

Condoning Wrongdoing

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Abstract:

It is widely acknowledged that condoning the wrongdoing of others can itself be worthy of moral blame. Accusations of someone's condoning the wrongdoing of others have become relatively common in public discourse. But it is not always clear what exactly is meant by these accusations or how the alleged condoning of others qualifies as morally blameworthy. I attempt to shed some light upon the notion of condoning wrongdoing, to contrast it with other related moral concepts, to explore the manner in which it can qualify as morally blameworthy, and to argue that in some instances it is not actually blameworthy.

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It is widely acknowledged that condoning the wrongdoing of others can itself be worthy of moral blame. Accusations of someone's condoning the wrongdoing of others have become relatively common in public discourse (for example, in October, 2018 both Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi charged that President Trump condoned physical violence). But it is not always clear what exactly is meant by these accusations or how the alleged condoning of the wrongdoing of others qualifies as morally blameworthy. Here I will attempt to shed some light upon the notion of condoning wrongdoing, to contrast it with other related moral concepts, to explore the manner in which it can qualify as morally blameworthy, and to argue that in some instances it is not actually blameworthy.

The basic idea involved in condoning the wrongdoing of another is that one is aware that wrongdoing has taken place (and this would include the wrongful intent to commit wrongdoing), one realizes that the wrongdoing deserves blame, and that one finds no good reason to cast blame upon the wrongdoer in any manner. The wrongdoing might consist of a single act, a cluster of acts, or a pattern of actions over a period of time. Definitions from a variety of dictionaries include the following: To disregard or overlook, to give tacit approval, and to disregard without protest or censure. The most elaborate definition in the literature is provided by Murphy and Hampton who define 'condonation' as the acceptance, without moral protest (either inward or outward) of an

action which ought to warrant such protest, made possible, first, by ridding oneself of the judgment that the action is wrong, so that its performer cannot be a wrongdoer, and, second, by ridding oneself of any attendant feelings (such as those which are involved in resentment) which signify one's protest of the action (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 40).

Fundamental to the notion of condoning is that it is dependent upon the reality that someone has in fact engaged in wrongdoing. I am in no position to condone someone's alleged wrongdoing if wrongdoing has not actually taken place. When two people are rehearsing a violent scene for a dramatic production, I might not realize that a rehearsal is taking place, become convinced that one of them is guilty of wrongdoing, decide to say nothing, and I might judge that I have condoned the wrongdoing. But I would be mistaken, for it is not possible to condone wrongdoing that does not exist. It is possible that I am blameworthy for something else, deciding not to say anything when confronted with what I believe to be wrongdoing, but that is not the same thing as being blameworthy for condoning wrongdoing.

One must be aware that wrongdoing has taken place if one can truly be judged to have condoned the wrongdoing. If I am totally unaware that someone has caused harm, I am in no position to condone it. On the other hand, to insist that a necessary condition of condoning wrongdoing is that one knows that the wrongdoing has taken place is to insist on a condition that is too strong. In some situations true belief that the wrongdoing has taken place may suffice to place one in a position to condone the wrongdoing. (Although one must believe that wrongdoing has taken place to be eligible to condone it, one might not believe that what has taken place *is* wrongdoing. All that is required is that one believes that what has taken place would generally be considered wrongdoing by societal standards.) If I come to believe that one of my children has stolen something and my suspicion is true but I lack the right sort of evidence to know that it is true, I can arguably condone this wrongdoing by shrugging my shoulders and saying nothing. More on this example in what follows.

Normally condoning takes the form of inaction, and normally it takes the form of inaction that is deliberate. There are, however, cases in which condoning can involve overt action. In a supermarket another shopper is placing handfuls of candy in her purse. When she realizes that I am watching, I smile and make a gesture that conveys affirmation of her actions.

In this example she is made aware that I condone her wrongdoing, but it is not a necessary feature of condoning that the wrongdoer realizes that someone else condones his or her actions. I might observe the shoplifter from a distance, admire her audacity to do so in a public place, and condone her wrongdoing on the basis of the admiration. This is not to say that I have done anything morally blameworthy, for, as I shall later argue, not all instances of condoning someone else's wrongdoing qualify as morally blameworthy.

