Forgiveness, Guilt, and Blame

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**Forgiveness and Realities**

Forgiveness is an action taken in psychological (inner) reality and/or in shared (outer) reality. It is also **a choice made in three separate relationships: my relationship with the person, and each of our relationships with shared reality.**

**Why this is important is that we often believe that forgiveness in one reality should automatically create forgiveness in the others, and this is decidedly not so.**

There are, in fact, six separate choices being made here.

Three relate to me:

1. my inner reality in relationship to the other person (how I see them)
2. my inner reality in relation to shared reality (how I see the outer world)
3. shared reality in relation to me (how the outer world sees me)

Three relate to the other person:

1. their inner reality in relationship to me (perceived by me as an outer reality)
2. their inner reality in relation to shared reality
3. shared reality in relation to them

**Let’s use a specific example to explore this. Let’s say that the other person stole my car.**

**I like the other person and value our relationship, so let’s start by saying that I forgive them for what they did.** This is a choice in my inner reality as it concerns my relationship with them. IT HAS NO REAL BEARING ON THEIR CHOICES, on their own inner reality, other than to present them a choice to respond to. How they choose to respond to this choice of mine depends on their own construction of their inner reality, not my belief in how that should be.

So, for example, they may choose to not accept my forgiveness. They may accept that I forgive them, but not be able to forgive themselves for what they did. They may believe that forgiveness for what they did is impossible. They may believe that what they did was not done by their real self, so forgiveness is unreal to them.

**Let’s go ahead, however, and assume that they can accept my forgiveness and also forgive themselves.** In our relationship together we are in harmony. However, we also exist in a larger shared reality, and if our actions affect “the real world” then we must address that as well.

I may choose to forgive them, but find that in my relationship with the real world (outer shared reality) it does not. For example, I may forgive them for stealing from me, **but the legal system still decides to prosecute them.** I also may forgive them in terms of our relationship, **but choose not to forgive them in my relationship with the real world.** Using the above example, I may forgive them for stealing from me but still hold them accountable to make right what they took, or ask them to do something as a penalty for what they did. Essentially **I am forgiving the choice they made, but not forgiving (eliminating) the real-world consequences or their accountability for those.**

Many people have trouble with this last possibility – inner forgiveness but outer non-forgiveness. If we forgive someone, aren’t we absolving them of all aspects of their choice? The simple answer is no – **forgiveness in the relationship with them is only one of the three relationships at play. Each requires separate choices, and NONE of the choices automatically changes any other.**

However, **for purposes of moving on, let’s say that in my relationship with shared reality I also choose to forgive them there, and my shared reality agrees.** I absolve them of the real-world consequences of their actions, and the real world decides to do the same. They did something bad but my outer reality and I are both going to let it go. They stole the car, I forgave them, and the prosecutor agrees not to press charges.

Again, it might seem like that should be the end of it. However, it’s still not. The other person still has to deal with this in their own relationship with outer reality. For example, if they’re Catholic, they might go to confession. Even though forgiven by me and my shared reality, they might decide that in their relationship to shared reality they need to do something other than just let this go – perhaps they will make a donation to charity, or do some other positive action. They may feel relieved at being forgiven by me, but feel a need to act either in response to what they initially did, or in gratefulness for being forgiven. They stole the car, I forgave them, the prosecutor let it go, but they still feel a need to atone for it or make some kind of amends.

It’s also possible that their outer reality may not forgive them. I may forgive their ill treatment of me and my shared reality be willing to let it go, and they may be able to forgive themselves for what was done --but their friends or religion or employer or other part of their own external reality still chooses not to forgive them for what they did. There are literally millions of possible permutations. They stole the car, I forgave them, the law forgave them, they forgave themselves, but they got fired from their job anyway.

**And, of course, even if I forgive them, my shared reality forgives them, and their shared reality forgives them, they can still choose not to forgive themself.** Everyone else forgives them but they can’t forgive themselves for stealing the car from me.

Even as my shared reality can forgive them, they can forgive themself, and their shared reality forgive them, but I still choose not to forgive them. Everyone else accepts stealing the car from me as forgivable under the circumstances, but I don’t.

