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Review of “Forgiveness and Revenge”

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Book Review

Forgiveness and Revenge, Trudy Govier. London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. x + 205. Hardback. ISBN: 0-415-27855-4

Notwithstanding its title, Trudy Govier's book is much more about forgiveness than it is about revenge. Chapter 1 is the first of two chapters about revenge, in which Govier argues that seeking revenge is objectionable for both practical and moral reasons. Chapter 2 is a rejection of group revenge. These chapters set the stage for Govier's thesis in the remaining six chapters that forgiveness releases a victim of injustice from bitterness and resentment that is backward-looking and unhealthy, and that political forgiveness enables parties in a conflict to achieve reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Along the way, Govier addresses some of the central issues concerning forgiveness. Is a forgiver condoning the wrongdoing? Can forgiveness be unilateral, that is, without acknowledgement and repentance from the wrongdoer? Can groups as well as individuals forgive? Are there atrocities that are so monstrous as to be unforgivable? Some of these issues have been discussed in other philosophical writings. Govier is aware of the views of these writers, discusses them, and presents her own take on their ideas.

Chapter 3 explores what is involved in forgiveness. Govier rejects the argument that resentment should not be overcome as it could ground a sense of justice, for the reason that resentful people are vindictive towards others and preoccupied only with themselves. She also distinguishes between forgiving and forgetting. Chapter 4 is about the topic of unilateral forgiveness for both individuals and groups. Govier argues that there are ethical reasons to forgive those who have not repented, as respect for persons is incompatible with continued resentment and ill-will towards them. She also suggests that unilateral forgiveness may initiate acknowledgement by the offender and lead to eventual reconciliation.

Chapter 5 deals with the possibility of forgiveness in politics, addressing three forms of skepticism about forgiveness between groups. Govier argues that groups can be moral agents, with feelings, attitudes and beliefs, and can suffer wrongful harm. She denies that only the primary victim is entitled to forgive, and argues that the ability to forgive is within reach of most ordinary human beings, not just moral saints such as Nelson Mandela. Chapter 6 is concerned with the possibility that there are deeds, such as Nazi genocidal crimes against Jews, which are too atrocious to be forgiven. Govier utilizes South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu's distinction between the wrongdoer and his wrongful deeds, to deny that the monstrous character of acts can be used to show the perpetrator to be "entirely lacking potential for positive change." She suggests that there are situational factors that may lead ordinary people to act badly.

Chapter 7 continues the argument that moral transformation is possible, no matter how badly a person may have acted. Govier rejects John Kekes' thesis that "some people have permanently evil characters and deserve to be treated accordingly." Instead, she thinks that human beings always have the ability to reflect on the merits of their actions and to change their characters and habits. To believe otherwise is to make the mistake of accepting a Myth of Pure Evil. Finally, in Chapter 8, Govier turns to the concept of reconciliation, mostly presented in a political context. Obstacles to forgiveness in politics are discussed, including non-acknowledgement of crimes, the 'lure of the ethnic tent', and the temptation to assert moral superiority by claiming victimhood.

Govier's book is written in a way that is accessible to non-philosophers, and philosophers who need an introduction to the ethics of forgiveness will find it a good place to start. But readers with a philosophical interest in the topic should be alerted to the fact that Govier relies more on drawing conclusions from selected examples than in providing either a philosophical analysis of the concept of forgiveness, or an examination of alternative moral theories of forgiveness.

Part of the explanation for her approach to the topic by way of examples can be deduced from the background to the book. As Govier tells us in the Preface, her "interest in forgiveness in politics was stimulated by a trip to South Africa in March 1997." She has since worked closely and co-written papers with Wilhelm Verwoerd from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and his input into the book is clear from the many references and examples attributed to him. Although Govier's book begins with individual revenge and forgiveness, there is a sense in which she has generalized from political forgiveness that had been exemplified (for her) in the South African experience.

Is individual and political forgiveness basically the same concept? Govier recognizes the need to show that groups could be the subjects and objects of forgiveness (p. 87). It is necessary to show that "a group has the capacity to act which is distinct from that of unrelated individuals," that people can be harmed as a group, and that groups can have beliefs, attitudes and feelings. The five pages that she devotes to this challenge are not quite sufficient for the task. Relying on an idea from Larry May, Govier provides examples to show that there are "actions that cannot be performed by individuals acting alone," and therefore are attributed to a group. This is true of choral singing, for instance, but the argument overlooks *what makes a group an agent*. An individual alone cannot fight a boxing match, but is boxing a group activity as opposed to an activity in which more than one person has to individually participate? If cooperation or joint intentions are necessary for group agency and responsibility, then it may not be so easy for Govier to attribute wrongdoing and forgiveness to a group in every instance of political conflict.

