

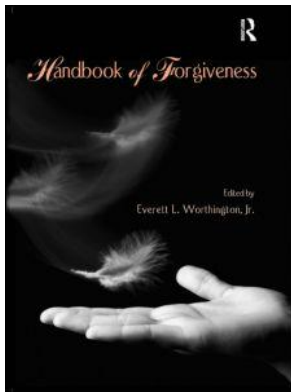
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Everett L. Worthington, Jr.

Forgiveness, Self-Respect, and the Value of Resentment

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Jeffrie G. Murphy

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Chapter Three

Forgiveness, Self-Respect, and the Value of Resentment

Jeffrie G. Murphy

As a moral philosopher rather than a psychologist, I will not be able to follow the format typical for this volume. I have no experiments or studies to report, no recommendations for further research, and no clinical recommendations. My interest is in ethical questions, and my discipline is not empirical but is essentially conceptual and normative—seeking to clarify the concepts that we use in moral evaluation and to suggest ways in which such evaluation might profitably be structured. One goal—one that goes back at least as far in time as Socrates—is to raise skeptical doubts when certain moral views have uncritically become a part of the conventional wisdom of the day.

PERSONAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

It has for some time seemed to me that such skepticism should be directed to much contemporary thinking on forgiveness. There is, I think, a powerful contemporary “forgiveness movement” that often suggests that forgiveness is an unambiguously good thing—promising psychological, moral, and even physical benefit to those who practice it. If one looks at the self-help and recovery sections of most bookstores, for example, one will see an enormous number of books with forgiveness in the title, and many of these books represent little more than uncritical, sentimental boosterism. In fairness, however, it should be noted that this kind of boosterism is most commonly found in works of popular psychology. Works of scientific psychology are typically (though not always) more nuanced and critical.

Although by no means an enemy of forgiveness, I seek to throw a bit of a wet blanket on this trendy movement by highlighting the dangers of hasty forgiveness. Hasty forgiveness can in my view undermine self-respect, respect for the moral order, respect for the wrongdoer, and even respect for forgiveness itself. This final consequence occurs when the genuine and valuable article is reduced to a set of posturing clichés and becomes what is sometimes called “cheap grace.” I am not the only

one who urges such caution, of course; indeed, psychologist Sharon Lamb (Lamb & Murphy, 2002) and I have recently edited a book in which a variety of authors, both philosophers and psychologists, express a variety of cautions. My own views on the positive value of resentment and its link to self-respect have been greatly influenced by Joseph Butler (1718/1896), Jean Améry (1986), Aurel Kolnai (1978), Thomas Hill, Jr. (1991), and Peter Strawson (1974).

Before I proceed to make this case, however, let me emphasize my view that philosophy on such matters should not pretend to lay out any final truths. Its job is rather to raise interesting (often skeptical) questions and to develop a framework for discussion that will (it is hoped) advance the conversation. This framework will necessarily be somewhat personal to its author and thus can represent no more than one perspective on the issues in question. My own perspective has been deeply formed by my own philosophical and religious (specifically Christian) studies, but other perspectives could emerge from different studies of equal depth.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

My own thinking on forgiveness has been most influenced by the writings of the great 18th-century moral philosopher and theologian (and Anglican Bishop), Joseph Butler (1718/1896). Most of Butler's philosophy was developed in his published sermons, and two are of particular relevance to the present topic: "Upon Resentment" and "Upon Forgiveness of Injuries."

In the second of these sermons, Butler (1718/1896)—rightly, in my judgment—characterizes forgiveness as primarily an internal matter, a change of heart. It often does, of course, have external behavioral consequences, but its essence is internal.

What is this inner state or change of heart that is the essence of forgiveness? It is not itself an emotion or passion but is rather, according to Butler, the overcoming or limiting of certain passions, namely, the vindictive passions that are naturally aroused when we are wronged by others. These vindictive passions—anger, the desire to strike back, the desire to see the wrongdoer punished, sometimes even hatred—are called by Peter Strawson (1974) "reactive attitudes" (p. 6), and he with Butler sees them as natural responses to being wronged. Butler uses the term *resentment* to refer to these vindictive passions.

