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978-1-107-01796-2 - Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing

Margaret R. Holmgren

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Forgiveness and Retribution

Responding to Wrongdoing

Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing argues that, ultimately, forgiveness is always the appropriate response to wrongdoing. In recent decades, many philosophers have claimed that unless certain conditions are met, we should resent those who have wronged us personally and that criminal offenders deserve to be punished. Conversely, Margaret R. Holmgren posits that we should forgive those who have ill-treated us, but in many cases, only after working through a process of addressing the wrong. Holmgren then reflects on the kinds of laws and social practices a properly forgiving society would adopt.

Margaret R. Holmgren is associate professor of philosophy at Iowa State University. She co-edited *Ethical Theory: A Concise Anthology* (2000) with Heimir Giersson.

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“Margaret Holmgren’s book is a daring attempt to defend a new paradigm of forgiveness that would radically reorient our attitudes toward those who wrong us and our way of thinking about punishment and criminal law. No doubt the discussion it provokes will be intense.”

– George W. Harris, author of *Reason’s Grief: An Essay on Tragedy and Value*

“Moral, political, and legal philosophers who prize theoretical unity and comprehensiveness will appreciate Margaret Holmgren’s new book, which begins with a foundational virtue ethic and from it systematically derives conclusions about how individuals and institutions should respond to wrongdoers. Holmgren’s work is probably the most thoughtful and thorough defense of an unconditional forgiveness approach to wrongdoers, one that critically responds to work by contemporary retributivists and that should give them pause. Of particular interest is the fact that Holmgren argues that principles such as respect for offenders and for victims, to which retributivists standardly appeal, are best interpreted in ways that support anti-retributivist conclusions, such as the restitutive approach to punishment for which Holmgren is rightly well-known.”

– Thaddeus Metz, Humanities Research Professor,
University of Johannesburg

“Margaret Holmgren has written a very stimulating book on forgiveness... An additional virtue of her book is a discussion of forgiveness in the context of criminal punishment – a discussion in which she makes creative suggestions concerning the social and legal institutions that a truly forgiving society would adopt. I recommend that all those interested in a serious discussion of forgiveness read this book and ponder its many insights.”

– Jeffrie G. Murphy, Arizona State University, author
of the book *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*

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For my sister, Janet W. Holmgren

In memory of my mother, Jean Dunn Robb, and of Campbell

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Preface

Human history is full of turning points. Although we may prefer not to think about it, the one we face now is arguably the most momentous of all that have occurred up to this point in time. If we do not learn to work together as a global community within the next decade or two, we may well cause irreparable damage to the planet that results in seriously diminished life prospects for all who inhabit it in the future. In fact, irreversible damage is already occurring, and our goal now must be to minimize it.

I believe that if we are to rise to the occasion and meet the critical challenge that our generation has been handed, each of us must establish within ourselves a predominant attitude of real goodwill toward all beings. This task is different from attempting to work out policies that maximize preference-satisfaction globally, or from attempting to articulate a hierarchy of universal human rights. Both of these latter aims are important, but not as important as learning to care on a deep and abiding level about every being there is.¹ If we could learn to do this one thing, I think our policies would fall into place and we would be able to do what we need to do to create a good future for all. This book on forgiveness is my small contribution toward this vision that I pray we will all have the wisdom to adopt.

This book, then, is intended for anyone who has a serious interest in forgiveness. Although it addresses the philosophical literature on forgiveness, I have tried to make it accessible to those in other disciplines

¹ The term “care,” as I use it here, should be understood to entail respect. The concept of respect will be discussed in Chapter 2.

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and also to a lay audience. A lay friend very generously offered to read the entire manuscript for me, and she reported that she was able to follow the reasoning throughout, with interest. I hope that other readers who are not professional philosophers will have the same experience.

I have one important caveat to issue about this book. It seems to me that true moral growth is not simply a matter of constructing a moral theory that performs better than its competitors in achieving reflective equilibrium, and then using will power to adhere to the results. Although it is well motivated, this “white-knuckle virtue,” as I call it, does not reflect a true change in our attitudes. Instead, it amounts to a suppression of the attitudes we actually hold. A more meaningful kind of moral growth comes with a deep change in attitudes – a change in what we see as most salient in the various situations we encounter in our lives, in how we feel about these situations, and in how we are motivated to behave. Changes of this sort generally do not occur overnight. Instead, they require a good deal of contemplation over time and, among other things, an honest exploration of the various nuances of our current feelings and attitudes.

