Introduction: When and When not to Forgive

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Most people have serious moral or pragmatic beliefs about forgiveness, yet scepticism about when and when not to forgive – and, likewise, if and when revenge is ever appropriate – are common to contemporary society. For instance, a passing glance at popular culture, including the latest internationally acclaimed books and television series, let alone countless news stories, attest to the power of forgiveness and revenge in human affairs.[1] Still, there remains an air of scepticism, even among popular sources, about such things as universal concepts of forgiveness;[2] forgiving atrocious crimes;[3] whether group forgiveness is even possible;[4] and what forgiveness accomplishes in particular circumstances.[5] Likewise, when it comes to revenge, sceptics raise questions about the place of retributive justice in modern society;[6] whether some crimes warrant revenge;[7] how to control human propensities for vengeance;[8] and whether the threat of revenge – both interpersonally and internationally – deters or exacerbates transgressions.[9]

Among scholars of forgiveness, there are three perennial queries, especially within western notions of forgiveness and its putative psychosocial effects. First, what exactly constitutes forgiveness and, second, when – and when not – should one forgive? Third, how does forgiveness vary from one context to another? In other words, how in fact does forgiveness depend on the circumstances of the transgression, the agents involved and the relationship between offender and victim?[10] These questions parallel challenges raised in many fields of study. To illustrate, scholars in the humanities, such as philosophy, sceptically ask how forgiveness should be defined, most notably in particular contexts or studies.[11] Other scholars in both the humanities and social sciences, such as sociology and history, inquire about the function of forgiveness and revenge (including how forgiveness and revenge evolved both biologically and culturally alongside one another).[12] Finally, empirical scholars, such as those in psychology and anthropology, routinely investigate how forgiveness and revenge vary between individuals, societies, cultures and religions.[13]

Given the importance of these questions and challenges, we believe that contemporary scholars who address them are making significant advances in what is known (and still unknown) about forgiveness and revenge. Moreover, because investigating forgiveness or revenge is a cross-disciplinary endeavour, it is important for scholars to engage with experts outside their field of study. The latter has been the goal of our publishers, including the present volume and the conference on which it is based. Although a single volume such as this one cannot do justice to the broad array of insights and results from several different disciplines, it is our hope that this collection of original articles offers an outlook on the benefits of interdisciplinary discussions about forgiveness and revenge. Indeed, by building upon what is observed in other disciplines, scholars can learn

from each other and advance moral and pragmatic discussions, including issues of policy-making, which can contribute to enhancing forgiveness and deterring revenge in several aspects of human life.

In what follows, we will briefly describe the three previously mentioned issues that are at the centre of scholarship on forgiveness and revenge. These issues not only correspond to well-known challenges regarding the place of forgiveness and revenge in human affairs, but also to the central themes addressed by authors in subsequent chapters. After briefly discussing these three issues in turn, we will conclude this introduction with some suggested directions for future research.

We begin with the perennial challenge of delineation. Over the past 20 years, several philosophers and theologians have undertaken investigations with the sole aim of defining and properly conceptualizing forgiveness and revenge. The purpose of doing so has been to define and demarcate both concepts as proper objects of study. On the topic of forgiveness, there were many important discussions in the 1990s on the meaning and purpose of forgiving, especially in the context of truth and reconciliation, and whether concepts of interpersonal forgiveness could be applied to entire communities.[14] These discussions were often dominated by scholars and practitioners whose motivations to defend forgiveness were grounded in religious philosophy or human rights. As such, several theorists argued that, on the one hand, forgiveness derives from the Judeo-Christian tradition but has now become a necessary social and political practice for all communities.[15] On the other hand, other scholars defended the view that forgiveness is a rather natural phenomenon, and thus the focus should be on the social and political conditions in post-conflict environments that need to be altered to ensure forgiveness.[16] However, besides these defenders, many of whom were motivated by a genuine desire to increase the practice of forgiveness in potentially reconciliatory circumstances, several continental philosophers critically problematized forgiveness and shed light on the limits thereof.

For instance, Derrida famously argued that forgiveness, in most senses, is to let go of negative ill will towards someone who has caused significant suffering, an offender who has engaged in an otherwise unforgivable act.[17] Derrida argues, however, that whenever we do forgive, we do so because we have reasoned that the offense is, after all, forgivable. If so, and by all means and purposes, Derrida's concept of forgiveness seems to hold, we face a remarkable paradox: either the offense is unforgivable and we grant amnesty but never truly forgive or the offense is forgivable and forgiveness does not exist in the strict sense of the term. Accordingly, *forgiveness* is either a conditional and rationalistic amnesty for an offense deserving forgiveness or an unconditional and irrational act that, in the end, does not contribute to the healing of a permanent wound.[18] It is only very recently that the insights and advances of Derrida's work have begun to filter back into discussions of practicing forgiveness and applying it to the philosophy of truth and

reconciliation, human rights and justice. In fact, many chapters in this volume are examples of scholarship motivated by Derrida's critical paradox.

