

Forgiveness and Redemption

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Lecture to 2001 TOC Summer Seminar

6 July 2001

(The slide presentation that accompanied this lecture is also available from www.dianahsieh.com.)

Introduction

Imagine that you are speaking to a close friend. She tells you that she suspects her husband of having an affair. She turns to you and says, "Do you know anything about it? Do you know if he is cheating on me?" You panic. You have been aware of the affair for months, but suffered with that knowledge in silence, not knowing how to broach the subject. So, in a moment of very poor judgment, you reply, "No, I don't know anything." Oh dear.

So, what should you do to fix this mess? Should you admit your lie and tell the truth? What if it is two weeks or two months later? Do you owe your friend an apology or an explanation? How can you demonstrate your trustworthiness in the future?

If you are the lied-to friend, how should you react when you discover the lie? What kind of explanation or apology would you require to continue the friendship? Should you forgive your friend even if she offers no apology or regrets? Might the transgression be too serious to ever be forgiven?

Finally, if you are a friend of both of these people, should you choose sides? Should you become involved in any subsequent disputes or reconciliation? Should you regard the friend who lied as less trustworthy in general, even though she didn't harm you?

The still-youthful Objectivist ethics does not yet have a clear, well-developed set of principles for rationally responding to such conflicts in human relationships. Neither Ayn Rand's fiction nor her philosophical writings substantially address the issues of apology, forgiveness, and redemption. In contrast, Christianity has a rich literature on these concepts. However, these analyses are permeated by principles and justifications deeply antithetical to Objectivism: forgiveness is a gift of grace from God, God will not forgive our sins unless we forgive the sins of others, we must forgive anyone who repents their sin, and so on.

So today, we are going to broach this complex issue of how to rationally respond to harm, immorality, and conflict in our relationships. However, we must first address two foundational issues: (1) the purpose and importance of our human relationships and (2) the cause and gravity of harm and conflict in those relationships. Only after this foundation is in place can we understand the function of apology, forgiveness, and redemption in our relationships.

However, let me add a word of caution before we begin: the amazing complexity of human relationships precludes us from formulating a simple set of rules for responding to conflicts in those relationships. We cannot compile lists of forgivable and unforgivable offenses; cowardice and dishonesty on one side, lack of integrity and irresponsibility on the other. Rather, once know how to evaluate the importance of a relationship and the significance of harm done, then we can decide, using the egoistic principles of Objectivism, the most rational response to the resulting conflict -- whether we are the victim of a harm, the perpetrator of a harm, or an interested third party.

Let's get started.

Relationships

The relationships under discussion today are those with other adult humans with whom we have repeated interactions over time, such as those with friends, co-workers, and family. (Our relationships with dependent children are a can of worms for another talk.) The complexity, variety, and uniqueness of these sustained relationships often makes them resistant to analysis and understanding. But, particularly where conflicts are concerned, three aspects of our relationships are crucial: purpose, shared values, and expectations.

Purpose

All of our human relationships serve some purpose or purposes in our lives. Those purposes can be business or pleasure, material or spiritual, rational or irrational. For example, friendships offer companionship and advice, businesses offer goods and services, family members offer us help in times of need. Every relationship that we choose to create and sustain is a means to some particular ends in our lives.

As Objectivists, as egoists, our relationships must also serve our primary purpose: our own life and happiness. In keeping with the trader principle, a relationship is only worth pursuing and sustaining if it is mutually beneficial to both people.

But precisely what does mutual benefit mean? A mutually beneficial relationship is one in which both people objectively regard the values gained through the relationship as more valuable to themselves than the values traded and foregone. Consider, for example, two people who meet every morning for a run. If both runners gain more value from the company of the other person on the run than they lose in the time and hassle of working with another person's schedule, then the relationship is mutually beneficial.

So such trade for mutual benefit is the normal, healthy state of all of our relationships. But more than that, as egoists, we also ought to be attentive to the ways in which we can maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of a relationship -- get more bang for our buck, so to speak. Conflicts focus attention on the ways in which we can do this.

As a result, when a relationship does encounter trouble, when one person harms another or conflict arises, the most basic goal is to restore the relationship to a state of maximal mutual benefit.

Shared Values

Mutually beneficial relationships are possible only because each person in a relationship has a distinct constellation of values and interests that at least partially overlap with or intersect the values and interests of the other.

The values shared in relationships, however, are not all shared equally; rather, they vary along three major dimensions: (1) breadth (the number of shared values), (2) depth (the importance of those values to each person), and (3) scarcity (the frequency of those values in the wider population). These differences in the shared values determine the overall value, uniqueness, and replaceability of a relationship. Let's take a closer look at each:

Breadth: The breadth of a relationship tells us the number of values shared by both people. Some relationships have a broad base of shared values while others only intersect narrowly at a point or two. For example, I chose my realtor in Colorado based on a single complimentary interest: he specialized in horse property south of Denver and I wanted horse property south of Denver. But we soon discovered a much broader range of values in common, such as his interest in libertarianism and firearms. The resulting expansion in the breadth of our relationship allows us to

have a wider variety of interactions (such as going to the shooting range together) than was previously possible.

