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What Is It to Hold a Grudge?

ABSTRACT: *Philosophers who write about blame tend to focus on angry confrontations, but in this article I look closely at the less visible, longer lasting, and seemingly more insidious side of blame: grudges. After offering an extended example of grudge-holding and surveying the scant literature on this topic in both psychology and philosophy, I offer an account of what it is to hold a grudge. On my account, grudges involve negative feelings toward a transgressor that are (1) antagonistic, (2) easily reactivated, (3) persistent, (4) globalist, and (5) not-yet-overcome. The article is dedicated to fleshing out and justifying these components, and showing how the account fits with existing research on forgiveness and related notions. I conclude by suggesting that theorists of responsibility would benefit from broadening their gaze beyond blame and forgiveness to the more general notions of holding against and letting go.*

KEYWORDS: blame, grudges, forgiveness, responsibility

1. Introduction

Anger can flash, here and then gone. Resentment, by contrast, is like long-form anger: it simmers. Or perhaps it's more like anger-in-waiting, poised to flare. These are not definitions, nor are they exceptionless rules; they are just observations about how we tend to think about the duration and intensity of blaming emotions. We can explode, but we can also seethe. We can confront, but we can also harbor. We can lash out, but we can also nurse.

Philosophers who write about blame tend to focus on the sorts of angry confrontations that, to be honest, are very foreign to my own interactions with people who hurt me (e.g., Macnamara 2013 and Reis-Dennis 2019). I rarely reproach, chide, or remonstrate with anyone. That's not because I'm a skeptic about moral responsibility; nor is it because I never encounter reasons that make blame fitting – in our fallen world, they seem to be all around. It's more a matter of temperament, I guess. When I'm hurt, I'm more prone to withdraw and silently brood.

In what follows I want to look more closely at this less visible, longer lasting, and seemingly more insidious side of blame: grudges. With a few notable exceptions to be discussed below, philosophers and psychologists have largely left the topic of grudges unexamined. But they are worthy of further exploration. For one thing, I suspect they are much more widespread than we'd like to admit. Moreover, as we will see, grudges fit less well into the anger/forgiveness dichotomy than more confrontational instances of blame do, and that suggests that philosophers working on these issues would do well to broaden their gaze a bit to theorize about the categories of *holding against* and *letting go* more generally. Finally, on a more practical note, coming to a

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clearer understanding of grudges promises to illuminate how each of us might go about weakening their hold on us when they become too much to bear.

I'll begin by situating the discussion in the broader context of philosophical work on moral responsibility, since grudge-holding seems to belong in that network of attitudes and behaviors that are often referred to as our "responsibility practices" (Vargas 2013; McCormick 2022). Next I'll offer an extended example of grudge-holding taken from literature, to help anchor the discussion to follow. I'll then survey previous work on grudge-holding in both psychology and philosophy – what little of it there is – before offering my own thoughts about what grudge-holding involves.

2. The Responsibility Neighborhood

Grudge-holding lives in the general neighborhood of moral responsibility – similar but not quite the same as holding someone responsible for a transgression; similar but not quite the same as seeking revenge; similar but not quite the same as holding someone in contempt; similar but not quite the same as being unforgiving. So, let's begin by exploring this neighborhood in order to get our bearings (see Macnamara 2011 and Tognazzini 2015 for attempts to map some of the terrain here).

The boundaries of the responsibility neighborhood are marked by what P. F. Strawson (1962) calls *the participant attitude*. (The boundaries are not sharp, because the participant attitude itself is something we can take up to varying degrees.) When you take up the participant attitude toward someone, you make yourself vulnerable to being hurt by what they think about you, by how they regard you. That's not a definition; it's just a fact. When you occupy this orientation toward someone, you are prone to experience a wide range of emotions that arise out of your relationship with that person: resentment, indignation, hurt feelings, gratitude. When you discover how someone really feels about you or someone you care about, you are liable to take it personally, rather than absorb the information with detached curiosity.

Strawson himself was concerned to draw a tight connection between the participant attitude and moral responsibility, but we don't need to get into those weeds. In any event it seems right that most, if not all, of those toward whom we take up the participant attitude are also people that we regard as morally responsible for at least some of what they do. They are those with whom we fully expect to be able to have everyday moral conversations (McKenna 2012): we hold them to certain normative expectations, and when they fail to live up to those expectations, we are liable to feel hurt and respond with blame. And it tends to go the other way too: we fully expect them to have normative expectations of us, and we are liable to feel guilty and apologize when we let them down.

I hope it's clear that holding a grudge is located squarely in this general neighborhood. Captain Ahab is one of the more notorious grudge-holders in literature, and he sought vengeance on the white whale with a monomaniacal passion. At first it seems an odd example, perhaps, since we don't tend to take the actions of non-human animals personally in the way characteristic of the participant attitude. But it seems clear that Ahab, at least, did – and, to be fair, given how things ended up, it seems personal for Moby Dick as well. One of the things that gives the

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story its drama is precisely that Ahab and the whale seem locked in the sort of interpersonal conflict that we easily recognize from our landlubber lifestyle. (For all his faults, perhaps Ahab was ahead of his time in realizing that whales are different.)

But there are many streets within the responsibility neighborhood. Praise and blame are perhaps the most well-traveled, and there are different views about what they involve (Stout 2020; Shoemaker 2024; Telech 2021; Tognazzini and Coates 2025). Expressions of anger and gratitude are relatively uncontroversial examples, but there are others. On the side of praise, we might think of admiration, approbation, esteem, and their expressions. On the side of blame, we can think of disdain, resentment, and indignation, but also of rebukes and reproaches and demands for an explanation, or even, as T. M. Scanlon (2008) suggests, relatively dispassionate and silent modifications in our relationships with wrongdoers. Generalizing, we might say that these are all various ways of *holding someone responsible* for what they've done. So far, we are still on well-trodden ground.

