Forgiveness Confronts Race, Relationships, and the Social

The Philosophy of Forgiveness - Volume V

Edited by
Court D. Lewis
Pellissippi State Community College

Series in Philosophy of Forgiveness

VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Philosophy of Forgiveness

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022931214

ISBN: 978-1-64889-407-7

Cover design by Vernon press. Cover image created by rawpixel.com / Freepik.

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James Norton is a postdoctoral fellow with the project Understanding Progress, in Science and Beyond at the University of Iceland. He is also a research affiliate of the University of Sydney's interdisciplinary Centre for Time. He seeks to bring relevant empirical work to the forefront of philosophical investigation, and to generate empirical work where it would be helpful to our theorizing yet is unfortunately absent. His research is primarily on metaphysical explanation, the philosophy of time, and experimental philosophy. More information, and links to publications, can be found at https://jamesnortonphilosophy.weebly.com/.

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Introduction: On Listening

Court D. Lewis

Pellissippi State Community College

Listening to others, and not just waiting for them to quit speaking, requires a willingness to recognize the worth of the other and to believe what they say is worthy of consideration. Similar to reading a book, one must strive to quiet the constant voice in one's own head in order to hear and process the information communicated. Listening is not always easy, and it takes considerable practice, but it is one of the most effective means for developing understanding and growing as an intellectual and moral person.

Forgiveness Confronts Race, Relationships, and the Social, Volume V of Vernon Press's The Philosophy of Forgiveness series, is an exercise in listening. When I first proposed the series, one of my goals was to address two areas missing from the forgiveness literature: 1) the exploration of non-Christian, religious conceptions of forgiveness, which Gregory L. Bock completed in Volume III of the series; and 2) the exploration of overlooked, ignored, and/or discounted perspectives on forgiveness. My interests in underrepresented perspectives began by reading Kathryn Norlock's essential work, *Forgiveness from a Feminist Perspective*, where she provides several arguments for why a narrow definition of forgiveness tends to diminish and degrade non-traditional conceptions of forgiveness. As a result, my work on forgiveness purposefully avoids the trappings of creating an essential definition of "genuine" or "true" forgiveness. My interests were further piqued while editing the first two volumes of Vernon's The Philosophy of Forgiveness series. To my delight, authors from all over the globe submitted chapters dealing with forgiveness in all sorts of intriguing non-traditional ways. Finally, as I continued to research and work on other projects, I found the forgiveness literature lacking many voices. Where are the voices of First Peoples, African and African American, LatinX, and LGTBQ+ communities? Myisha Cherry and others (some in this volume) show that such voices exist, but where are the volumes of articles and books from these historically and systemically oppressed voices? I cannot speak for other editors and publishers, but when the time came to commission a fifth volume, I wanted to provide a space for these underrepresented perspectives on forgiveness to be heard. This volume is

a step in the right direction, but it only takes a tiny step towards representing the unheard voices of forgiveness that exist. My hope is that the work of authors in this volume will inspire others to make their diverse voices of forgiveness heard, and that philosophy publishers and readers will embrace such work, creating a true dialogue of diversity and wisdom.

Our Dialogue

In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young uses the analogy of community within a big city to illustrate a normative, socially connected framework for embracing difference and promoting justice. Within diverse enclaves of big cities, people communicate meaning and value in different ways. Over time, they learn to embrace difference, and for those who become immersed, they learn to flourish. Philosophy works best under similar circumstances, when diverse voices work together to develop sound and wise conclusions. That is the guiding principle of this volume.

The book is broken into two parts. Part I focuses on how forgiveness confronts racism, bias, and injustices that exist between others and ourselves. Court Lewis's "Crossing White Lines: My Son, Racism, and Forgiveness" begins the volume by addressing issues of parenting and racism. Recognizing the difficulties of discussing forgiveness for racists, especially in light of continued personal and systemic racism, Lewis uses a biographical approach to philosophy as a means of indirect communication to both talk to racists and suggest ways in which forgiveness can reform and reconcile racists to their victims. Agreeing with authors like George Yancy and Ibram X. Kendi, Lewis maintains that repentant racists must be antiracist and adds that sustained self-resentment can motivate and inspire a commitment to anti-racism. Instead of quickly granting self-forgiveness or seeking forgiveness, which might make one a complacent non-racist, a repentant racist must commit to a life of being antiracist and promoting antiracist policies. The ends of forgiveness and self-forgiveness are achieved through the embodiment of antiracism. As such, forgiveness is a tool for combating racism in oneself and for dismantling racism in our lives and the lives of others.

