

Forgiveness in the Public Realm

Dissertation Abstract

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In my dissertation, I argue that forgiveness is not a necessary practice for human societies to adopt and engage in, that its conceptual parameters are contingent and contestable, and that even if forgiveness is valuable (and we will encounter some reasons to doubt that this is the case), it cannot be obligatory, and should occasion alarm when imported into public life. The work is comprised of two parts.

Part One responds to the questions of how, and why, the practice of forgiveness might have arisen in human society. In Chapter One, I develop speculative genealogies inspired by the work of Hobbes and Nietzsche. These serve to motivate a striking suggestion: namely, that the practice of forgiveness could plausibly have arisen in societies of agents predominantly motivated by selfishness, cruelty, and the search for power. In Chapter Two, I consider the historical record left by those who sought variously to justify, explain, and query the practice of forgiveness as it rose to prominence in early Christian thought. This work serves, among other things, to demonstrate the contingency of prominent contemporary conceptions of forgiveness.

In Part Two, I proceed to address the normative status of forgiveness, focusing on the questions of whether forgiveness is obligatory, and whether it is good. I argue that forgiveness is not obligatory: it cannot be demanded of us by morality, and it should not be demanded of us by society. As to whether forgiveness is good: I argue that there are cases in which forgiveness is not good, and that wherever it is good it can only be supererogatory. Chapters Three and Four elaborate and support these claims. In Chapter Three, I fend off arguments that it is sometimes bad, and hence morally wrong or blameworthy, to withhold forgiveness. In Chapter Four, I respond to a contemporary political suggestion: that forgiveness might be facilitated by public institutions and directed towards the goals of state or quasi-state actors. I argue that institutional attempts to secure forgiveness cannot be morally defended and will violate standards of procedural and substantive justice. Even if forgiveness has a role to play in private relationships, we should reject efforts to export the conceptual framework of forgiveness into the public realm.