



## 12 On the Blameworthiness of Forgetting

*Sven Bernecker*

Broadly speaking there are two kinds of phenomena the ethics of forgetting is concerned with. First, there are the moral and legal ramifications of the fact that we sometimes forget about our past wrongdoings. Consider two agents accused of the same kind of wrongdoing. One agent has suffered memory loss, albeit through no fault of his own, and cannot remember anything about the action he is accused of. In this case, the forgetting may be used as evidence of incompetence to stand trial or in mitigation of criminal and moral responsibility. The other agent intentionally brought about the memory loss (say, by taking a forgetting pill) before committing the wrongdoing. The voluntary nature of his forgetting has the consequence that it does not mitigate his responsibility (Birch, 2000). This suggests that whether the fact that an agent has forgotten about his past wrongdoing can be used as an excuse for a wrongdoing crucially depends on whether the forgetting was brought about intentionally and voluntarily.

Besides the moral assessment of past wrongdoings the agent has forgotten about, there is the moral assessment of the harm an agent brings about as a consequence of forgetting something. This is the issue the chapter is concerned with. There are at least two ways in which forgetting might be harmful. Sometimes it is the forgetting itself that constitutes the harm. For instance, it is common for your partner to feel hurt if you forget her birthday and for a close friend to be upset if you forget his name. People expect to be remembered by those who are important to them. The fact that you forget your partner's birthday is taken as evidence that the partner is not sufficiently important to you. Besides cases where the forgetting itself constitutes the harm there are cases where forgetting gives rise to another event that, in turn, constitutes the harm. An example of the latter kind is a baby suffering from a heat stroke because it was forgotten inside a parked car on a hot day.

The moral assessment of harm caused by forgetting crucially depends on whether the forgetting is brought about intentionally or unintentionally. If the memory loss is brought about unintentionally, the harmed person is usually upset, but when the memory loss is intentional and voluntary the harmed person often feels anger and resentment directed toward the



forgetting subject (Driver, 2009, pp. 84–85). This is nicely illustrated in the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* where the protagonist Joel (Jim Carrey) realizes that his ex-girlfriend Clementine (Kate Winslet) chose to undergo a memory erasure procedure offered by Lacuna, Inc., to overcome the pain of their breakup. The technicians at Lacuna wiped out all memories of Joel and of their prior relationship. Joel feels betrayed by Clementine's intentional memory zap. But since he wants to give their relationship another chance he too undergoes the memory erasure process. Joel asks Lacuna, Inc., to not only erase all of his memories of Clementine and of his relationship with her but also his memories of the feeling of betrayal upon learning that she decided to erase her memories of him.

In this chapter, I argue that forgetting has ethical impact in three ways. First, psychological studies show that we sometimes have control over forgetting. Hence the claim that we cannot be morally responsible for forgetting because forgetting is outside of our control is based on a misunderstanding of the psychology of forgetting. Once this psychology is understood it becomes apparent that there are instances in which we do have control over our forgetting and are therefore morally responsible for harm brought about as a consequence of forgetting something.

The second claim concerns instances in which we have control over our ability to remember something at a later point in time. We can learn, for instance, that as an individual we are bad at remembering people's names and birthdays. Our awareness of this fact should prompt us to take extra steps to improve our memories regarding names and birthdays. When we fail to take these extra steps and then forget, we are morally responsible. This type of moral responsibility is similar to the moral responsibility someone who intentionally got drunk bears for doing regrettable acts while drunk.

The third claim concerns instances where we have neither control over our forgetting something nor control over our ability to remember something. Intuitively a person can be morally responsible for forgetting something even if it is beyond her control that she forgets that thing and even if she did everything that can be reasonably expected of her to remember that thing. The literature on culpable ignorance contains two accounts of the blameworthiness of cases of forgetting over which the agent has no control: attributionism and the liberalized awareness condition of moral responsibility. Rather than playing one account off against the other, I will give a neutral assessment of their strengths and weaknesses.

Section 1 distinguishes between two kinds of forgetting: trace decay and interference. Section 2 reviews the two standard conditions for moral responsibility: the control condition and the awareness condition. Section 3 draws on work in the psychology of forgetting to argue that there are things an agent can do to actively forget something. The picture whereupon, in principle, it is beyond a person's control whether she forgets something does not hold up to scrutiny. Section 4 discusses the tracing account of wrongdoing due to forgetting. On the tracing account, the blameworthiness

of the forgetting can be traced back to an intentional action the agent performed earlier. The point of Section 4 is to argue that not all cases of blameworthy forgetting can be captured by the tracing account. Section 5 is a critical discussion of an attempt to explain the blameworthiness of nontracing cases of forgetting in terms of a liberalized awareness condition of moral responsibility. Section 6 is a critical discussion of the attributionist explanation of the blameworthiness of nontracing cases of forgetting. Section 7 contains some concluding remarks.