Continuing with the theme of parenting, Laci Hubbard-Mattix examines the relationship between child and parent in Chapter 2's "Parent and Child Forgiveness." As Hubbard-Mattix notes, the child-parent relationship is complex and filled with expectations of resentment and anger. Both attitudes are understandable given the historical treatment of the child-parent relationship and the realities of our current world. Hubbard-Mattix uses the Derridian concept of the *aporia* to demonstrate that these feelings are not necessary, and she suggests ways of moving beyond this impasse to liberate both the child and the parent. More specifically, the aporetic relationship

facilitates a liberating and more meaningful child-parent relationship. The suggested framework requires forgiveness on the part of both parties. The parent must forgive the *debt* accrued by the child for the gifts of birth and life entered in the commodity of exchange. While children must forgive their parents for the circumstances of their lives and their coming into existence.

Continuing with the theme of racism, "Forgiveness and Racism: Answering the Condonation and Resignation Objections" has Gregory L. Bock and Jason Cook questioning the role of forgiveness in both dismantling racist social structures and advocating for victims. Bock and Cook begin by addressing two objections: 1) the condonation objection that maintains that forgiveness fails to recognize the moral status of the wrong; and 2) the resignation objection that suggests forgiveness fails to stand against wrongdoing by abdicating responsibility to stand up for oneself and others against wrongdoing. The authors show how the rational, emotional, and pragmatic components of both objections are meant to show the utility of withholding forgiveness as a means of opposing the racially unjust status quo. Instead of accepting an account of unforgiveness based on these two objections, Bock and Cook argue that Jesus' forgiveness toward those who crucified him provides a paradigmatic example of morally responsible forgiveness. According to the authors, Jesus modeled invitational forgiveness, a form of preemptive kindness that invites offenders to acknowledge their offense and imagine the possibility of a transformed relationship with those they harmed. Jesus also gave voice to his emotional distress through lament, while also confronting corrupt religious and political leaders with the injustice of their deeds and their ultimate accountability before God. For the authors, then, Jesus' example of invitational forgiveness is not only compatible with opposition to racism, but it is also an important means to accomplishing the moral transformation necessary for a racially just society.

Chapter 4's "A Vow of Forgiveness" contains Brooke Rudow's and Isadora Hefner's argument that forgiveness is best understood relationally, as something dynamic and ongoing, and as a process constituted by a revised worldview (or what they call the "other-view"). Rudow and Hefner suggest that forgiveness includes more than deliberation, decision-making, and the management of emotions: forgiveness cultivates, it moves forward, and is a set of commitments. Rudow and Mosch begin by providing an overview of emotional accounts of forgiveness, illustrating how most are exclusively negative emotional accounts, meaning that forgiveness is typically understood as a process of removing certain emotions such as resentment and anger; negatively as a removal of the harm; and as largely rationalistic. They then question this negative, rationalistic account of forgiveness as "getting over" something, and though such an account has a place in considerations of forgiveness, Rudow and Hefner develop a

phenomenological account where forgiveness recognizes that though rational activity is indeed a crucial component, the process of forgiveness cannot be reduced to it. Importantly, it is not an isolated rational activity but a process that takes place in the relationship between the wronged and wrongdoer. They then use *Jane the Virgin* to show that forgiveness is better understood relationally, as something dynamic and ongoing, and as a process constituted by an other-view. This other-view incorporates the harmful act of the wrongdoer into the forgiver's conception of that person and then accepts this new conception as conducive to the existing relationship or revises the relationship in light of the other-view, which highlight three features that are central to forgiveness: it is a positive emotional transformation, it is forward-looking, and it is an ongoing commitment.

The final chapter of Part I features Subhobroto Banerjee's "Jahangir and the Dilemma of Self-Forgiveness." In his chapter, Banerjee examines Jahangir (r. 1605-1627 C.E.), the Mughal Emperor who succeeded Akbar the Great (r. 1556-1605), who was well-known for his eccentric, unpredictable behavior, and his seeming inability to overcome his role in the murder of his father's closest aide, Abul Fazl. With a focus on self-forgiveness through the absolution of guilt, Banerjee sheds light on Jahangir's various stages of self-forgiveness, focusing on the twin fields of the philosophy of forgiveness and the history of emotions. He then explains how not being able to emotionally forgive one's own self affects how we treat and govern others.