Depth: The depth of a relationship measures the importance of the shared values to each person. Two identical values, after all, can occupy vastly different places in each person's overall hierarchy of values. For example, two people might both value classical music, but the person who has a massive CD collection and season tickets to the symphony probably values it more than the person who only occasionally listens to the classical station on the car radio. The greater the similarity in the depth of two people's shared values, the more meaningfully they are able to interact with one another.

Scarcity: The scarcity of a relationship measures the frequency of the shared values in the wider population. It is much easier to find someone interested in professional football or gardening than llama breeding or 14th century poetry. Only a small number of people have known me for all of my life; an even smaller number (my two sisters, to be exact) shared the process of growing up with me. The more scarce the shared values are in a relationship, the more difficult (if not impossible) that relationship would be to replace if it were to end. I can't just go out and get some more sisters, contrary to feminist confusion about the nature of sisterhood.

What these three axes of shared values (breadth, depth, and scarcity) provide is a basic objective determination of the overall value of a relationship to our lives. (Note that these measurements are, as with Rand's discussion of the how to measure the intensity of love, ordinal not cardinal; they give rankings and comparisons, not absolute numbers.)

So when conflict arises in a relationship, neither person can rationally choose a course of action without first understanding the purpose and value that the relationship serves in their lives. We can come to understand that function and value by locating the relationship on these three axes. As such, these axes provide an objective method of analyzing our relationships so that we can make informed choices in times of turmoil about whether to continue, transform, or terminate the relationship.

Expectations

All of our relationships with other people are entwined with expectations, with judgments predicting the future behavior of the other person in a relationship. We expect friends to treat us fairly, we expect dinner guests not to insult our cooking, we expect a doctor who was on call the previous night to be tired, we expect family members to pick us up at the airport as agreed.

Such expectations are practical applications of our understanding of another person's character, personality, and life to the question of how they will act in the future. As such, they allow us to rationally plan and choose our actions within a relationship; by acting in accordance with them, we can maximize benefit and minimize cost in our interactions with others. For example, you might expect a friend to show up for dinner due to her acceptance of your invitation and her reliability. As a result of that expectation, you might decide to prepare the dinner in advance, so that you are not distracted from the conversation by unnecessary last-minute cooking. You make plans and commit to a course of action on the basis of your expectation.

However, as we have all surely experienced, one person's expectations do not always correspond to the other person's actions. When expectations fail, the plans made unravel, imposing unexpected costs upon the expecting person. So if your friend does not show up for dinner, the two hours you spent making the marinara sauce and meatballs from scratch has been wasted. Such failed expectations are the primary cause of harm and thus conflict in relationships.

Because of this causal relationship between failed expectations and harm, we must we must know a bit more about the range of variation we see in our expectations before we can understand the nature of harm. In particular, the violation of some expectations is more serious than the violation of others because of certain characteristics that generally those expectations have. The two primary characteristics of serious expectations are moral weight and rationality. Let's take a look.

Moral Weight

Although all expectations are primarily descriptive (predictions about how we think someone will actually behave), some expectations also implicitly subsume moral principles. For example: In keeping with sympathy, we expect our friends to be sensitive to our misfortunes. In keeping with politeness, we expect our house guests to throw away a milk carton after all the milk is gone rather than sticking it back in the fridge. As a result of this correspondence between expectation and moral principle, violations of these morally weighty expectations are also violations of moral principle.

In contrast, some expectations have either have no significant relationship to moral principle or an opposite relationship to moral principle. For example, you might expect the eccentric lady down the street to talk to herself and wear gaudy clothing; that's morally neutral. Parents of a drug addict might expect their son to do something morally wrong, like steal and lie, in order to get his next fix. Occasional violations of these expectations may be surprising, but they are less likely to cause harm and do not call a person's character into question as do violations of morally weighty expectations.

Let me mention the obvious fact here that expectations can integrate irrational moral principles, such as a husband expecting his wife to ignore his infidelities. Such expectations, although related to moral principles, probably ought to be more closely scrutinized with respect to the second characteristic of expectations, rationality.

But before we move on to rationality, there are two additional, secondary dimensions of expectations related to moral weight that I would like to very briefly mention here: explicit vs implicit and negative vs positive.

Explicit vs Implicit: Explicit expectations have been mutually agreed upon in advance. For example, Will Thomas expected that I would give this talk today because I signed a rather lengthy contract to that effect. If I violated Will's expectation, I would also be violating a moral principle by breaking my word. In contrast, implicit expectations are unstated or even subconscious defaults assumed in a relationship. A woman might assume that her date will pay for dinner, for example, although who would pay was not specified in advance.