Griswold draws a distinction between two kinds of condoning (Griswold 2007, 46-47). One kind of condoning consists of accepting and not disapproving of conduct, and the other kind consists of disapproving of conduct but tolerating it. The first kind is exemplified by observing

a person parking illegally in a spot reserved for the handicapped when all of the other spots in the same lot are occupied. I accept the driver's conduct without disapproving of it. The second kind is exemplified by hearing a senior level executive in the firm where I work humiliating one of my co-workers in front of the entire department. I find this behavior appalling, but I tolerate it in that I do not stand up for my co-worker in front of everyone else.

Condoning someone else's wrongdoing is weaker than enabling someone else's wrongdoing. Elsewhere (Mellema 2016, 46) I have defined the notion of enabling as follows. Suppose that moral agent A intentionally acts in such a way as to cause or produce harmful outcome O. Then moral agent B can be said to enable the production of O just in case A's acts would not produce O were it not for B's action, and B is aware that this action may contribute to O's occurrence. In this way B's action is a necessary condition of A's producing outcome O in the manner that A produces it. Condoning someone else's wrongdoing comes nowhere near this level of participation or involvement.

Condoning someone else's wrongdoing is also weaker than facilitating someone else's wrongdoing. Elsewhere (Mellema 2016, 55) I have defined the notion of facilitating as follows. Assume that a moral agent has decided to perform act A as a means to producing harm H. Then another agent facilitates the first agent's wrongdoing by increasing the antecedent likelihood that either A is successfully performed or that H is brought about by the performance of A, and doing so in a manner that is morally blameworthy. The basic idea is that one facilitates someone else's production of harm by making it more likely that the person produces the harm in question.

It is important to recognize that one can facilitate harm through one's inaction. A manager in a large financial institution learns that a co-worker has been dispensing insider information to selected clients and plans to do so again. The manager is in a position to alert federal authorities, senior officers in the organization, or to confront the co-worker, but does none of these. The inaction of the manager makes it more likely that the co-worker will dispense insider information in the future and hence qualifies as facilitating the co-worker's wrongdoing (wrongdoing which harms other shareholders).

Although facilitating someone's wrongdoing is a stronger notion than condoning someone's wrongdoing, there is some overlap between the two notions. One who condones another's wrongdoing does not normally do anything to make the harm more likely to occur. But neither does one who facilitates wrongdoing by way of inaction. It is the inaction that makes harm more likely to occur; the person does not *do* anything to make the harm more likely to occur (other than, of course, deciding not to do anything). Hence one who condones the wrongdoing of someone who produces harm might at the same time facilitate that person's production of harm. Accordingly, the manager in the previous paragraph not only facilitates the co-worker's production of harm but also condones what the co-worker does.

What is the point at which condoning someone else's wrongdoing itself becomes morally blameworthy? I believe it is at the point where one is morally expected not to turn a blind eye to the wrongdoing of another. Now moral expectation is a weaker notion than moral obligation or

duty. Whenever one has a moral obligation to perform an action, one likewise is morally expected to perform it. But the reverse is not true. One can be morally expected to perform an action and lack a moral obligation to perform it. Suppose, for example, that after paying for your purchases at a certain store, you are standing by the door waiting for the heavy rain to diminish. Suddenly a woman with her arms full of packages approaches with the intent of entering the store. It is very easy for you to open the door for her and, under the circumstances, you can be expected to do so. Not doing so does not qualify as the failure of moral obligation; it is the failure of moral expectation and would be at least mildly blameworthy.

Applying the concept of moral expectation to the topic of condoning wrongdoing, the following principle emerges: When and only when one is morally expected not to turn a blind eye toward the wrongdoing of another, one's condoning the wrongdoing is morally blameworthy. Suppose one is in a public park and observes a stranger fishing in a small lake nearby a sign that explicitly forbids fishing. It is reasonable to suppose that one is not morally expected to express displeasure to the person who is fishing. On the other hand, when I suspect that one of my children has stolen something, I can be morally expected to do more than simply shrugging my shoulders and saying nothing. If I follow this course of inaction, then my condoning what my child did (and recall that my suspicion is founded on truth) is morally blameworthy.

