Margaret R. Holmgren


Margaret Holmgren’s Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing offers a comprehensive virtue-oriented theory advocating “an integrated attitude of unconditional genuine forgiveness” as always being morally worthy (p. 26). This attitude is integrated, unconflicted, and undertaken unilaterally, independent of any repentance or reparations from the wrongdoer. Genuine forgiveness requires looking squarely at the wrong that was done, without denial or evasion, regarding oneself as a person with moral value and worthy of respect, and dealing with the wrongdoer about the issues that arose from the event (p. 63). The victim is free to forgive unilaterally, without waiting for apology or atonement. Similarly, if a wrongdoer does the corresponding moral and epistemic work, owning up to his actions and his feelings about it, acknowledging the victim's personhood, offering atonement if that would not harm the victim further, then he may achieve genuine self-forgiveness, independent of the victim's response (p. 111). Ideally, each party should engage the other, but Holmgren distinguishes the processes because in some cases interaction could be dangerous. Genuine forgiveness does not require or necessarily occasion reconciliation. Holmgren is adamant that moral theory and moral persons treat both victims and perpetrators as persons, worthy of respect, compassion, and genuine goodwill. This trio of concepts echoes through the book.

Holmgren carefully positions forgiveness debates within general contemporary Anglo-American ethical issues and theories, making Forgiveness and Retribution an important scholarly contribution. Combining solid grounding in both Kantian and virtue ethics, the analysis emphasizes character and yet cautions against judging persons. Arguing for the unconditional value of cultivating an attitude of forgiveness, Holmgren attacks both personal and political retributivism. Holmgren's arguments against retributivism are clear, and, even when not compelling, present criticisms worth addressing. Beginning with issues of forgiveness and retribution on the level of individuals, Holmgren applies this analysis to offender self-forgiveness, and then to restorative justice. I focus here on what Holmgren identifies as “the paradigm of forgiveness,” as this is fundamental to the theory. Although I disagree with Holmgren's core theses (that genuine unconditional forgiveness is always morally worthy and that retributivism is always a mistake), her arguments raise important considerations. This is a rich and thoughtful book, worthy of study, and no brief review can do it justice.
Holmgren’s positive thesis fits well with many religious perspectives on forgiveness, but here she offers a secular defense. Consider her final sentence: “I have also provided some support for His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s claim that if our overall state of heart and mind is wholesome, then the rest of our moral deliberations and decision-making will be wholesome as well” (p. 278). With this commitment to wholesomeness, I worry that Holmgren has not completely faced up to the heinousness of the crimes some people commit against others. Her view cannot countenance unforgiveable acts, and explicitly denies that there are unforgiveable persons.

Holmgren’s “paradigm of forgiveness” consists of six required tasks for the victim of wrongdoing, unless “the wrong is relatively trivial, if we are advanced spiritual masters like the Dalai Lama or Lopon-la, or if we have become very adept at responding to wrongdoing” (p. 58). So, pretty much everyone must do these tasks, and the grave wrongs that constitute atrocities are well within the scope of Holmgren’s concerns. Many of the tasks are uncontroversial, even if sometimes couched in terms with which one could argue. For example, the first task centers on the victim’s need to rebuild her self-esteem, which may have been damaged by the wrong done. Not every wrong, even a grave wrong, shakes the person’s sense of her own worth. The issue is not restoring self-esteem, but reclaiming one’s moral standing, before oneself and others (see Alisa L. Carse and Lynne Tirrell, “Forgiving Grave Wrongs”, Putting Forgiveness In Perspective, C. Allers and M. Smit, eds. (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press), 2010, pp. 43–65). This fits with Holmgren’s requirement that a victim must squarely face the wrong done to her, see it as a wrong, and see herself as having moral worth. And yet, this is more than self-esteem. If one’s world has been shattered, as in genocide, then one might need to work—usually with others—to regain a moral foothold. One might think that a survivor who has not reclaimed her own moral standing may not be in a position to bestow a new moral status (“forgiven”) on anyone else. On the other hand, one could argue that the very attempt to bestow such a status might be a victim’s way of reclaiming her own moral standing, through exercising her moral powers.

Holmgren rightly emphasizes that the survivor must face her feelings about the event, for “these feelings will connect her to the reality of what has happened and help her to appreciate more fully both the nature of the wrong and her own status as a person” (p. 60). Fair enough: ignoring and denial are not forgiving. As she reminds us, some survivors will not need to work for this, if they have neither suppressed nor denied their feelings. Here I wish Holmgren had more fully explored the crucial connection between the moral and epistemic grasp of the wrong.

For Holmgren, to have integrity, a victim must recognize the wrongdoer’s personhood. Holmgren’s consistent emphasis on the moral value of offenders