**A right way to forgive?**

**None of these choices is necessarily “wrong”. The only thing that can be said is that they are not in harmony with each other.** Each of the four entities (and there are four because your shared reality is different from mine, even if there is great overlap between the two) **makes separate choices based on what it believes is the best acceptable choice for it.**

Therefore, **be careful when addressing issues of forgiveness to distinguish between the six choices, and to realize that each entails a separate decision**. Other than simply to achieve harmony, there is no automatic reason why these should all agree.

And harmony is not necessarily the best outcome in a situation – we could, after all, both decide to murder some innocent people – and if those people were Jewish and we were both Nazis in Germany in 1943, our shared realities would also be in harmony with that choice. **If everything is in harmony, how could it be wrong? – yet of course it could.**

The conclusion here is that there is nothing wrong per se with forgiving someone’s actions but leaving them accountable for the real-world consequences. Or for refusing to forgive someone even if, as in the Nazi Germany example above, they and the shared realities all are quite willing to forgive the action (or commend it). **What’s important is to be clear about which of the realities you are looking at, in which of those the choice is forgiveness, and in which it is not.**

**Guilt**

Forgiveness naturally brings up concerns regarding guilt. When we do something that violates a relationship’s agreements we become guilty. Often we then find ourselves “seeking forgiveness” from the other person or entity.

Dealing with guilt and obtaining forgiveness are separate things. Guilt has to do with fairness – finding a balance to the choice made, and then accepting/taking that choice. This also ensures that the guilty person has full ownership of the choice made. **Forgiveness recognizes the same balance but allows the person the option of not having to take the corresponding choice.**

**For this to work, both parties have to be clear as to what specifically that choice entailed – otherwise there will be no ownership by the guilty party. Guilt needs ownership, otherwise it is a wasted emotion. Forgiveness needs a clear establishment of owned guilt, otherwise it is a wasted resolution.**

**The way to deal with guilt**

Guilt is the result of our initiating a choice. The correct way to deal with guilt is:

1. to acknowledge our wrong-doing and our accountability for it,
2. to do what we can to correct it, and
3. to accept, if required, the specific punishment appropriate.
4. (optional) to state the intention of never doing this again.

The first part is about accepting that this is a result of my initiation of a choice that knowingly or unknowingly violated the relationship’s agreements, and being clear what those agreements are.

The second part is to address the specific FORM-BASED consequences of my choice and to seek to restore the form as much as I can – to return the form to its previous condition (polarity and intensity). If it was something positive and moderately intense, the goal is to return it to those previous levels.

The third part is to address the MEANING consequences of my choice. Because the form and meaning are not permanently attached, an insignificant form can have an intense meaning, or an intense form have an insignificant meaning. This third part is to address any such differences.

Typically the form affected is less intense than the meaning attached to it. Punishment is a way of increasing the intensity of form so that it better matches the intensity of the meaning. It basically says “You thought that the meaning was small because the form was small, but you were mistaken. To make sure you understand this, you will accept a more negative form being attached.” This is about fairness regarding meaning, but also about perception – understanding the meaning the relationship attaches to the form.

When the process is done correctly, it focuses on MAINTAINING the relationship. That entails fairness and basic respect for both parties, including that the remedies must be specific, achievable, have defined time limits, and be reasonable and appropriate to the offense. **When the conditions have been met, there is an end: the guilt has been addressed.** Although the person thereafter will always previously have been guilty, they are not guilty now and treating them as such has no real purpose, since there is no further corrective action to be taken.

**When the balance has been re-established by doing this, the event becomes intensity and polarity neutral – and thus simply another thing that happened, another part of who we are. The choice is not forgiven, but is instead balanced out.**

The fourth part reflects a decision to not violate the agreement by such a choice in the future. Guilt does not require this as a condition that must be met. However, most relationships rely on trust that agreements will be followed, and such statements act to help restore trust by re-affirming intent.

**A primary issue here to understand is that while the method of dealing with guilt may be the same, the way it plays out depends on each reality affected. Dealing with guilt in one reality relationship does not necessarily have any impact on any other reality relationship.**

**Our guilty actions do not necessarily affect all the realities.** There may, for example, be no outer shared reality violation, only one against inner reality, as in “letting someone down” or “not being who you counted on me to be.” In such cases outer reality actions or amends may have no impact.