It is easy to see why forgiveness, as a way of overcoming or transcending resentment, is often a good thing. Forgiveness may allow us to reconcile with others and restore relations of value, free us from the inner turmoil that may come from harboring grudges, and free us from an overly narcissistic involvement with our own injuries—a tendency to sometimes (but not always) see ourselves as more victimized than we really are. Forgiveness may also have social value—blunting vindictive responses that might result in a kind of revenge taking that would undermine civil order.

None of the above, however, shows that forgiveness—particularly hasty forgiveness—is *always* a good thing. Neither does it show that the resentment that is

overcome is always a bad thing. So it is time to say, with Butler, something on behalf of resentment.

THE CASE FOR RESENTMENT

Bishop Butler, in his powerful sermon “Upon Resentment,” seeks to make a case for the legitimacy of resentment and other vindictive passions, arguing that a just and loving God would not have universally implanted these passions within his creatures unless the passions served some valuable purpose. (A similar point—without any reference to God—might be made by an evolutionary biologist.) The danger of resentment, he argued, lies not in having it but rather in being dominated by it to such a degree that one can never overcome it and thus acts irresponsibly on the basis of it. As the initial response to being wronged, however, the passion stands in defense of important values—values that might be compromised by immediate and uncritical forgiveness of wrongs.

What are the values defended by resentment and threatened by hasty and uncritical forgiveness? In my own writings (Murphy, 2003; Murphy & Hampton, 1988), I have argued that three of the most important are self-respect, self-defense, and respect for the moral order. A person who never resented any injuries done to him or her might be a saint. It is equally likely, however, that such lack of resentment reveals a servile personality—a personality lacking in respect for himself or herself and respect for the rights and status that attach to a free and equal moral being. (This is the point behind S. J. Perelman’s famous quip, “To err is human, to forgive supine.”) Just as indignation over the mistreatment of others stands as emotional testimony that we care about them and their rights, so does resentment stand as emotional testimony that we care about ourselves and our rights.

This is a very important point to emphasize: Moral commitment is not merely a matter of intellectual commitment; it requires emotional allegiance as well, for a moral person is not simply a person who holds the abstract belief that certain things are wrong. The moral person is also driven to do something about the wrong; and what drives us is found mainly in our emotions or passions. It is not enough for me simply to say, “I respect myself.” If this is indeed true, I will also convey emotionally, typically by resentment, that my being wronged truly matters to me and that the wrongdoer should expect a strong negative response.

Related to this is an instrumental point: Those who have vindictive dispositions toward those who wrong them give potential wrongdoers an incentive *not* to wrong them. If I were going to set out to oppress other people, I would surely prefer to select for my victims persons whose first response is forgiveness rather than persons whose first response is revenge. Those temperamentally given to hasty forgiveness or nudged toward it by an overly enthusiastic forgiveness therapist may also be given to hasty reconciliation—letting abusive people back into their lives—and thus putting themselves at continuing risk. Although these people no doubt deserve our sympathy, Kant

(1797/1996) was not totally off base when he noted that “one who makes himself into a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him” (p. 559). It is important to stress, however, that resentment does not stand merely as emotional testimony of self-respect. This passion and the reluctance to transcend it in hasty forgiveness also stands as testimony to our allegiance to the moral order itself. We have a duty to support—both intellectually and emotionally—the moral order, an order represented by clear understandings of what constitutes unacceptable treatment of one human being by another. If we do not show resentment or indignation to those who, in victimizing others, flout those understandings, then we run the risk—as Aurel Kolnai (1978) has warned—of being complicitous in evil. We also run the risk of failing to show moral respect for wrongdoers themselves who, if regarding themselves as free and responsible moral agents, *should* expect to find their wrongdoing met with resentment. Any other response would flirt with treating them as nonresponsible and would be patronizing. I certainly want my own wrongdoing to be met with resentment and would feel insulted and degraded if others viewed me merely as pitiful, sick, and myself as much a victim as those whom I have wronged. Do I not thus owe other wrongdoers at least the initial presumption that they, too, are legitimate objects of blame, resentment, and punishment?

It should be noted that the link I am suggesting between resentment and such values as self-respect may help to explain why *repentance* on the part of the wrongdoer often opens the door to legitimate forgiveness. For example, if a man offends me and is unrepentant, standing behind the wrong he has done to me, then I run the risk that in forgiving him I am endorsing the symbolic message that he conveyed in wronging me—the message that he matters more than I do and can use me like an object for his purposes. If the wrongdoer is truly repentant, however, he seeks to break the symbolic and emotional connection between his present self and his previous wrongful self—now joining me in condemning that previous self. Thus, I can relate positively to what he now is with less risk of complicity in evil.

