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Beyond Extrinsic Forgiveness:
Recognizing the Dignity of the Offender

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Abstract

Extrinsically motivated forgiveness, to which believers appear to be particularly susceptible, is insufficient to meet the generally accepted definition of forgiveness. Anger, a natural response to injustice, becomes resentment when the anger is maintained, for any of a variety of reasons. While both repression and venting are inadequate responses to resentment, forgiveness is a more appropriate response. Forgiveness, a moral gift to the offender that is consistent with justice and rational judgment, requires an internal understanding of the reasons motivating the cognitive decision to forgive. The dignity of the human person appears to be a helpful principle in reaching the internal motivation to forgive the offender. This understanding of dignity shared by the offender with all persons is approachable by philosophical or theological avenues of reasoning.

Beyond Extrinsic Forgiveness: Recognizing the Dignity of the Offender

“If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14-15).¹ While Christianity may not be the only religion that advocates forgiveness, certain Christian denominations rigorously oblige their members to forgive.² Interest in forgiveness as a therapeutic method to improve mental health has heartened religiously oriented persons, especially in light of the somewhat strained relationship between religion and psychology. Many Christians are delighted at the prospect of lending their ideas to psychology. However, forgiveness arising from a religious injunction can be very different from the forgiveness sought by therapy. The strong expectations of a peer group or a religious affiliation to forgive can be experienced as coercive. An example of an extreme case is a minister who demanded forgiveness from a church member that he had sexually abused because she would otherwise not really be a Christian (Vitz, personal conversation, April 13, 2005).³ Forgiveness does not consist in responding to an extrinsic motivation or conforming to a law, as this paper hopes to demonstrate. However, the motivations behind the command to forgive, such as the dignity of the human person, if unpacked and digested by the person, could be helpful in making the cognitive decision to forgive. This paper also aims to provide a rationale for making the choice to forgive based on the dignity of the human person, viewed from both a secular and a religious perspective.

To distinguish forgiveness from excusing, reconciling, and forgetting, and for the purposes of this paper, I have adopted Joanna North's generally accepted definition of forgiveness: "People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right), and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right)" (1987).

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivations

Because of the perceived obligation to forgive, some Christians claim to forgive and attempt verbal and behavioral conformity to forgiveness without actually forgiving. Enright and Fitzgibbons call this kind of extrinsically motivated forgiveness "lawful expectational forgiveness" (2000). In order to distinguish between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, they name two different types of obligation. "Grim obligation" involves conformity without understanding, while "wise obligation" requires internal appreciation of the principles behind the obligation. Though some persons easily achieve a "wise obligation" to forgive on their own, others require that intermediary steps be explicitly laid out so that they can reach an internal understanding of forgiveness.

This internal conviction about the value of forgiveness is crucial because the multiplication of extrinsic motivations amounts to a form of coercion. As the APA urges

in principle E of the ethics code, psychologists are to respect clients' self-determination and promote their autonomous decision-making (2002). Because coercion is an injustice, any coercion to forgive cannot but compound the resentment that is already present. Forgiveness, as a moral choice, must be chosen freely. To forgive means to decide to abandon resentment and to attempt empathy with the offender: overlooking a wrong and suppressing anger to conform to a law is insufficient. Externally motivated forgiveness appears to lead to repression, reaction formation, and condoning evil. When a person forgives on principles, though founded on religious belief, that she does not recognize as her own, she obeys an external law instead of acting freely, her freedom constricted by a "grim obligation". Therefore, a command to forgive can do more harm than good, and become an insufficient motivation to will beneficence towards a malefactor, unless the principles backing the command are internally accepted and owned. Internalizing the principles can correct the believer's perception of forgiveness from a "grim obligation" to a "wise obligation".

Responses to Anger

Before making a case for forgiveness, however, the framework from which the offended person proceeds should be understood. The natural response to injustice is anger. The offended person feels compelled by justice to respond to wrongdoing reciprocally. Revenge is the norm of the human condition, leading some to theorize that stable political societies are dependent upon regulating the revenge response (Gouldner, 1960; Shriver, 1995). Revenge seems to be driven by anger to desire a confrontation

with the hated object and to destroy it directly. Such confrontation and revenge is not always possible, because the offender is often beyond the reach of satisfactory retaliation, because he cannot be sued for a particular type of crime, is already in prison, or is dead, for example. Anger is a vital force that arises within the person and demands a response.

