
In this engaging study, two well-known moral philosophers discuss the nature of forgiveness and its role in the moral life in prose of admirable crispness and clarity. Although aimed primarily at a general readership, the book has much to offer to professional philosophers and students and can be commended as one of the best critical overviews of this more than usually contentious virtue. ‘Forgiveness is admirable,’ say Garrard and McNaughton, ‘because it represents a moral achievement: the triumph of goodwill over ill will, of love over hate’ (p.120). Forgiveness is a gift which people of good character may bestow on those who have wronged them, though it cannot usually be demanded as a right (pp. 116, 121). But the authors’ praise of forgiveness is by no means unqualified or undiscriminating; forgiveness, they think, should carry some serious moral health warnings. While forgiveness at its best is a praiseworthy and positive means of mending fences and a powerful expression of our human solidarity, it can also be ‘glib and facile’ (p. 29) or make too light of offences that deserve to be resented. If *Forgiveness* is a paean to the virtue it discusses, its trumpets are to some extent muted.

A target of special criticism is the ‘boosterism’ of forgiveness in contemporary ‘self-help’ manuals, where ‘forgiveness is all about the victim’ (p. 13), a feel-good device to enable subjects of wrongdoing to escape the past and move on. This ‘therapeutic’ conception of forgiveness, in advising victims to cancel their resentments and ignore past injuries for the sake of their present peace of mind, seems to leave morality out of the picture altogether. It forgets that genuine forgiveness is a gift that the offended gives to the offender, and one given without blinking the reality and moral gravity of the offence. (In any case we cannot just forgive at will, as the therapeutic approach falsely supposes; forgiving typically takes time to accomplish, as we struggle to replace an attitude of ill-will with one of good will towards the offender (p. 96).) In an echo of Bishop Butler, Garrard and McNaughton are at pains to emphasise the legitimacy of feeling resentment at unjustified injuries, especially when those injuries are unrepented by the wrongdoer. Someone who ‘feels too little indignation at the spectacle of serious wrongdoing is suffering from both an emotional and cognitive deficit’ (p. 38), and it is false to assume that a person who finds it hard to forgive some serious injury must be morally inferior to another who forgives it readily; for while it is certainly possible to harbour a resentment too long, it is also possible to dismiss an injury too lightly. Forgiveness is problematic because while the argument for forgiveness ‘speaks to our desire for reconciliation, harmony and generosity, the case against it satisfies our commitment to justice, to moral responsibility, to an uncompromising rejection of atrocity’ (p. 40). Why, after all, should we strive to feel good will to other people who have not shown any towards us? Maybe lasting resentment is exactly what we ought to feel towards them, at least unless they repent and apologise (and even then they cannot demand our forgiveness as of right).

Admitting the strength of the case against it, Garrard and McNaughton nevertheless conclude that forgiveness of a certain ‘robust and unsentimental’ kind is a valuable part of our moral repertoire (pp. 103-4). The ‘robustness’ of this style of
Forgiveness appears in what it may coexist with: an unwillingness to wrap the past in kindly oblivion, a refusal to restore earlier friendly or cooperative relations, and a demand that the offender should suffer punishment or make atonement. One can forgive yet still feel indignation at the injury done to one, though one cannot retain hostile feelings towards the wrongdoer; and while one may hold that he should be punished for retributive or deterrent reasons, one cannot revel in the pain that punishment inflicts (p. 105). And since the core of forgiveness is the substitution of good will for ill-will, and not merely the extinguishing of the latter, one must wish for the future flourishing of the wrongdoer (along good moral lines, of course). To explain why the cultivation of such attitudes is virtuous, the authors appeal ultimately to a notion of ‘human solidarity’ (p. 110f.). Because we share a common moral frailty and susceptibility to wrongdoing,’ it is fitting to find in that ‘dreadful commonality’ a ‘reason for forgiveness’ – a reason that may extend even to forgiving the unrepentant (pp. 113, 118).

Garrard and McNaughton’s advocacy of a ‘robust’ (in the sense of ‘exacting’) form of forgiveness may strike some readers as amounting to rather less than a ringing endorsement of the virtue. Is ‘robust’ really just a kinder word for ‘thin’? To defend a concept of forgiveness that is worth the name while maintaining an unswerving respect for justice is to walk a very narrow tightrope; and although Garrard and McNaughton attempt to walk it as well as anyone, they do so with doubtful success. In contrast to Robert Enright and the Forgiveness Institute, they reject the view that genuine forgiveness excludes all negative attitudes, such as ‘anger, indignation and sadness,’ and the refusal to have anything more to do with the wrongdoer (p. 71). To relinquish these attitudes, or to welcome the offender with open arms, would be inappropriate, they claim, if it signifies that the offence didn’t really matter, or that it should now be forgotten, or that it makes no difference to a relationship. Forgiveness does moral harm if it persuades an offender to underrate the wrongness of his offence or to underestimate its effect on the victim. An act of forgiveness which blurs the contours of the moral landscape may be a well-meant gift but it is also a misguided one. But this leaves us with the question of what the content of the gift can be if it is not the banishment of such negative attitudes.

To say, as the authors do, that to forgive is to substitute good will for ill-will towards the offender seems on promising lines but needs considerable fleshing out. And here the authors have less to offer than one might have hoped. Forgiving an offender, they argue, is consistent with having nothing further to do with him and demanding his punishment or reparation. A person can also forgive while refusing to be reconciled or even to ‘rub along’ with the offender (‘An abused woman may forgive her partner, but feel that it’s unsafe to be fully reconciled with him’ (p. 96).). The trouble with this account is that it seems to leave little more to the good will involved in forgiveness than a vague (if sincere) desire for his future well-being – a well-being that one need not personally lift a finger to assist. If the merit of this book is that it makes a strong case for thinking that maybe this is as far as victims should normally go in treating with their offenders, it also risks putting the concept of forgiveness at risk of death by too many qualifications.