## 1 Theories of Forgetting

Forgetting in long-term memory indicates that an item of information that was once learned is either permanently lost or temporarily inaccessible.<sup>1</sup> According to the *decay theory*, forgetting occurs as a result of traces in long-term memory declining in strength with time. The competing *interference theory* states that what causes forgetting is the disruption and obscuration of memory traces by preceding or succeeding learning. Interference manifest itself in two ways: when previous learning interferes with later learning and retention it is called *proactive* interference; when later learning disrupts memory for earlier learning it is called *retroactive* interference (cf. Baddeley, 2014, ch. 6).

It has proven difficult to experimentally verify the automatic degeneration of memory traces postulated by the decay theory. One of the problems is that in any real-life situation the time between learning something and recalling will be filled with all kinds of different events. It is therefore impossible to rule out that any forgetting that takes place between leaning and recall is the result of trace decay rather than interference effects. On the other hand, there is solid experimental support for the interference theory by means of paired-associate learning.<sup>2</sup> This may explain why, for many years, the interference theory was the majority view. But even though the interference theory has been supported in numerous studies it is not clear to what extend the findings from paired-associate learning in a laboratory setting can be applied to forgetting in everyday life. So even though decay (indexed by time) and interference (indexed by amount of distracting information) have historically been viewed as competing accounts of forgetting there is a recent tendency to view them as complementary processes. Hardt, Nader, and Nadel (2013), for instance, argue that in certain brain areas, notably the hippocampus, interference-driven forgetting is minimal and decay causes most forgetting; but in other brain areas it is the other way round (cf. Altmann & Gray, 2002).

When a piece of information is forgotten due to the relevant trace having disappeared, it is permanently gone. When forgetting occurs because of interference, it is sometimes possible that the memory comes back if the agent is provided with the appropriate retrieval cue. So while forgetting due to trace decay is permanent, forgetting due to interference may be only

temporal. From a first-person point of view, it is usually indistinguishable whether a memory item is merely inaccessible or whether it has been deleted.

In this chapter, I focus on cases of forgetting where the relevant information is still stored in the memory system and could be retrieved if the appropriate retrieval cues were provided. My reasons are two-fold. First, interference-driven forgetting happens much more frequently than decay-based forgetting. Even a forgotten item of information

can typically be recognized at a rate that greatly exceeds chance levels, can be relearned at an accelerated rate, and can often be recalled in special circumstances that reinstate certain cues from the past—all of which constitute evidence that such items have not been lost from memory in any absolute sense.

(Bjork & Vanhuele, 1992: 156, as cited in Michaelian, 2011, pp. 403–404)

Second, the ethical implications of forgetting due to inaccessibility (and interference) seem to be more interesting than those of forgetting that takes the form of trace elimination. In other words, it seems more promising to try to prevent interference from rendering certain memory items inaccessible than to try to stop the decay of a particular memory trace.

## 2 Two Components of Moral Responsibility

Intuitively there are two kinds of conditions that can be used to excuse oneself from moral responsibility: ignorance of the nature of one's action and lack of control over one's action. Consequently, the standard account of moral responsibility lists two necessary conditions: a control condition and an awareness condition.

The control condition specifies the type and degree of control the agent needs to have over her action for her to be morally responsible for it. A crude form of the control condition states:

*Control Condition:* S is morally responsible for performing (not performing) action A only if it is within S's power to perform (not to perform) A.

A lot of ink has been spilled over the question of whether the kind of control required for moral responsibility is compatible with causal determinism. For the purpose of this chapter we can put the issue of determinism to one side.

The awareness condition specifies the type and degree of the agent's awareness of the likely consequences of his action and its moral status for the attributability of moral responsibility. The idea is that an agent cannot be blamed for the harm she is causing if she is unaware, and has no reason to be aware, that her action risks or leads to harm. Given that blame responds

to contempt or the absence of concern for others, there is nothing in the mental life of an ignorant agent that could be the proper object of blame; or so the standard conception of moral responsibility claims.<sup>3</sup>

The awareness condition of moral responsibility is said to have two components. The first component states that an agent can be held responsible for doing something only when she is aware that she is doing it. And since an action may be intentional under some description and unintentional under another (Anscombe, 1957, pp. 11–12) the agent needs to be aware of what she is doing under the appropriate description. The second component of the awareness condition states that the agent can be held responsible for doing something only when she is aware of why she is doing it. In other words, it is a condition on moral responsibility that the psychological state that moves the agent to perform (or omit) some action matches the consideration that counts in favor of performing (or omitting) some action (Alfano, 2016). When both components are combined, we get a condition that looks something like this:

*Awareness Condition:* S is morally responsible for action A only if (i) S is aware of doing A (under the appropriate description) and (ii) S does A while believing that A is morally wrong (in the case of a blameworthy action) or permissible/obligatory (in the case of a praiseworthy action).<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, one cannot be aware of why one is doing what one is doing unless one is aware of what one is doing. I focus on the first component of the awareness condition. The reason is that the main worry about blaming someone for forgetting something has to do with the agent not being aware of what she is doing, rather than with the agent not being aware of her motives.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that we blame people who cause harm due to having forgotten something seems to fly in the face of the standard conception of moral responsibility. It is commonly thought that forgetting is not under our control. But if forgetting is not under our control and if it is wrong to blame someone for something that they have no control over, then we ought not to blame someone for forgetting something, not even if the forgetting is harmful. Furthermore, forgetting does not seem to meet the awareness condition. The element of awareness commonly required for blameworthiness is absent in forgetting. If an agent has forgotten at *t* that *p*, then she is *not* aware at *t* of the likely consequences of not acting on the basis of *p*. For if the agent *were* aware of the likely consequences of not acting on the basis of *p*, then she would most likely act on the basis of *p*. So how can an agent be responsible for an action she is not aware of performing?<sup>6</sup>

The point of the chapter is that, contrary to what many people think, we can indeed be morally responsible for our forgetting. There are instances of forgetting where the control condition *is* satisfied, either because we have control over our forgetting (Section 3) or because we have control over our

ability to remember at a later point in time (Section 4). Moreover, it seems that a person can be morally responsible for forgetting something even if it is beyond her control that she forgot that thing. The literature contains two accounts of the blameworthiness of forgetting over which the agent has no control. One of these accounts modifies the awareness condition so that it is satisfied in some cases of forgetting (Section 5). The other account argues that neither awareness nor control are necessary for moral responsibility (Section 6).

### 3 Directed Forgetting

It is common to think that there are no techniques for forgetting specific items that are non-drastring in the sense of not significantly diminishing one's general epistemic competencies or abilities.<sup>7</sup> This rules out, among other things, forgetting as a result of inflicting a serious brain injury on oneself. This section discusses the possibility of non-drastring techniques for forgetting specific items in light of recent work in psychology.

There are a number of pharmacological tools available that can make us forget. Medications such as scopolamine, benzodiazepines, and kinase inhibitors have the proven effect of inducing amnesia.<sup>8</sup> While these medications, when they work properly, block memory consolidation altogether there are other medications, namely beta-blockers that merely dampen the strength of a memory by reducing both its emotional intensity as well as its factual richness. Beta-blockers such as propranolol can reduce the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) without wiping out the memory in question. PTSD develops as a result of extensive amounts of stress hormones being released at the time of a traumatic event. When propranolol is taken shortly after a traumatic event this can disturb the consolidation of the traumatic memories and thus prevent the disorder from developing.<sup>9</sup> An advantage of propranolol over other amnesia-inducing medications is that it can be used to target specific items of information encoded in the memory system.

Arguably the most interesting method of forgetting is known as *directed forgetting*. Directed forgetting is impaired memory arising from an instruction to forget a learned piece of information. In a typical directed forgetting experiment, subjects are presented with a list of words (list 1). After the presentation of list 1, one group of subjects is instructed to forget the words on the list. The other group of subjects is instructed to continue remembering the list.<sup>10</sup> Then both groups of subjects are presented a second list of words (list 2) and are asked to study the words. Next the subjects are asked to recall all of the previously presented items, including both to-be-forgotten and to-be-remembered words. These experiments show two things: first, a forget-instruction leads to poorer memory for the targeted material (list 1) than a remember-instruction, and second a forget-instruction sometimes leads to better memory for materials learned following that instruction (list 2).

