

# Perspectives

IDEAS AND OPINIONS

## The Hardest Thing You'll Ever Do

A PHILOSOPHER TACKLES THE ETHICAL CONUNDRUM OF FORGIVENESS BY NATALIE JACOBSON McCracken

**DURING THE PERIOD** of apartheid in South Africa, Eugene de Kock, the head of a notorious death squad, earned the nickname "Prime Evil." But de Kock, now serving a life sentence, decided to tell the truth about the atrocities he had committed and to ask for forgiveness from women he had widowed.

Incredibly, the women chose to forgive him.

Using examples from de Kock to Achilles, Charles Griswold, the outgoing chairman of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences philosophy department, examines the often inexplicable process of forgiving in his book *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge University Press).

### WHY WRITE A BOOK ABOUT FORGIVENESS?

In addition to the very large number of people who are ac-

tively working on forgiveness and reconciliation, forgiveness is of interest to ordinary people. It comes up at home, in the workplace. How should I respond to wrongdoing, including when I am the wrongdoer? These are human issues of the greatest importance.

### IS RECONCILIATION THE GOAL OF THIS KIND OF FORGIVENESS?


Yes, at least in the minimal sense of cessation of hostility, the forswearing of revenge.

### SO, THE MOTHER, SAY, OF A MURDERED CHILD WHO WANTS JUSTICE — MEANING SHE EITHER WANTS THAT GUY TO FRY OR SHE WANTS HIM TO STAY IN JAIL AND SUFFER — SHOULD SHE FORGIVE HIM? SHOULD SHE TESTIFY ON HIS BEHALF?

It's very important to keep issues of forgiveness and justice distinct. You may both forgive the wrongdoer and believe he should be judicially punished.

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“To move  
beyond, to  
forgive, is to  
no longer see  
yourself in the  
same way.”

— Charles Griswold

Judicial punishment is not revenge, or it shouldn't be.

#### **WHERE DOES FORGIVENESS BEGIN?**

In the model case of forgiveness, the offender goes to the victim and apologizes specifically, stating not just that there was a wrong done somewhere, but something more like, “I did the following to you, and I shouldn't have done that, and I take responsibility. I'm not excusing myself; I'm not asking you to condone it; I don't want you to forget it; I haven't forgotten it; I take responsibility.” That's working toward real forgiveness.

#### **WHAT ABOUT REPARATIONS? CAN THEY HELP THE WRONGED PERSON TO FORGIVE?**

You might take an example from the political sphere, that of the women who were abused sexually by the Japanese military and wanted reparations. In all such cases, reparations should be kept separate from forgiveness except when reparations can function symbolically as proof that the wrongdoer is changing his or her ways.

#### **WHAT IF ALL THOSE INVOLVED HAVE DIED — AMERICAN SLAVES AND SLAVE OWNERS, FOR INSTANCE?**

The difficult question of forgiveness of and by the dead, or of the unrepentant, falls under the category of “imperfect forgiveness.” In the case of forgiving the dead, what's required is some evidence that the dead person would have acknowledged responsibility had he been able to, or taken other important steps. The evidence might take the form of a deathbed confession, or some other indication.

#### **AND IF THAT DOESN'T EXIST, IS IT USELESS TO APOLOGIZE FOR YOUR ANCESTORS?**

That's “third-party forgiveness,” and it's tricky. It's not as though just anybody could stand up and say, “I hereby forgive the Nazis on behalf of the Jews.”

#### **HOW DOES AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FIT IN?**

I don't see that affirmative action has anything to do with

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forgiveness. It's a social remedy, trying to right wrongs as a matter of either justice or of social utility, or both. In the case of collectivities, such as a government, what we should really be talking about first and foremost is apology by a spokesperson with standing, such as the president. And the criteria are lower for the successful giving and receiving of an apology in the political realm. For example, the victims have to put aside the taking of revenge, but they do not have to put aside resentment. So when the oil company that polluted the water apologizes, you can accept it and still say, "I'm angry as hell about it, but I do accept it." It's interesting, isn't it, that people place a lot of store on apology in the political context.

#### **IN THE CASE OF INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS, DON'T SOME PEOPLE APOLOGIZE SO THEY CAN GET ON WITH LIFE?**

I think forgiveness is a humanly beneficial process when it meets the criteria that make it ethically praiseworthy. When it doesn't meet those criteria, I'm not sure it's a good thing; you could put your anger at someone aside as a result of therapy, or fear, or sympathy, but that may just help to condone continued wrongdoing. Think of it as an abused wife syndrome.

