not wronged you. However, I have damaged your property. Restitution must be paid for that harm, but whether it is paid by me or by a friend of mine makes no difference. Wrongs, on the other hand, are a different matter. Suppose I broke into your cabin wrongfully, simply to amuse myself. My friend might be able to pay for the damage I cause to the door, but he cannot repair the wrong for me. Repairing the wrong, claim the retributivists, requires the punishment or self-punishment of the wrongdoer. A moral debt can only be repaid with the coin of the wrongdoer's own suffering.

But the retribution model of atonement faces a problem that mirrors the one faced by the restitution model. Whereas we worried that restitution can be made without involving the wrongdoer, it seems that retribution can occur without involving the victim. The wrongdoer might punish himself, or be punished by others, without the victim being aware of this fact. And even where the victim is aware of the wrongdoer's suffering, it is hard to see why that suffering should be described as the repayment of a debt to her. It is true that victims sometimes do benefit from the punishment of a wrongdoer. For example, if punishment has a deterrent effect, then the victim faces a lower risk of being victimized in the future. But retributivist accounts (both in the literature on atonement and the literature on criminal punishment) make no appeal to the good consequences of punishment in their theories. Punishment is presented as the intrinsically appropriate response to wrongdoing, just as repayment is the intrinsically appropriate response to debt. One ought to repay a financial debt even if the creditor will only put the funds to poor use. One ought to suffer over one's wrongdoing whether or not it leads to benefits such as deterrence.

Retributivists say that the suffering of the wrongdoer is necessary to repay the moral debt. But, again, what good is that suffering to the victim? Are we meant to believe that victims find the suffering of their abusers intrinsically pleasing? Some retributivists embrace this result (Hershenov 1999). Others deny that such a vengeful, bloodthirsty image of the victim must be part of the retributivist picture; they try to develop some other account of why retribution is intrinsically valuable for the victim (Murphy and Hampton 1988; Hampton 1992). I cannot pursue this line of debate in sufficient depth here, but elsewhere I argue that these attempts do not work (Radzik 2009). While punishment is sometimes (but not always) instrumentally valuable to victims, victims should not intrinsically value the suffering of their abusers.

While both restitution and punishment have a role to play in the story of atonement, neither one seems to provide on its own a fully satisfactory guide to the wrongdoer's obligations in the aftermath of wrongdoing. Nor can we simply add the two principles together. Even if a wrongdoer has both paid compensation to his victim and submitted to punishment for his misdeed, this does not provide everything that we care about in the aftermath of wrongdoing. After all, this same wrongdoer could perform these actions without ever giving up his contemptuous view of his victim or his intention to repeat his transgression at the first opportunity. What is missing, it seems, is repentance.

This brings us to the second of the three main approaches to atonement—the moral transformation model.⁶ Whereas the repayment model conceives of wrongdoing as the incursion of a debt, the moral transformation model depicts wrongdoing as a problem within the wrongdoer's soul or mind. She has taken the wrong path; she has turned away from the right and the good. In order to make amends, she needs to reorient herself. Atonement requires repentance. The wrongdoer must accept that her past action was wrong and that she was responsible for it. She must regret her transgression. Further, she must sincerely commit herself to living according to proper values in the future.

The claim that repentance is necessary for atonement is a compelling one. However, repentance seems not to be sufficient for atonement. After all, the wrongdoer could regret her past and recommit herself to better values while failing to apologize to her

6. Discussion of this model, including the versions developed by Immanuel Kant, Josiah Royce and Max Scheler, can be found in Radzik (2009).

victim or to compensate him for the harms she caused him. Defenders of moral transformation models of atonement tend to argue that, when repentance is sincere, the wrongdoer will be motivated to actions such as apology and compensation as well. But we are unable to explain why these actions are required, or to give a satisfactory account of why some forms of apology or compensation are preferable to others, with the materials that are generally provided by moral transformation accounts of wrongdoing. When the problem that wrongdoing poses is represented exclusively as a problem in the transgressor's soul or mind, we fail to properly acknowledge the stake that other parties (especially the victim) have in the aftermath of wrongdoing.