These two effects are taken to be evidence for retrieval inhibition initiated by the forget-instruction (Bjork, Bjork, & Anderson, 1998). The instruction to forget triggers inhibitory mechanisms that temporarily reduce the accessibility of the to-be-forgotten information in memory, which explains why subjects who received the forget-instruction have a harder time to recall the words of list 1. Moreover, this inhibition reduces proactive interference from list 1 and thus facilitates retrieval of list 2 items. This is why subjects who have forgotten some of the words on list 1 remember more of the words of list 2 than the subjects who did not receive a forget-instruction and thus still remember more of the words of list 1.<sup>11</sup>

Forget-instructions have been shown to work not only for lists of random words but also for autobiographical material. Regardless of the kind of material studied and regardless of its emotional valence, directed forgetting instructions are surprisingly effective. In an experiment conducted by Joslyn and Oakes (2005) participants in the group that received the forget-instruction recalled approximately 24% fewer personal events from the previous week than participants in the group that received the remember-instruction. In an experiment conducted by Barnier et al. (2007) the forget-group recalled 11% fewer words from a list than the group that was asked to remember the words. It is also worth noting that this effect occurred after only a single effort on the part of the participants to voluntarily inhibit the retrieval of the said items. Barnier et al. therefore speculate that the repeated use of retrieval-inhibition techniques will make it impossible for a subject to recall a learned item not only in the short term but also in the long run:

Our success in reliably inducing inhibition of recently recalled autobiographical memories in the laboratory with a simple, unrepeated procedure suggests that in everyday cognition, much more powerful effects might be present. Spontaneous and repeated use of a directed forgetting procedure on the same knowledge may induce much stronger and enduring inhibitory effects. In everyday life, there may be many opportunities for repeated directed forgetting, and inhibitory control of autobiographical memories may be both common and effective.

(Barnier et al., 2007, 319, as cited in Matheson, 2013, 201–202)

As was mentioned at the beginning of the section, the standard view has it that forgetting cannot be under our control in the sense that there are no non-drastic techniques for forgetting specific items. When this view is combined with the view that blame requires control on the part of the agent, then it follows that it is wrong to blame someone for forgetting something. This argument is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the studies on directed forgetting show that it is sometimes possible to make oneself forget something. That said, most forgetting takes place unintentionally and involuntary. Second, just because an agent does not have complete control

over something she does need not mean that she cannot be blamed for that which she does. Moral responsibility may not require control on the part of the agent. There will be more on this issue in Section 6.

#### 4 Tracing Blame

After having discussed techniques that allow us to control our forgetting I will now discuss the control we have over our ability to remember at a later point in time. There are things we can do to improve the likelihood that we will remember them later. Among these techniques is writing oneself reminder notes, keeping a calendar, getting enough sleep, and not overcrowding one's memory with useless information. Alternatively one can simply think about the thing one wishes to remember later. For the less frequently a stored piece of information is retrieved from memory the more likely it is that it will be forgotten. As Michaelian notes, "the memory system renders records inaccessible (in part) according to their retrieval history" (2011: 420).

As we saw before, the moral assessment of harmful forgetting crucially depends on what led the agent to forget. If the agent did not follow the steps we ordinarily follow when we want to make sure that we remember a certain piece of information later, then we hold him accountable to a greater extent than if the agent did everything in his power to try to remember and still forgot. *Prima facie*, this is baffling. How could it be appropriate to blame someone for forgetting something if she does meet neither the control nor the awareness condition at the time she forgets?

According to the *tracing account* an agent can be morally responsible for a wrongdoing even if she does not meet the control condition or awareness condition at the time of action—provided the action can be causally traced back to an earlier choice or action and provided the agent met the control and awareness condition at the earlier time. Following H.M. Smith's (1983: 547) classical terminology, we can say that the tracing interpretation of ignorant wrongdoing involves a sequence of two actions: a benighting act and a subsequent unwitting wrongful act. The benighting act is one "in which the agent fails to improve (or positively impairs) his cognitive position" and in virtue of which he subsequently performs the unwitting wrongful act. Talbert (2016: 141) summarizes the tracing account as follows:

Tracing principles help us explain how a person can be responsible for an action when, at the time of action, she lacked some element of control or knowledge that seems crucial for moral responsibility. We substantiate the claim of responsibility in such a case by tracing the agent's lack of control or knowledge back to decisions that were made when the agent's abilities (and/or knowledge) were not compromised. Thus, the drunk driver is morally responsible because the actions he takes while impaired can be traced back to unimpaired choices.<sup>12</sup>



The upshot is that we are blameworthy for our ignorant and unintentional conduct if we are blameworthy for our ignorance or unintentionality.

To see the tracing theory in action, consider two agents, A and B, who have both forgotten the birthdays of their respective partners. But while it is the first time that agent A forgot his partner's birthday, agent B has often in the past forgotten the birthday of his partner. Intuitively agent B is more blameworthy than agent A because he is, or at least could be, aware of his tendency to forget birthdays and is therefore expected to take extra precautions to prevent these memory failures from reoccurring. The upshot is that if an agent has epistemic access to the fact that he easily forgets birthdays, then it is reasonable to expect him to take measures that will remind him and to actively search for momentarily inaccessible memory items. And when he fails to take these extra steps to remember the birthdays of close friends and family and then forgets them, he is blameworthy for forgetting. The blame can be traced back to an earlier time when the agent knew the birthday and had the choice of setting up reminders that would have prevented the forgetting.