Though anger is a natural response, persons choose to hold onto anger and to remain in the state of resentment, which Worthington and Scherer term “unforgiveness” (2004). It is possible to contrive benefits that accrue from forming resentment and hatred. In some social groups, xenophobic hatred is a strong cohesive force, which preserves social identity through maintaining hostility. Vitz and Mango present an array of ways in which hatred is employed as a defense mechanism (1997a). For example, they speak of how hatred defends the moral pride of an offended person, who can feel morally superior to the “sinful” or “truly horrible” person who committed the offense. They also note that persons who hate benefit from wallowing in self-pity and from playing the “sick role”—a victim status that rationalizes away the pain of shame, inadequacy, and failures. Another common defense that these two scholars mention employs hatred to ward off the pain of an underlying sadness or hurt caused by an unpleasant memory. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to recognize a few of the motivations that maintain resentment.

Despite possible perceived benefits from anger, evidence continues to mount that holding onto anger is psychologically and physiologically harmful. Unresolved anger

saps the strength of a person, as he must direct a portion of his energy to maintaining resentment (Larsen, 1992). Holding on to grudges appears to increase levels of stress and of physical ailments (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Once anger has taken hold, however, overcoming resentment is a difficult task. The offended person is afforded few alternatives such as repression and venting in dealing with resentment.

Before the advent of forgiveness therapy, psychologists often advised venting—the condoned expression of anger in response to perceived injustices—in order to let the emotion run its course and dissipate naturally. If one session were insufficient to remove recalcitrant resentment, the process could be repeated. Unfortunately, as behavioral conditioning has shown, repetition reinforces behavior: venting persons learn to be angry, gradually becoming angrier and at lesser provocations. Rather than diminishing anger and improving the emotional well being of the person, venting appears to have negative effects (Felton, Revenson, Hinrichsen, 1984).

Repression, on the other hand, responds to anger by denying it. The religiously inclined person seems to be falling into the trap of repression when she forgives superficially due to extrinsic motivations, such as the word of her pastor. Instead of choosing to abandon resentment and will beneficence in response to rationally determined unfair treatment, she glosses over the injustice perceived and imposes upon herself the appearance of whatever external manifestations of forgiveness that seem appropriate while leaving the resentment hidden and untouched. She overlooks the offense, masks

the injury, and suppresses the anger. As was examined above, the extrinsic motivations coercing her will leave her with more unresolved anger than before.

Clearly, then, both venting and repression are unsatisfactory responses to resentment because in both approaches, the offender continues to exert a form of control over the offended person, who is weighed down by the burden of his unresolved anger.

Forgiveness is an alternative response to injustice and a proactive approach liberating the offended person from past injustices.

Decision to Forgive

Within the Enright and Fitzgibbons four-phase model, the decision to forgive takes place in the aptly named “decision” phase (2000). It assumes that the “uncovering” phase, in which the multifaceted elements of the offense have been brought to light, has already taken place. By “rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated” and examining the wrongdoing, offended persons avoid the trap of denial.⁴ Usually, the cognitive decision to forgive precedes the emotional decision to forgive: Enright and Fitzgibbons grasp this concept by placing the “work” phase, in which the forgiving takes place, as a separate and further step beyond the simple decision to forgive (2000). Worthington and Scherer make the distinction between the cognitive and emotional decisions to forgive by labeling them “decisional forgiveness” and “emotional forgiveness” (2004). Even the internalization of reasons to a degree sufficient for a cognitive decision to forgive may require patient and arduous effort.

Forgiveness can be consciously chosen by the offended person for her own benefit. She can free herself of the domination of past injustices and relinquish resentment. As the architect of her own life, she can lay aside her status as victim, without condoning, excusing, or forgetting the offense, and without necessarily reconciling with the offender. Though justice may seem to call for retaliation and retribution, she can choose mercy, in view of the person she wants to be, while maintaining an accurate view of wrongs committed against her (Enright, 2001). Recognizing that she is not responsible for the actions of the offender, but solely for her own actions, she can choose to respond to a base act with a noble act. Forgiveness, motivated by a desire to better and free oneself, is appropriate to self-respect (Holmgren, 1993). Understood as a liberating and ennobling choice, releasing resentment can qualify as an intrinsic motivation.

The forgiveness remains an altruistic choice, though the motivations to forgive are not without some self-interest. The consequences of any action are virtually never completely positive or negative, and a type of decision-making calculus is undertaken with any serious decision. When a person forgives, though she profits from self-liberation and lofty motives, she must relinquish anger and all its perceived benefits. Forgiveness hurts: rising above injured narcissism and breaking through defense mechanisms is painful (Vitz and Mango, 1997a). For a person to choose forgiveness, she must determine that the positive aspects of forgiving are convincing and outweigh the losses. The fact that the person views forgiveness as a gain in order to choose it

does not remove its altruistic status but simply allows it to be chosen. The morally good quality of forgiveness can be an intrinsic motivation.

Morality seeks the good, rationally discovered and determined within the context of interpersonal relationships, rather than in an atomistic individual vacuum (Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2000). Forgiveness is a moral good chosen in an interpersonal relationship. The subject choosing the good of an interpersonal relationship as such must perceive it as an interpersonal relationship before she is able to perceive it as a good of an interpersonal relationship.

