

Calhoun on Forgiveness

At first pass, forgiveness involves a change of heart. It involves forgoing resentment.

Not all changes of heart, however, are genuine kinds of forgiveness. I might change my heart because the relationship to you is too important to me to hold on to my resentment and so I may change my heart for the sake of maintaining a relationship with you. But this is forgiveness in a minimal sense; it's an instance of ignoring rather than genuinely forgiving.

But Calhoun argues that we need to distinguish between true, what she calls 'aspirational' forgiveness and these more minimalist kinds of forgiveness. Calhoun argues that philosophers have wrongly focussed on the latter kind.

Those writing on forgiveness have tended to emphasize the question of when we *should* forgive: when does a culprit *deserve* forgiveness. But once someone deserves forgiveness, then forgiveness is rationally/morally *required*.

What's wrong with this conception of forgiveness?

It places the object of forgiveness under the wrong kind of description. It involves not really thinking of the wrongdoer *as* a wrongdoer. At best it minimizes their wrongdoing.

In contrast, aspirational forgiveness involves forgoing resentment despite being entitled to it; it involves forgiving even when forgiveness is entirely undeserved.

Second, it makes forgiveness morally required. But forgiving is something that it's good to do but that we are not morally required to do. It's supererogatory.

Is forgiving someone who has repented aspirational? Calhoun argues that it's not. That's because "repentance makes forgiveness both risk free and rational." (p. 81) The fact that the agent repented separates her wrongdoing from her 'real self'. It separates the immoral act from the immoral agent.

But, Calhoun argues this blurs the line between forgiveness and excuses: "All excuses work by driving a larger or smaller wedge between act and agent. Thus in insisting that forgiveness be given only when act can be separated from agent, Murphy in essence is requiring that forgiveness be given only for excused wrongdoing." (p. 83)

If, however, an act is excused, then again it no longer becomes optional to forgive. The agent deserves our (minimal) forgiveness.

Why is there such resistance to recognizing aspirational forgiveness? Why insist that it needs to be deserved?

One problem is that aspirational forgiveness might seem to condone the wrongdoing in question. The worry is that

- (1) in every unrepentant case, failure to protest sends a message that the act was not wrong after all, or the harm not as serious, or its object not a moral equal.
- (2) such a failure to protest will always have objectionable consequences.

Calhoun argues that these worries are overstated. In contexts where everyone knows that the relevant action was wrong, forgiveness need not send a message to the contrary.

Second, it's not obvious that forgiveness needs to worsen the wrongdoer's behaviour. Human moral psychology is not only receptive to resentment and punishment.

The challenge: to see how one can forgive without condoning, we need to be able to tell a story about the wrongdoer that at the same time shows them as undeserving of our forgiveness and yet manages to move us to forgive. It needs to connect misdeeds with the agent's true self.

Calhoun suggests that this is very difficult. Recall Strawson on Freedom and Resentment.

Resentment presupposes the capacity for goodwill. Should we come to believe that the individual is incapable of caring about our wellbeing, we thereby become invulnerable to resentment. We take up the objective stance.

But forgiving is also a reactive attitude. It's something that's offered to disappointing persons. So, on this account we are able to forgive only if we are dealing with the kind of individual that is capable of caring about our wellbeing.

On Strawson's picture then we cannot have both: an agent who is unrepentant, whose wrongdoing is unexcused, and unjustified and cannot be divorced from their true self and who is yet an appropriate object of reactive attitudes, including forgiveness.

To make sense of their wrongdoing, we have to portray them as not quite a person, or not a moral agent. (Recall Watson's discussion of Robert Harris!)

Calhoun argues that we need an alternative: we can make sense of intentional harm not by denying full moral agency but rather by attributing malignancy and moral indifference. Such agents are still moral agents, they are subject to moral expectations. But they have made a fundamental choice to not care or listen. They are "permanently disappointing individuals".

How does aspirational forgiveness work in this context? It paints a picture on which individuals who we can take up reactive attitudes to need to make moral sense of their choices. They must be the sort of people who are responsive to moral demands (even if they reject them). But it also recognizes that in living through time "normal persons need to make the sorts of choices that will add up to and sustain an integrated, rather than fragmented, biography. They need their actions to make sense within, or to make sense of, their past and projected future lives." (p. 92)

Going beyond minimalist forgiveness requires us to admit that the moral sense-making does not always have unmitigated priority. There may be equally important ways that normal persons of goodwill need to make sense of their lives.

Aspirational forgiveness thus involves understanding how the wrongdoing fits into the individuals biography without taking this to be an excuse or justification. It involves: "that one stops demanding that the person be different from what she is...It is the choice to place respecting another's way of making sense of her life before resentfully enforcing moral standards."

Such forgiveness cannot be obligatory because it's very demanding and also because we cannot be required to background moral standards.