A bit further afield are two other responsibility interactions that seem to be types of "holding", though they are less well-explored in the literature. First is the forward-looking idea of holding someone to a norm, the way you might do with someone who has asked you to help safeguard their integrity about a personal resolution they have made. Second is the backward-looking idea of holding something *against* someone, which might be involved in run-of-the-mill cases of blame, but which also seems connected to being judgmental (Watson 2013) or just painting someone with a broad evaluative brush based on some perceived fault or annoyance. (For example, I might jokingly ask an acquaintance not to hold it against me that I root for a different sports team than they do).

At this point it seems like we've arrived at the cul-de-sac where grudges live. Holding a grudge is a responsibility interaction, broadly speaking, and it is a particular way of holding a transgression *against* someone, whatever exactly that means. When you hold a grudge, you take something they have done, some transgression of theirs for which you blame them, and you grasp it tightly, carrying the memory of it into the future, perhaps far into the future, continuing to use it as a sort of measuring stick for sizing up the person, a reference point for structuring your future interactions with them. You hold their transgression against them for a long period of time.

That's not a bad start, but I think we can do better. For one thing, it will prove illuminating to look at the psychological literature on grudges – I'll do that in section 4. But a few philosophical discussions of related ideas – such as *bitterness* and *the ethics of memory* – will also help to bring the concept into clearer focus, so I'll look at those in section 5. Before we get to the psychological and philosophical details, though, let's examine a particular example of grudge-holding, so that we can have the phenomenon vividly in mind.

3. The Case of Anne and Gilbert

I've mentioned Captain Ahab already, but for various reasons he's probably not the best data point from which to build a theory. So let me pull another example from literature, this one a bit less grandiose but much closer to everyday life. I'm thinking

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of the heroine and title character from *Anne of Green Gables*: the wildly imaginative, maddeningly headstrong, and charmingly precocious Anne Shirley.

At the beginning of the story Anne is an eleven-year-old orphan who, despite not being a boy as requested, is adopted by the quiet Matthew Cuthbert and his no-nonsense sister, Marilla. We learn much about Anne in the first few chapters of the book: she is an intelligent and talkative girl who is not afraid to speak her mind, she has a penchant for romanticism, she tends to get into scrapes and – most importantly for our purposes – she is deeply insecure about her looks, especially her red hair.

Meanwhile, there is a boy at her local school – Gilbert Blythe – who notices her, but who is frustrated that she doesn't really seem to notice him amidst all her daydreaming. So, he makes the ill-advised decision to get her attention by teasing her about her red hair, picking up one of her braids during class one day and whispering, "Carrots! Carrots!" The story continues (Montgomery 2014: 154):

> Then Anne looked at him with a vengeance!
>
> She did more than look. She sprang to her feet, her bright fancies fallen into cureless ruin.
>
> She flashed one indignant glance at Gilbert from eyes whose angry sparkle was swiftly quenched in equally angry tears.
>
> "You mean, hateful boy!" she exclaimed passionately. "How dare you!"

And then Anne smashes her slate over his head, which naturally gets the teacher's attention, who comes over and demands an explanation. Gilbert takes responsibility – "It was my fault Mr. Phillips. I teased her." – but Anne gets in trouble and spends the rest of the school day seething.

After school that day as Anne is walking home with her best friend Diana, Gilbert seeks her out and apologizes.

> "I'm awfully sorry I made fun of your hair, Anne," he whispered contritely. "Honest I am. Don't be mad for keeps, now."
>
> Anne swept by disdainfully, without look or sign of hearing. "Oh how could you, Anne?" breathed Diana as they went down the road half reproachfully, half admiringly. Diana felt that *she* could never have resisted Gilbert's plea.
>
> "I shall never forgive Gilbert Blythe," said Anne firmly… "Gilbert Blythe has hurt my feelings *excruciatingly*, Diana" (156-157).

For most of the rest of the book, which takes place over five years, Anne sticks to this resolution. The narrator tells us, in fact, that Anne has "an unpraiseworthy tenacity for holding grudges" (189).

However, a crucial softening in her stance occurs when she is fourteen. She finds herself in need of rescuing from the middle of a pond after her boat sinks, and Gilbert is the one who happens to find her there, desperately hanging onto a bridge pile. She

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has no choice but to accept his help, and once safely ashore, aims to escape quickly but Gilbert pleads with her:

> "Anne," he said hurriedly, "look here. Can't we be good friends? I'm awfully sorry I made fun of your hair that time. I didn't mean to vex you and I only meant it for a joke. Besides, it's so long ago. I think your hair is awfully pretty now – honest I do. Let's be friends."
>
> For a moment Anne hesitated. She had an odd, newly awakened consciousness under all her outraged dignity that the half-shy, half-eager expression in Gilbert's hazel eyes was something that was very good to see. Her heart gave a quick, queer little beat. But the bitterness of her old grievance promptly stiffened up her wavering determination. That scene of two years before flashed back into her recollection as vividly as if it had taken place yesterday. Gilbert had called her "carrots" and had brought about her disgrace before the whole school. Her resentment, which to other and older people might be as laughable as its cause, was in no whit allayed and softened by time seemingly. She hated Gilbert Blythe! She would never forgive him!
>
> "No," she said coldly, "I shall never be friends with you, Gilbert Blythe; and I don't want to be!" (312-313)

I'm sure you see where this is going. That flicker of hesitation Anne experiences in this scene is a transformation in her overall attitude toward Gilbert, something she doesn't quite realize in the moment but appreciates later when she finds herself feeling hurt that Gilbert has now taken to ignoring *her*.