Needless to say, the degree of blameworthiness for harmful forgetting has to do, among other things, with the relationship between the agent and the harmed individual(s). To see this reconsider the forgotten birthday case. When the person in question is your partner, you are expected to work harder to remember her birthday than if she is, say, a distant relative. The idea here is that one has special obligations to those to whom one stands in some special relationship, e.g., one's friends, family members, colleagues, and those to whom one has made promises or commitments of some sort.

The tracing view is a powerful strategy for explaining why it is reasonable to hold a wrongdoer morally responsible even if she is not aware of doing anything wrong and when she has no control over what she is doing. However, it is questionable that the tracing view captures *all* cases of blameworthy forgetting. A number of authors maintain that there are cases of wrongdoing where the agent is intuitively responsible even though the wrongdoing cannot be traced back to a past act or omission that grounds the agent's present moral responsibility. Matthew Talbert, for instance, holds that "it is at least possible that some forgetful or inattentive agents are blameworthy without ever having committed a past culpable action" (2016: 147). To get a sense for the limits of the tracing account consider the following example:<sup>13</sup>

*Forgotten Baby.* Jill is a single mother of a 7-year-old boy and a 10-month-old girl. She has to pick up her son from elementary school. Usually the baby is at home while she does the school run. However, today the babysitter cancelled as Jill is walking out the door, and so she takes the baby along. Although it is very hot, the pick-up has never taken more than a few minutes, so Jill leaves the sleeping baby in the car while she goes to gather her son. This time, however, Jill

is greeted by a tangled tale of misbehavior, ill-considered punishment, and administrative bungling which requires several hours of indignant sorting out. During that time, the baby languishes, forgotten, in the locked car. When Jill and her son finally make it to the parking lot, they find the baby unconscious from heat prostration.<sup>14</sup>

The first thing to notice about this case is that there is a lot more at stake than in the forgotten birthday case discussed earlier. Though it can be quite upsetting when a partner forgets one's birthday, the degree of harm inflicted on a person by not remembering her birthday does not compare with the degree of harm inflicted on a baby by actively endangering its life. Everything else being equal, when there is a lot at stake, we expect the agent to take more precautions to not forget the memory item in question than when the stakes are low. In a situation where the consequence of forgetting something could result in someone's death, the agent must double and triple check to make sure that he has not forgotten. What qualifies as an adequate procedure for remembering the birthdays of friends and family may not count as an adequate procedure for remembering things that are more important. The importance of a memory item is in part a function of the degree of harm caused if the said item is forgotten.

At first sight, it might seem that the forgotten baby case is perfectly compatible with the tracing account. Jill's culpability for the baby's heat stroke can be traced back, say, to her culpability for not setting an alarm on her cell phone while she is away from the car. Alternatively, we can trace Jill's culpability back to her decision to take the baby on the school run in the first place. She should have asked a neighbor to watch her baby while she picks up her son from school. It is important to realize, however, that while these are perfectly good explanations for why Jill is culpable for endangering the life of the baby they do *not* explain the blameworthiness of Jill's *forgetting*. To drive this point home, suppose that we trace Jill's culpability for the baby's heat stroke back to her decision to not set an alarm on her cell phone. In this case, we are blaming Jill for intentionally bringing about a situation that required her to remember that the baby is in the car. But to blame Jill for deciding to rely on her unaided memory is one thing; to blame her for failing to remember is quite another.

For the trace account to explain the blameworthiness of Jill's forgetting we have to stipulate that Jill knew, or should have known, on the basis of past experience, that she easily forgets important things. If she knew this about herself and if she nevertheless decided to rely on her unaided memory in a life-and-death situation, then and only then can we trace her forgetting to what H.M. Smith calls an 'benighting act,' i.e., an act the subject has awareness of, and control over, and that gives rise to the wrongful act over which the subject has no control because she is unaware of committing the act. However, if, prior to the wrongful act, Jill's memory for important things had never failed her, then she does not have compelling reasons to

mistrust her ability to remember these things. And if she doesn't have good reasons to mistrust her ability to remember important things, the tracing account cannot explain the blameworthiness of her forgetting. In other words, the tracing account can explain the blameworthiness of harmful forgetting only if it assumed that the subject is, or has good reasons to be, aware of the reliability of her memory to be below average.