When considering what is meant by revenge, scholars outside the humanities and largely within the biological sciences have begun to reconsider the significance of revenge – alongside that of forgiveness – as a natural human inclination. In particular, McCullough has drawn from game theory, evolutionary biology and primatology to argue that revenge was (and may remain in some environmental contexts) an adaptive behaviour.[19] After all, revenge is not a psychological illness but rather a form of punishment, and punishment in turn provides (a) retributive justice, which thereby (b) contributes to cooperation, and (c) deters future transgressions.[20] Given this much, vengeance is sometimes important for the cooperation and coherence of traditional human societies. Despite the overwhelming evidence in support of this point, McCullough's ideas have not gone without criticisms. As McCullough himself notes, revenge may have been adaptive in early environments of human adaptation but that does not entail that it is adaptive – let alone appropriate – in modern society. Still, if one is already inclined to reject revenge, then one might be too quick to interpret challenges to theories that support revenge as confirmations of one's own views on the absolute goodness of forgiveness in most instances of conflict. Likewise, those who appreciate the descriptive evidence favouring the importance of revenge may be too quick to dismiss the prescriptive claims favouring the promotion of forgiveness and discouragement of revenge.

In each case what is evident is that one's delineation of forgiveness and revenge is often connected to one's moral and practical views of the respective behaviours. Amid such arguments for the meaning and importance of both forgiveness and revenge a question is naturally raised and demands our consideration. When should one forgive and when should one not forgive? Furthermore, presuming the potential value of vengeance or retributive justice, when should one opt for punishing offenders as opposed to forgiving them? These are difficult questions that undoubtedly depend on the individual case in question and the environmental context in which it occurs. One serious allegation, raised by such challenges, is that there is a deep conflict – and perhaps a moral issue – between those who prescribe forgiveness and those who must practice it.[21] For despite the valid and pragmatically sound ethical arguments in favour of forgiveness, the act itself is always a particular event and emotionally driven behaviour that depends entirely on the victim. As such, a victim may very well demand: who else besides me is to forgive my offender? Furthermore, who else decides whether I should forgive? These queries are particularly evident in so-called acts of collective forgiveness. A further problem to arise in cases of collective or group forgiveness is whether forgiveness, an interpersonal behaviour between a victim and an offender, can even be applied at the group level.[22]

This leads to the second perennial challenge, namely, that of when – and when not – to forgive. Regardless of how scholars delineate forgiveness, the behaviour itself remains a fascinating one because so many victims who have suffered horrendous crimes do, in fact, forgive their offenders.[23] In these cases, the victim appears prone to manifesting a deep sense of catharsis and moral probity in doing so; not to mention that persons who forgive often serve as moral inspiration to those who witness or learn about their actions. Scholars have thus been grappling with cases where an otherwise unforgivable act is, notwithstanding Derrida, apparently forgiven. Again, such cases are as fascinating as they are inspiring. Of course, whether one forgives or chooses not to forgive begs an important question for scholars: in what circumstances do people attempt to forgive? Likewise, when do they choose not to forgive? These questions are addressed by several authors in this volume whose work demonstrates the plurality of forgiveness as well as the cultural and psychological factors that go into the act of choosing to forgive.

With regard to when people forgive and when they do not, several theorists from Kant to Arendt have challenged the morality of forgiveness in all circumstances, especially in the face of so-called *radical* evil or unconscionable crimes. Echoing these theorists, Vetlesen recently asked: 'Can there be cases of wrongdoing so extreme that forgiveness ceases to be a morally justified, or indeed humanly possible, response?'[24] In addressing this question, Vetlesen argues that despite the late twentieth century surge in forgiveness as a practical means to reconciliation and peace, widespread forgiveness can have the opposite effect. Instead of helping individuals and communities overcome evildoing in the world, uncritical and misplaced forgiveness can perpetuate evils and, arguably, inspire wrongdoers. The reason for this is simple: in many cultures, when transgressions occur, social support and collective sympathies are geared toward the victim, not the offender. In turn, the victim is able to remain loyal to his or her dignity and forgive when doing so perpetuates wellbeing.[25] Returning to McCullough, this seems to happen whenever the victim wishes to maintain relations with the offender, and the offender in turn expresses indebtedness and remorse about his or her offense. Furthermore, the offender has given unequivocal signs – usually by means of costly signals – that he or she is serious about their repentance and dedicated to never repeating their offense.[26] Put briefly, whenever these elements are present, forgiveness is likely to occur; whenever these elements are absent, forgiveness is unlikely.