> All at once, as it seemed, and to her secret dismay, she found that the old resentment she had cherished against him was gone—gone just when she most needed its sustaining power. It was in vain that she recalled every incident and emotion of that memorable occasion and tried to feel the old satisfying anger. That day by the pond had witnessed its last spasmodic flicker. Anne realized that she had forgiven and forgotten without knowing it (340).

Anne persists in keeping her forgiveness a secret for awhile longer, lest it give Gilbert an annoying sense of self-righteousness, until the end of the book when she makes a full confession. Gilbert responds with words that Anne knows are true: "We are going to be the best of friends…We were born to be good friends, Anne. You've thwarted destiny enough" (426). Perhaps needless to say, in one of the sequels Anne and Gilbert get married.

It's an example from childhood – Anne holds her grudge against Gilbert from age eleven to age fourteen, then finally expresses her forgiveness at age sixteen – and while the transgression might seem not particularly weighty, I still think it's a useful example for a few reasons. First, even in the supposedly grown-up world, the intensity and persistence of a grudge can outstrip the seriousness of the original

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transgression. Second, whether or not we think Anne overreacted to having her hair ridiculed, the fact is that it did hurt her – excruciatingly, as she says – and that's what matters for our inquiry into what grudges look like. Third, the example contains enough interpersonal detail, and the narrator is so articulate about Anne's inner feelings, that we have a lot of material to work with.

Start with the fact that when the transgression occurs, Anne feels both *hurt* and *angry*. She immediately expresses her feelings to Gilbert with an angry *reproach* and an attempt to *punish* him, or at least *retaliate*. In fairly short order, Gilbert *apologizes*, but Anne ignores him and then confesses to Diana an *intention never to forgive* him. In passages I haven't quoted, we also learn that Anne feels *contempt* for Gilbert, and harbors a *vengeful* desire to see him feel pain – at one point he offers her a candy heart that says "You're sweet", which she proceeds to crush with her heel right in front of him.

When she is rescued from the pond, she refuses to look him in the eye and interacts with him in a *cold*, transactional manner, until she experiences that flicker of hesitation when he apologizes again and points out how *long ago* the transgression occurs. Instead of allowing herself to soften in that moment, though, her *bitterness* reactivates her memory of the original transgression, which is once again *brought vividly to mind*, and she reminds herself of her commitment not to forgive him. She expresses this to him out loud, though she talks the language of *reconciliation as friends* rather than explicit forgiveness.

After only a few moments, though, she experiences "an odd feeling of regret", which she later learns was a clue that, her angry outburst notwithstanding, she had indeed forgiven him despite herself. Even once she does realize it, her pride keeps her from *communicating her forgiveness* to him, until that day toward the end of the book when she offers him her hand as a peace offering, confesses her stubbornness, and they are *reconciled*.

The richness of the narrative here is helpful, I think, because it invites us to consider an antagonistic relationship in all its messiness so that we can get a good look at all its layers before peeling them apart and setting some aside. Just to put my cards on the table: while it is clear to me that Anne holds a grudge against Gilbert for the better part of five years, I don't think everything listed above is part and parcel of what it *is* to hold a grudge. Anne goes above and beyond, as it were, and gives us a portrait of a fully-adorned grudge. I don't intend to make any empirical claims about how often grudge-holding involves all the above elements, and certainly a therapeutic focus on helping to rid someone of their grudges would need to cast a very wide net. But I think the conceptual heart of the matter is considerably narrower than what we find in the saga of Anne and Gilbert. Seeing the broader picture, though, will help to bring the conceptual core into focus.

To make a start, let's review the psychological research on grudges. There's not much on this specific topic, but the studies that do exist are helpful.

4. Grudges in Psychology

In a broader discussion of the psychology of forgiveness, Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer (1998) construct an understanding of grudges by starting from the concept

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of forgiveness. On their view, there are two dimensions to forgiveness, one that is "intrapsychic" and one that is "interpersonal" (1998: 86). The intrapsychic dimension of forgiveness involves overcoming the negative feelings caused by the transgression, whereas the interpersonal dimension involves communicating to the transgressor that one's negative feelings have changed.

Baumeister et al. propose that holding a grudge is the "opposite" of forgiveness: it is a matter of *refusing to forgive*. Parallel to the two dimensions of forgiveness, then, grudges can also manifest in two different ways. On the intrapsychic side of things, grudge-holding involves a "commitment to remain angry (or to resume anger periodically)" (1998: 98). On the interpersonal side, it involves a refusal to communicate to the transgressor that one's anger has dissipated, if it ever does. Both components fit well with the story of Anne and Gilbert. Immediately after the transgression Anne vows never to forgive Gilbert, and throughout the story she ruminates on the transgression as a way of shoring up her resolve when it starts to flag. Moreover, even once she does realize that her negative feelings have dissipated, she intentionally refrains from telling Gilbert of her change of heart, at least for awhile.