**Guilt must be addressed for each affected reality.**

**Guilt and forgiveness**

For forgiveness to be effective, it is important that the other person accepts part one of guilt – acknowledges their accountability and is clear on the agreement that has been violated – or it is determined that for some acceptable reason they are incapable (or were incapable) of doing so.

If that condition is met, then forgiveness becomes effective by utilizing an essential aspect of ownership of choices – that I recognize the balancing opposite of my choice and accept it as a real, possible, acceptable choice, but that I never need to actually take it. Knowing where the fire escape is allows me to “own” the possibility of a fire, even if neither choice ever happens. Knowing I can choose a military option allows me to “own” a diplomatic solution, or to not act at all. Recognizing that my love for a pet includes the cost of deep grief when that pet dies can still mean I die before the pet does so I never experience that grief in my life.

Forgiveness retains ownership of the choice by the other person; it simply is a choice not to respond with the fair and balanced consequence. It does not REMOVE that consequence, it simply does not choose it. If the appropriate consequence/opposite choice is not acceptable/real to the person asked to forgive, the forgiveness will be hollow and role-bound: not a choice but an automatic reaction. This bears more discussion, but I’ll defer that for the present time.

**When we expect forgiveness but don’t get it**

Typically the times when we expect forgiveness but don’t get it occur because we confuse one reality with another.

We may achieve all the phases of balancing out guilt in one reality and then expect that to ensure forgiveness in another –“I did everything physically possible to set this right, but he still won’t forgive me.”

The problem is, of course, that there is no requirement that realities be in harmony.

And forgiveness always remains a choice, it can never be forced or made mandatory. Finally, when we have made the balance in the reality relationship, forgiveness becomes irrelevant. A person telling us it’s OK not to take a choice that we’ve already taken is superfluous or disingenuous.

If you ask forgiveness and don’t get it, what that means is that you asked forgiveness and didn’t get it. For this choice of yours you do not have harmony. What it doesn’t mean is anything else. This lack of harmony can’t be used as a measure of whether your or their choices are good or bad, or real or unreal.

**What if we cannot make the balancing choice called for in the specific relational realities?**

There are times when, because of differences in balance point, what one reality sees as the necessary balance the other reality will see as unfair and/or impossible. If in your reality the penalty for theft is having my hands cut off, but in my reality that penalty is unacceptable or just too negative, then dealing with guilt may be something that cannot become harmonious. Forgiveness partially bridges this gap –but at the cost of feeling that both parties feel the other person did not truly take full ownership (either of the offending action or of the resulting reaction). In such cases both accept forgiveness as a resolution, but retain a sense of injustice.

**When we expect recognition of balancing out our guilt but don’t get it**

Having a different balance is one way that we can feel we have balanced our guilt out to zero but are not getting recognized as having done so. The second way this happens is when we balance in one reality relationship and expect that to have automatically balanced a different relationship as well.

Making outer reality amends, as is common in 12-Step programs, often works on only two of our own realities – our inner reality relationship with our shared outer reality, and our outer reality’s relationship with us. Do I see myself as having done what I should in the external world to set this straight? Does the external world agree? But my relationship with you is different from my relationship with the external world, and often needs different things to achieve balance.

It is not anyone’s fault if my external reality and your internal reality do not agree, especially since my external reality, for all the same forms it may share with yours, still is not the same as your external reality. In your view of external reality I might have needed to do things differently.

This approach to resolving guilt applies to all the realities involved. In each of the realities these issues must be addressed separately. The most efficient solutions will contain elements applicable to most or all the realities – for example, paying back money stolen may satisfy my external reality, the other person, and their external reality, but I may find that for my own internal reality I have to also do something further, such as donate time to an organization helping the poor. It is, also wise to remember that the most efficient solution is not necessarily the best possible solution.

