

TOWARD A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS

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Forgiveness is a central notion of Christian doctrine and practice. For Christians forgiveness is not simply a psychological or therapeutic act for the purpose of self-healing and spiritual tranquility; instead, it is a moral duty. Christians are obliged to forgive those who have seriously injured them, regardless of whether the act produces any psychological benefits for them. Framing forgiveness as a Christian moral duty has several important consequences: first, it highlights the importance of understanding the *normative* nature of forgiveness. My philosophical analysis centers on *what forgiveness should mean* and not on what it does mean.¹ Second, since I focus on the Christian community's normative conception of forgiveness, my analysis provides a limited perspective: *What forgiveness should mean for Christians*. Third, understanding what genuine forgiveness should mean for Christians will elucidate what is required and expected in an act of forgiveness on the part of a Christian forgiving agent. The thesis of this paper, then, is to develop a theory of Christian forgiveness. First, I demonstrate that forgiveness is an essential part of Christian doctrine and practice, and that it is intertwined with other Christian virtues. Second, I work toward constructing a Christian definition of forgiveness by critically examining Jeffrie Murphy's definition,² which represents one of the most comprehensive contemporary philosophical views on the subject.³ Third, I provide an analysis of forgiveness that can overcome Murphy's shortcomings and represent a more promising Christian view.

1. Forgiveness and Christianity

To understand the importance of forgiveness for Christians, the most obvious place to begin is with the gospel.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?” “No, not seven times,” answered Jesus, “but seventy times seven, because the kingdom of heaven is like this.”⁴

Are we to forgive all those who have sinned against us regardless of the severity of injury they have caused and the malice with which they have performed their evil deed? What if our resentment toward a person is so intense that we cannot forgive him? Is forgiveness an involuntary passion or a voluntary act of the will? Jesus uses the following parable to explain to Peter the importance and meaning of forgiveness:

Once there was a king who decided to check on his servants’ accounts. He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before the king. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay you everything!’ The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go. The man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he said. His fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. So he called the servant in. ‘You worthless slave!’ he said. I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.’ The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he could pay back the whole amount.” And Jesus concluded, “That is how my Father in heaven will treat everyone of you unless you forgive your brother from you heart.”⁵

According to this parable, forgiveness is an essential part of a Christian’s relationship with others and God. The parable proclaims that a Christian ought to be moved by compassion and mercy toward forgiving those who are in debt to him and who ask him for forgiveness.

However, in the story, the King was neither seriously injured by the debtor nor did his forgiveness of the debt constitute a major sacrifice on his part. In addition, if the King were to forgive everyone who owed him money, he would probably be a very poor King. Thus, several questions arise: Whom should the King forgive? How do we discern which cases are genuine

cases in which one ought to forgive another? What justifies forgiving someone who has wronged us? This parable, then, raises many questions, leaving open its meaning to various interpretations. Here are other interesting ideas that can be derived from a deeper analysis of this story.

First, forgiveness seems to have an important connection with the Christian virtue mercy. What is mercy? How is mercy related to forgiveness? Second, the moral duty of forgiveness appears to run contrary to the Christian virtue of justice as “a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due.”⁶ If justice calls for one to render only what each is due, then it is possible that one can be just and not be merciful and forgiving. But if forgiving is a moral duty, then a Christian may be *just* and yet act immorally, which seems absurd. Should we say, then, that forgiveness is a supererogatory act? Third, Jesus claims that forgiveness must come from the “heart;” therefore, it seems that forgiveness requires not only an external action on the part of the forgiving agent, but also an internal change in the mind of the forgiver.

Fourth, a central message of the above parable is captured more succinctly in The Lord’s Prayer: “...and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,...”.⁷ In the parable and in the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches that the standard by which God shall judge us concerning the forgiveness of our sins is the same standard which we use to forgive those who have sinned against us. If this is correct, it places a great burden on Christians to understand forgiveness and act in a prudent and judicious way when it comes to forgiving others. Notice that the moral obligation to forgive is not a simple moral prescription, with a set punishment if not complied; instead, the moral precept to forgive is fashioned by Jesus in a much more interesting manner. The theory of forgiveness we endorse through the practice of forgiveness in our lifetime

will be the standard God uses to forgive our sins. This clever method of approaching the moral duty of forgiving is similar to the Rawls' methodology known as the veil of ignorance.