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While there is much to be learned from repayment and moral transformation models of atonement, I find both alternatives lacking. As the discussion above emphasizes, the different versions of these models threaten to leave out one of the important stakeholders in the aftermath of wrongdoing. We can improve upon the repayment and moral transformation accounts of atonement by turning to the third general model of atonement: reconciliation.

Like the other accounts of atonement we have seen, the reconciliation model has at its heart a metaphor.⁷ Here, wrongdoing is represented not as the incursion of a debt or as the losing of one's path but as a rending of the social fabric. Wrongdoing tears at the threads of mutual respect and trust that properly bind us to one another. Atonement aims to mend that fabric. In atoning, the wrongdoer works to reconcile her relationships with those people who have been alienated from her by her wrongful actions.⁸

A reconciliation model of atonement is supported by the observation that wrongs are events that do not stay neatly isolated in the past. As Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton have argued, this is because wrongful actions have a kind of expressive content (Murphy and Hampton 1988). To wrong someone is to send the message that one does not find his value sufficiently high so as to preclude such an action. The wrongdoer may not intend to communicate such a message, but actions are taken as evidence of attitudes. In this way, wrongful actions insult their victims. Furthermore, because past actions and attitudes are indications of future behavior, wrongdoing

7. Works that emphasize something like reconciliation in the aftermath of wrongdoing include Morris (1976), Swinburne (1989), Harvey (1995), Walker (2007), and Bennett (2008).

8. While most speakers of English associate "atonement" with self-punishment, the etymology of the word links it to reconciliation. "Atonement" comes from "at-one-ment."

generally suggests a threat of future mistreatment. In these ways, wrongful acts poison the future relationship between the victim and the wrongdoer.

Wrongs may also damage the relationships among both the victim and the wrongdoer and members of their communities. People who were privy to the wrong, and to the insulting messages that it communicated, might be led to see the victim as unworthy of better treatment. Alternatively, these witnesses may take a lower view of the wrongdoer, regarding her with indignation and mistrust. Additionally, the experience of being mistreated can lead the victim to feel degraded and low. We can say that his relationship with himself has been damaged. Similarly, in doing wrong, the wrongdoer may damage her relationship with herself. She may feel corrupted and untrustworthy. In sum, we have a myriad of relationships among victims, wrongdoers, and their fellows that may be damaged or threatened by wrongdoing. In order to atone, the wrongdoer must repair these relationships to the best of her ability.

In talking about relationships, I mean to bring attention to the ways in which people interact, their expectations of one another, and the attitudes and emotions they hold toward one another or toward themselves. Different kinds of relationship are distinguishable by different sets of interactions, expectations, attitudes and emotions. One's relationship with one's child differs in many ways from one's relationship with one's co-workers. But whatever our particular, personal relationships to other people, we also always stand in another sort of relationship to other human beings. We stand in what I will call the "moral relationship." Even wrongs that take place between strangers passing one another on the street can be described as damaging relationships, because even strangers are bound by moral norms in their interactions, expectations, and attitudes toward one another.

This understanding of moral relationships—and of the norms that should regulate the interactions, expectations, attitudes, and emotions that are constitutive of it—is rooted in a broadly Kantian perspective. A proper relationship, whether among strangers or intimate friends, is one in which the parties regard one another and themselves as equally valuable moral persons. They view each other as beings who are capable of judging right from wrong and regulating their behavior by these judgments. This moral agency gives them a particular kind of value, which Kant describes as "dignity" rather than "price" (Kant 1996). Furthermore, when a relationship is morally healthy, people view one another and themselves as reasonably trustworthy in moral

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matters. The repair and maintenance of such relationships is the goal of atonement.

When reconciliation has been made, the victim, who was denigrated by the wrongful action, can now be confident that he is being granted proper respect by the wrongdoer, in the view of the community that is privy to the wrong, and in his own eyes. The wrongdoer will be regarded by her victim and community as someone who is not only capable of moral action but also worthy of a normal degree of trust with respect to the type of interaction in question. She will also be able to regard herself as valuable and trustworthy once more, and feelings of guilt may permissibly subside.