Social roles play a part in determining whether one can be morally expected not to turn a blind eye to someone else's wrongdoing. As a parent, I can be morally expected to be concerned about the consequences of my children's behavior (when they are young) to the extent that I not condone this behavior when it is more than slightly wrongful. If I were a paid employee of the park, I could be expected to approach the man who is fishing and request that he remove his line from the water. And if I were a teacher on playground duty, I could be expected to stop a child from bullying a smaller child.

When I condone someone else's wrongdoing by way of inaction, the inaction must be deliberate. Suppose that I observe someone's wrongdoing, I make a decision to reproach the person, but there is no opportunity to do so. In this example my failure to reproach the person is not deliberate and hence does not constitute condoning the person's wrongdoing.

One might suppose that reproaching someone regarding his or her wrongdoing is a sufficient condition for not condoning it. But this is not the case. Consider a situation where a child's misbehavior strikes his father as hilarious; perhaps the child makes a brilliantly witty but disrespectful comment to a pompous, obnoxious adult in a public place. The father feels obliged to reprimand his child, but inwardly he condones what his child did, delighted that an arrogant, insufferable adult was made to look foolish in front of others as the result of his child's wit.

This example shows that it is possible to condone someone's wrongdoing in one's heart. Although one reveals no outward signs of a condoning attitude or disposition, one inwardly is not in the least inclined to condemn the other's wrongdoing. Refusing to condone another's wrongdoing, on the other hand, is frequently a matter of both a person's outward actions and

interior feelings or dispositions. When I refuse to condone another's wrongdoing, I am typically motivated to take action to communicate this sentiment to the wrongdoer. If there is no opportunity to do so, as in the earlier example, other options are available. Suppose that a husband and wife in a restaurant observe an angry man shouting obscenities at the cashier on his way out the door. The husband and wife express agreement that his behavior is deplorable, and in this manner they make it evident that neither one condones what the man is doing.

Sometimes it is fear that prevents one from expressing displeasure concerning another's wrongdoing. If the wrongdoer is a stranger with a weapon, it might be highly imprudent to confront the person. But the failure to confront the person does not mean that one condones the stranger's behavior. Whether or not one condones this behavior is dependent upon one's feelings concerning the behavior. A condemnatory attitude or state of mind is almost always sufficient to guarantee that one does not condone the behavior in question, just as a feeling of approval concerning someone else's wrongdoing is normally a sufficient condition for ensuring that one condones it, assuming that one realizes that the other's behavior constitutes wrongdoing.

If a feeling of condemnation is normally sufficient to guarantee that one does not condone the behavior in question and a feeling of approval is normally sufficient to guarantee that one does condone it, what about feelings that are located in the intermediate zone between these two poles? Suppose that I observe another's wrongdoing, I am quite distracted by other thoughts, I barely have an opportunity to register feelings about the wrongdoing one way or another, thereby feeling neither a sense of approval nor a sense of condemnation, and I say or do nothing in reaction to it. Have I condoned the other's wrongdoing?

First, in cases of this type I might have no clear grasp of the nature of the wrongdoing in question, and I might not even recognize that what I am observing is wrongdoing at all. Under these conditions I am in no position to condone the wrongdoing. If I am at work and see two co-workers quarreling in a heated manner, I may suspect that wrongdoing has taken place but have no idea what it is. Thus, if I have barely had an opportunity to register feelings about the wrongdoing one way or another, it is possible that my awareness of the wrongdoing is not such that condoning is even feasible.

A second possibility is that, although I recognize that wrongdoing has taken place, I am uncertain as to the identity of the wrongdoing. Now in some cases it is possible to condone wrongdoing when uncertain as to the identity of the wrongdoer. Suppose that I know that one of my two children has broken a lamp in someone else's house. In this example it would be sensible to speak to both of them in order to learn which of them is guilty of breaking the lamp, and it would be irresponsible to throw my hands up in despair and say nothing. On the other hand, if wrongdoing has occurred in a public place and I am not sure of the identity of the wrongdoer, my failure to say or do anything does not rise to the level of condoning it.

On the basis of these considerations we might conclude that condoning wrongdoing does not take place unless one has a clear grasp and awareness of the nature of the wrongdoing and

the identity of the wrongdoer (with very few exceptions). In addition, if one barely notices the wrongdoing through no fault of one's own it is highly unlikely that one is in a position to condone it.