In discerning what would be the most just rules for the distribution of goods in society, Rawls asks us to imagine that we are completely ignorant as to our place in society. Given our ignorance and assuming that we would act to implement rules that would be in our self-interest, the result of our choices should be a system for the distribution of goods that would produce the greatest overall benefit for all parts of society. Similarly, in developing a practice of forgiveness, Jesus asks us to imagine that whatever doctrine we sanction will be the one that God will use to adjudicate against our sins. Since it is difficult to estimate our sinful state at the time of the last judgment, and we hope that no matter how sinful we are God will be merciful and compassionate, giving us hope for redemption, we should develop a practice that offers others similar redemptive opportunities. What is important to remember is that a Christian theory of forgiveness is essentially connected, in a transitive way, to the existence of God, so that how we forgive our neighbors is connected to how God will forgive us.

Another biblical text that sheds interesting insight into the Christian notion of forgiveness concerns the love we should have toward our enemies. Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."⁸ As in the case of forgiveness, the case of love is transitive with God, so that when we love our neighbor we also love God. The important question for us concerns the relationship between love and forgiveness. Does love of our neighbor require us to forgive him as well? If so, and we are asked to love our enemies, do we have to forgive our enemies who have maliciously hurt us?

I appeal to one last biblical text concerning *anger* and *peace*:

You have heard that people were told in the past, ‘Do not commit murder; anyone who does will be brought to trial.’ But now I tell you: whoever is angry with his brother will be brought to trial, ... So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God.⁹

This passage supports the view that for Christians sustaining an angry and resentful disposition toward their neighbor is morally impermissible. Moreover, from this we can derive that a sustained disposition of hatred toward our neighbor would be morally incorrect. Here the burden is on both the victim and the alleged perpetrator of an injury, since Jesus calls for those who remember that there is someone who has something against him to act toward a peaceful resolution. Therefore, in addition to the moral obligation of forgiving, a Christian also has a moral obligation to seek forgiveness. This brings up several important topics: What is the relationship between anger, hatred and forgiveness? Is it always wrong to be angry? Is it always wrong to hate? Do we have control of these feelings? What is the relationship between asking for forgiveness and forgiving?

In this section, I have appealed to the Gospel not as support for an argument, but rather to show that forgiveness is a central moral precept of Christian life, and that it cannot be treated in a vacuum. Instead, forgiveness must be analyzed along side other important Christian concepts such as mercy, love, justice, anger, and hatred. These are complex feelings, passions, virtues and cognitive states that require extensive analysis and discussion. Below I will explore some of these concepts interpreted from a Christian perspective and as they relate to forgiveness.

2. An Analysis of Forgiveness

According to Jeffrie Murphy, forgiveness is one of various possible responses to evil. He defines evil as “grave wrongs and harms that are inflicted maliciously or at least recklessly.”¹⁰ Murphy’s definition encompasses terrible acts of evil, such as rape, murder, and

genocide, as well as personal evils such as betrayal of a friend or spouse. Murphy's question is: When and under what conditions is forgiveness an appropriate response to such evils? In answering this question Murphy presents his view of the nature of forgiveness. There are many possible contexts in which forgiveness can take place. Therefore, before we begin to analyze Murphy's notion of forgiveness it is important to refine the context he has in mind.

First, we can speak about forgiveness between two persons, one who is the wrong-doer and the other the victim (i.e., interpersonal forgiveness). The interpersonal moral relation is the paradigmatic case of forgiveness. There are other non-paradigmatic cases such as forgiveness between a person and a corporation, institution or government. We can also imagine forgiveness between two entities or between a person and society or between two cultural or national groups (i.e., political forgiveness). We can also conceive of the possibility of someone forgiving themselves.¹¹ Finally, we can speak of forgiveness between a person and God. The analysis of forgiveness in each of these different contexts may produce different results and may entail different assumptions, elements and approaches; however, to a large extent, these contexts depend on the results of the analysis of the paradigmatic case.

The nature of the paradigmatic case of forgiveness may also take on different forms, depending on the nature of the relationship of the two persons involved. For instance, the notion of forgiveness between two close friends may be different than between two enemies. The former is considered by most authors to be the standard paradigmatic case of forgiveness. There are, however, many non-standard paradigmatic cases, such as forgiveness between the perpetrator of an evil and a victim's friend or relative (i.e., third party forgiveness). There are also extraordinary cases such as forgiveness between two persons, one of whom has passed

away. Murphy's analysis of forgiveness assumes the standard paradigmatic case, as does most other contemporary analyses.