Let me make two quick remarks about this way of understanding grudges. First: while holding a grudge will certainly have important consequences for one's interpersonal relationships, I want to limit my scope here to accounts of grudge-holding that emphasize what's going on inside the mind of the person holding the grudge. Perhaps there is a sense in which Anne continues to hold her grudge against Gilbert even after she has had the relevant change of heart – though I'd be more inclined to say that she continues to *hold the transgression against* him even once the grudge has disappeared – but in any case, it is the "intrapsychic" phenomenon that I hope to give an account of here. I'm open to the possibility that there are grudges that are merely *behavioral* or *performative*, as it were, but those are not my primary concern here.[1]

Second: the understanding of grudges offered by Baumeister et al. involves an active contribution from the grudge-holder. It is not enough simply for one's negative feelings to persist; instead, the grudge-holder is someone who *refuses* to forgive, someone who *makes a commitment* to the persistence of the negative orientation.[2] This fits well with the common idea that grudges are things we "nurse", and other work in psychology incorporates this idea as well.

In a recent paper on the connection between exercise and forgiveness, for example, Struthers et al. write (2017: 2): "We define a grudge as hanging on to negative sentiment and judgments toward transgressors by ruminating or repetitively thinking about the transgression." This understanding also includes an active component – "hanging on" – and adds the notion of rumination, which also fits

[1] Of course it is also possible, as an anonymous reviewer points out, that grudges outlasting the relevant change of heart are still motivated by negative inner feelings, just ones that are different than those that sponsored the original grudge. If so, then the grudge wouldn't be merely behavioral after all.

[2] Baumeister, et al. seem to be interpreting "refusal to forgive" in a way that is synonymous with "commitment to remain angry", though it's not clear that these are in fact the same ideas. Making a commitment to remain angry seems intuitively more future-oriented and second-order than mere refusal to forgive. Thanks to Sara Protasi here.

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well with the idea that grudges are nursed over time. Rumination is how we feed and nurture our grudge so that the negative feelings don't waste away on their own through the natural processes of a fading memory. (Again, compare Anne: throughout the story she periodically "re-ups" her anger at Gilbert by rehearsing the "carrots" incident in her mind.) If we think of forgiveness as a matter of eliminating negative feelings toward a transgressor, then the definition of grudge-holding offered by Struthers et al. seems roughly equivalent to the one offered by Baumeister et al: someone holds a grudge when they refuse to forgive, which they can do by playing an active role – perhaps through rumination – in maintaining their anger at a transgressor.

There are also scattered references to grudge-holding in the literature on so-called *unforgiveness* (Seawell et al 2014 and Stackhouse et al 2018), but the most comprehensive recent treatment of grudges in psychology is by Elizabeth van Monsjou (2018), who develops both an analysis of grudge-holding, based on semi-structured interviews, as well as a psychological scale that can be used to measure grudge-holding in future research (see also van Monsjou et al 2023).

The research conducted by van Monsjou led her to define grudge-holding as "sustained feelings of hurt and anger that dim over time without disappearing, and are easily resurrected by triggers" (2018: 62), and her model for future research includes three factors: (a) disdain, (b) emotional persistence, and (c) perceived longevity. She elaborates (2018: 99):

> Disdain accounts for feelings of contempt toward the transgressor and the desire to have nothing to do with him or her, with high scores indicating greater dislike and desire to avoid. Emotional persistence evaluates the strength of individuals' ongoing hurt and anger. Finally, perceived longevity captures the sense of permanence associated with these ongoing thoughts and emotions.

It's worth drawing attention to a few things about van Monsjou's analysis. First, she explicitly remains neutral on the question of *why* the feelings of hurt and anger are sustained over time: perhaps it is due to rumination, and perhaps it is due to some sort of commitment to remain angry, but some of the people she interviewed simply reported that they felt unable to let the transgression go, despite desperately wanting to move on. As van Monsjou says: "[I]t seems important to distinguish between individuals who actively choose to hold grudges and those who are holding grudges despite their desire to let go" (2018: 54). Rumination may of course still play a role, even in those individuals who would prefer to let things go, but it's important to note that rumination need not be, and often isn't, something done on purpose – and, in fact, it is often conceptualized by psychologists as *passive* (Nolen-Hoeksema et al. 2008).

Second, van Monsjou's analysis nicely captures the idea that even when one is holding a grudge, one's negative feelings do tend to dim over time, perhaps even to the point where one is no longer fully aware that one is harboring such feelings. But the grudge in those cases is merely *latent*, awaiting the right sort of trigger, at which point it is reactivated (2018: 56-57).

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Finally, it's notable that the third factor in the scale that van Monsjou develops – perceived longevity – is not really captured in the concise definition that she gives of grudge-holding, which focuses only on disdain and emotional persistence. Perhaps this is because whether people expect their grudge to go away any time soon isn't really part of what it *is* for them to be holding the grudge, but instead is just a natural *consequence* of their grudge-holding.

What, for van Monsjou, is the relationship between grudge-holding and an unwillingness to forgive? Well, for one thing, van Monsjou points out that the participants in her study were, by and large, willing and eager to rid themselves of their persistent negative emotions toward the transgressor (2018: 54). So, if we take forgiveness to be a matter of successfully overcoming negative emotions toward a transgressor, then it seems like the grudge-holders van Monsjou talked to were certainly *willing* to forgive. But there is good philosophical reason to construe forgiveness not merely as the overcoming of negative emotions, but as the overcoming of negative emotions *for certain reasons*. This point is made repeatedly in the philosophical literature on forgiveness, in part because it seems crucial for distinguishing forgiveness from other ways negative emotions might disappear. As Jeffrie Murphy puts it: "…my ceasing to resent will not constitute forgiveness unless it is *done for a moral reason*…Forgiveness is…forswearing resentment on moral grounds" (Murphy and Hampton 1988: 23-24). Murphy suggests, for example, that if you forswear your resentment because the wrongdoer has had a change of heart, or because the wrongdoer has suffered enough, or because the wrongdoer meant well, then that will count as forgiveness. On the other hand, if you overcome resentment through some sort of "behavior-modification" therapy or hypnosis, then while that may be helpful for your own daily functioning, it won't count as genuine forgiveness.