Positive vs Negative: If I have a positive expectation, I expect you do something, like pay me money, knit a sweater, or dance a jig. If I have a negative expectation, I expect you refrain from doing something, like not steal my wallet, not chew with your mouth open, or not say mean things about my dogs.

In general, (and I am not entirely convinced of this analysis), positive expectations are expectations to receive some benefit, while negative expectations are expectations to refrain from some harm. If this is generally true, then positive expectations might be generally more difficult to justify than negative expectations.

Rationality

The rationality of an expectation measures how well-justified it is, whether it is consistent with all relevant known facts and moral principles. For example, under normal circumstances, a man might rationally expect his wife to help him move their old sofa down to the basement. But if his wife is nine months pregnant, then clearly his expectation is not rational, because it is inconsistent with his knowledge about the limitations of her physical state.

Because rational expectations reflect knowledge of a person's life, personality, and abilities, they provide a prime opportunity to offer and experience visibility. As a relationship endures and deepens, as knowledge of each other grows, so do the rational expectations. This connection between rational expectations and visibility is the reason why the same harm is so much more of a betrayal between close friends than between acquaintances; the violation is not merely of an expectation but also of our sense of knowing the other person and being known to them.

Our expectations of one another are indispensable to our relationships. Without them, we would have to plan for every contingency, rather than just the likely ones. However, as we know, when expectations fail, they are also a source of conflict. We expect and plan for X, so when we get Y instead, our time and effort in planning for X has been wasted and we are not prepared for the consequences of Y. Harm, and possibly conflict, result. In sum, harm is the potential consequence of one person's actions not matching the other person's expectations.

Cashing out

So, looking back over these three major dimensions of human relationships -- purpose, shared values, and expectations -- we can see that each plays an important role in the analysis of conflicts in relationships. Summarizing in reverse:

1. The primary cause of conflicts in relationships is failed expectations, where the expectations of one person do not match the actions of the other. You expect your roommate to take out the trash, he forgot, so you end up in a heated discussion about responsibility for household chores.

2. The breadth, depth, and scarcity of shared values are objective criteria in determining the value and replaceability of a relationship, and thus indicate how much time and effort we ought to spend in order to preserve that relationship. Kicking out a roommate and finding a new one takes a great deal of work -- and you might end up with one with far worse habits.

3. The purpose of eliminating conflict in a relationship is the restoration of the relationship to a state of mutual benefit. If you do conflict with your roommate over those household chores, you want to find an arrangement that is acceptable to both you and your roommate. So you decide take out all the trash while he does all the vacuuming; everyone is satisfied.

One final note about relationships before we move on to harm. In certain types of relationships, such as with co-workers, neighbors, and family members, there are often fairly serious costs associated with fully terminating the relationship to the point of no or minimal contact. You have consider whether severing the relationship is worth finding a new job, moving to a new house, or missing family get-togethers. So even if a person is a complete raving immoral lunatic, it might be worth tolerating their presence, being civil to them, in order to preserve other values in your life.

Harm and Conflict

So far, we've taken a brief look at the primary aspects of human relationships that bear upon the conflicts that occasionally arise within those relationships. Now we need to understand a bit more about those conflicts, particularly the harm that usually precipitates them. In particular,

we need a method of evaluating the seriousness of a particular harm to a relationship. Let's start with a definition of harm.

Harm

What is harm? Harm is, in essence, the loss of value. For example: The owner of a car damaged in an accident is harmed by being unable to drive it while it is being repaired. When a wife is caught in an affair, both husband and wife are both harmed by the difficult and costly divorce that results. A woman's reputation suffers harm when a co-worker lies about her performance to her boss. As these examples indicate, the loss of a value in a harm can be temporary or permanent, partial or total, present or future. The value lost can be material, monetary, temporal, or spiritual. The cause of the harm can be forces of nature, other people, or ourselves. Harm is, one might say, very flexible.

Whatever variations we find in harm, there are two particularly important ways to evaluate it with respect to our relationships: existentially and psychologically.

Existential Evaluation (the "what?")

The existential evaluation of a harm measures the consequences of the harm to the victim, particularly the magnitude of the harm and the replaceability of the values lost.

Magnitude of Harm: The magnitude measures the extent of the actual negative impact of that harm upon a person's life and happiness by comparing the life having lost the values to the life without having lost the values. For example, when a friend picks you up at the airport two hours late, the magnitude of the loss is those two hours of waiting in anxiety and discomfort compared to the two hours of fun, work, sleep, or whatever you would have experienced if your friend had been punctual. If you lose trust in a friend because of a lie she told, you measure that lost trust by comparing the present time, effort, and anxiety of second guessing her compared to your prior confidence in her word. The magnitude of a harm, in short, is just a measurement of the loss value suffered as a result of that harm.