Part II of the book begins with Jennifer Kling's and Colin Lewis's "Social and Political "Statutes of Limitations": Mo' Approaches, Mo' Problems." Kling and Lewis question how society ought to engage with wrongdoers who offer an apology and/or insist on having undergone a moral, social, or political transformation, asking: Does the passage of time heal all wounds, or should some oppressions never be forgiven or forgotten? They offer two moral-political narratives designed to help address the issue. The first is what they call the JRA approach that is constructed around the values and perspectives of justice, rights, and autonomy-based views, and suggests that a wrong is a wrong, thereby eliminating factors like time, relative social status, distance, etc. The second is what they call the CVR approach and is constructed around the values and perspectives of care ethics, virtue ethics, and relationality, drawing on non-Western traditions, including Confucian and Buddhist thought. The CVR approach holds that while there is no particular moral obligation to forgive or regard an oppressive wrongdoer as "lovable," there is a prosocial need to adopt a kind of openness to, over time, socially and politically moving past the oppressive transgression. Otherwise, the wrongdoer is left without either means or incentive to improve and reenter the community, which in turn stifles moral, social, and political growth. Kling

and Lewis conclude that both approaches contain shortcomings, which illustrates the importance of finding a solution to the problem of social and political statutes of limitations.

Chapter 7 is Leonard Khan's "A Place for Political Forgiveness in *Jus post Bellum*." In it, he notes how even though war is ancient, it is not eternal, for we have learned how to live together after war. Even after the premature deaths of millions in both World Wars, most parties have been at peace for over seventy years. In the face of others who continue to war, Kahn questions what role political forgiveness can have in promoting and maintaining a just and lasting peace. He begins by unpacking the theory of Jus post Bellum, outlines the ascendant view of political forgiveness and why it should be rejected, then produces a rival conception of political forgiveness. He concludes by sketching a picture of how this understanding of political forgiveness can play a role in attaining the goals of Jus post Bellum.

Chapter 8 features Elisa Rapaport's and William N. Schabio, Jr.'s "The Impact of Tribalism: Forgiveness in the Political Sphere." Their chapter presents examples from entertainment and twenty-first-century American perspectives on politics to reveal how the unwillingness to forgive erodes the fabric of society. They begin with an explanation of forgiveness: that forgiveness (a) is more emotion than moral obligation, (b) is necessarily self-guided, thus cannot be coerced, and (c) in a pragmatic sense allows for communication and cooperation in a pluralistic society. Rapaport and Schabio apply Ronald de Sousa's approach to emotion theory to help demonstrate the functionality of forgiveness: it's an emotional state that can guide moral interactions and inform our obligations to one another. As such, forgiveness is essential to the overall well-being of society. Without forgiveness, the caustic conditions of resentment, suspicion, ill-will, and exclusion come to dominate the headspace of society. The inability of the interlocutors to understand and appreciate the interests of the other precludes the space from advancing the best interests of society. That interspace is called "forgiveness." As a result, politics becomes primal, eviscerating the space in which we once recognized the social contract. Rapaport and Schabio, then, utilize the key tenets of the philosophies of Kant, Mill, Hobbes, and Plato to show how these respected ethical and political ideas can accommodate their position that our inability to forgive is existential.

Next, Adam Barkman and Bennet Soenen explore the role of forgiveness in Scientology, Gnosticism, and Christianity. Barkman and Soenen begin their chapter with a brief history of the origins of, and the controversy surrounding, Scientology. Following this, they discuss the main beliefs and practices surrounding and related to Scientology's philosophy of forgiveness. These beliefs and practices are based on Scientology's concepts of good and evil, the beliefs about the moral state and existence of man, and the practice of

Auditing. Barkman and Soenen then discuss how these beliefs and practices relate to the ancient systems of gnostic religions and philosophies, which they relate and contrast their philosophy of forgiveness and morality to the predominant Western philosophies of forgiveness, specifically the Christian philosophy of forgiveness found in the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

Continuing with the theme of Christianity, Rev. Merianna Neely Harrelson examines the conception of forgiveness that appears in the gospel of Matthew. By focusing on the gospel of Matthew, which Harrelson suggests should be read in relation to the Torah, she argues that the Matthean interpretation that says forgiveness should be understood in terms of distributive justice is wrong. Instead, the Matthean Jesus promotes a different understanding of forgiveness when he says, "You have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 5:38-39). According to Harrelson, this clarification establishes a picture of restorative justice, an invitation to consider what it means to be forgiven by the Divine, but also to understand how forgiveness from the Divine is inextricably linked to how we treat one another. If Divine forgiveness is linked to interpersonal forgiveness, then it is important to understand more about the community from which this gospel comes.