Murphy's conception of forgiveness is an adaptation of Bishop Butler's view of forgiveness as a moral virtue that requires essentially a change of heart about the evil wrongdoing and evil-doer.¹² The change of heart cannot be provoked by just any reason whatsoever; rather, it has to be motivated by moral concerns and reasons. Thus, according to Murphy, a victim forgives a perpetrator of an evil act if and only if the victim can overcome, on moral grounds, the hatred, vindictiveness, desire for revenge, anger and resentment he or she feels toward the evil doer. Murphy submits the following definition of forgiveness:

I propose, then, to understand forgiveness as the overcoming, on moral grounds, of what I will call the *vindictive passions* – the passions of anger, resentment, and even hatred that are often occasioned when one has been deeply wronged by another.¹³

Jean Hampton argues that we should not understand Murphy's vindictive passions as referring only to feelings; it should also include a cognitive aspect.¹⁴ Thus, vindictive passions include cognitive judgments about the agent's actions being morally wrong and about the agent being a wrongdoer. As a consequence, when Murphy says that to forgive is to overcome vindictive passions he means not only the overcoming of one's angry feelings but also one's cognitive judgments as well. For clarity's sake, instead of grouping these into one category, I will make explicit the distinction between vindictive passions and vindictive cognitive judgments.

One of the most controversial aspects of Murphy's theory is his view that forgiveness, if given too hastily, may not only lack moral praise-worthiness but may constitute a moral wrong (i.e., a vice rather than a virtue). When one is morally wronged, mistreated or disrespected, the morally appropriate response is resentment. Resentment on the part of the victim demonstrates that he respects himself, and that he condemns the transgression as an intolerable wrong-doing.

Resentment, then, is not only a morally permissible response to wrong doing; it can be, in some circumstances, a morally required response. As a consequence, Murphy argues, a complete negative view of the vindictive passions and vindictive cognitive judgments is mistaken, because “important values may be compromised if one overcomes vindictiveness in hasty forgiveness.”¹⁵ I will refer to Murphy’s view that sustaining a vindictive disposition in certain circumstances may be morally correct as *positive vindictiveness*. To get a fuller understanding of Murphy’s notion of forgiveness we have to examine four similar and related notions: justification, excuse, mercy, and reconciliation.¹⁶

First, Murphy argues that there may be acts that are harmful but are not wrong doings, since they are not inflicted maliciously or recklessly. The perpetrator of a harmful act may be justified in performing the act. For instance, a professor may be justified in giving a student an F grade. While this may be harmful for the student, we cannot conclude that the student has been morally wronged. Therefore, the student has no legitimate reason to feel resentful toward the professor. Justified, harmful acts, then, do not produce a context in which genuine forgiveness can take place. Notice that in the above scenario the professor may apologize to express a feeling of regret for the student’s unfortunate circumstances, but he need not repent or ask for forgiveness. In this context, then, the question of genuine forgiveness does not arise.

Second, Murphy distinguishes forgiveness from excuse. A conduct is excused when the perpetrator lacks the cognitive capacity to have any degree of responsibility over the act. So, for instance, a harmful act perpetrated by an infant would be excused, since an infant lacks the cognitive capacity to know any better. In such a case, it would be incorrect to speak of the victim forgiving the infant. Murphy uses the case of Jesus on the cross, arguing that when Jesus asked

God to forgive his executioners because they did not know what they were doing, Jesus should have asked for them to be excused instead.

Third, Murphy distinguishes forgiveness from mercy. He claims that mercy belongs in the public realm while forgiveness belongs in the private or personal realm. Mercy, he argues, is leniency granted by someone other than the victim, such as a judge. According to Murphy, since a judge is not involved in a personal way and has no resentful feelings to overcome, she cannot forgive the perpetrator of a wrongful act. Murphy argues that only a victim who has been harmed has a standing to forgive.

Finally, Murphy distinguishes forgiveness from reconciliation. He claims that we can conceive of cases in which an offender and a victim are reconciled for reasons other than forgiveness. For instance, two business partners may reconcile their relationship in order to save the business. Or consider the case of two siblings who decide to reconcile their relationship as brothers in order that the family not suffer. In these cases, while there may be some form of reconciliation, it would not constitute a case of genuine forgiveness. On the other hand, we can also conceive of cases where there is genuine forgiveness and yet the offender and the victim do not fully reconcile. For instance, consider a case of spousal abuse where the husband physically abuses the wife. Imagine they divorce and remain separated for life. With time and much therapy, the wife may eventually come to forgive the husband for all his wrongdoings and yet not fully reconcile herself with him. In this scenario, then, we would have a case of genuine forgiveness without full reconciliation.