So, it seems to me better to interpret van Monsjou's result as showing not that grudge-holders are often willing to forgive, but instead that they are often willing to *let go of their grudge*. This is still an important point, though, since it runs counter to the stereotype that grudges are always actively nursed.[3]

I think that van Monsjou's research on grudge-holding is a very helpful guide for us.[4] It seems just right to focus on persistent negative emotions that tend to fade but are easily reactivated. It also seems right to prize apart the question of what grudge-holding *is* from the question of its causes (e.g., rumination) and effects (e.g., perceived longevity). Finally, it also seems right to distinguish grudge-holding from the refusal to forgive, which seems narrower. Nevertheless, I think the account is not quite complete, since – as I will argue below – I think it's possible to have easily reactivated persistent negative feelings that nevertheless don't count as a grudge. To help us fill in

[3] Since grudges are affectively aversive, it makes sense that a grudge-holder might desperately want to let their grudge go, even while not wanting the transgressor to go unblamed. Thanks again to Sara Protasi here.

[4] Let me flag one concern about the methodology of two of van Monsjou's studies, however. Participants were recruited by seeking volunteers who were "able to recall a specific transgression that was currently unresolved… meaning that the person had not apologized or they had not forgiven him or her" (2018: 75). This methodology would exclude potential participants who would say that they have forgiven the transgressor but who also self-identify as continuing to hold a grudge. (Younger et al. 2004, for example, reports that some people who claim to have forgiven also claim still to be harboring grudges.)

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the details, let's look at the philosophical literature that touches on the issue of grudge-holding.

5. Grudges in Philosophy

Grudges have received even less attention among philosophers than they have among psychologists, and in fact I've only been able to find three discussions.

From Alison Reiheld (2018: 396), we hear that grudge-holding is a matter of "rehearsing a hurt with a lack of empathy for the offender".[5] Moreover, when we hold a grudge, says Reiheld, we "see only the hurt" and "nothing else around the hurt that might lead us to have empathy for the offender" (397).

From Agnes Callard (2018: 129), we hear that grudge-holders "store away grievances for years only to 'reactivate' them when it is convenient to do so". So, for Callard, the person who holds a grudge – or at least, the person who exhibits the *vice* of holding a grudge – is someone who keeps track of ways they have been wronged, as if on a mental spreadsheet or ledger, so that they can later appeal to their status as a victim to gain some benefit or exact some further concession from the transgressor.

Finally, grudge-holding also comes up in Lynne McFall's (1991) classic discussion of bitterness. McFall begins that essay by saying, "Bitterness is a refusal to forgive and forget. It is to maintain a vivid sense of the wrongs one has been done, to recite one's angry litany of loss, long past the time others may care to listen or sympathize" (1991: 147). A bit later she explicitly connects this to grudges: "To be bitter is to hold a grudge, vividly and continuously. Those who are bitter have, we might say, trouble in letting go of their pain" (1991: 152).

To be clear, none of these papers is specifically about grudges (Reiheld's is primarily about memory, Callard's is about anger, and McFall's is about bitterness). But the quotations I've pulled are enough for our purposes, I think. In each case we can highlight both something helpful and perhaps something not quite right.

Reiheld emphasizes *rehearsal* (or rumination), and I'm sure that's involved in many real-life grudges. However, that seems to be more a point about how a grudge is often *sustained* rather than about what a grudge *is*. (For some modest empirical support for the claim that rumination is just one mechanism among others that account for emotional inertia, see Bagnara et al. 2025.) What I think Reiheld's description gets right, though, is the implicit idea that when someone holds a grudge, they take up a particular, and a potentially distorted, view of the transgressor *as a person*. The way in which our grudges color our vision of the transgressor is something I'll come back to below.

Callard also identifies something that surely characterizes *some* instances of grudge-holding, namely the fact that grudges can be nursed on purpose for the

[5] Reiheld cites Witvliet et al. 2001 as the inspiration for this characterization. Witvliet et al., in turn, take their cue from Baumeister et al. 1998, which I discussed at the beginning of the previous section. The sort of rumination associated with "rehearsing the hurt" is part of what Baumeister et al. had in mind when they characterized grudges as involving a commitment to remain angry.

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instrumental benefits they bring (Baumeister et al. 1998 also emphasize the instrumental benefits of grudge-holding). But this does not seem to be a general fact about grudges as such. Grudges need not be held *on purpose* nor *for a purpose*. Instead, they may simply be a sort of psychological residue that forms in the aftermath of a transgression, one that seems particularly resistant to scrubbing. Callard's discussion helpfully emphasizes the potentially unsavory nature of grudges, though, and we'll want our account to explain why many have such a negative view of them.

Finally, McFall explicitly appeals to the idea of *refusing to forgive*, which we encountered above in our discussion of the psychological research, and she also talks the language of *rumination*, both of which we've said may often be present in grudge-holding but aren't necessary components. McFall also identifies bitterness with a particular *way* of holding a grudge: "vividly and continuously". But intuitively, and in line with van Monsjou's psychological research, not all grudges need to be held in this way. Often there is a fading, perhaps even a temporary forgetting of the grudge until one encounters a trigger. Grudges, it seems, can be softer and more in the background.