#### **THE WIFE WHO FORGIVES HER HUSBAND EACH TIME HE BEATS HER.**

I would argue that isn't forgiveness. It's putting up with it, removing anger enough to continue to function in the context.

#### **WHAT WOULD MAKE IT FORGIVENESS?**

The victim has to put aside revenge, first of all, and also put aside anger (or at least start to put it aside) and stop thinking of the wrongdoer just as the wrongdoer, but because the person is changing, accept that the wrongdoer is becoming somebody else.

#### **ISN'T THAT HOW YOU GET BEAT UP AGAIN NEXT SATURDAY NIGHT?**

Not if the offender is taking steps to change. And the injured

party also has to reframe his or her view of self — and this is very important — because as the injured party, especially where the injuries are really great, you can come to identify yourself as The Injured Party. It's true that to move beyond, to forgive, is to no longer see yourself in the same way.

#### **SO PRESUMABLY FORGIVENESS DOES SOME GOOD.**

Exactly. It does seem to do good. I think it has to do with recognition of oneself as a moral equal who should not have been harmed and may not be harmed that way. It speaks a truth and bespeaks a commitment to the view that we're better off living by the truth. I suspect there's a view that when people apologize fully, the likelihood of repeating the injury is lessened. This is in part because it's all on the public record.

I developed the argument by reflecting on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, which I think is the only federal statement, so to speak, about that war.

#### **IT'S VERY INTERESTING, I THINK, THAT THAT MEMORIAL EXISTS.**

Isn't it? Everybody agrees that the war was calamitous. It was a defeat, for openers, and that's a historical fact. Here's a case where an apology has not been made: it's sidestepped, evaded. There's a lot of therapeutic reconciliation at that memorial. It's famous for it. But it's brittle, because it's not an apology and the truth has not been confronted.

#### **WHERE DOES RESPONSIBILITY FOR THAT WAR END? THE VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE WHO SUPPORTED THAT WAR DIDN'T DO MUCH EXCEPT SIT AROUND THEIR LIVING ROOMS SAYING, "YUP, HE'S RIGHT." SO ARE THEY RESPONSIBLE? DO THEY HAVE SOMETHING TO APOLOGIZE FOR?**

Yes, I think actually there's a lot of responsibility to go around here.

#### **IS FORGIVENESS IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT'S THERAPEUTIC?**

Here's where I part ways with a great deal of the popular lit-



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erature on the subject: I think there are conditions that must be met if forgiveness, in the true sense of the term, is to come off. Simply putting aside your anger, or going through therapy and putting it aside, or taking a pill and moving on is not forgiveness.

#### **AS IN, LET'S HAVE A DRINK TOGETHER.**

Let's have a drink, kiss, and make up. That's therapy; that's a kind of reconciliation for the moment. It might be good — I'm not against it — but it's not forgiveness.

#### **ARE SOME THINGS UNFORGIVABLE? CAN WE FORGIVE HITLER?**

Those are two separate questions. I argue against the idea that anybody is in principle and forever, no matter what, unforgivable. However, I do think that in some cases, at a given time, it is humanly impossible to forgive because of the extreme of wrong that was done.

But it is the case that people who've done terrible things have eventually been forgiven by their victims. Furthermore, in the political sphere, people who've done horrendous things have offered real apologies, and those apologies have been accepted.

#### **WHAT IF YOU DOUBT THAT THE PERSON WILL SUCCEED IN NEVER DOING IT AGAIN, EVEN IF THEY MEAN IT AT THE MOMENT: "I WAS DRUNK WHEN I HIT YOU, AND I'LL NEVER TAKE ANOTHER DRINK"?**

That's a very good question. I think my theory commits me to saying that in such a case, forgiveness has not come off, because like the alcoholic, you sort of know that the person is not going to change, even if he really means to. They're compelled to do it again.

#### **HOW ABOUT THE PERSON WHO WAS RAISED TO HATE — SAY, THE GUY IN IRELAND WHO HATES WHICHEVER SIDE HE WASN'T BORN INTO?**

This issue of where responsibility is or is not may be the most difficult issue in philosophy. It is, as we philosophers like to say, the subject of another book.