Objectively measuring the magnitude of a harm is not always an easy task; people often have a tendency to unjustly minimize or aggrandize a harm. The victim moans that his life is ruined; the perpetrator denies that the victim has suffered any harm. Additionally, there is a general asymmetry of knowledge in measuring the magnitude of a harm; the victim directly experiences the harm; the perpetrator does not.

Replaceability of Lost Values: The replaceability measures how easily the lost value can be replaced by a similar or similar-enough value. Some values, particularly simple material possessions, can generally be easily replaced with some time, money, and effort. If your kid sticks the grilled cheese into my VCR, you can buy me a new one identical in almost all respects. However, other values are more unique and irreplaceable. If a husband accidentally drops the only picture of his wife's great-grandmother Bertha into the paper shredder, he cannot simply reprint it from negatives. If you step hard on my toe and cause me to howl in pain for 2 minutes, you cannot go back in time and replace those two minutes of agony with two minutes of bliss.

The replaceability of the values lost due to harm is particularly important to conflict-resolution because, as we will see, it bears upon whether and what kind of restitution is possible.

Psychological Evaluation (the "why?")

The psychological evaluation of the harm examines the cause of the harm, in particular, the intent of the perpetrator in performing the action that led to the harm.

The intent of an action resulting in harm measures the perpetrator's foreknowledge of and attitude towards the harm resulting from the action. For example, imagine that a friend reveals an embarrassing secret about you to a third person. In order to judge her moral culpability and likelihood that she will embarrass you again, you need to know whether or not she knew and cared that you would be harmed when she acted. You need to know what motivated her action.

Determining the intent of an action that caused harm is often the most difficult step in conflict resolution for two related reasons. First, we must interpret the motives of others indirectly, based on their statements, body language, emotional responses, past behavior, reasonableness of the action and such. Second, the strong emotions that often arise when one person has harmed another are often an obstacle to objectivity, obstacles to justice. The perpetrator might rationalize bad intent in order to quiet feelings of guilt or embarrassment. The victim's feelings of self-pity or anger might blind them to mitigating factors. So in order to objectively evaluate intent, we must keep these two pitfalls in mind. We must infer from known facts, not guesses or emotions.

So now that we have those warnings behind us, we can now examine the axis of intent, ranging from intentional to negligent to unintentional harm. Let me note that these are not hard and fast categories, but rather a broad-ranging continuum, with lots of borderline cases.

Intentional Harm: Intentional harm arises when there is clear foreknowledge of the harm that will result from action taken. The person performs the action knowing full well that the action will cause harm. Such intentional harm can be malicious; the harm is the intended effect of the action. For example, a soon-to-be-ex-lover might pick a fight with you in the middle of a dinner party particularly for the purpose of embarrassing you in front of your friends. Intentional harm can also be callous; the harm is a result of reckless disregard for the known harmful side effects of the action. That same soon-to-be-ex-lover might start an argument, realize your embarrassment but be too hell-bent on having the argument right then and there to care. In both of these types of intentional harm, the person pursues the action despite clearly knowing the harmful consequences.

Negligent Harm: Negligent harm arises when a reasonable person ought to have but did not foresee the harm that would result from action taken. The person evaded their knowledge of either the harmful consequences of their action, the risk of that harm, or the ways in which they could have mitigated that harm. A businessman with a cold might spread his contagion by shaking hands with clients because his false pride prevents him from acknowledging either that he could infect his clients (evading consequences), that the risk of infection from shaking hands is high (evading risk), or that he could prevent infection by excusing himself from the handshaking ritual (evading mitigation).

Such evasion, as we all know, is a serious moral failure in Objectivism. But not all evasion is of equal moral weight; the light of consciousness can be dimmed with a small tweak of "nah, that's not relevant" or a brute force "like hell I'm going to ever think about that." That a harm was negligent just tells you that you ought to have thought about it, not how much evasion you had to do to achieve that state of ignorance.

Unintentional Harm: Unintentional harm arises when a reasonable person could not and did not foresee the harm that would result from their action. Their "honest error" was either the result of misapprehension of the situation or unfortunate, unexpected necessity. The five types of such honest errors that I will mention here today are not an exhaustive list, but they are, I think five very common types.

Misunderstandings: Misunderstandings arise from reasonable misinterpretations of words and/or deeds. A spouse taking out the trash might mishear your statement "Don't throw out the

trash bag by the door!” as “Throw out the trash bag by the door!” Or they might simply assume that the trash bag by the door is trash when it is actually sweaters to be dry cleaned.