Hence, when the offense is radically evil or committed by a group, forgiveness may appear to be unlikely – or even improbable – for many victims. This is because radical evil usually involves an offender who felt justified or took pleasure in their crimes, and thus remains or seems unrepentant. Similarly, in the case of collective evil, it is unwise to forgive a group that does not express collective remorse or continues to threaten the victimized group. As several victims themselves suggest, forgiving an offender who is unrepentant or perpetually

threatening violates one's moral intuitions and contradicts the very purpose of forgiveness.[27] According to the Kantian tradition, these intuitions are correct: to forgive radical evil or active enemies negates the moral thrust of forgiveness for both the offender and victim. Yet some victims are willing to forgive radical evil and many groups have been able to forgive and reconcile with former perpetrators. The reasons for doing so are not always apparent, as victims grant forgiveness to unrepentant or threatening offenders for a variety of reasons that run counter to the Kantian and Darwinian tradition.[28] Therefore, scholars must not only critically reflect about how to conceptualize forgiveness but also investigate when victims refuse forgiveness and when they grant it.

While early explorations focused on definitional issues and the potential benefits of forgiveness, most early theorists were predominantly oriented with Western perspectives. As such, they were subsequently criticized for overlooking the many diverse social and cultural factors that not only influence forgiveness but also discussions thereof.[29] A common view today is that all models of forgiveness, regardless of being philosophical or psychological, are infused with cultural meanings and assumptions; and the act of forgiveness itself is both a psychological and *socio-cultural* process, grounded in particular cultural and historical circumstances. Hence, any discussion that focuses strictly on the interior experience of forgiveness – as commonly told from a Western perspective – often overemphasizes psychological issues but ignores critical situational factors such as the cultural norms informing the processes and decision-making behind forgiveness.

As noted by McCullough, 'Without addressing religious, cultural, and situational variations, scientific notions of forgiveness are likely to be disconnected from lived experience.'[30] One important matter here is the cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism.[31] Collectivistic cultures view individuals as interdependent, with an emphasis on social norms and duties, group goals and social connectedness, where forgiveness is construed as a prescribed duty for reconciliation and group coherence.[32] Individualistic cultures, on the other hand, focus on cognition, emotion and personal well being, with clear links to justice, where forgiveness is construed as a personal choice.[33] Critically, collectivism and individualism are not simple opposites: they are different cultural dimensions that guide alternative worldviews and contrasting social and cultural patterns. They will, in turn, identify different aspects of forgiveness as salient.[34] Collectivistic forgiveness is motivated by the desire to promote and maintain group harmony,[35] while individualistic cultures are motivated by self-enhancement.[36]

For example, several studies have demonstrated that participants from collectivistic cultures, such as the Congo[37] or Indonesia,[38] are more willing to forgive than their individualistic (largely Western European) counterparts. Other works have demonstrated that participants from collectivistic cultures pay less attention to the emotional proximity of the offender and victim when making

forgiveness decisions than participants from individualistic cultures.[39] An important issue here is face: the public portrayal of the self as it relates to the local culture, which can be maintained or lost through relatively honorable or dishonorable actions, respectively. Much forgiveness literature in the West is victim oriented, revealing the Western concern for saving one's own reputation and honor over that of others, which is a view that neglects the collectivistic orientation of forgiving for the sake of others.[40]

Linguistic and performative tools also shape the forgiveness of particular socio-historical groups. Many cultures have cultivated special tools to promote forgiveness, including moral narratives, rituals and symbols that promote harmony and reconciliation, as witnessed by linguistic variations in the language of forgiveness.[41] In fact, the term *forgiveness* does not have a direct correlate in all languages.[42] The closest translations focus on apologies or restoring respect, without a clear analogue for forgiveness. This underscores the inadequacy of lumping major geographic areas into one understanding of forgiveness. Sandage and colleagues, for instance, examined forgiveness among Hmong immigrants in the United States, finding that the Hmong are like other oppressed groups from Southeast Asian cultures, where forgiveness is offered only in particular circumstances.[43]

Nuanced cultural norms may exert an influence beyond that of potentially oversimplifying categories of *individualistic* and *collectivistic*. There may be particular circumstances that are more likely to be labeled *unforgivable* based on cultural historical context. Between-group differences in levels of forgiveness may be less significant than cross-sectional differences in forgiveness within specific ethnic groups, just as levels of acculturation also shape notions of forgiveness or disrespect.[44] For instance, within the United States, there exist regional cultural variations that may impact forgiveness experiences. For those participating in the 'culture of honor' within the southern United States, as identified by Nisbett and Cohen, retaliation is considered the appropriate and necessary response to an offense.[45] This cultural standard may prove stronger and more consistent than general *individualistic* tendencies that have been previously demonstrated.