McFall's discussion does point us in a helpful direction, though, since she argues that bitterness (and thus, in her view, grudge-holding) is sometimes a fitting response to transgression or injustice, since it is a response to having one's legitimate, important hopes disappointed, and sometimes this is exactly what has happened. While it might seem like a truism to say that grudges are never fitting, I think we should resist that impulse in our own analysis. I think it will be more helpful to try to separate the question of what a grudge is from the question of whether grudges are ever appropriate, precisely so that we can leave room for a view like McFall's.

But we're now at the point where it makes sense to begin drawing together some of the threads of the discussion in order to sketch an account of grudge-holding that can accommodate all the data we've canvassed so far.

6. A Portrait of a Grudge

If there's anything that we can take as a datum in theorizing about grudges, it's that grudge-holding involves some sort of "negative" feeling. But what negative feeling is involved? Anger is a natural contender, but in fact I'm not sure there's any *single* negative feeling that is always involved without exception. What unites grudges as a family isn't any particular negative feeling that is always involved without exception, but instead the fact that they all feature some negative feeling or other (of the right sort).

Consider, for example, the contrast between anger and contempt. Details aside, there are at least two major differences between anger and contempt (Mason 2003; Bell 2013; Cogley 2019). First, whereas anger tends to take *actions* as its focus, contempt tends to involve an evaluation of the *whole person*. And second, whereas anger tends to motivate *engagement* (in the form of confrontation or communication), contempt tends to motivate *withdrawal*. While we naturally associate grudge-holding with anger, I think there are cases of contemptuous grudge-holding as well. For example, in addition to holding a grudge against you

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for something you've done, I might also hold a grudge against you for *the way that you are* (Bell 2008).

Imagine a younger sibling growing up in the shadow of an older sibling who is clearly given preferential treatment by the parents. Once both siblings are grown and moved away, it seems possible for the younger to hold a grudge against the older, to view the older sibling in a holistic way as having been too much of a goody-goody, for example, even while acknowledging that their older sibling was not guilty of anything like a "demeaning offense" that might give rise to anger (Lazarus 1991: 122; see also Shoemaker 2018).[6] Perhaps this would be a grudge that features contempt, perhaps envy, perhaps even hatred. But the general point is just that grudges seem flexible enough to accommodate several different negative emotions, so long as they are what we might call "antagonistic" (unlike sadness, which is negative but not in a way that would allow it to count as a negative feeling that might be partly constitutive of a grudge).[7]

For it to be a grudge, however, the negative emotion cannot simply *flash*; it must persist. This is what gives rise to the common intuition that grudges are things you *nurse* or *ruminate on*. As I've said above, though, I don't think rumination is necessary for grudge-holding. Common, yes, but mostly it seems like one key mechanism or explanation for the persistence of a grudge, rather than part of the grudge itself. It's the *persistence* itself that seems to matter, and like memories in general, grudges can persist on their own, even if someone doesn't take any steps to renew or refresh them (and perhaps even despite efforts to get rid of them). You might imagine, for example, that shortly after Anne and Gilbert had their initial interaction, Gilbert and his family moved out of town. In that case, Anne may have had no occasion for her grudge against Gilbert to be activated, and she might even succeed in not thinking about him at all, for years. But supposing that a few years down the road he moves back into town, it's easy to imagine that seeing him again would reactivate all those feelings of unresolved anger. Anne needn't have *nursed* her grudge in order for it to persist.

Even if rumination isn't necessarily the explanation for why the negative feelings persist, though, perhaps we can trace their persistence to a general refusal to forgive? I don't think so, for reasons I hinted at above, but let me make them explicit.

Recall that the participants in van Monsjou's studies described themselves as perfectly willing, even eager, to let go of their negative feelings. It would be too quick to interpret this as a willingness to forgive, though, since most philosophers think that not every route to ridding oneself of negative feelings counts as forgiveness. For example, it's possible for a victim to hold the view that forgiveness is inappropriate unless it was in response to a genuine change of heart on the part of the transgressor,

[6] We might describe the younger sibling as having a "chip on their shoulder" as a result of their childhood experiences. This is another psychological phenomenon worth exploring; Cherry 2019 argues that it is distinct from holding a grudge. This seems right to me, as well, though grudges seem like they may be involved.

[7] This includes the sort of blame that Telech and Katz (2022) call "condemnatory disappointment", which they argue is importantly different from anger. Thanks to Jada Strabbing and her students for pushing me to clarify the sort of negativity involved.

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and yet also wish, for the sake of their own sanity, that they could wave a magic wand to get rid of persistent negative feelings.

Still, van Monsjou's results suggest that, according to the participants' own conception of grudge-holding, letting go of negative emotions toward the transgressor would be *sufficient to dissolve the grudge*, whether or not it would be sufficient for forgiveness. If that's right – if the conditions for forgiveness are different from the conditions for letting go of grudges – then it follows that forgiving is not the same thing as letting go of a grudge, and likewise, that holding a grudge is not the same thing as refusing to forgive.

Might it not be, though, that refusing to forgive is still *part* of what it is to hold a grudge? I think van Monsjou's results also give us reason to be skeptical of this claim. Not only did the participants in her study seem eager to rid themselves of their negative emotions (which, as I've pointed out above, is not the same thing as forgiveness), but also many of the grudge-holders van Monsjou interviewed seemed perfectly willing to forgive, properly speaking, with the right sort of responses from the transgressor. In fact, some of the participants indicated that their anger had turned into a grudge in large part because the transgressor had failed to take responsibility for what they had done (van Monsjou et al. 2023: 66). This suggests that grudges form in part as a result of feeling that the transgressor has, due to their own intransigence, closed off forgiveness as a viable path forward. Refusing to forgive may not even be possible in these circumstances, since intuitively you can only refuse options that seems open to you in the first place. (Compare also van Monsjou et al. (2023: 74): "Holding a grudge is often incidental and unwanted, whereas unforgiveness may be more of a conscious choice".)