The final chapter of the book, "Forgiveness: From Conceptual Pluralism to Conceptual Ethics," features intriguing research done by Andrew J Latham, Kristie Miller, James Norton, and Luke Russell. They provide empirical research that suggests there is a range of folk conceptions of forgiveness present in the population, and as a result of these multiple distinct concepts used by ordinary people under the banner 'forgiveness', philosophers must reorient their expectations and analysis of forgiveness. The existence of multiple distinct conceptions of forgiveness presents an especially difficult challenge for philosophers offering accounts of forgiveness who aim to delineate a single, unified concept. In light of these difficulties, the authors consider two ways forgiveness theorists might respond. For one, philosophers might deny folk conceptual pluralism and argue that forgiveness is a functional concept; that the disagreement the authors report is really only disagreement about what plays the relevant functional role(s). On the other hand, philosophers might accept folk conceptual pluralism and turn their attention towards the project of determining which conceptions of forgiveness we ought to deploy. With the latter in mind, the authors gesture towards some of the ways in which their data can be used to evaluate the practical prospects of projects in conceptual ethics.

A Long Road to Here

These are the voices that I was able to gather, but there were many lost along the way. This book began in 2018, when I applied for a national grant to research, write, and provide speaking events related to conceptions of forgiveness from underrepresented voices. One of the outcomes of the project was to produce at least one edited collection related to the grant. Sadly, I did not receive the grant, but I refused to be deterred by the shortsightedness of the grant reviewers whose comments suggested the project had no value. So in 2019, I developed a call for papers that received a positive response from authors. When the global pandemic hit during the winter of 2020, several authors were forced to leave the project. As the number of authors forced to remove their work increased, and several personal issues arose in my own life, the project was canceled during the summer of 2020. As a result of several conversations and the resolution of my own issues, the project was recommissioned and a new call for papers distributed. With some original contributors and several new, COVID-19 continued to wreak havoc on the lives of our authors and myself. Again, some authors were forced to leave the project, but again, we gained a few new chapters. Though the voices and focus of the book has morphed several times, by the end of 2021, the book you are reading was completed.

I share this story with readers because I want to recognize those authors who completed this difficult journey, along with those who were unable to finish. Many have suffered greatly since the winter of 2020, and I hope they have found a place of peace to reflect and grow from their suffering. I also wanted readers to have insight into the dedication of our authors, all of whom overcame great adversity to share their voices. My hope is that you will find their voices as challenging and enlightening as I do. They might not be what you are used to or expect, but they all offer positive philosophical insight into the philosophy of forgiveness, and it is these insights that I hope will open the door for many more expressions of forgiveness from all voices, but especially those underrepresented voices that we desperately need to hear.

Part I:
Parenting, Race, Relationships, and Self-Forgiveness

Chapter 1

Crossing White Lines: My Son, Racism, and Forgiveness

Court D. Lewis

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Abstract: Recognizing the difficulties of discussing forgiveness for racists, especially in light of continued personal and systemic racism, Lewis uses a biographical approach to philosophy as a means of indirect communication to both talk to racists and suggest ways in which forgiveness can reform and reconcile racists. Agreeing with authors like George Yancy and Ibram X. Kendi, Lewis maintains that repentant racists must be anti-racist, and adds that to sustain such an anti-racist position requires we retain the self-resentment for past racist actions. Instead of seeking self-forgiveness, which might make one complacent, a repentant racist must commit to a life of being antiracist and promoting antiracist policies. Lewis concludes that forgiveness is a tool for combating racism in oneself and for dismantling racism in our lives and the lives of others, and he ends with a call to action for readers.