Sometimes one has a clear grasp of the nature of the wrongdoing as well as an awareness of the identity of the wrongdoer, but someone else is in a much better position to speak to the wrongdoer. In a store a child is angry and begins throwing merchandise on the floor. The child's parent is present and begins disciplining the child. If I have disapprovingly observed the child's behavior and also observed the parent's subsequent actions, I can be excused from saying or doing anything, and it would not be fair to accuse me of condoning the child's behavior.

Even if one qualifies as condoning the wrongdoing in cases where one does not approve of the behavior in question, it is far from clear that such condoning is worthy of moral blame. Recall that nothing is morally blameworthy when one condones another's wrongdoing, unless one can be morally expected to condemn it in some manner (including in one's heart). Frequently people condone the wrongful behavior they observe by others in situations where they are not expected to condemn the behavior. I observe a total stranger parking illegally. I am mildly amused and smile at the driver, indicating that I am not condemning what she did. But since I am not morally expected to chastise her, I am not blameworthy.

Second order condoning takes place when one condones someone else's condoning the wrongdoing of a third party. Imagine that a grandmother observes her daughter being treated horribly by the daughter's teenage son. He is treating his mother in a shockingly disrespectful manner, and his mother permits him to get away with it, thereby condoning his behavior. The grandmother, who by all rights should have a condemnatory attitude toward both her grandson's behavior and his mother's allowing him to get away with it, finds the situation amusing and in turn condones her daughter's condoning his behavior.

Sometimes a person causes somebody else to condone the behavior of a third party. Suppose that I am a mid-level manager in a financial institution and I come to learn that an employee in my department has engaged in questionable financial behavior. Before I have a chance to confront the employee, I am ordered by one of my superiors to ignore the situation, and I do as I am told. I do not particularly have condemnatory feelings toward the employee or what he did, and in the end I condone his behavior. In this set of circumstances I am no doubt not blameworthy for condoning the employee's behavior.

Condoning wrongful behavior can take the form of condoning the behavior of several individuals. Suppose that a large family lives in the house next door to mine, and it is obvious that their dog is suffering from starvation and neglect. Depending upon my reaction to the situation, it is possible for me to condone the wrongdoing. If so, I am condoning the wrongdoing of more than just a single individual.

It might be observed that my analysis sets a rather low bar for what counts as condoning the behavior of another. One might question whether someone condones the man's fishing in the park or the person parking illegally in a space reserved for the handicapped if one does not at least

register a negative attitude or feeling regarding such activity. This might especially be the case if there are others present who observe the activity and could potentially express disapproval. According to my analysis, the presence of other observers who condone wrongdoing has no effect on one's own situation. One who judges that I have condoned wrongdoing need not revise the judgment upon learning that others likewise condoned the same wrongdoing (it is different if someone else present *refuses* to condone it, as in the example of the mother who disciplines her child).

Here I reiterate the principle that condoning someone else's wrongdoing is morally blameworthy only if one is expected to at least feel disapproval. There can be multiple instances throughout the course of a day in which I observe wrongdoing, condone it, but escape being morally blameworthy for doing so. In these instances my condoning the wrongdoing is innocent of moral blame. Thinking of condoning wrongdoing as something that is frequently innocent from a moral perspective is not something that seems to have attracted attention in discussions about condoning wrongdoing, but it is a point that certainly deserves emphasis.

As to whether it is possible to condone one's own wrongdoing, I am inclined to judge that one can condone such wrongdoing if it occurred in the past. Suppose that someone tells me that I should be ashamed of what I did, and I respond truthfully that I am not in the least ashamed. Assuming that what I did was indeed a wrongdoing, I can be said to condone it. Whether my condoning it is blameworthy, of course, is another question altogether. What I do not think possible is my condoning a wrongdoing that I am planning for the future, for it does not yet exist.

In conclusion, there is a growing body of literature on the relationship between forgiving and condoning. More specifically, some have advanced the view that condoning can sometimes qualify as one type of forgiveness. Here I shall simply observe that this view has a certain appeal and the discussion it has generated is for the most part quite intriguing, but it lies outside the scope of this paper.

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