This distinction between grudge-holding and refusing to forgive makes sense from a theoretical perspective too. Consider again the version of the story of Anne and Gilbert where, after the schoolhouse incident, Gilbert's family moves away from the island for several years. Anne may well refuse to forgive Gilbert for this transgression, but after some time, her negative feelings could fade and she might completely forget about the incident. Then suppose that Gilbert moves back to town and when Anne runs into him, their meeting doesn't reactivate any of those negative feelings at all. She might even find herself surprised that she no longer holds a grudge against Gilbert, and yet, the disappearance of the grudge may have had nothing to do with any process that deserves to be called forgiveness, nor need it coincide with her changing her mind about whether she is willing to forgive people for ridiculing her red hair. She has let go of her grudge, but she has not forgiven.[8]

In fact, I'm not sure we need to commit ourselves to any particular *causal explanation* of why the negative feelings persist. From the point of view of trying to identify the essence of grudge-holding, it's enough simply that they do persist and –

[8] It may be that forgiveness requires letting go of grudges, but they are not the same thing. I've just argued that it's possible to let go of a grudge without forgiving. It's also possible to forgive even when no grudge ever formed in the first place.

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as van Monsjou's research suggests – are susceptible to *easy reactivation*. So, here's a start:

> Grudge-holding involves *easily reactivated persistent antagonistic negative feelings* toward the transgressor (either for what they've done or for who they are).

Is it perhaps redundant to say both "easily reactivated" and "persistent"? Maybe, but what I'm trying to capture is the idea that the persistence of grudges need not be a matter of a persisting state of occurrent awareness. Rather, they can – and often do – fade. But the grudge persists in the background so long as the negative feelings are capable of being easily reactivated.

It's also important to distinguish negative feelings that are *reactivated* by the remembrance of a past transgression, versus similar negative feelings that are *activated* by the occurrence of a *new* transgression. If you are constantly breaking promises to me, such that I am very frequently angry with you for breaking your promises, this need not be a grudge, even though it involves persistent negative feelings in some straightforward sense. Reactivation by triggers is different from activation by repeat offenses.

7. Refinements

That's a start. But, even if we want our official analysis to remain neutral on the question of whether grudges are ever fitting or justified, I think the analysis ought to include some element that at least explains why, or makes sense of why, people often take grudges to be poisonous. And for another thing, I think there are cases where negative feelings are easily reactivated but where this indicates not a harbored grudge but instead simply the difficulty of healing. Each of these thoughts will motivate an additional component to the above analysis.

It's not hard to see why grudges are thought to be problematic. One reason is that grudges are often associated with something like an *expired statute of limitations*. In her discussion of bitterness, McFall says, "Bitterness is a refusal to forgive and forget. It is to maintain a vivid sense of the wrongs one has been done, to recite one's angry litany of loss, long past the time others may care to listen or sympathize" (1991: 147). And when it comes to grudges, it's actually even worse than that: the worry is not just that people no longer care to listen or sympathize, it's that the anger has persisted so long (maybe even despite sincere apologies, like in the case of Anne and Gilbert) that it has become pathological or vindictive.

We could perhaps build into our analysis of grudges that they involve negative feelings that have lasted *too long*, but as I mentioned above, I think it's often more illuminating to have an analysis that is neutral on the ethical questions, so long as the analysis has some component that can explain how the phenomenon might reasonably thought to be unjustified. In this case, we already have the idea of *persistence*, and this ethical worry is about those cases where the negative feelings persist too long. (Maybe that's *all* cases, but that would take a separate argument.)

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But there's another reason one might worry about the appropriateness of grudge-holding, and this one will sponsor a tweak to the analysis. This one is inspired by Alison Reiheld's (2018) idea that when we hold a grudge, we do so "with a lack of empathy for the offender" (396), and instead of attending to aspects of the context that might lead us to a broader view of the offender, we "see only the hurt" (397). Grudges are liable to distort our vision, and that's one primary reason to worry about whether they are ever appropriate.

So as not to prejudge any of the ethical questions, though, I think it's better not to incorporate the idea of *distortion*, and instead simply to incorporate the idea of *vision*. When we hold a grudge, in other words, the negative feelings involve what Macalester Bell (2013: 77) calls an "evaluative prioritization" of certain features of the transgressor. Bell is discussing the emotion of contempt, and she claims that it is a "globalist emotion", one that involves seeing "some of the person's traits as more important than others" (77).

My suggestion is that holding a grudge against someone also has the sort of "globalist" or person-centered orientation that is characteristic of contempt. In some cases that may be simply because the negative feelings that are partly constitutive of the grudge include globalist emotions like contempt or hatred, but I think grudge-holding is a person-centered phenomenon even when the negative feeling is garden-variety, action-centered resentment or anger.[9] That is, I think it's possible to experience easily reactivated persistent anger toward someone for what they have done *without* holding a grudge against them, because grudges also must involve an "evaluative prioritization" of the transgression in one's overall view of the person.