When we realize that we have been seriously wronged by others or have seriously wronged them, we are likely to go through an initial period of pain and confusion in which our thoughts and feelings are not what we would ideally like them to be. Although this book will provide a strong defense of unconditional genuine forgiveness, I ask the reader to bear in mind that this state is generally achieved through the type of process just described. It is therefore important that we not condemn ourselves or others for experiencing negative emotions as we respond to wrongdoing.² To do so is not only unfair, it is also counterproductive in that it is likely to obstruct the path to lasting moral transformation.

Finally, Sharon Lamb has suggested that persons who write about forgiveness are often deeply influenced by their religious beliefs, and that some authors may be engaged in the task of promoting them.³ It would therefore be helpful for those of us who write on forgiveness to be explicit about these matters at the outset. I was raised as an Episcopalian, although I never developed a high level of religious devotion in my early years. From the age of fifteen until the fall of 1999, I had no religious affiliation. In the fall of 1999 I was exposed to Tibetan Buddhism, and

² It goes without saying that engaging in negative behavior is another matter. Here, clearly, suppression is a good thing.

³ Sharon Lamb, *Before Forgiving*, p. 10.

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I have been practicing and studying in this tradition since that time. While Tibetan Buddhism has deeply influenced my belief system in the past decade, my thinking about response to wrongdoing has remained quite consistent over the past twenty-five years. I believe that part of my attraction to Tibetan Buddhism is its harmony with the deepest values I have held over time. In any case, it is not my intention here to advocate for Tibetan Buddhism. To do so would be antithetical not only to the spirit of philosophical inquiry but also to the spirit of Tibetan Buddhism itself, which eschews proselytizing and supports individuals in pursuing whatever path of moral or spiritual growth is most productive for them. Tibetan Buddhism also harmonizes nicely with Western philosophy in that it invites individuals to subject every idea to rigorous critical scrutiny.

My work on forgiveness began with a conversation over dinner with Joseph Kupfer and Lu Klatt, and they have each offered me important insights from the disciplines of philosophy and psychology, respectively. From a broader standpoint, I owe a great debt of gratitude to the late Edmund L. Pincoffs. He and I talked extensively about punishment, desert, and virtue-oriented approaches to ethics. Robert Enright contacted me after the publication of my first article on forgiveness. Although we had been working in different disciplines, we found that we had arrived independently at remarkably similar views of forgiveness. I have profited from discussions with him, as well as from discussions on this topic with Jeffrie Murphy. In my judgment, Jeffrie Murphy has done more to stimulate the philosophical discussion of forgiveness than any other author. The spirited interdisciplinary discussion of forgiveness that has emerged in the two-and-a-half decades following the publication of Murphy and Hampton's *Forgiveness and Mercy* has been very fruitful.

Special thanks go to my friend Kay Knifer of Lyons, Colorado, who read the entire manuscript from a lay perspective and offered me much-needed support and encouragement. I also owe a large debt of gratitude to many other individuals who have helped me to refine my thinking and complete this work. Specifically, I would like to acknowledge Kevin deLaplante, Carla Fehr, George Harris, Ned Hettinger, Janet Krengel, Sharon Lamb, Thomas Magnell, Kate Padgett Walsh, Bill Robinson, Tony Smith, and Christianna White. In the spring of 1998, Iowa State University provided me with a faculty development leave that was beneficial in the very early stages of my research. I also owe a great deal to Robert Dreesen, my editor at Cambridge University Press, to three anonymous readers for Cambridge who read carefully through the

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manuscript and made many valuable suggestions, and to the Cambridge editorial staff (especially Abigail Zorbaugh). Special thanks go as well to my manuscript editor, Ronald Cohen, who played a significant role in shaping the text, which I consider very much improved as a result of his work, and who patiently coached me through the process of creating the index. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my mother, the late Jean Dunn Robb, and my sister, Janet Warner Holmgren, for the tremendous support they have given me throughout this project.

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