Bad Guesses: Bad guesses are the result of reasonable but wrong guesses as to the preferences of a person unavailable for questioning. For example, pressed for time before a movie showing, a man might order a dinner of barbecue chicken for his wife, not realizing that she can’t stand that particular restaurant’s barbecue sauce.

Unconsidered Alternatives: Some honest errors are the result of unconsidered alternatives, when there is not enough time, information, or previous experience for a person to rationally choose the best possible alternative. For example, if the toilet in the bathroom is overflowing, your teenage son might not think to turn off the water just at the toilet. Instead, he turns off the water to the whole house, which causes mechanical problems with the dishwasher running at the time.

Unforeseeable Circumstances: Unforeseeable circumstances can cause harm when they prevent someone from accomplishing their goals and fulfilling their obligations. A terrible traffic accident on the road into town might prevent you from meeting your spouse on time for dinner, even if you were diligent about allowing time for the usual rush-hour delays.

Emergencies: Emergencies can override our normal priorities, forcing a person to abandon plans made with others or violate expectations with little or no warning. For example, when my dog broke her leg this spring, I had to delay my already scheduled and promised work for clients in order to take proper care of her. (Thankfully, they were sympathetic.)

Recognizing honest error as honest error can be trying, as we often feel the need to blame someone -- anyone! -- when our carefully laid plans go awry. But sometimes, life just isn’t fair.

This sketch of the range of intent, I should mention, is a bit more complex than the one offered by Rand in Galt’s speech. There, Rand differentiated merely between errors of knowledge and breaches of morality. Errors of knowledge always ought to be forgiven; breaches of morality never. But I think that I have shown that the intent is far more complex than a such a binary distinction.

So, to sum up our discussion of harm, these three aspects of our evaluation of harm (magnitude, replaceability, and intent) enable us to determine the seriousness of the harm done to a particular relationship. An objective, dispassionate evaluation of the harm is absolutely necessary if we wish to make a moral choice about what action to take next. We must understand what went wrong before we can decide how to fix it.

Conflict

Before we discuss the ways to repair a relationship, I’d like to briefly mention two issues about conflicts in relationships.

First, not all conflict is the result of actual harm. Sometimes conflicts in relationships arise as a result of perceived harm. Irrational people can fabricate harm where none exists for the purpose of attention-getting or gaining control in a relationship. So just remember, not all claims to harm will be valid.

Second, sometimes harm and conflict arise in relationships because the actions of both people in conjunction lead to harm. For example, two people might be examining a newly-purchased handgun. Following the rules of safety absolutely requires that each person personally verify that the gun is safe, that is it unloaded. If either person followed this rule, the bullet in the chamber would be discovered. But since neither person does, each is responsible for the accidental discharge that results, regardless of who pulls the trigger.

Repairing Relationships

So now that we have laid the groundwork of understanding how to evaluate the importance of relationships, expectations, and harm, we can now turn our attention to the heart of the matter: how to rationally respond to conflict in relationships. Let's work through a fairly simple example to illustrate the existential, cognitive, and emotional requirements for resolution of the conflict.

Trouble in Paradise

Suppose that two neighbors, let's call them Neighbor Hank and Neighbor Francisco, are co-existing peacefully qua friends and neighbors in a small valley. They have developed close, mutually beneficial relationship based on respect and admiration. But that peaceful relationship is disturbed when one morning, backing his car out of his driveway on his way to Rearden Steel, Hank runs over Francisco's garbage can. Hank has violated Francisco's both rational and moral expectation that his garbage can would not be damaged, that his property would be respected by his neighbor.

Because the values gained in the relationship between Hank and Francisco are so important to them, each wishes to resolve this disturbance as quickly and smoothly as is rationally possible. But both have three basic questions that need to be addressed in order to close the issue: What's wrong with this picture? Who's going to pay for this mess? and How many garbage cans is this guy going to run over? To put it more philosophically, each of them must understand the nature and causes of the harm, the process of replacing the lost values, and the risk of future harm. Let's look at each of these issues more closely.

Evaluation of Harm

Understanding the nature and causes of the harm sets the stage for discovering a peaceful resolution to this conflict; it provides the necessary background material of both the overall seriousness and particular details of the harm. These two friends need to know what harm was done and for what reasons in order to determine how to repair and prevent it. This is comes before the ought.

Existential Evaluation: Francisco, being the owner of trash can, has the most knowledge about the value and replaceability of the value lost. He knows that the trash can was only worth \$10 (in gold, of course). There is no additional symbolic value to the trash can; it was not a birthday present from John Galt or anything. Given that the value of the trash can is exclusively monetary and that he can obtain an identical one from a store in the valley, the trash can is also highly replaceable. It will just take \$10 and a trip to the store. This is the existential evaluation of the harm.