As in the main discussion above, it is common to find that when asking forgiveness and dealing with guilt one or more of the realities involved is in disagreement with another about forgiveness and restitution. Particularly when seeking to deal with guilt regarding others, we may find that resolving the guilt with our own shared reality is fairly straightforward, whereas resolving the guilt or gaining forgiveness from another person is much more confusing and difficult.

**Forgiving ourselves and/or feeling we have dealt with our guilt**

Sometimes the greatest difficulty is actually in resolving guilt and gaining forgiveness ourselves: finding forgiveness in our own internal reality.

Problems here have many possible aspects: deciding if our original actions were “really real” or not, asking if our balancing response is at the correct intensity, deciding if it is fully owned (genuine), or dealing with choices we see as unacceptable.

If you run into a disagreement about forgiveness and feel unsettled by it, then re-evaluate whether you have agreement on this in your internal reality and with your own shared reality. If you do, then stop arguing about what’s real or unreal, right or wrong, and instead focus on what the disagreement means for the relationship and what you can and want to do about it, if anything.

**Blame**

Blame is assigning responsibility for guilt. **There is nothing wrong with blaming in its correct sense.** However, when we usually use it the term carries a negative connotation because it refers to incorrect assigning of responsibility – either towards others and/or away from oneself.

That kind of blame is clearly unhelpful. Sometimes it does, however, make sense. There are two main areas in which this happens.

**Blaming others for my “not really me” reactions**

**If my actions or responses were out of an area of choices I regard as unacceptable to “the real me” I may deny responsibility for them.** From this perspective I will see myself as correct in doing so. If I responded with these choices, it was “not really me” doing so, and clearly a force4d reaction I had no chopice but to make BECAUSE I SEE MYSELF (THE “REAL ME”) UNABLE TO INITIATE THESE CHOICES. Therefore, how can I be held responsible?. Clearly whoever or whatever caused/forced me to react this way is the responsible party.

Of course this is not true in external reality, even if it seems true in my inner reality. I still actually have/own the choice of how or if I respond. Also I may have actually initiated the choice, directly or by instigating outer reality to act, but believe I could not have done so.

How does that happen? If I need to yell at someone but do not have that choice available for “the real me,” I may goad the other person into yelling at me so that I can yell at them (what I wanted to do) but see it as them forcing me to react that way – “they started it.” This happens much more often than we usually recognize.

But it is often the cause for refusing to take responsibility for one’s actions and for assigning the guilt– blaming -- something outside of the person themself.

The most extreme case I encountered of this was a depressed young man who stated that he would never consider suicide, but when questioned further said he intended to walk out in the street in front of a moving truck. The truck driver would then be responsible for his death and he would be blameless.

**Blaming others for setting up an unfair situation which my actions/choices were only trying to correct**

The second major way we can mistakenly blame others is through ownership/fairness imbalances. If I don’t balance things out as you do – if we are not in harmony regarding our balance points – then what you see as fair, as the proper balance of negatives with positives, I will see as unfair – and vice-versa. **In such circumstances I may refuse to accept guilt if I see my actions/choices as “only being fair” or “doing the fair thing” or “trying to make things be fair” when you are being unfair.**

Why should I accept any guilt when I was the one trying to be fair? Why wouldn’t you be the one to blame for trying to get away with something that was unfair?

Complaining that the person in this circumstance is unfairly blaming you or others will have little to no impact on them because in their conceptualization of internal reality what you’re saying is, simply, wrong. They will see these attempts by you as you lying, being manipulative, having a hidden agenda, trying to cover up your own bad choices, or some other such unfair intent, -- but they will not your criticism as accurate.

**Can this be resolved?**

**The way to resolve this is to find a way to harmonize the balance points.** A first step might be for each side to acknowledge that the other side is not intentionally being unfair, but instead is trying to be fair – as they see that from their inner reality.

It may then be possible to identify where the relationship reality does balance (or agree on where it should balance) and use that as the measure for determining fairness **in your interactions together, or in how the relationship interacts with outer shared reality.** It may be possible to determine how outer shared reality sees this and both of you accept that as the measuring standard.

**Without a shared standard the only conclusion is that both parties are equally right, and that the two right answers disagree. Each person will then assign guilt, responsibility, and blame differently.**

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