Keywords: Forgiveness, racism, repentance, anti-racism, self-resentment

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As I begin this challenging chapter, the words from the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* are haunting:

> I am an invisible man. No. I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded

> by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison [1952] 1995, 1)

My original goal was to continue the exploration of forgiveness after heinous wrongdoing started in my book *Repentance and the Right to Forgiveness* (2018), but upon every musing, I could not distance myself from the reality of my whiteness and my son's Blackness, a reality that includes: 1) my own 2% South African heritage, which I would like to imagine occurred through mutually respectful relationships, but more realistically was probably the result of oppression, slavery, and rape; and 2) my son's own Nigerian heritage that is thoroughly mixed with the genetic material of European slavers. With these facts in mind, how does one do justice to the philosophical analysis of forgiveness and racism? So instead of providing analysis from the viewpoint of an ideal, rational observer, I practice what Danielle Poe calls "biography as philosophy" (2020)—examining my own life to provide ethical guidance for how to proceed. To quote George Yancy, "…I've decided to model, as best as I can, what I'm asking of you. Let me demonstrate the vulnerability that I wish you to show. As a child of Socrates, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, let me speak the truth, refuse to err on the side of caution" (2015).

Let me explain my conundrum. I wish to teach my son how the power of forgiveness can contribute to a life of peaceful flourishing, which is difficult on its own, but because I am white and my son is of color, I feel an extra burden to address issues related to racism. Racism and the structures that support it offer unique challenges to forgiveness. Racist actions are inherently wrong, so if we[1] racists continue to engage in such activities, we do not deserve forgiveness. It is only when we are repentant that we become deserving. On one level, to repent requires we reflect, challenge, change our racist beliefs, and refuse to support racist policies. On another level, repentance requires more than simply dedicating ourselves to being non-racist. Supporting or taking advantage of racist policies is an act of racist wrongdoing, so as Ibram X. Kendi argues, it is not enough to be non-racist, one must be antiracist (2019). To be antiracist is to stop using "I'm not a racist," admit racism exists, confess the racist policies we support, accept our racist upbringing, acknowledge and live as an antiracist—"someone who is supporting antiracist policies or expressing antiracist ideas" (Kendi 2019, 226). The result is that to be a repentant racist is to be antiracist, and to be

[1] I use "we" because I do not want to delude myself or readers that racism is only someone else's problem. We must admit our own racism and examine its cause and effects, if we are to become antiracist.

deserving of forgiveness, we must challenge our own beliefs, change our actions, resist racist policies, and promote antiracist policies.

We are responsible for the beliefs, actions, and history of the groups and ideologies with which we identify (Lewis 2011). By knowingly identifying with groups and ideologies that support the degradation and wrongdoing of others, we either actively support such beliefs/actions or tacitly agree that such beliefs/actions are acceptable. Either way, we support and promote the degradation and wrongdoing of others, which is unethical. Racist ideologies flourish within our natural human inclination to discriminate against those who are different, even when no factual basis exists to justify such discrimination. Racist ideologies create a false consciousness fueled by family, community, media-entertainment masquerading as news, and sometimes theology, even when the theology supposedly supports love and acceptance of all. For instance, God's scattering of people after building the Tower of Babel supposedly included God creating a hierarchy of humanity with whites on top (Genesis 11), God punished the family line of Canaan (who are, without proof, assumed to be the ancestors of Africans) to be slaves because Ham viewed the nakedness of Noah (Genesis 9: 20-27), and as Jeremy Schipper notes, "According to Gen. 4:15, God places an unspecified "mark" on Cain shortly after Cain kills his brother Abel. [… A] widespread belief at the time [1835, was] that this mark was a curse that darkened the skin of Cain and his descendants, thereby explaining the origins of people of African descent" (2020, 393). The result of all these racist teachings is many (including myself) grow up racist. To avoid being complicit in racism and its influence on society, one must reject racist ideology, meaning one must continually strive to be antiracist. The term 'racist' is not simply a noun that describes a person's beliefs, but it is a verb, describing a way of life. Therefore, rejecting racist ideology requires one be antiracist—a verb describing the fight against racism. In the following pages, I will suggest three ways in which we must recognize our own racism and repent, if we are to be deserving of forgiveness. We must repent and change our irrational beliefs, which we do so by understanding how they are grounded in fallacious logic. We must repent and change our racist beliefs grounded in fear, which we do by having relationship with our feared group. Finally, we must repent and change how we support racist policies, which we do by eroding the beliefs and structures that support racism.

Here I am, then, a recovering racist with a son of color, attempting to teach him of the inherent worth of all humans, the value of forgiveness as part of a flourishing moral life, and why he should forgive those who wrong him—even racists who, if capable of seeing him, only view him as inferior, dangerous, worthy only of slavery and/or extermination. I can imagine the question lurking in his mind: "Do racists deserve forgiveness, Dada?" My response, "I

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