Psychological Evaluation: Hank, being in possession of the mind that directed his body to direct the car to run over the trash can, has the most knowledge of why the harm occurred, of what his intent was. Hank knows that he was distracted that morning by thoughts of new uses for Rearden Metal in the Gulch. He knows that he didn't look carefully enough in his rear-view mirror as he was backing down the driveway. He knows that he was negligent, that he did not take the proper precautions required by the situation. So our psychological evaluation tells us that the harm was due to minor negligence on Hank's part about the consequences of his failing to look in the rear view mirror.

Being that both Francisco and Hank are rational and honest, both communicate these existential and psychological evaluations when they talk about the damaged trash can. Francisco does not moan and groan about the difficulty of finding another such perfect trash can; Hank does

not blame Francisco for putting his trash can too far from the curb. Openness and honesty rule the conversation.

Replacement of Lost Values

The process of determining whether the lost values can be replaced, how they will be replaced, and who will replace them is what restitution is about. Restitution is the process by which the victim of a harm is compensated for the values lost by the perpetrator of the harm.

The justice and prudence of restitution in the resolution of conflicts is fairly intuitively obvious to most people, but let me at least briefly mention the two distinct functions of restitution: the reflection of consequences and the demonstration of sincerity.

Reflection of Consequences: As we know, in many cases, harm to the victim is the result of immoral action on the part of the perpetrator. In these cases, it is wrong for the consequences of that immoral action to impose costs upon an innocent person when those costs could be reflected back onto the perpetrator. Because the moral is the practical, we also can see that, by failing to reimpose those negative consequences back upon the perpetrator of the harm, we are merely incenting him to cause more harm.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, such a reflection of negative consequences back onto the perpetrator is often good for him. By exercising the virtue of pride, by being ambitious about developing and strengthening his moral character, the perpetrator can use the negative consequences as a way to break bad habits and reinforce good habits. He can use the harm that he did this time to prevent harm in the future.

Demonstration of Sincerity: In general, restitution signals that verbal statements of regret of the harm, which we shall discuss shortly, are sincere. By being willingly taking on the costs of harmful action, the perpetrator demonstrates, in action, concern for the victim's well-being. The perpetrator is willing, so to speak, to put his money where his mouth is. As such, even when no moral fault was committed, restitution is often appropriate as a concrete demonstration of good will and genuine regret.

These two functions of restitution are particularly important for the perpetrator to keep in mind in making a decision of what amount and kind of restitution to offer, because merely not having done anything wrong is not always a good enough reason not to offer restitution for a harm.

So let's return to Neighbor Hank and Neighbor Francisco in order to determine whether restitution is justified, in order to answer the question: Who's going to pay for this mess? Let's look at Hank's options: full restitution, partial restitution, and no restitution.

Full Restitution: Hank could go to the store himself and purchase Francisco a new trash can. Given that it was Hank's lack of attentiveness that caused him to run over the garbage can, as a matter of pride, Hank ought to be willing to fully reflect the negative consequences of his carelessness back upon himself. He ought to be willing to provide full restitution.

However, sometimes full restitution is not appropriate because it is not in the interest of the victim. Sometimes, as I'm sure Miss Manners would say, the perpetrator of a harm can allow himself to grudgingly be argued out of full restitution by the victim.

Partial Restitution: Hank could partially replace the lost trash can by, for example, giving Francisco the \$10 worth of gold. Francisco would spend his own time and effort going to the store to buy a new trash can. Such a situation might be preferable for Francisco because he would like to personally choose the color and design of his new garbage can or because Hank might have a brutally tight schedule at Rearden Steel that Francisco is happy to accommodate.

No Restitution: Hank could also never replace the damaged garbage can. This situation might be preferable for Francisco if he already has a second trash can that was merely taking up space in his garage. Hank's destruction of his first trash can might thus be a blessing in disguise; a replacement trash can would be a disvalue to him.

Because of the importance of restitution to Hank's development of his moral character, in such a case where no direct restitution is desired by Francisco, Hank might make restitution in a less direct fashion. He might build Francisco a planter for his tomatoes, help him paint his deck, or fashion him something interesting out of Rearden Metal. (Personally, I'd recommend physical labor for such indirect restitution, so that the issue of moral character can be pondered over the ache of muscles.)

The perpetrator also might offer such indirect restitution where direct value-replacement is impossible, due to the uniqueness or expense of the values. The particulars of what kind and degree of restitution are appropriate will vary widely from case to case, but usually some "punishment" can be found that will fit the "crime."

So, having covered the need for restitution, let's move on to the more complex and critical issue of the risk of future harm.

Risk of Future Harm

The risk of future harm is where the rubber really meets the road in this discussion. The analysis of the risk of future harm tells the victim the likelihood of suffering the same or a similar enough harm in the future. It tells the victim whether and to what extent a mutually beneficial relationship is still possible. It is these issues, these worries about being fooled a second, third, and fourth time that generates our trinity of concepts: apology, forgiveness, and redemption.