3. Toward a Christian Understanding of Forgiveness

3.1 A Critique of Murphy

There are several objections to Murphy's definition of forgiveness (these objections are also valid for most other contemporary views of forgiveness). First, Murphy's view of positive vindictiveness misses the essential character of what makes forgiveness a moral virtue. Murphy argues that if forgiveness is given too hastily it can constitute a moral wrong. Moreover, he argues that there is something morally praise worthy about having vindictive passions in certain cases. I concur with Murphy in his view that vindictive passions are sometimes a morally permissible response (i.e., positive vindictiveness). I also agree with Aquinas that vengeance seeks a good, insofar as it seeks a kind of justice which produces pleasure in one who delights in what is just. Nevertheless, what makes an act of forgiveness morally praiseworthy is the *reasons why* one forgives. Similarly the question concerning the moral praise worthiness of vindictive passions has nothing to do with the length of time or even the intensity of the vindictive passions, but rather with the *reasons why* one sustains them.

Second, Murphy claims that forgiveness entails the overcoming of the vindictive passions and cognitive judgments on moral grounds. Thus, the elimination of angry feelings and negative moral judgments on moral grounds are necessary and sufficient for a genuine act of forgiveness to occur. I argue that overcoming vindictive passions and vindictive cognitive judgments are neither necessary nor sufficient for an act of forgiveness to occur. Why is the elimination of vindictive passions not sufficient? Jean Hampton has shown that Aurel Kolnai's notion of "condonation"¹⁷ fulfills Murphy's criterion of forgiveness concerning the elimination of vindictive passions and yet is not what we would correctly understand by the idea of forgiveness.¹⁸ Condonation occurs when a victim overcomes vindictive passions based on moral reasons, but the moral reasons are not the kinds that lead to genuine forgiveness. So, for instance, if I overcome all my vindictive feelings caused by a moral wrong of a family member in order to

achieve the higher moral good of family peace, I would not necessarily be forgiving my offender. Thus, the overcoming of vindictive passions based on moral grounds is not sufficient for forgiveness.

Why is overcoming vindictive passions on moral grounds not necessary for forgiving? If forgiveness is a moral precept, then it will be an act of the will and thus guided by reason. Thus it will be an act that we have a duty to perform, even though it runs contrary to our passions. This is no different from the relationship portrayed by other moral obligations which many times run contrary to our passions. Thus, it may be that a Christian has a moral obligation to forgive an offender for whom he still feels strong vindictive passions. I argue, then, that the complete elimination of the vindictive passions is not necessary for a victim to forgive an offender.¹⁹ On the contrary, such an act of forgiveness, in the eyes of God, may actually have more moral worth than forgiving someone for whom we feel no vindictive passions. Given this understanding of forgiveness, it makes sense that we can forgive our enemies. On the other hand, if we had to overcome our vindictive passions to forgive someone, then it would make little sense to say that we should forgive our enemies.

The view that overcoming vindictive judgments is a necessary and sufficient criterion for forgiveness makes even less sense. If we believe that an agent has acted immorally and caused us great injury as a consequence, our forgiving that agent has no effect on the ontology of past moral states of affairs. Our forgiving someone changes neither the events of the past nor the moral worth of these events. On the contrary, I argue that if we were to change our judgments about the moral status of an agent's immoral act, then forgiveness would be impossible, since there would be nothing to forgive. If we were to change our judgment about the agent being a wrong doer and yet sustain our judgment about the immoral act, then it must be because I have

attributed the immoral act to the wrong person. Again, in this case there would be no genuine forgiveness since one cannot forgive an innocent agent. Thus, it appears that the overcoming of vindictive cognitive judgments is neither necessary nor sufficient for forgiveness; instead, the opposite seems to be the case: sustaining vindictive cognitive judgments are a necessary condition for genuine forgiveness to take place. In all fairness to Murphy, we may interpret “overcoming” in the case of cognitive judgments not as “eliminating” (as in the case of vindictive passions), but rather as “putting aside.” This raises another interesting paradox, as Jean Hampton has pointed out: “How can you absolve someone from guilt and still remain committed to the idea that his actions were wrong and unacceptable?”²⁰