Likewise, religious traditions often promote forgiveness and provide guidance on how to handle transgressions, including how and when one should forgive. Within some Jewish communities, for instance, repentance and atonement are necessary prerequisites for forgiveness,[46] and for many Jews, it is considered morally wrong to forgive murder.[47] Similarly, Islam is both a diverse religion and a political entity in various world regions, entailing that a universal and unconditional form of forgiveness for all Muslims is neither possible nor viable.[48] Within varieties of Islam, the offender must always show repentance and contrition and beg for forgiveness. Christianity is equally as political but is more focused on the individual, such that unconditional forgiveness is taught as a moral imperative. To illustrate, Mullet and Azar studied the role of religion in forgiveness among

Lebanese Muslims and Christians, and French Christians.[49] As predicted, Lebanese Muslims scored lower in unconditional forgiveness than Lebanese or French Christians, demonstrating the impact of religion over culture.[50] However, the Lebanese Muslims and Christians alike 'gave special status to apologies and contrition.'[51] For Christians, apologies simply provided context, but for Muslims, apologies helped to reduce victim resentment. Here we see substantial differences in the expectations of forgiveness, which underscores the need to measure the multiple elements of the forgiveness experience.

In most contexts, women are expected to forgive more than men.[52] However, few studies have attempted to understand why this might be the case. Gender differences in forgiveness may be tied to differences in disposition, affective traits, attachment styles and religiosity.[53] Given that religions tend to promote forgiveness, higher rates of religiosity in women may partially explain their higher rates of forgiveness.[54] Another factor to inform forgiveness strategies among men and women is the cultural notion of injustice,[55] which is, in turn, shaped by gender politics. It is possible that gender norms promote collectivistic forgiveness among women more than men, even in predominantly *individualistic* societies.[56] Furthermore, different situations may trigger different responses in men and women, and prime gender norms or gender stereotypes. For instance, vengeance moderates the relationship between gender and forgiveness for some populations. According to Kadiangandu and colleagues, French men predictably score higher in revenge-seeking behaviours than women, but both men and women from the Kasai region of the Congo have equally scored desires and strategies for revenge.[57] Thus, some of the differences that have been uncritically attributed to gender may, in fact, be more appropriately linked to culturally patterned gender norms, such as the Western view that men are overall more vengeful than women.[58] Still, there are notable differences across genders that are worth mentioning. As an illustration, Sani and colleagues used fMRI scans to examine the brain patterns of men and women as they responded to hypothetical scenarios of forgiveness or unforgiveness.[59] The fMRIs revealed clear gender differences in brain structures, including increased activation of the precuneus, extrastriate visual regions, DL-PFC and the posterior cingulate in females relative to males during hurtful conditions, and larger areas of activation in anterior cingulate, STS and the inferior frontal context in males compared to females when imagining forgiveness. Hence, men and women appear to process and respond to harm in functionally different ways, which bears on forgiveness.

All of this suggests the postmodernists have had ample grounds for criticizing much of the extant literature on forgiveness. Such literature often uncritically assumes that forgiveness is the right and correct path, with various social, evolutionary, and psychological benefits. Yet recent studies find that people occasionally regret their decision to forgive an offender, particularly if forgiveness inflicts costs to the forgiver's self interest.[60] Also, it is possible that the

psychological rewards of forgiveness do not accrue if forgiveness is granted solely out of cultural expectations, rather than the victim's beliefs and desires. Along these lines, Huang and Enright found that participants who forgave out of love for the offender showed less elevation in blood pressure when recalling the offense than did participants who forgave out of a sense of religious obligation.[61] Even within religious contexts, the victim often does not forgive indiscriminately, and may properly hold on to both anger and justice. As many critics observe, then, forgiveness is not always a virtue or strength, particularly if it is exercised out of fear of confrontation or an unwillingness to acknowledge one's own anger.[62] In some circumstances, forgiveness may even be dangerous or morally questionable.[63] And while there are data to suggest that forgiven perpetrators reciprocate more goodwill and benevolence than those who are unforgiven,[64] such data overlooks the critical socio-cultural and gendered differences across populations that contribute to justice, reconciliation and forgiveness.