In addition to the moral relationship, victims and wrongdoers also occupy all sorts of more particular, personal relationships. Unfortunately, even if a wrongdoer responds to her transgressions in a fully morally satisfactory way, this will not always be sufficient to repair the personal relationship. Friends who have been separated by a serious betrayal of trust might never again achieve the level of personal intimacy they had before the wrongful action. Still, I believe that the wrongdoer should be counted as having satisfied her moral obligation to atone to her friend when she has given him good reason to accept that she is once again reasonably trustworthy in the domain of friendship. That is, even though their own friendship is over, the victim recognizes that the wrongdoer has shown herself to be someone who can be trusted in the role of friend (to someone else) in the future. The wrongdoer's obligation to atone consists in an obligation to create the conditions in which this more modest sort of reconciliation can take place.

How can the wrongdoer merit the restoration of her place as member in good standing in the moral community? She must attend to the ways in which her relationships were damaged or threatened by the original wrong. In most cases, three steps must be taken by the wrongdoer. The first is respectful communication. The wrongdoer must acknowledge her misdeed in a way that communicates regret and renewed respect, and that invites the victim's own response. Secondly, the wrongdoer must act to repair the various kinds of harm she has created, insofar as that is possible. These might include financial, emotional, or physical harms. To leave those harms unrepaired is to allow her victim to continue to suffer from the wrong she committed; it is to continue to give the victim reason to resent and distrust her. Thirdly, the wrongdoer must reform herself so that she becomes morally trustworthy. She must address the flaws in her character that led to the wrongful act so as to provide both others and herself with

good reason to accept that she will not repeat this sort of misdeed. Through this process the wrongdoer provides her victim, her community, and herself with good reason to reestablish the respect and trust that are distinctive of relationships in a moral community.

I believe that the reconciliation model of atonement has many advantages over the repayment and moral transformation models. First, unlike those alternatives, the reconciliation model never loses sight of the fact that the wrongdoer and the victim are both central to the project of atonement. Furthermore, the reconciliation model recognizes that wrongdoing between individuals can infect larger communities. Proper atonement requires a response to that sort of damage as well. The reconciliation model includes the insights of the moral transformation model, in that atonement requires the wrongdoer to make herself morally trustworthy once more. Restitution has a place as well. Since unaddressed harms damage relationships of mutual respect and trust, relational repair requires restitution. The reconciliation model can even incorporate what is worth preserving in the retribution model. Practices of self-punishment or submission to punishment sometimes have a role to play in the aftermath of wrongdoing. But whereas the retribution model claimed that these responses were intrinsically valuable, the reconciliation model values them only insofar as they are instrumental to rebuilding relationships of trust among the parties to wrongdoing.

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An objection to this reconciliation account of atonement, which I will explore in the remainder of this essay, has to do with the scope of the obligation to atone. The account requires wrongdoers to make themselves morally trustworthy. But how much is entailed by this requirement? In theological circles, the ideal of atonement is frequently linked with the command to “go forth and sin no more,” but this is surely too high a standard. If this is what atonement requires, who would even attempt it? The early history of the Christian Church provides a cautionary tale. It was once the case that the penitential rites in the Church could be performed only once. If one received absolution, then one had better behave perfectly from then on because there would be no fixing new sins. Predictably, people put off the sacrament until they were convinced they were dying. Understandably, the Church decided it was better to change those rules and encourage frequent confession and reconciliation instead. In developing a secular conception of atonement for wrongdoing, I too want to avoid the suggestion that atoning for a wrong requires you to become a moral saint. Requiring perfection

discourages improvement. But when I start dealing with particular cases, I find that the slopes can get rather slippery.

Let's imagine a particular wrongdoer, named Don. At first it seems intuitive that Don can right the particular wrongful act of cheating on his wife, Betty, while failing to repair misdeeds in other parts of his life, such as bullying his co-workers. He could work hard to repair his relationship with Betty and count as having atoned to her, even though his relationship with his co-workers remains problematic and calls for other, separate acts of atonement. In favor of this position, we could argue that moral improvement is something that admits of degrees. Celebrating the advances Don makes would encourage him to address his other moral failings. This suggests that we should believe that a wrongdoer is capable of successfully atoning for one act without addressing all of the moral failings in his life.