It seems undeniable that there are cases of harmful forgetting where, prior to the subject unwittingly committing the wrongful act, she has no good reasons to question the reliability of her memory. The *Forgotten Baby* case can be spelled out to fit this mold. But this raises the question of how we can explain the blameworthiness of cases of harmful forgetting where the wrongful act is not traceable to a benighting act? The following two sections are concerned with explanations of moral responsibility in nontracing cases of forgetting.

## 5 The 'Rational Man' vs. You and Me

The literature on culpable ignorance contains two accounts of the blameworthiness of nontraceable cases of forgetting: the liberalized awareness condition of moral responsibility and *attributionism*. This section is a discussion of the liberalized awareness condition. Attributionism is the topic of the following section.

We can account for the intuition that Jill is blameworthy for forgetting the baby by modifying the awareness condition on moral responsibility. According to the version of the awareness condition stated in Section 2, an agent is blameworthy for an action only if she is aware of what she is doing. Jill doesn't meet this condition at the time she commits the wrongful act because she is oblivious of having left the baby in the parked car. For the awareness condition to be applicable to the forgotten baby case the condition needs to be strengthened in something like the following way:

*Liberalized Awareness Condition:* S is morally responsible for action A only if (i) S is aware of doing A (under the appropriate description) or a rational person in S's situation would be aware of doing A (under the appropriate description) and (ii) S does A at least partly on the basis of the belief that A is morally wrong (in the case of a blameworthy action) or permissible/obligatory (in the case of a praiseworthy action).<sup>15</sup>

Applied to the forgotten baby case, the idea is that Jill is blameworthy for the baby's heat stroke because a rational person in her situation would have remembered the baby in time. The motivation behind the liberalized awareness condition is expressed in the following quotation:

Ignorance, whether circumstantial or normative, is culpable if the agent could reasonably have been expected to take measures that would have

corrected or avoided it, given his or her capabilities and the opportunities provided by the social context, but failed to do so either due to akrasia or due to the culpable, nonakratic exercise of such vices as overconfidence, arrogance, dismissiveness, laziness, dogmatism, incuriosity, self-indulgence, contempt, and so on.

(FitzPatrick, 2008, p. 609)

The liberalized awareness condition raises two kinds of issues. First, there is the issue of what, if anything, a rational person may forget. Second, there is the issue of what characterizes a rational person in the agent's situation and how much the rational person would remember in a specific situation. I will discuss these issues in turn.

Forgetting has negative consequences but it also serves valuable functions. Forgetting promotes subjective well-being by limiting access to negative memories and by reducing unpleasant affect; it orients information processing for the present and the future by ensuring that beliefs are current and updated; and it provides a basis for obtaining semantic and procedural beliefs by allowing for abstraction and automatization (Nørby, 2015). Yet despite the fact that forgetting has adaptive value, it might still be irrational. The claim that forgetting is irrational is due to John Broome (2013: 178), who maintains that rationality demands persistence of belief as well as persistence of intention. The former requirement states that it is irrational to abandon a belief unless one has a sufficient reason to let go of it. And the persistence of intention requirement states that, if you have an intention, then it is irrational to stop having that intention without a sufficient reason. Broome further holds that forgetting does not provide a sufficient reason for ceasing to have a certain belief or a certain intention and that the persistence conditions therefore require that we do not forget.

Broome's claim that forgetting is irrational rests on the idea that any change in an agent's confidence with respect to  $p$  must be the result of some change in the evidence the agent has for the belief that  $p$ . Given this view, it is rational for you to abandon the belief in  $p$  only if you have acquired new evidence that suggests that not- $p$ . This position is plausible only in so far as we focus on intentional changes in a person's confidence with respect to  $p$ . But a change in confidence with respect to  $p$  that is the result of having forgotten  $p$  usually takes place unintentionally (cf. Section 3). And to the extent that forgetting is a passive mental event, it is not irrational. As Williamson (2000: 219) states: "[unintentional] forgetting is not irrational; it is just unfortunate." A rational agent may not intentionally forget anything, but he may unintentionally forget something. Rationality does not require perfect memory.

Granted that unintentional forgetting is not irrational, the question arises of how much a rational person would remember in a specific situation. According to the liberalized awareness condition, an agent is responsible for the harm that arises from his having forgotten something if a rational

person would have remembered the thing in question. Another way of putting this point is to say that an agent is blameworthy for the harm caused by his forgetting  $p$  if, had he actively searched for  $p$  in his memory, he would have been able to recall  $p$ . The problem, however, is to give a general specification of the kinds of activities an agent has to undergo to qualify as having actively searched for a memory item. In Section 4, we saw that the kinds of activities that we expect an agent to engage in so as to recall something depend, among other things, on the importance of the memory item (where the importance is a function of the degree of harm caused if the said item is forgotten). The point is that I don't see how we could say with any reasonable degree of precision what kinds of memory-jogging activities a rational person (as opposed to you and me) would engage in so as to remember something and how much the rational person would be able to remember. Yet the fact that the proposal under consideration can't give a definite verdict even in a simplified hypothetical case like *Forgotten Baby* seems to be a good reason to rule it out.

