Mention morality in public life, and people generally think of bad behavior by politicians—of immorality, that is, such as sexual misconduct, bribe taking, and the most widespread of immoral political practices, pandering.

But while we can easily agree on what is immoral—a congressman texting pictures of his genitals, a governor taking kickbacks, a politician of any sort telling us what we want to hear by oversimplifying an issue (which makes us feel so good that we try not to notice)—we are rarely of one mind in what we consider moral.

And that is why it is hard to envision how the admirable notion advanced by Paul Nieuwenburg in his article “Conflicts of Values and Political Forgiveness” might progress from paper to practice. One struggles to imagine establishing a standard of political morality in a pluralistic society, at least one so widely shared that its violation would trigger some sort of forgiveness mechanism. It is almost as though Nieuwenburg is proposing a cure without defining the illness.

For example: Is it moral for America to use unmanned drones to attack military targets in Afghanistan? Yes, some say, because the policy’s skillful use can reduce terrorist threats to peace at a lower risk to U.S. forces than conventional weapons. No, others say, because it dehumanizes and thus facilitates warfare and leaves more civilians on the ground at lethal risk.

Certainly it is useful to weigh how we as citizens respond to the kind of decision making in the public arena that does not come easily or that arises amid alternatives that may all seem morally right, or at least not wholly wrong. We need to think about how we respond to public servants who arrive at morally complex conclusions that could be called wrong.

Nieuwenburg acknowledges at the outset the sad truth that politics tends to be hostile to public servants who venture beyond the certainty of black-and-white and into the real world of full-color decision making.

While “it is in the interest of citizens to have morally sensitive officials running their constitution,” he writes, “such officials face no better fate than those who lack this sensitivity.” This observation suggests that in Nieuwenburg’s home country, the Netherlands, as in the United States, voters usually turn aside candidates they judge to be insufficiently dogmatic toward our predisposed notions. In the
single example he cites to illustrate the need for the “political forgiveness” process he advocates, that of a high-ranking German police official, Nieuwenburg clarifies that he envisions this applying not only to elective office.

His goal is commendable. Beyond keeping officials who violate moral norms in office if they apologize for their lapses, Nieuwenburg clearly hopes that this process might encourage more frequent presence of morally thoughtful decision makers in the public arena.

“What the reason is that citizens have a right to be governed by officials with an acute awareness of the conflicts between the constitutional values of liberal democracy,” he writes. It is “a non-negligible accomplishment”—a big deal, that is—merely “to stand up to a moral dilemma.”

Indeed, it is. But we seem to like better to be governed by officials who see stick-figure dimensionality and derive political support by ignoring pesky nuance. And that is one reason we cannot agree on the moral standards that we might wish to see imposed.

What if, for example, the military jets that were scrambled on the morning of 9/11 had caught up with the airliners aimed at the World Trade Center? By what moral code would a general or a president order the downing of that passenger jet, presumably killing hundreds of innocent people? Is that act of mass murder justified because there is some higher morality in trying to save a greater number of people on the ground?

Or what if an official decided to cut aid from some drug-addicted mentally ill people so the money could be redirected to the care of impoverished diabetes patients? Both target groups are worthy of support. Surely such a choice would arise in the context of considerations both practical and moral. Yet advocates for each group would view the morality of reallocating those funds from different perspectives. Some would say the only moral course would be to raise taxes so each group could be helped. Not all would agree with that, either.

Or, on a point of the moment, consider Edward Snowden, whose act in leaking top-secret files revealing unimagined government snooping and data gathering renders him either hero or traitor, martyr or coward, defender of rights or thief. There is no doubt that Snowden committed crimes in using his role as a National Security Agency contractor to harvest and distribute the information. Does it matter that he seems to have been motivated to this criminal behavior by a moral judgment that the government was breaching the privacy rights fundamental to a free society?

In Nieuwenburg’s better world, Snowden (whom he does not mention) would have access to “some kind of public ritual” involving an apology for breaching a moral code—in this case, breaking the laws aimed at keeping government secrets—and in exchange would get the “restoration of a relationship of trust” between him and his government. Whether Snowden would avail himself of that option is questionable, as he seems unlikely to concede that his actions warrant an apology.

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Nieuwenburg leaves to others what he calls the “technical task” of constructing an apparatus to realize his vision. Of course, the task of judging public officials’ behavior and meting out rewards or penalties in a free society falls ultimately to voters. How lovely it would be if we could bring an appreciation for moral complexity to that fundamental task of citizenship. How unlikely—even as unlikely, that is, of citizens reaching consensus on what constitutes moral behavior in the public arena or what its forgiveness-worthy absence might look like.