A third criticism concerns Murphy’s argument that even though mercy and forgiveness are related insofar as they both flow from compassion, they are very different concepts. He concludes that mercy has a public behavioral dimension that forgiveness lacks. He doesn’t provide any argument to support this distinction, and it seems far from obvious that mercy and forgiveness are to be distinguished in this way. First, the public-private distinction does not appear to be a categorical distinction that correlates with our common sense understanding of these concepts, particularly mercy. Can’t mercy cut across public-private lines? Can’t a victim have mercy on a repenting wrong doer who is devastated with guilt for his evil action? If so, then Murphy’s distinction fails, and mercy and forgiveness are connected in more essential ways than Murphy suggests.

A fourth criticism of Murphy’s definition shows that forgiveness does not even require the existence of injury. Murphy’s approach toward the analysis of forgiveness, as one of various possible responses to evil, assumes that the existence of some harm is an essential prerequisite element for forgiveness to occur. Instead, I argue that only a wrong act and a wrong doer are

necessary. Imagine that two men are in love with the same woman. They are also best friends. One of the men, Mr. Mean, sets up a trap for the other, Mr. Nice, to undermine his attempts at courting the woman, Ms. Desired. Mr. Mean's intentions are evil and malicious, but in the end his evil plan backfires and instead of keeping Mr. Nice and Ms. Desired apart, it brings them together. Mr. Nice and Ms. Desired marry and live happily ever after. Mr. Nice has suffered no injury or harm from Mr. Mean's evil plot; instead, it has been the cause of his greatest happiness. Also, imagine that Mr. Nice never discovers Mr. Mean's malicious intentions or evil plan. As a result, Mr. Nice has no anger or resentment toward Mr. Mean. A year later, Mr. Mean has a religious and moral conversion, and, upon reflection of what he attempted to do to his best friend, becomes overwhelmed with guilt. He seeks redemption by asking Mr. Nice to forgive him for his botched evil plan. Mr. Nice does not become resentful or angry, and since he is no longer friends with Mr. Mean, he feels no disappointment or sorrow at his betrayal. However, at witnessing Mr. Mean's authentic remorse and suffering, he is compassionately moved by mercy and pity to forgive him. Cases like this one constitute situations in which authentic forgiveness can take place, even though the victim has not suffered harm or injury. What this shows is that harm or injury is not necessary for forgiveness, and, more importantly, that what is necessary is an immoral act or sin.

A final criticism is that Murphy's account of forgiveness does not provide justification for forgiving. Why should we forgive those who have wronged us? Most contemporary philosophical analyses of forgiveness cannot satisfy a Christian normative view of forgiveness, because they fail to provide this kind of justification. For instance, to appeal to our personal mental health is not a satisfactory Christian response for several reasons. First, there are other ways, such as anger therapy, to alleviate much of the unhealthy effects of resentment without

having to forgive. In fact, I would argue that the reverse is true: forgiving (if a moral duty) sometimes can cause more mental stress and anxiety than not forgiving. Second, according to the Christian view, we could have a *prima facie* obligation to forgive, irrespective of the consequences it has for our personal mental health and happiness. Another common argument is to appeal to justice, since the right thing for a victim to do is to forgive a repenting offender. The appeal to justice will not satisfy a Christian conception of forgiveness, because it is not evident that a secular conception of justice would morally obligate (as the right thing to do) a victim, who has been seriously harmed, to forgive an offender, even if the offender sincerely repents and has been adequately punished for his wrong doings. Forgiving an offender appears to ask the victim not simply to act fairly and with respect toward the person (i.e., to treat him justly), but also to have a change of heart toward the offender. This seems to go beyond the call of what is just.