But has Don successfully atoned for one act of marital infidelity when he later has another affair with a different woman? The second affair is evidence that the degree of moral improvement required for the former atonement failed. The later wrong so closely matches the earlier one, being the same type of wrong committed against the same victim, Betty, that it seems to invalidate Don's first attempt at atonement. Again, this seems to be the right answer. Don's affairs are connected with one another and with deeper issues in his relationship with Betty and in his character. Even if Betty has signaled a willingness to forgive the former affair, she would be gullible indeed if that forgiveness were left unshaken by the revelation of the latter affair.

Notice, however, that in other, less serious cases of wrongdoing, this principle seems too severe. Don forgets his lunch appointment with his friend Roger and sincerely apologizes. Six months and many lunches later, he forgets again. Here, the repetition of wrong and victim probably does not invalidate Don's earlier apology.

Let us inquire a little further. Is there anything Don can do to count as atoning to Betty for his multiple affairs if he continues to deceive her about their finances? One might argue that, in order to atone for his marital infidelity, Don must come to recognize that Betty deserves better than to be deceived. How can he achieve this goal if he continues to deceive her in other ways? His lies about their finances undermines the claim that he has morally improved himself in one of the aspects of his character that is directly relevant to the transgression of adultery.

Could Don atone for cheating on Betty if he fails to do his fair share of the housework and childcare? This unfairness, after all, could

be described as involving the same sort of moral failing as the marital infidelity. Both are cases of treating Betty unfairly, or, even more generally, of failing to respect Betty as an equally valuable moral person. If this line of reasoning is plausible, then we must reconsider Don's bullying demeanor at the office, where, in different ways and to different degrees, there are many people whom he fails to treat as equally valuable moral persons. If we diagnose Don's marital infidelity as a failure to recognize the dignity of other persons, then, to repair that wrong, he will have to stop doing *that sort of thing*; he will have to reform his character so that he stops doing *that sort of thing*. Now it looks like we are requiring Don to become a moral saint in order to atone for his affair.

The moral saint problem can be classified as a "slippery slope" objection. The reconciliation model of atonement appears to be unacceptable because it seems unable to draw a line between the reasonable and the unreasonable demands that we might place on a wrongdoer. What makes this slope slippery? I have argued that to atone for a wrong, a wrongdoer has to reform himself, including the relevant part of his character that led to the wrongful act, so as to become morally trustworthy in the future with respect to the sort of wrong in question. However, any particular case of a wrongful action can be described in multiple ways. The transgression that was Don's having a romantic liaison with another woman can be described as a case of marital infidelity towards Betty, as deceiving Betty, as being unfair towards Betty and, yet more generally, as violating the moral value of *another person* (without even specifying Betty as the victim). The character flaw that the transgression revealed could be described as infidelity, deceptiveness, unfairness, or as immorality in the fully general sense of not regarding other people as equally deserving of respect. Don's transgression can be accurately labeled at each of these levels of description. This is what seems to lead us to the conclusion that, in order for Don to repair any particular wrong, he will have to become a moral saint.

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As I have said, my goal is not so much to solve the moral saint problem as to learn to live with it. I do not want to solve the problem because there is a sense in which it is true that Don (and the rest of us) *should* become moral saints. Each of our particular moral failures points to our general moral flaws, which we ought to repair. When we talk at the level of moral philosophy, all of that is true. But when we are living our lives, we are not better off when we demand perfection from ourselves, or the people who mistreat us. I would like to

articulate a conception of the obligation to atone that we can live with, one that offers a principled way to stop short of demanding moral saintliness as necessary for righting the wrongs of everyday life.

The conception of moral repair as the reparation of relationships is helpful here. When we ask how Don is to repair *his misdeed*, the demands of atonement tend to scale up because the misdeed can be accurately described at so many different levels of abstraction. Let's instead ask how Don is going to repair the damage his misdeed did to his relationship with Betty. To answer this question, we have to consider not (or not primarily) how Don is going to satisfy the demands of an abstract principle, but how Don is going to satisfy *Betty*. Betty's view of the wrong—her own description of the transgression, why it was objectionable and harmful, and how it has affected her ability to trust Don—will play the major role in defining for Don what he needs to do in order to make amends. Depending on Betty's point of view, she may be more disturbed by the fact that he had a sexual encounter with someone else, or by the lying, or by the fact that the affair is just one more example of how Don has maintained his own life, independent of her and the children, while her own life has been entirely subsumed to the family. She probably does not care about the affair as an immoral act *per se*. All of these characterizations of the misdeed are true, but not all of them are equally crucial to Betty and her relationship with Don—to her ability to see him once more as a reasonably trustworthy partner, whether or not their marriage survives.