## 6 Attributability vs. Control

Let us step back and remind ourselves of where we are in the dialectical structure. We started out explaining the blameworthiness of harmful forgetting by tracing it to an earlier act the subject had awareness of and control over. The earlier act gives rise to the unwitting forgetting over which the subject has no control. We saw that the problem with the tracing account is that it can only explain the blameworthiness of forgetting if it is assumed that the agent is, or has good reasons to be, aware of the reliability of her memory to be below average. This gave rise to the question of how to account for the blameworthiness of forgetting in cases where the tracing account does not get a foothold because the subject has no good reasons to question the reliability of her memory. One strategy is to weaken the awareness condition so that it is met by the subject while she forgets the item in question and brings about harm. Another strategy, to be discussed in this section, is to develop a notion of moral responsibility that is completely independently of the awareness and control conditions. If it can be shown that moral responsibility requires neither awareness nor control, then it would seem that the moral assessment of harmful forgetting poses no special problem.

Attributionism is the view that agents need not meet the control and awareness conditions to be properly blamed or praised for their behavior. According to attributionism, for an agent to be blameworthy for his wrongdoing all that is needed is that the behavior is attributable to the agent and to his orientation toward other people. An action is attributable to the agent if it is expressive of his emotional reactions, spontaneous attitudes, and values. Even though the emotional reactions and attitudes are nonvoluntary they give a good insight into the agent's moral personality. Sometimes the

picture provided by these reactions and attitudes is even better than that provided by the agent's voluntary actions, which may be performed for strategic reasons so as to disguise his real feelings.<sup>16</sup>

To see attributionism at work, consider once again the forgotten birthday case. Forgetting one's partner's birthday is usually not the product of an act that is intentionally aimed at bringing about the memory lapse. Moreover, if the subject has never before forgotten about his partner's birthday then, prior to the incident, he has no good reason to doubt his ability to remember the birthday without relying on external tools such as calendar entries. But if he has no good reasons to question his ability to remember his partner's birthday, then the tracing account doesn't get a foothold. To the extent that we think that the memory lapse is nevertheless blameworthy we have to resort to an account of blameworthiness that differs from the tracing account. According to attributionism, the memory lapse is blameworthy if it is expressive of the agent's orientation toward other people, in this case his partner. It would, for example, be expressive of the agent's orientation toward his partner if he generally didn't care much about her and if he neither acknowledged his fault nor apologized upon learning about the memory lapse. If the agent didn't feel the need to apologize, he would manifest disregard toward the way his actions affect his partner's feelings.

Sher (2009: 24) illustrates attributionism by means of an example of a dog (as opposed to a baby) being forgotten in a parked car by its owner called Alessandra. Sher labels this case *Hot Dog*. Alessandra, Sher argues, is blameworthy for the dog's heat stroke but the reason she is blameworthy is not (as the tracing view would have it) that she "negligently failed to do something that would have prevented her from forgetting [the dog]" (2009: 36). Instead Alessandra is blameworthy for harming the dog because her behavior has fallen below the standard of care a dog owner owes to her pet and because the behavior is reflective of an underlying blameworthy evaluative attitude. Sher writes: "if . . . Alessandra were less solicitous of her children, or was made less anxious by conflict—then she would not have forgotten about the dog" (2009: 92). Thus for the attributionist to be able to ascribe blame in a case of harmful forgetting he has to argue that the harmful behavior is representative of the agent's moral character in general and her orientation toward the harmed individual in particular.

There are no doubt cases where the attributionist strategy is appropriate; but there are also instances of harmful forgetting where the agent's orientation toward other people leaves nothing to be desired. To see this consider a version of *Hot Dog* where Alessandra loves her dog dearly and where she has, up to the incidence, been a model dog owner. The attributionist strategy seems *ad hoc* in cases where an agent has no history of wrongdoings of the specific kind and where the harmful behavior does not fit with the agent's overall character. Why should we have to accuse Alessandra of being too

solicitous of her children or of not genuinely loving her dog just so that we can blame her for the one time she has forgets the dog in the car? Why do we have to suppose that the wrongdoing is always reflective of the agent's character? The worry is that the attributionist account of the blameworthiness of forgetting may tempt us to misinterpret the agent's moral character for the sake of being able to attribute blame for the wrongdoing she committed.