Often, the personhood of the offender has been obscured to the offended person. In other words, as Vitz and Mango discuss, the offended person has been “demonized”, and one does not forgive a demon (1997a). They examine the Kleinian concept of “splitting”, whereby the offended person polarizes her view of the offender and of herself. The evil actions of the offender expand to encompass the whole perception of the person, who becomes, in the offended persons eyes, wholly evil and abhorrent. Consequently, Vitz and Mango conclude that there is a tendency to minimize any personal blame and thus to adopt an entirely positive and uncritical self-perception (1997a). This explanation seems probable as an application of the fundamental attribution error—persons emphasizing environmental factors in their own mistakes but attributing personality traits to other persons’ mistakes, and vice versa for successes—, concentrated and magnified by an emotionally charged situation. A person, therefore, could be unable to choose to forgive because of his perception of the offender. Because

of prejudice against the offending person, an explanation and defense of her personal dignity and human worth may be necessary before the moral decision to forgive and empathize with the offender can be made. From the point of view of the offended person, the offender's actions may have merited him expulsion from the ranks of persons.

The Dignity of the Person

The dignity of the offending person can be addressed on both philosophical and theological premises. Kant concluded that all persons are of equal intrinsic worth because every person has the capacity for a good will (Holmgren, 1993). Many Christians would reframe the principle in light of their belief that every person is made in the image and likeness of God. Regardless of the approach, further explanation of these principles may be necessary to achieve the internal conviction to choose compassion and empathy with the offending person. Not only philosophical reasons are open to the religiously oriented person, but reasons imbued with religious overtones also offer an avenue for reaching the goal of forgiveness.

According to Kant, all persons are capable of making their own choices. A common human nature confers the ability to employ the will to choose the good, which makes them responsible and autonomous moral agents. His grounding of the equal and inherent dignity of persons in their capacity for a good will allows for the separation between offender and offense. As Holmgren points out, a person's intrinsic worth

derived from her capacity for excellence and goodness does not depend upon her performance on some moral scale (1993). Though the person is qualified by her acts, for which she is morally responsible, her human dignity is constituted at a more fundamental level. The person may commit reprehensible actions and yet still deserve respect and empathy. While an unjust act should not be condoned, the person should never be rejected. This principle translates into theological idiom as “hate the sin but love the sinner”.

Some object that the distinction between sin and sinner cannot be made. They would argue that, as a moral agent, a person’s moral quality and worth are constituted by his actions because he is responsible. The person has willingly and deliberately inflicted evil upon himself and is an evildoer because of it (Soloveichik, 2003). However, precisely because of the value of the person, the act is abhorred while respect for the person is retained. The egregious actions committed by a person do not cancel out that person’s ability to attain a good will. Even if a person’s actions or status were judged to be such that he has lost the capacity for a good will and thus his intrinsic dignity, he would still deserve pity and compassion, as a wounded sentient being that has fallen so far from the ideal (Holmgren, 1993). However, one has to wonder if anyone has sufficient knowledge about the moral possibilities of a person to be able to make such a judgment.

Though a person’s actions may be objectively wrong and thus worthy of condemnation, that person should still not be judged and despised (Holmgren, 1993). The person could

be held responsible for her actions and restitution could be demanded from her. The competent authority could punish a malefactor and steps could be taken to prevent her from harming society in the future. However, the offended person could also protect himself from further harm from the offender without spite or malice. He could demand separation, a restraining order, tort damages, or incarceration without harboring resentment, as forgiveness does not require reconciliation (Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2000). Empathy and goodwill are still possible toward the malefactor.

As Holmgren analyzes, wrong actions have sources. Unjust acts are often traceable to other unjust actions or mitigating circumstances. Rapists, pedophiles, murderers, and other loathed offenders have often been horribly scarred by horrifying personal histories. For example, those who commit incest were often abused themselves and may have difficulty processing their disturbed experiences. They may be confused as to how to cope with bizarre sexual impulses and often have a distorted understanding of relationships. Deficient parenting in general could severely handicap a person's ability to parent, thus passing on inadequacies from generation to generation. Another inhibition to making good decisions could be neurochemical imbalances. Due to the subjective influences that impinge upon a person's decision-making abilities, an individual does not have the right to condemn another person. Even the offended person, or rather especially the offended person, is in no position to make a fair and balanced assessment of the offender's quality as a person. Another person cannot fully understand the malefactor's psychological pressures, limitations, and inadequacies that skew her view of the world and range of action, and thus another person cannot

ascertain how much subjective blame her actions merit. Knowledge of the sources of mistaken attitudes leading to wrongful behavior could be a powerful aid in developing compassion for a wrongdoer and intellectually justifying a cognitive decision to forgive.