Repentance is generally viewed as a necessary condition for forgiveness in the Jewish tradition, but there are deep disagreements about this within Christianity. Many Christians advocate universal and unconditional forgiveness, whereas others retain the idea that repentance should first be required. These Christians are, not surprisingly, fond of quoting Jesus’ remark at Luke 17:3:

If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

If the vindictive passion of righteous and punitive anger is regarded as totally unchristian, and if Christians seek to follow in the imitation of Christ tradition, then what are they to make of the story (John 2:14) where Jesus, moved it would appear by righteous anger, inflicts punitive violence (whipping) on the money changers in the temple?

If what I have said thus far—with the aid of Butler—is correct, then there is much of positive value to be found in resentment, in the vindictive passions. Why then do these passions enjoy such bad press? Why do so many people think that, like cruelty

or malice, they are unambiguously irrational (sick or evil) and that one may transcend them with no loss of value at all? Why has opposition to these passions taken such a firm root in ordinary language that even to call a person “vindictive” is normally taken to express severe criticism of that person?

It is possible, of course, that what people say—and think they are supposed to say—about such matters is not always an accurate index of how they actually believe and feel. Indeed, the great popularity of revenge entertainment in books and films suggests that many people take vicarious delight in seeing wronged people get even through acts of revenge. To the degree that people really do believe that the vindictive passions are sick or evil, however, it is at least possible they have been seduced by some arguments that—though plausible on their face—may not survive close rational scrutiny. I will explore a few of the most prominent of these.

One typically argues for the irrationality (sickness or evil) of an emotion by attempting to show that it is not fitting to its object, is harmful to the person who experiences it, is inherently self-defeating, necessarily leads to pathological excess, or is pointless—lacking in any useful purpose.

I do not think that vindictiveness can easily be shown to be irrational on any of these tests. It certainly seems fitting that one strikes back when one has been injured—indeed, such a response seems encoded in us by our evolutionary history—and thus the vindictive person does not seem like the neurotic who does indeed have an emotion that is not fitting to its object—for example, a person who is phobic, who has an irrational fear of something that is not in fact dangerous.

Neither does the emotion seem pointless. Vindictive people want to get even, and no doubt will often, having asserted their own equal worth and rights, feel much better when such revenge is realized. That is just its point. To say it is pointless only because it does not have a point of which the critic of vindictiveness would approve is simply to beg the question at issue.

Many people love to say, of course, that forgiveness provides (I hate the word) “closure,” but getting even can sometimes provide closure as well. And forgiveness does not always provide this anyway. My first philosophy professor told a story (perhaps apocryphal) of Lord Bacon visiting a seacoast church and asking the priest the meaning of a large painting on a wall. “It represents,” said the priest, “all those who were saved from drowning through prayer.” Bacon replied: “And where do you hang the picture of those who were not saved?” Sometimes the boosters for forgiveness remind me of this priest—keeping the successes vividly in sight while remaining blind to the failures.

It is commonly argued that the resentful, grudge-holding person tends to harm himself or herself, like a scorpion stinging itself to death with its own tail. It is, of course, irrational to regard as legitimate emotions that are self-poisoning, and this looks like a good case for the irrationality of the vindictive passions. But such a conclusion would, I think, be hasty for two reasons.

First, it is possible that vindictiveness will poison only if *repressed*. If so, this is as much an argument in favor of expressing our vindictiveness in acts of revenge as

it is an argument for the elimination of vindictiveness. In short, there are at least two ways to avoid nursing a grudge: forgive or get even. (There are, of course, varieties of other options as well.)

Second, we need to distinguish between the rationality of the emotion itself and the rationality of the *role* that this emotion plays in the overall psychological economy of the person. Recall Spinoza (1677/1985) on the fear of death. He did not argue that the fear of death is, like a phobia, itself irrational. He did not, for example, counsel against looking both ways before crossing a street. Rather he argued that it is irrational to be *led* by the fear of death—that is, to let the fear play such a dominant role in one's life that it sours all the good things that life has to offer. Thus, unless it can be shown that vindictiveness must always be the dominant passion and thus lead the vindictive person in some self-destructive or other-destructive way, we do not yet have a case for the undesirability of the passion itself.