Govier's examples of harms to groups concern individuals harmed because of their group affiliation. What she calls secondary and tertiary victims of harm are individuals who are indirectly harmed. But she has not shown that there is any possibility of harming a group over and above, and not reducible to, the harm to individuals. Finally, Govier thinks that groups can have beliefs, attitudes and feelings because otherwise, "what the group is doing does not make sense." The problem is that this is simply an assumption: she has not shown that individual beliefs, attitudes and feelings cannot be sufficient to make sense of group action. In fact, this seems to be the case for her example of mob action in the storming of the Bastille.

Contrary to Govier, individual and political forgiveness may differ also in moral justification. She has a problem, I think, showing that it is morally better, not just practically healthier, for an individual to forgive. Concerning bilateral forgiveness where the wrongdoer shows repentance, Govier writes, "In

forgiving the offender, the victim acknowledges him as a human being with worth, dignity, and the moral freedom to change his ways" (p. 49). Firstly, I think that the moral necessity of respecting the wrongdoer does not always support forgiveness. Secondly, Govier's preference for Kantian morality is a reflection of her implicit acceptance of Christian ideas, thereby limiting the generalization of her argument to examples other than those chosen by her.

To respect a person as an autonomous agent is to hold that person responsible for his actions. Kant advocated retributive reasons for punishment for the reason that a responsible wrongdoer deserves to be punished. Govier argues that respect for persons also entails a willingness to allow the wrongdoer a fresh start in life. An agent should be distinguished from his actions, and not be labeled by his past deeds. Now, it may be that because there is no further interaction between victim and wrongdoer, the latter does not depend on the forgiveness of the former to make a fresh start. It may be sufficient for the wrongdoer to pay his dues and commit himself to a new beginning. Moreover, the argument that victims should allow the wrongdoer a fresh start does not apply to unilateral forgiveness where the wrongdoer does not acknowledge his misdeed. If the latter does not think that he has done wrong, the forgiveness of the victim may actually be considered disrespectful of persons (as Govier in fact recognizes in an example on p. 46).

Govier takes pain to stress that the ethical basis for forgiveness is secular. Although she does discuss 'forgivingness' as a virtue, she clearly accepts the Kantian idea of respect for persons as the correct moral view: "Morality is about how we treat each other as persons" (p. 165). But she also notes, "there is a stronger emphasis on forgiveness, and a greater stress on unconditional forgiveness, in Christianity than in Judaism" (p. 101). As mentioned, the central example on which Govier builds her account of forgiveness is that of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that was set up by President Nelson Mandela, a professed Christian, and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The actions of these men were based on Christian ideas, and the example may be rather exceptional. Why shouldn't we generalize from Simon Wiesenthal's attitude towards forgiveness instead? Moreover, Govier's appeal to Kantian ethics as a secular moral theory overlooks the fact that Kant's view developed in the context of a Christian society.

With respect to political forgiveness, Govier sees it as necessary for reconciliation and peaceful co-existence. The problem is that by arguing from examples, she only shows that forgiveness *may* foster reconciliation, and not that there is no other way to bring the latter about. A further problem is that the examples are not entirely convincing. It is too early to tell whether reconciliation has been successful in South Africa, and in other examples, she seems to be presenting a counterfactual case: that people would have reconciled had they been prepared to forgive. Another problem is that she has assumed and has not shown that reconciliation through forgiveness is morally better than its alternatives. Perhaps it is more important for a group to maintain an identity, even one that is based on victimhood. Perhaps it is more important that monstrous crimes be unforgiven to emphasize their severity, or to deter such crimes from being committed again. Perhaps a willingness to forgive is incompatible with justice. (Govier raises some of these possibilities herself.)

The book is replete with examples, which are of great value to stimulate moral and philosophical thinking. It is a pity that Govier has not incorporated more philosophical discussion from different theoretical perspectives to accompany the examples. Instead, she interprets them simply as illustrations of her own view. But one thing I do like about the examples provided in the book is their range in terms of history and geography. For American readers, there is much that can be learned here about the nature of

conflict in other parts of the world.