## 7 Conclusion

It is a mistake to think that we cannot be morally responsible for forgetting because, as a matter of principle, forgetting is outside of our control. Sometimes we do have control over our forgetting. When forgetting is under our control there is no question that it is the proper object of praise and blame. But we can also be morally responsible for forgetting something when it is beyond our control that we forget that thing. The literature contains three accounts of the blameworthiness of forgetting over which the agent has no control—the tracing account, the liberalized awareness condition, and attributionism. The point of the chapter was to examine each of these accounts and spell out the pros and cons. Even though these are competing accounts of the blameworthiness of harmful forgetting they are compatible with one another. In particular, it is possible to come up with a position that endorses the tracing account for certain kinds of harmful forgetting and attributionism for other kinds of harmful forgetting. But this combination of the tracing account and attributionism is the topic of another chapter.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

- 1 For a conceptual analysis of forgetting, see Frise (2018).
- 2 Paired-associate learning involves the pairing of two items (usually words)—a stimulus and a response. For example, words such as 'candle' (stimulus) and 'table' (response) may be paired, and when the learner is prompted with the stimulus ('candle'), he responds with the appropriate word ('table').
- 3 In Section 5, we will see that proponents of attributionism challenge the idea that moral responsibility requires awareness.
- 4 This condition is modeled after Haji (2008: 90).
- 5 The control and the awareness conditions of moral responsibility are, of course, connected in the sense that if an agent does not know what she is doing, then she does not have (complete) control over her behavior (Talbert, 2016, 154 n10).
- 6 Harm brought about by forgetting is, of course, not the only putative counterexample to the awareness condition of moral responsibility. Forgetting is a kind of ignorance. Besides forgetting ignorance can be brought about by intoxication, distraction, fatigue, and intense emotions such as rage.
- 7 The notion of an epistemically non-drastic technique for forgetting is borrowed from Matheson (2013, pp. 197–8).
- 8 Cf. Caine et al. (1981), King (1992), Pastalkova et al. (2006), and Shema et al. (2007), all cited in Liao (2017, p. 374).

- 9 See Pitman et al. (2002) and Vaiva et al. (2003). For a discussion of the ethical issues connected with the use of beta-blockers for curing PTSD see Evers (2007) and Kober (2006).
- 10 See Bjork (1989, Bjork and Bjork (1996), and MacLeod (1998). The description of the experiment is taken from El Haj et al., 2011, p. 994.
- 11 MacLeod (1998) claims that sometimes list 1 forgetting occurs without an enhancement of the memory for items of list 2.
- 12 Talbert (2016, pp. 130–141) distinguishes between different versions of the tracing view. For a discussion of tracing views see: Peels (2011), H.M. Smith (2011), Timpe (2011), and Vargas (2005).
- 13 This example is modeled after an example by Sher (2009: 24). In Sher's example, it is a dog instead of a baby that is forgotten in the car.
- 14 Since 1998, 376 children have died in the U.S. of heatstroke because they were forgotten by caregivers in cars (see <http://noheatstroke.org/>). The psychologist David Diamond talks about the *forgotten baby syndrome*. According to Diamond, when people perform habitual actions, they operate on autopilot. When in fact things are different, the brain creates an alternative reality that matches how things usually are when the person engages in a habitual action. The tragic memory lapse dubbed 'forgotten baby syndrome' occurs when an agent is guided by that alternative reality (see <http://psychology.usf.edu/faculty/data/ddiamond/baby-sy.pdf>).
- 15 The concept of a reasonably intelligent and impartial person goes back to antiquity (cf. Lucas, 1963). Component (i) of the liberalized awareness condition is similar to Vargas' formulation of the awareness condition: "For an agent to be responsible for some outcome (whether an action or consequence) the outcome must be reasonably foreseeable for that agent at some suitable prior time" (Vargas, 2005, p. 274).
- 16 H.M. Smith, 2011, pp. 118–9; Talbert, 2016, pp. 52–61. Among the proponents of attributionism are Frankfurt (1988), Scanlon (1998), Sher (2009), and A. Smith (2005). The negation of attributionism is called *volitionism*. Among the proponents of volitionism are Sidgwick (1907, p. 59–61), Taylor (1970, pp. 241–52), and Wallace (1994, pp. 131–2).
- 17 For comments on a previous draft and for conversations related to the topic of the paper I am deeply grateful to Maura Priest and two anonymous reviewers. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support from an Alexander-von-Humboldt Professorship Award.

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