Of course, some writers have argued this very thing—that vindictiveness will in fact always so dominate a person's life as to prevent that person's human flourishing. Here as one example is what the psychoanalyst Karen Horney (1948) says about vindictiveness:

There is no more holding back a person driven toward revenge than an alcoholic determined to go on a binge. Logic no longer prevails. Whether or not the situation is appropriate does not matter. It overrides prudence. Consequences for himself and others are brushed aside. He is as inaccessible as anybody who is in the grip of a blind passion. (p. 5)

This is a serious claim, because, if true, it would reveal the vindictive person as having both an irrational and destructively immoral self—a self likely to harm others and to undermine the social order.

But is Horney's (1948) claim true? I think that it is not. Speaking (as almost any Irishman can) from personal experience as a somewhat vindictive person, I believe that I have often gotten even with people in ways that, in addition to being satisfying to me, were moderate and proportional. My chosen strategy of revenge sometimes involved nothing more than a few well-selected (and hurtful, I hoped) words or by actions no more extreme than no longer extending lunch invitations or rides to work to them.

Rarely have I been dominated by my vindictive feelings. I often let them float harmlessly in the back of my mind until an appropriate occasion for their expression occurs. I am not suggesting that this makes me particularly admirable—and I might even accept the charge that it reveals in me a streak of pettiness—but I do not think that it qualifies me as dangerously crazy or evil.

Where then do Horney (1948) and others get this idea that vindictive people are all potentially dangerous lunatics just waiting to inflict unjust harm and destroy the social fabric? Therapists, I imagine, often get it from their clients, because people of proportional and moderate emotions tend to be rare in their practices. Others may get it from art—particularly film and literature—where revenge is often mistakenly

identified with illegal and socially disruptive vigilante activity that at least borders on insanity. This theme goes back at least as far as the ancient story of Medea and is to be found in classic Western movies and in the most recent best-seller thrillers.

Of course, these works portray vindictiveness in extreme ways because moderate and proportional revenge taking is *boring*. However, just because the extreme cases are more interesting and gripping, it does not follow that there are not many more cases where revenge is taken in moderate and proportional ways. But who would want to read a revenge novel or view a revenge film where the central character ultimately gets back at his victimizer by no longer extending lunch invitations to him?

To summarize: None of the arguments I have surveyed establishes either the irrationality or the immorality of vindictiveness or even of moderate acts of revenge.

Because the arguments against vindictiveness are weak and because something (recall Butler) has been found to say in its favor, I think that it is justified to conclude—at least provisionally—that vindictive passions can legitimately be attributed to sane and virtuous people. Virtuous people can, I think, sometimes even enjoy without guilt the knowledge that those who have wronged them—particularly if unrepentant—are “getting theirs” through such mechanisms as criminal punishment.

CONCLUSION

Because others in this volume (and I in many of my other writings) have much to say on behalf of forgiveness, I have in this entry set myself a very limited objective: to introduce some cautions with respect to its hasty and uncritical bestowal. The vindictive passions have some positive value—they are not, like cruelty or malice, simply sick and evil—and thus seeking to overcome them always carries with it the danger that something of value is being improperly sacrificed. This sacrifice may be of proper self-respect, sacrifice of respect for the moral order, or—if hasty forgiveness leads to hasty reconciliation—sacrifice of reasonable self-protection. Even as we rightly preach the virtues of forgiveness, we should recognize that victims deserve to have their vindictive passions to some degree validated. Even if these passions should generally not be the last word, they have a legitimate claim to be the first word. Even when they should not control, they should be listened to with respect instead of met with pious sermons and sentimental, dismissive clichés. In short: Even if one subscribes to a brand of Christianity that must ultimately reject the legitimacy of Elie Wiesel’s (1995) prayer at Auschwitz or is committed to forgiveness for purely psychological reasons, one must surely still have *some* sympathy with that prayer and not see it merely as a symptom of irrational illness or evil:

God of forgiveness, do not forgive those who created this place. God of mercy, have no mercy on those who killed here Jewish children. (p. 1)

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