An offended person, though he cannot fully understand the subjective condition of the person who offended him, can see his malefactor as a fellow human being who has had a hard time adjusting to difficult circumstances. Instead of a demon to be loathed, she is a person to be respected. Even while reviling her actions, or rather, precisely because he despises her actions, he feels compassion for the perpetrator. By doing wrong, the malefactor has harmed herself by failing to live up to her moral potential. The person is capable of choosing the good and has denigrated herself by committing this offense, but extenuating circumstances, without excusing the evil, can make it comprehensible. The offended person could rise above the “splitting” and recognize that he, as well, has made mistakes on numerous occasions. With this connection to the offended person’s experience, the malefactor’s motivations are no longer opaque and incomprehensible to him. Thus, the offended person can abstain from passing judgment to condemn the wrongdoer but instead hope that the person would live up to the capacity for a good will that she possesses. The offended person can decide to break the cycle of victimization and make a moral gift of forgiveness to the perpetrator without excusing the evil of the offense.

A Christian Perspective

An explicit belief in God does not contradict any motivation or argument given above, but rather may add another layer of reasons that would make the cognitive decision easier. Christianity does not necessarily lead to coercion or repression, but could give another avenue for achieving sufficient motivation to forgive. Instead of starting from a philosophical principle to ground the dignity of the person, the theological belief that all persons are made in the image and likeness of God would be more immediate for the Christian: “So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Furthermore, the Christian believes that Jesus suffered and died for all persons to offer them salvation when they were still sinners. The constitutive dignity in which the Christian believes is a divine imprint that transcends any actions that person has done. The Christian can be inspired by the example of Christ, who called out from the cross “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34). From the Christian worldview, even wrongdoers have great worth.

Christianity places all persons under the umbrella of God’s love and reserves judgment to God.⁵ The Christian maintains that each person exists because of the personal love of God for that person. For the Christian, judgment on salvation is reserved to God, who alone completely knows the person’s situation and internal circumstances. Deferring judgment to God for this reason could help avoid “splitting”. The knowledge that both he and his offender will be judged can help the believer be conscious of his hope for definitive forgiveness despite the reality of his failings. It should be easier for a Christian to empathize with those whose decision-making abilities have been severely hampered.

Furthermore, because she believes in a loving God, who wants what is best for each person, a believer could strive to will what is best for this person who offended her. Because she believes the offender is still loved by God, she can decide to will beneficence towards the offender. The Christian hopes that her offender will turn away from actions that do not befit his dignity and will become good. The Catechism of the Catholic Church encapsulates this principle in number 1703: “Endowed with a ‘spiritual and immortal soul,’ the human person is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake.’ From his conception, he is destined for eternal beatitude” (1997). Christian beliefs could provide incentives to recognize the human dignity of the offender and thus to achieve intrinsically motivated forgiveness. For a Christian, theologically founded reasoning is complementary with, and perhaps more convincing than, a philosophical foundation.

Conclusion

Anger, the natural fruit of injustice, presents powerful obstacles to be overcome and resolved. Though some religiously oriented persons short-circuit the forgiveness process by remaining in extrinsic motivations, it seems repression arises from misunderstanding forgiveness and not internalizing the beliefs, rather than the religious orientation itself. A “wise obligation”, founded on theological or philosophical principles, is amicable to the forgiveness process. An internal understanding and acceptance of the principles leading to forgiveness such as the equal intrinsic dignity of all persons allows forgiveness to be chosen and resentment resolved. In sum, recognition of the

human dignity of the offender can be a powerful motivation to forgive, both liberating the person from the offense and allowing him to appropriately respond to injustice by relinquishing suppressed anger and advancing beyond a merely extrinsic motivation.

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Notes

¹ All Biblical quotes, using traditional book, chapter and verse notation, are taken from Catholic Biblical Association of Great Britain. (1965). *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.

² “To understand all is to forgive all” is a Buddhist saying; Confucious has been attributed with “to be wronged is nothing unless you continue to remember it”; some Hindus see forgiveness as part of the way to escape the karmic cycle of suffering; the Talmud urges flexibility in forgiving (Ta’an 20a); Sura 42 of the Koran implies that it is necessary to forgive in order to avoid injustice and thus to be able receive reward from God.

³ Dr. Paul Vitz kept the identifying information confidential for obvious reasons when he recounted this story to me.

⁴ As well, they discuss how the ‘uncovering’ phase allows the person to adjudge the offense as real rather than imaginary. Only actual offenses require be forgiven, though an offense does not have to be intended to be real.

⁵ Just as Christianity is not the only religion to advocate forgiveness, other religions may count believers in a God who universally loves and judges.