3.2 A Christian Definition

If Murphy's analysis of forgiveness does not satisfy a Christian understanding of it, how can it be improved? I propose that Christian forgiveness can arise in two ways: (1) When a person commits a moral wrong (offender) toward another person, and he later seeks redemption by asking for forgiveness, or 2) When a person is injured by a moral wrong (victim) and he later forgives the offender for his wrong doing. Notice that in the first case the offender does not need to actually harm the other person. Also, in the second case, the offender need not repent. This analysis, however, does not clearly state what it means to forgive, and so greater elucidation is in order. When either of the above forgiving circumstances arises, a person genuinely forgives if and only if he sincerely resolves to thereafter treat the offender in accordance with the virtue of Christian charity.²¹ Therefore, I define Christian forgiveness as a voluntary act of the will

directed at re-establishing a relationship, which has been severed by a moral wrong, based on Christian charity. Christian love is a species of friendship in which one benevolently loves another and wishes him good things by extension of loving God. According to the virtue of Christian charity, one should love another like himself in three ways: (1) for God's sake (i.e., holy love); (2) for the sake of good and not evil (i.e., righteous love); and (3) for the other's good and never for one's own benefit (i.e., true love).²² The Christian understanding of forgiveness I propose here overcomes all of the difficulties Murphy's definition could not.

First, overcoming vindictive passions is neither necessary nor sufficient for Christian forgiveness, since the act of love implies an act of the will. Passions such as anger are moved by natural instincts and arise naturally within a person when he is provoked or stimulated by a harmful, unjust act. Therefore, it is not uncommon that we shall find a person's soul moved in opposite directions, as the passions provoke sentiments opposite to the commands of reason (i.e., prudence). Moreover, overcoming vindictive cognitive judgment is not necessary for Christian forgiveness, since a victim who forgives an offender loves her in spite of the wrong doing. In addition, understanding the act of forgiving as a victim's willingness to re-create (or create) a relationship based on Christian charity with an offender does not require the victim to give up the idea that the offender's actions were wrong and unacceptable. Hence, this view also presents Hampton's paradox in a less puzzling light, for it is reasonable for you to love another and still remain committed to the idea that he has committed actions that were wrong and unacceptable toward you.

Second, according to a Christian understanding of forgiveness, the virtue of charity is congruent with the virtue mercy, since one has mercy for another because he loves the other. Third, according to my definition of Christian forgiveness, the offender need not harm the

intended victim (as I have explained above); rather, what is required is that a person commits a moral wrong toward another. Finally, my definition does provide a justification for why we should forgive those who have wronged us. According to the Christian understanding of forgiveness proposed here, all forgiving - even forgiving enemies - is grounded and justified in the most excellent virtue of all: charity or love of God. An understanding of Christian forgiveness, then, requires two elements which Murphy's view (and all other contemporary philosophical views) omits: (1) forgiveness understood within a triadic relational framework, and (2) forgiveness understood in relation with other Christian virtues. Without these two elements a view of forgiveness cannot satisfy a Christian definition.

First, Christian forgiveness must be understood within a triadic (as opposed to a dyadic) relational framework, which includes a wrong doer, a victim and God. Charles Griswold points out that "There is nothing in the concept itself [of forgiveness] that requires a religious framework, even though it may be thought through within such a framework."²³ I submit that the framework of a Christian understanding of forgiveness is relevantly different than the framework of a secular understanding of forgiveness. Moreover, I want to make the point that the contemporary philosophical analyses of forgiveness have hitherto missed this essential difference. Those who have made notice of it, such as Griswold, have gone on to expound primarily a secular view of forgiveness and ignored the religious perspective.

For Christians the paradigmatic context is not an interpersonal but a tri-personal relation. The Christian ought to conceive his relation with others always in light of God's relation to His creation. The best way to understand and interpret this tri-relational character of forgiveness is through an analogy. Imagine that sister A wrongs sister B. The mother of A and B loves them both equally; moreover, both A and B love their mother. When B considers whether she should

forgive A for her transgression, an important consideration is her love relationship with her mother and the mother's love relationship with her sister (i.e., A). In this tri-personal relation, sister B might be moved and justified to forgive sister A on the basis of her love for her mother (i.e., for her mother's sake). Similarly, then, we could imagine how and why a victim may be moved to forgive a wrong doer, who has severely offended him, for the sake of God.

Consider another analogy. Imagine that a friend who you greatly respected and loved passes away. Imagine that when his children grow up, they are not as kind or friendly as their father was. Despite your natural dislike (or even abhorrence) of them, you might still love them for your friend's sake. Indeed, I would argue that the more you loved your friend, the more you would love his children for his sake. Similarly, we can imagine a Christian forgiving his enemy for God's sake, even when the wrong doing seems unforgivable. From a secular perspective, since the paradigmatic context of forgiveness is limited to the interpersonal relation, it is difficult to imagine forgiving one's enemy for an unforgivable act, and even more difficult justifying such forgiveness.

