

Title: Forgiving without Forgetting: Ethically Obligatory Memory

Abstract: We are often urged by the norms of folk morality to forgive and to forget wrongs done to us. However, forgiving and forgetting are clearly quite distinct phenomena. In this paper, I explore the possibility that there are situations in which (1) a person's forgiveness of a wrongdoing is either ethically admirable or even ethically obligatory and nevertheless in which (2) the same person is morally required to cultivate and to protect memories of moral harms done to him/her, which he/she has forgiven.

Begin with the idea that to forgive is to renounce and overcome, for morally good reasons, feelings of resentment toward someone who has wronged one (Murphy & Hampton 15). Many philosophers claim that it is morally impermissible to forgive a wrongdoer unless that wrongdoer takes certain steps - steps that include apology, showing regret, attempting to make recompense, and undergoing *metanoia* (Griswold 59ff). Typically, arguments for this claim rely on the premise that attempting to forgive without demanding and receiving conciliatory behavior of this kind from the wrongdoer demonstrates a lack of self-respect, a lack of respect for the moral norms that the wrongdoer has violated, and, perhaps, even involves a condonation of the wrongdoers action (Haber 59-60).

I take this premise for granted and contend that even after a wrongdoer has put him/herself in a position where it is permissible to be forgiven, self-respect and respect for morality require that one cultivate and protect memories of the wrongdoing itself. To begin with, morally acceptable self-respect requires that one recognize *one's own* moral rights and treat them as seriously as anyone else's (Hill 12). Since it would be wrong to allow oneself to forget serious moral wrongs done to people with whom one's has close ties, it is also wrong to allow oneself to do likewise with wrongs done to one. Likewise, respect for the norms of morality require that we do not simply forget violations, regardless of whether those actions were done to oneself or not. While folk morality is sometimes thought to require that forgiveness "wipe the slate clean," this idea must be rejected if it is understood to mean that we must forget the wrongdoing that we forgive (Garrard & McNaughton 21-22). Restoration of the relationship (if any) between the wrongdoer and the victim must occur in full light of the wrong done (Walker 161).

Let me correct some possible misunderstandings. First, I do not mean that one must constantly have before one's mind's eye memories of being wronged any more than I mean that in order to remember one's surname one must always be thinking about it. Rather, I mean that one must be able to recall being wronged accurately and fairly and be able to comport oneself appropriately in light of this memory. Second, I realize that certain kinds of wrongs as so horrific that one *might* be well-advised to forget them. For instance, it would be cruel to insist that a victim of rape must remember of event, if he/she thought it best for her to forget it. The obligation to remember is a *prima facie* obligation, though a very strong one. It can, in certain circumstances be defeated by other considerations.

References

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