Betty's role in the project of moral repair can keep the moral saint problem at bay in another way as well. Betty has reason not to demand moral saintliness from Don as a condition for her forgiveness or reconciliation, because she knows that she will not be able to live up to that standard when she will someday need Don's (or someone else's) forgiveness. If the goal of atonement is moral reconciliation, then the victim's own standards for atonement might help to keep the slope from getting too slippery.

Betty should be permitted to decide what she needs from Don by way of atonement—at least within certain limits. Betty cannot demand a form of atonement that is immoral in itself (for example, that Don physically harm the woman with whom he had the affair). Betty's demanding too little from Don may also be a sign of a problem. Don has not atoned properly if he meets a low standard that Betty sets forth only because she has lost all sense of herself as a person who deserves decent treatment, or because she is so trapped by the circumstances of her life that she cannot risk losing Don's support.

A more difficult problem with letting Betty set the standards for Don's atonement has to do with the limits of her knowledge, limits that are themselves the results of Don's lies. Her standards for an acceptable atonement will surely be lower if she falsely believes that this is the only affair Don has ever had. Also, whether Betty sees the sexual infidelity or the lying as the more important aspect of Don's transgression would likely change if she found out that Don has been lying to her about their finances as well. Even if Betty does not have all the facts, Don does. He cannot honestly take Betty's particular demands as authoritative—as defining the extent of his obligation to atone to her—when he knows that she would set other standards if only he was not deceiving her. But, still, we need not conclude that Don must become a moral saint in order to make amends with Betty.

A related point that will help us avoid demanding moral saintliness has to do with the nature of trust and trustworthiness. Recall the example of Don forgetting his lunch appointment with Roger. Roger accepts his apology. When Don forgets again six months later, Roger does not take this as a reason to revoke his earlier forgiveness. In forgiving, Roger re-accepted Don as a trustworthy lunch companion, but the bar for being a trustworthy lunch companion does not require infallibility. In judging someone to be morally trustworthy, we are always judging relative to the particular kind of interaction in question. A friend remains trustworthy though he forgets a lunch date every once in a while, in part because so little is at stake. In trusting a spouse to be faithful much more is at stake. Betty is justified in wanting a greater degree of assurance that Don will not repeat his infidelities. By attending to the particular relationship that needs to be repaired, and to the kind of trust that is necessary to keep that relationship healthy and morally acceptable, we will find standards of atonement that are appropriate to the case yet stop short of a demand for saintliness.

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What does a wrongdoer have to do in order to atone for a misdeed? I have argued that a wrongdoer needs to repair the moral relationships that were damaged or threatened by her misdeed, and that this requires her to respectfully acknowledge wrongdoing, repair the harms to the best of her ability, and reform her character. But depending on how we identify the wrong, we will get different conclusions about what is required for atonement. Because any particular transgression can be described in very general terms as a moral wrong, there is cause to worry that the demands of atonement would be very general too; the obligation to atone would amount to an obligation to “stop being

someone who commits wrongs.” If atonement requires moral perfection, it forfeits its usefulness as a guide to our thinking about everyday life. In this essay, I have argued that we can avoid this problem by conceiving of atonement, not as the demand of an abstract morality, but as a demand that we make of one another within the context of real, imperfect relationships.

One consequence of this move is that the project of atonement becomes intertwined with other forms of moral repair. The scope of Don’s obligation to atone to Betty is set by the demands she makes of him—but only insofar as Betty’s demands are reasonable and morally permissible. To fully think through the ethics of moral repair, we must also think of the moral obligations that victims, and perhaps communities as well, have the aftermath of wrongdoing. Genuine moral repair may only be possible when each of these parties plays their role properly.⁹

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