It is helpful here to compare grudge-holding with Krista Thomason's (2018) account of shame. Thomason distinguishes between one's *self-conception* – which is one's own "take" on what one is like – and one's *identity* – which is at least partly determined by how one is seen by others. With that distinction in mind, Thomason says that we feel shame when "we feel that some feature of our identity eclipses, overshadows, or defines our self-conception" (87). For example, I might feel shame about some aspect of my body if I'm in a situation where that aspect of who I am somehow seems to take on a significance (perhaps because others are staring) that outstrips the one it has in my own view of myself. In my case, the fact that I am under 6 feet tall doesn't play a very large role in my self-conception; I know it's true of me, but it doesn't seem to be a very significant piece of who I am. However, if I were playing a pickup basketball game with my much-taller colleagues, I might begin to feel shame about my height, since in that context it might begin to overshadow everything else that is true about me.

In her book, Thomason ably defends her account of shame and draws out its normative implications, but for our purposes that oversimplified sketch should suffice. What I want to say is that I think holding a grudge is a bit like other-

[9] Some of van Monsjou's research supports the idea that often – even if not always – a grudge-holder views the transgressor with contempt. For example, some participants indicated that they themselves would never do what the transgressor had done (van Monsjou 2018: 30). Van Monsjou interprets this as a feeling of moral superiority, but it may also simply be a judgment that the transgressor did something that falls below the victim's personal baseline, which according to Bell (2013: 39-40), is one of the constituents of contempt.

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directed shame. I don't mean that it involves *shaming* someone, or trying to get someone to feel shame about something they've done. Instead, I mean that whereas shame arises in part from feeling that one's identity overshadows one's self-conception, grudges are partly a matter of seeing an aspect of someone *else's* identity as overshadowing the rest of one's conception of them. This is one way that anger can turn into a grudge: not only does the anger persist, but it also ends up changing the way you see the transgressor. Their transgression begins to overshadow other relevant facts about them and about your relationship with them.

Whether that's ever a fitting way to see someone is a question for another time. Macalester Bell argues that globalist emotions like contempt are sometimes fitting (2013: ch. 2) but we need not settle that question here. The lesson for us is that grudge-holding is globalist in just this way.

There's one more point to be made, though. We talk about grudges as things that we *hold*, and one way to cash out that metaphor is to talk in terms of *rumination* or *rehearsal*. The person who holds a grudge often voluntarily *grasps* the grudge and perhaps even takes steps to renew it (the way Anne does that day Gilbert rescues her on the pond). But we learned above that grudges need not be actively nursed. In some cases, it's not we who hold our grudges, but rather our grudges hold us, dominating our thoughts and guiding us toward certain interactions over others. And it's this *holding* aspect of grudges (whether us of them or them of us) that our analysis hasn't yet captured. Temporal persistence is part, but not all, of the story.

Suppose, for example, that a romantic partner is still healing from the aftermath of a significant betrayal but has committed themselves to working things out with their partner. Still, months or years later, they may find themselves triggered by certain situations. During those episodes where the negative feelings are reactivated, this partner reoccupies the globalist perspective for a period of time, finding it difficult – at least for a time – to see the bigger and more complex picture that was painted in detail over the course of several months of emotional late-night conversations and reinterpretations and attempts to make sense of how the betrayal happened. During those moments of reactivation, the simple fact of the betrayal looms larger than all those other explanations, apologies, and nuances. Does this person still hold a grudge against their romantic partner?

I think that the answer to this question depends on how much of a hold these negative feelings still have on the person who experiences them. Philosophers and psychologists who write on forgiveness often say that it involves "overcoming" one's resentment, but what does that come to, exactly? It can't mean – and these scholars don't think that it means – *never experiencing any twinge of anger about the transgression ever again*. Instead, it must mean something closer to "no longer be [ing] led or dominated" by the emotion (Bell 2013: 235). To overcome a negative feeling is not to eliminate it from one's mind altogether, but instead to be able to put it in its proper place when it does arise. (It is perhaps subtly different from the phenomenon of "letting go", helpfully explored by Brunning and Milam 2023.) And this means that someone might have easily reactivated persistent antagonistic globalist negative feelings toward a transgressor, but *not* hold a grudge against them, so long as those feelings, even when reactivated, are recognized and treated as recalcitrant intruders into a mind that has been hurt and which still bears the scars

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of the trauma. If the persistent feelings don't have a hold on the person in the relevant sense, then the person doesn't hold a grudge.

So, my final analysis is that grudges involve negative feelings toward the transgressor that are:

(1) antagonistic
(2) easily reactivated
(3) persistent
(4) globalist, and
(5) not-yet-overcome

This seems to capture the essence of Anne's grudge against Gilbert, and it does so without bringing in some of the more extreme elements – such as the disproportionality, the contempt, the bitterness, the desire for revenge, the commitment never to forgive – that seem to be extraneous to the grudge as such.

The analysis also makes clear that a lot of what makes us morally suspicious of grudges are not features of the grudge *per se* but instead concomitant attitudes that may, but need not, be present. Still, it's not as if this analysis implies that grudges are morally in the clear. There are still questions, for example, about whether we are ever justified in feeling antagonistic emotions toward transgressors, and even if so, whether it's ever fitting to give the transgression evaluative priority in our overall view of the transgressor. This analysis is also consistent with the commonsense view that grudges can be poisonous both for relationships and for the well-being of the person holding the grudge. But exploring the ethics of grudge-holding is a separate task.

Finally, let me point out that while grudge-holding lives in the same neighborhood – and perhaps the same cul-de-sac – as blame, it doesn't seem to fit easily into the common blame/forgiveness dichotomy. Instead, it seems to fit more broadly into a dichotomy we might describe with the phrases "holding against" and "letting go". Theorists of moral responsibility who wish to capture the full range of attitudes and interactions would do well, I think, to investigate these broader categories as well.[10]

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