Evaluating the risk of future harm is, in essence, an evaluation of the principles that guide the perpetrator's actions, including the depth of his commitment to those principles. It is an evaluation of character traits, if not of the whole of the person's character. As such, it is a difficult task, subject to all of the difficulties and complexities that David Kelley laid out in *Truth and Toleration* that I will not bother to repeat here, but I encourage you to read or reread. But in a nutshell, what we are most concerned about is whether the person's principles will attract him to or repel him from actions which lead to further harm. To come to such an understanding, we need to know, as Kelley points out, "whether the act represented a standing policy, or whether it was an aberration." (14)

So, to return to Galt's Gulch for a moment, Francisco needs to know whether his garbage cans will be safe from vehicular molestation next week and the week after. He needs to know whether this incident is an abnormal event or a sign of the destruction to come. To that end, he needs to discover whether Hank's principles of morality and driving are consistent or inconsistent with the respect for property.

When a harm has been committed, we can use more than just our knowledge of the perpetrator's past behavior and explicit moral principles to infer character traits. We can also incorporate our understanding of his intent and his attitude towards the harm done.

Now, we've already said a great deal about the nature and range of intent. So let's look at the perpetrator's attitude towards the harm done, as it directly bears upon the concept apology.

Apology: The perpetrator of a harm tells us a great deal about his underlying values and principles in his emotional response to the harm caused, particularly once he has thought through his actions. This one value-judgment tells us a great deal more about his moral character than do all of his professed claims about his moral code.

Just imagine Hank's reaction to demolishing Francisco's trash can. He would be distressed and aggravated with himself over his careless driving; that's just the kind of man Hank is. Now imagine what we would think of someone whose reaction was a gleeful "Wow, that was fun! Just like bowling!" or a self-absorbed "That better not have damaged my car or I'll sue the bastard!" or a unconcerned "Whatever." Those responses would indicate a great deal about the person's moral character.

It is Hank's moral/emotional response of distress and embarrassment and regret that is captured by an apology. An apology is a statement from the perpetrator of a harm to the victim of that harm acknowledging that his actions caused the harm and showing regret for that harm. In cases where the precipitating action was immoral, an apology also ought to include an acknowledgement of that moral wrongdoing. (In fact, there may be reasons to say that only a statement of regret that admits moral wrongdoing is an apology. But I tend to think that this is merely a semantic distinction.) Again, as David Kelley says in *_Truth and Toleration_*, "the function of apologies is not to enjoy the spectacle of someone's self-abasement, but to find out whether he endorses or renounces his action." (14)

In cases of moral wrongdoing causing harm, at this point another of our trinity of concepts arises: redemption.

Redemption: In cases where immorality is the cause of harm, we cannot simply be content with an apology. We must confirm that the moral principles have changed and/or that commitments to them have deepened. In order to know that the perpetrator poses little risk to us in the future, we must have proof over time that the character has changed; we must have proof of redemption.

Redemption is the process of altering or deepening one's commitments to rational moral principles after a moral wrong. It is the exercise of the virtue of pride after a failure of moral character. It is the pursuit and achievement of moral perfection when faced with one's own imperfections.

Redemption is not based upon some subjective recognition of moral reform by either the victim or the perpetrator. Rather, it is an objective fact about change in the person's character, demonstrated by consistent virtuous action, particularly in the area of the moral weakness, over time. Being an advocate of moral habits, I would argue that a person is not redeemed, is not deeply committed to proper moral principles until that moral principle is deeply engrained in their psyche as a habit. So deeply engrained, in fact, that the immoral course of action doesn't even occur to them as an option anymore. That's full redemption.

That process of full redemption can take months or years to complete. In particular, redemption from dishonesty can be a particularly arduous process, because others can never be sure that the perpetrator is not continuing the dissembling by pretending to reform his character. [Bill Clinton example]

During this process of redemption, we can still enjoy the relationship by insulating ourselves from the negative aspects of a person's character and encouraging further moral development. We can protect ourselves from harm without forsaking the values the relationship brings.

So now, having addressed two of the three concepts in our trinity, apology and redemption, we now know how to evaluate the risk of future harm in a relationship. Let's keep going.

Restoring Paradise

So now that we have come to understand the nature and causes of the harm, the process of replacing the lost values, and the risk of future harm, it's time for the victim of a harm to make a decision about whether the answers to the questions raised have been sufficient. It's time to make a decision about forgiveness and about the future course of the relationship.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is, in the end, a very simple concept. Forgiveness is a recognition of the perpetrator's honesty of explanation, genuineness of regret, and commitment to non-harm in the future. It is an positive evaluation of their efforts to rectify the wrong done to the victim. It is, as the analogy goes, a canceling of the moral debt created by the harm.