Second, a Christian understanding of forgiveness must take place in conjunction with other Christian virtues, particularly moral virtues (e.g., temperance, meekness, and clemency) and the theological virtue of charity. St. Thomas Aquinas defined a virtue, following Aristotle, as that which renders a person's act and the person himself good. He divided the virtues into (1) Intellectual Virtues, (2) Moral Virtues (e.g., Cardinal Virtues), and (3) Theological Virtues. In explaining the difference between intellectual and moral virtues, Aquinas says: "Accordingly for a man to do a good deed, it is requisite not only that his reason be well disposed by means of the intellectual virtue; but also that his appetite be well disposed by means of a habit or moral virtue."²⁴ The moral virtues fortitude and temperance are directly connected to the passions in

ways that affect our understanding of forgiveness. According to Aquinas, the purpose of the moral virtues temperance and fortitude is to control and moderate the passions so that the will can carry out the commands of reason. While fortitude provides strength of mind, removing the obstacle of fear, temperance provides a power of restraint, removing the obstacle of the sensual pleasures. The moral virtues, therefore, direct and guide the passions toward the good and that which is in accordance with reason. If we had no passions, then we would have nothing to guide, and we would not be able to act in accordance with reason.²⁵ On the other hand, if we had no moral virtues to mitigate the passions, we could never act virtuously. But how does this relate to forgiveness?

All modern and contemporary philosophical analyses of forgiveness entail overcoming some form of negative feelings such as anger, hatred, resentment, or indignation. For instance, recall Murphy's definition of forgiveness: "I propose, then, to understand forgiveness as the overcoming, on moral grounds, of what I will call the *vindictive passions* – the passions of anger, resentment, and even hatred that are often occasioned when one has been deeply wronged by another."²⁶ Consider some other definitions. Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald claims that "As a virtue, forgiveness is the disposition to let go of anger. The forgiving person is a person disposed to let go of anger."²⁷ Paul Hughs argues that forgiveness overcomes *moral anger*.²⁸ Robert Roberts argues "that [the virtue of] forgivingness is the disposition to abort one's anger (or altogether miss getting angry) at persons one takes to have wronged one culpably by seeing them in the benevolent terms provided by reasons characteristic of forgiving."²⁹ I argue that forgiveness should not be understood as a virtue essentially connected to the passions, but rather that the moral virtues associated with temperance should be left to perform this function. For instance, according to Aquinas, the passion of anger is restrained by the specific virtue of *meekness* (a

species of the moral virtue of temperance).³⁰ Moreover, the specific virtue of *clemency* (a species of the moral virtue of temperance) mitigates the external act of punishment.³¹ The mistake of explicitly connecting forgiveness with the passion of anger is the product of treating forgiveness in a vacuum and severing it from the other Christian virtues. The result of not treating forgiveness within a context of Christian virtue theory is that we can neither obtain a genuine Christian understanding of forgiveness nor justify forgiveness as a Christian moral precept.

If forgiveness is not directly associated with the overcoming of anger, then with what is it associated with? I argued above that forgiveness is associated with the theological virtue of charity. Of the three kinds of virtues - Intellectual, Moral and Theological - Aquinas argues that the theological virtues are the most important. He explains:

Consequently the theological virtues, which consist in attaining this first rule, since their object is God, are more excellent than the moral, or the intellectual virtues, which consist in attaining human reason.³²

Moreover, the difference between a secular and Christian analysis of forgiveness is that the latter includes God in its formulation of the virtues where the former does not. For a theocentric world, then, the theological virtues are central, since they “are virtues directing us to God.”³³

Of the theological virtues Charity or love is the most important. Aquinas explains:

...and it follows that among the theological virtues themselves, the first place belongs to that which attains God most. Now that which is of itself always ranks that which is by another. But faith and hope attain God indeed insofar as we derive from Him the knowledge of truth and the acquisition of good, whereas charity attains God himself that it may rest in him, but not that something may accrue in us from him. Hence charity is more excellent than faith and hope.³⁴