With regard to the three main challenges to forgiveness and revenge that we have considered here, there is much opportunity for future work and many important questions remain unexplored. To close, we wish to mention briefly some of the topics on which further research would be most beneficial. First, on the topic of delineation, it is time to move from the extensive discussions of what forgiveness means to the question of how to think about the epistemic consequences of definitions in arguments for – and investigations about – forgiveness. It is also worth examining how definitions vary among specific topics, including morality and religion, but also politics, philosophy, history and various sciences. Second, the topic of when and when not to forgive warrants further study. It would be expecting too much to think that people adopt forgiveness (or not) for the same reasons, and it is also reasonable to think that variations in forgiveness and revenge vary according to certain psychological, social, political, economic, cultural and religious compositions. It would be beneficial, then, to collect more data on the factors that influence when forgiveness takes place and when it does not.

Notes

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[3] Jerome Neu, 'To Understand All is to Forgive All—Or is It?,' *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, eds. Sharon Lamb and Jeffrie Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41-53.

[4] Jeffrey Blustein, *Forgiveness and Remembrance: Remembering Wrongdoing in Personal and Public Life* (New York: Oxford, 2014).

[5] Ibid, 143-177.

[6] Murphy, *Getting Even*; Bill Puka, 'Forgoing Forgiveness,' *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, eds. Sharon Lamb and Jeffrie Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 136-154.

[7] Samuel Pillsbury, 'The Meaning of Deserved Punishment: An Essay on Choice, Character, and Responsibility,' *Indiana Law Journal* 67.3 (1992): 719-752.

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[10] Michael McCullough, Kenneth Pargament and Carl Thoresen, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000).

[11] For example, see Jeffry Blustein, *Forgiveness and Remembrance*; Jacques Derrida, *On Comopolitanism and Forgiveness (Thinking in Action),* trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001); Glen Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[12] Michael McCullough, *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

[13] See Mark Rye, Kenneth Pargament, Amir Ali, Guy Beck, Elliot Dorff, Charles Hallisey, Vasudha Narayanan and James Williams, 'Religious Perspectives on Forgiveness,' *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. Michael McCullough, Kenneth Pargament, and Carl Thoresen (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 14-40.

[14] For example, see Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); for an overview of theories from the 1990s to 2010s, see Bas van Stokkom, Neelke, Doorn, and Paul van Tongeren, *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts* (London: Intersentia, 2012).

[15] David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (New York: Cambridge University Press.

[16] McCullough, *Beyond Revenge*.

[17] Derrida, *On Comopolitanism and Forgiveness.*

[18] Ibid.

[19] McCullough, *Beyond Revenge*.

[20] Ibid, 41-87.

[21] Bluestein, *Forgiveness and Remembrance*; Derrida, *On Comopolitanism and Forgiveness;* Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Geoffrey Scarre, *After Evil: Responding to Wrongdoing* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).

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[23] See Marina Cantacuzino, *The Forgiveness Project: Stories for a Vengeful Age* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015).

[24] Arne Johan Vetlesen, 'Can Forgiveness be Morally Wrong?,' *The Ethics of Forgiveness*, ed. Christel Fricke (New York: Routledge, 2011), 143-165, 143.

[25] Ibid, 143-152.

[26] See McCullough, *Beyond Revenge*.

[27] For example, see Joshua Thomas and Andrew Garrod, 'Forgiveness after Genocide? Perspectives from Bosnian Youth,' *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, eds. Sharon Lamb and Jeffrie Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 192-214.

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[29] Sharon Lamb, 'Introduction: Reasons to be Cautious About the Use of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy,' *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, eds. Sharon Lamb and Jeffrie Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-14; Steven J. Sandage and Ian Williamson, 'Forgiveness in Cultural Context,' *Handbook of Forgiveness,* ed. Everett L. Worthington, Jr. (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2005), 41-56.

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[37] Joachim Kadima Kadiangandu, Etienne Mullet and Geneviève Vinsonneau, 'Forgivingness: A Congo-France Comparison,' *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32.4 (2001): 504-511

[38] Christiany C. Suwartono, Yeti Prawasti and Etienne Mullet, 'Effect of Culture on Forgivingness: A Southern Asia–Western Europe Comparison,' *Personality and Individual Differences* 42.3 (2007): 513-523.

[39] Karremans, et al., 'Maintaining Harmony,' 444.

[40] Sandage and Weis, 'Contextualizing Models,' 203.

[41] Hook, Worthington and Utsey, 'Collectivism, Forgiveness, and Social Harmony,' 833.

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[56] Miller, Worthington and McDaniel, 'Gender and Forgiveness,' 849.

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