Thus forgiveness, when rationally applied, is a benefit to both the victim and the perpetrator of the harm, for it enables both people to fully enjoy the values available through the relationship again. But forgiveness also brings particular emotional benefits to the victim of the harm. Rational forgiveness resolves the issue, dissipates any vestiges of anger or disappointment, helps return a peace of mind.

However, forgiveness can be irrationally applied. People can and do forgive before the perpetrator of a harm has satisfied the objective requirements. A man might forgive his brother for nasty comments about his wife without the brother ever showing remorse, apologizing, or even ceasing his mean commentaries about others. But the victim of a harm cannot erase that harm or induce redemption by offering, as Rand would say, a blank check of forgiveness. Such an error is reversing cause and effect.

The opposite error with respect to forgiveness is to refuse to grant forgiveness even when the perpetrator of the harm has fulfilled all of the objective criteria for forgiveness. The righteous anger of the victim is more important than objective judgment, more important than the relationship. Such injustice, in an odd reversal, actually brings harm to the perpetrator of the original harm, and thus the process starts all over again with the roles reversed.

One final note about forgiveness: Forgiveness is a term generally restricted in common parlance to cases in which the perpetrator has done something morally wrong or in which the harm is of a fairly great magnitude. This makes sense. For trivial harms or honest errors, the process of offering an explanation, showing regret, and committing to refrain from harm in the future is so abbreviated that to respond with a moral concept as weighty as forgiveness seems overblown. I bump into you, say "oh, sorry" and step back, you respond with "no problem" and a smile. Surely that ultra-abbreviated process is not the same process of apology, redemption, and forgiveness that we find in a marriage struggling to overcome an affair. But, as different as this process is between the small harms and the large ones, they also share the same essential features.

Acceptance

When the victim of a harm is not fully satisfied with the perpetrator's efforts in this process of reconciliation, there is a weaker form of forgiveness available: acceptance. Acceptance, in this context, is the victim's recognition of the perpetrator's value to his life, despite the failure to meet the criteria of forgiveness. For example, some people just seem incapable of apologizing. Either such people are always right or they are simply unskilled in the process of reconciliation. But lack of skill in reconciliation, while a moral failing, is not necessarily a fatal one. It is not as bad as being, say, a drunken looter like Ted Kennedy. So if the relationship does offer significant value and if conflicts can be fairly easily smoothed over, if acceptance (rather than forgiveness) is

sufficient and to end the relationship would probably not be rational. We take acceptance as “good enough.”

However, when acceptance is “good enough,” the victim might also decide that he need to insulate himself from the portion of the perpetrator’s character and personality that prevents forgiveness from being a viable option. The victim may have to restructure the relationship so that it remains beneficial to his life and happiness.

Termination

The final option in a relationship is termination, the severing of all significant ties in the relationship. Termination usually arises when the victim discovers that the perpetrator is not the person he thought he knew. The perpetrator may have been faking good character. The victim may have been blind to the perpetrator’s deficits. The termination of a relationship is the practical result of the conclusion that the relationship is not and cannot be mutually beneficial.

As I mentioned before, some relationships do have extra costs associated with termination. If you really want to terminate a relationship with a co-worker, you might need to change jobs. In such cases, full termination, in the sense of never interacting with the person again, is probably not possible. Minimal civility, on the other hand, will insulate the victim from the costs of the relationship without depriving him of the benefits to be gained within the wider context.

Before I conclude today, let me say a few words about third parties. In general, and I think that other people’s experience bears me out, involving oneself in the disputes and conflicts of others is a great way to create a really terrible mess. But third parties, like Neighbor John Galt in the Hank and Francisco example, must worry about the same risk of future harm from Hank as Francisco does. Although the concepts of forgiveness and apology are not applicable, because no harm has been done to Galt himself, much of the same analysis applies.

Conclusion

I was hoping to conclude today by looking back at our original example, to see what we’ve learned since the start of the talk. But, since I’m short of time, I want to just say a few words about the immense complexity of this subject.

I had no idea what I was getting into when I proposed this talk this past winter. I had no idea that in order to have a coherent theory of forgiveness and redemption, Objectivism also needs a theory of relationships, a theory of friendship, a very detailed account of moral judgment, an account of responsibility that covers complex cases of multiple wrongdoings and errors, and so on.

I hope that my talk today has provided a sketch of some of the issues that need to be addressed in this area and some general methods for rationally evaluating and responding to harm and conflict in relationships. But I know that I haven’t done this subject justice in this short time I’ve had. I know that you have questions about complex issues that I just didn’t have time to address here today.

But I hope that you can ask me these question in the bit of time we have left in this session and in this seminar. If I can’t provide a decent answer, then that’s just one more issue that Objectivism needs to address!

Thank you.