I have avoided mention of the events of September 11, as Govier had written the book before they took place (but states in her Preface that these events in 2001 did not give her reason to change her mind). One worrying aspect of how things have turned out since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City is the lack of perspective and context for Americans to evaluate their response. Many of the examples from other parts of the world that are chronicled in Govier's book will challenge Americans to appreciate the complexities of the moral issues of forgiveness, resentment and revenge, that go beyond a simplistic comparison with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. (I do not mean that all Americans need this broadening of perspective, since among them are such moral exemplars as former President, international statesman and Nobel Peace prizewinner Jimmy Carter.)

I therefore conclude my review of Govier's book with a few quotations that have direct relevance to serious moral thinking in the post-September 11 world, about reasons to go to war, and about the divisions between people of different races and religions:

"What is wrong with revenge is that to act as agents of revenge, we have to indulge and cultivate something evil in ourselves, the wish to deliberately bring suffering to another human being and contemplate that suffering for our own satisfaction and enjoyment." (p. 13)

"Agents of revenge communicate a fearsome message...inspiring terror and hatred, not one of concern for humanity and respect for the rule of law and human rights." (p. 35)

"People engage in seriously wrong, or evil, acts because they find those acts useful or necessary in pursuing personal or ideological goals and do not take seriously the harm done to others." (p. 126)

"A self-serving, 'us-first' victim perspective according to which our victimhood is most paramount for our policy and more urgent than the victimhood of anyone else should be strongly contested in public debate. Even in the wake of immense tragedy and shock, such a perspective is likely to have the baneful effects of propping up the Myth of Evil, falsely polarizing groups in conflict, misrepresenting issues of policy, and supporting rash retaliatory moves that will worsen the problems they seek to eliminate." (pp. 154-5)

Govier's book has earned a qualified endorsement from me, but an endorsement nevertheless. For clearly, her heart is in the right place, and the examples in her book will stimulate readers to fill in the gaps in argumentation with their own philosophical analyses and reasoning.

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Annual Review of Psychology 31:169-193. CrossRef Google Scholar. Deutsch, M. (1973) The resolution of conflict. Yale University Press. Google Scholar. Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1940) The Nuer. Oxford University Press. Google Scholar. Fehr, E. & Gächter, S. (2002) Altruistic punishment in humans. Nature 415:137-140. CrossRef Google Scholar PubMed. A systems view on revenge and forgiveness systems. Tyler J. Wereha and Timothy P. Racine. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Volume 36, Issue 1. Adaptationism and intuitions about modern criminal justice. Michael Bang Petersen. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Volume 36, Issue 1. Affective antecedents of revenge. published psychological articles on forgiveness were descriptions of forgiveness-based therapeutic techniques for helping people recover from the effects of traumatic experiences (and residual vengeful feelings) that impaired their psychological and relational functioning (e.g., Hope, 1987). The "revenge as disease" conceit had a predictable effect on how forgiveness came to be understood: If the desire for revenge is a disease, then perhaps forgiveness is the cure. psychology of revenge is undermined. We review some relevant evidence below. This definition includes as cases of revenge all retaliatory impositions of costs that are caused by a mechanism designed for this purpose—even acts that are not based on deliberation. Just as revenge can serve a purpose, forgiveness is also important for the evolution and maintenance of social relationships that are important to human survival. If you want to have positive relationships in a group or team, you need to have a psychological mechanism that allows people to erase the ill will in order for relationships to evolve. Is that right? Forgiveness and revenge are perhaps more social constructions? So the questions become, in the contexts you so beautifully articulate and in many others how do we best manage within ourselves and with others these emotions of love and rage? One of the things I really like about your piece is the centrality of hope and the commitment that world can be better. Forgiveness is the best form of taking revenge as it makes him suffer from a sort of humiliation. A man decides to take revenge upon others when one is badly hurt by his friends or by his relatives. One gets angry when a person goes against him or does some harm and loses the mental balance and takes revenge upon him. Instead of taking revenge in the imbalance of mind if one pardons the person who does harm, the latter will suffer from a kind of humiliation. Jesus was crucified for going contrary to the accepted opinion at that time. After crucified he prayed to god almighty forgive them as th