Aquinas understands the virtue of charity to be a kind of friendship in which there exists a mutual well-wishing between two friends. Charity, then, is the mutual love between a person and God, and between friends. The goal of forgiveness is to re-establish this tri-personal harmonious,

communicative friendship to the fullest extent possible. Excluding God from our understanding of forgiveness, as the interpersonal paradigmatic context does, not only makes it impossible to define Christian forgiveness, but, more importantly, makes the forgiveness of horrendous or severely harmful wrong doings impossible to justify.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that forgiveness is a central moral virtue of Christian doctrine and practice by appealing to biblical texts. I have argued that the virtue of forgiveness is intertwined with other central Christian virtues, such as mercy, justice, temperance and love. I have analyzed Jeffrie Murphy's definition of forgiveness and pointed out many of its shortcomings as an understanding of Christian forgiveness. I have gone on to propose a Christian definition of forgiveness that overcomes many of the obstacles confronted by Murphy's view. I argued that the two central problems with Murphy's analysis serving as a Christian view of forgiveness are: (1) that it considers the paradigmatic context of forgiveness as interpersonal rather than tri-personal, hence excluding God from its analysis, and (2) that it treats forgiveness in a vacuum and not within the context of Christian virtues. I have shown that once forgiveness is placed within the proper Christian context, its normative value can be better understood and justified, and its relation and place within the Christian virtues can be better be identified. My view presents, therefore, a more holistic and comprehensive interpretation of Christian forgiveness than existing contemporary views, particularly Murphy's.

END NOTES

¹ See Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, "What Should Forgiveness Mean" *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36 (2002): 483-498.

² Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy: Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and Jeffrie J. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ For a more comprehensive discussion of contemporary philosophical analysis of forgiveness see the following: Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, "What Should Forgiveness Mean?" *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36 (2002): 483-498; Paul M. Hughes, "What is Involved in Forgiveness" *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 27 (1993): 331-340; Margaret R. Holmgren, "Self-Forgiveness and Responsible Moral Agency" *Journal of Value Inquiry* 32 (1998): 75-91; Trudy Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999): 59-75; Margaret R. Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993): 341-352; Joanna North, "Wrongdoing and Forgiveness" *Philosophy* 62 (1987): 499-508; Robert C. Roberts, "Forgiveness" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995): 289-306.

⁴ *Good News Bible*, Translated by The American Bible Society, (New York: The American Bible Society, 1976), Matthew 18, 21-35.

⁵ *Good News Bible*, Matthew 18, 21-35.

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.58.1c. My understanding of the Christian virtues is based on St. Thomas Aquinas virtue theory.

⁷ That the Lord's Prayer can summarize the general notion of forgiveness expressed in the gospel is not surprising, since, as Augustine suggests: "Run through all the words of the holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer" St. Augustine, Ep. 130, 12, 22: PL 33, 503

⁸ *Good News Bible*, Mathew 5, 43-44.

⁹ *Good News Bible*, Mathew 5, 21-24.

¹⁰ Jeffrie J. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*, p. 12.

¹¹ See Margaret R. Holmgren, "Self-Forgiveness and Responsible Moral Agency" *Journal of Value Inquiry* 32 (1998): 75-91

¹² See *The Works of Bishop Butler*, ed. W.E. Gladstone, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896) Sermons VIII and IX. Some have argued that forgiveness for Butler is the foreswearing of resentment: see Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy: Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and Margaret R. Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993): 341-352. Charles L. Griswold provides a different interpretation of Butler, arguing that forgiveness for Butler is the foreswearing of revenge (not resentment). See *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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- ¹³ Jeffrie J. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*, p. 20.
- ¹⁴ Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy: Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Law*, p. 38.
- ¹⁵ Jeffrie J. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*, p. 16.
- ¹⁶ These are distinctions that have been widely advocated by most contemporary philosophical analyses of forgiveness.
- ¹⁷ See Kolnai's "Forgiveness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1973-4, pp. 91-106
- ¹⁸ Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy: Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Law*, p. 40.
- ¹⁹ This view contradicts Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald definition: "Simple forgiveness allows us to claim that any act of letting anger go is an act of forgiveness." in "What Should Forgiveness Mean," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36 (2002): p. 498.
- ²⁰ Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy: Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Law*, p. 41.
- ²² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.44.7c.
- ²³ Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. xv.
- ²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.58.2c.
- ²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.60.2c.
- ²⁶ Jeffrie J. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*, p. 20.
- ²⁷ Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, "What Should Forgiveness Mean?" p. 487
- ²⁸ Paul M. Hughes, "What is Involved in Forgiveness" p. 331.
- ²⁹ Robert C. Roberts, "Forgiveness," p. 290.
- ³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.157.30c.
- ³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 157.30c.
- ³² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.23.6c.

³³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.62.1c.

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.23.6c.