

Margaret R. Holmgren

Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing.

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Margaret Holmgren states that the purpose of *Forgiveness and Retribution* is ‘to develop and defend a broadly coherent position on response to wrongdoing’ (1). That the position she develops is broadly coherent is indisputable. She is nothing if not consistent. Whether or not Holmgren defends it with entire success, she succeeds at advancing the ‘paradigm of forgiveness’ as a response to wrongdoing that anyone concerned with ethics should read, because she forces us to think harder about predominantly retributivist and all-too-settled models of response to harm. Holmgren’s position is that the attitudes of forgiveness and compassion, when achieved by requisite moral and emotional work through other feelings, are always appropriate responses to wrongdoing, regardless of any conditions a wrongdoer may meet or fail to meet. I disagree with her arguments for unconditional forgiveness, for reasons I identify below. But one need not agree with her to appreciate Holmgren’s attentive reasoning as she maps the architecture of the field of forgiveness and her place in with lucidity and (usually) care.

Holmgren develops her view unambiguously, but at times reaches for reasons to disagree with the accounts of others rather than doing them full justice. This is not to say that she would fail to take other views seriously. Holmgren’s is a judicious style and one can almost hear scales creaking as she weighs the merits and demerits of various accounts. However, she does not always get them quite right; Claudia Card’s paradigm of forgiveness, for example, is taken by Holmgren to argue for reconciliation as a ‘basic component’ of forgiveness (41), although Card has said she is describing typical or recurrent features of unproblematic cases, which are neither necessary nor sufficient. Holmgren also dashes a bit quickly past accounts of forgiveness as a speech act with the stipulation that we cannot know if performatives are appropriate unless we know if the attendant attitudes are appropriate; in concluding that philosophers who disagree ‘put the cart before the horse,’ she avoids grappling with much excellent scholarship that would problematize this easy dismissal (44).

Holmgren’s own account demands much work from readers, as she presses us to consider that resentment should never be a settled attitude, that one’s negative feelings about a harm are to be worked through in order to cultivate something better, which involves real goodwill toward one’s offender and not just a cessation of hostile grudge-holding. If one is to disagree with her, then one must do more than simply advocate the self-respect of victims, since Holmgren is happy to agree that victims’ self-respect is quite important and that hard feelings do indeed occur.

Indeed, Holmgren is so attentive to victims’ self-respect that the very first task she identifies for a victim who has been wronged is to ‘recover her self-esteem’ (59). Yet not all wrongs shake self-esteem; perhaps the first task should be to identify correctly how someone wronged us, not to escape the feeling that we agree. If my coworker, for example, should maliciously spread a rumour that I plagiarized this review, I would be outraged, but I’d still believe I’m quite splendid and original. I’d think my coworker wicked, but I wouldn’t think he’s

diminished the way that I feel about myself. Holmgren rests her argument for this first step on Murphy's observation that 'every act of wrongdoing carries with it the implicit message that the victim does not warrant a full measure of self-respect' (59), but it is not clear why Holmgren assumes that message always to be received. She reiterates this, saying that when we maintain an attitude of resentment, 'we view the disparaging claim as a threat' (75). I would think it a hallmark of many sorts of wrongs that their messages offend me because they are false, not because they shake my convictions.

Holmgren apparently disagrees. She suggests that a victim who *knows* she has equal moral worth, who knows herself as self-respecting and does not suffer feelings of being threatened by a wrongdoer, will not react to the wrongdoer's 'confused attitudes' (67). Rather, 'she will recognize his confusion for what it is and go on to determine her own position independent of his wrongful behaviour' (67). Holmgren stresses that hers is a virtue-ethical account focused on cultivating attitudes; she argues that internal attitude-cultivation can be absolutely separable from *any* facts about the wrongdoer, including whether or not he repents. Self-respect 'is not socially constituted' (71).

I disagree, but I see her reasons for believing we can cultivate attitudes independently of any information about the wrongdoer. Holmgren outlines a metaethical view that does not persuade, but does render her account consistent and clear, with two fundamental and related premises: (1) a wrongdoer is 'separable' (98) from his wrong acts and (2) the most 'morally salient feature of the offender is his intrinsic worth as a person' (99). In arguing for the importance of (1) a wrongdoer's separability from his act, Holmgren overdoes the job of describing the alternative position. She repeatedly states that those of us who hold a view of a wrongdoer as the author of his acts may too easily 'conflate' the author with his acts, and in light of such conflation, she argues that we must see him as entirely separate from his act instead (87, 90). Anything less than this is 'seriously flawed' (89). Yet holding Jane Austen to be the author of *Pride and Prejudice* does not usually jeopardize my ability to tell the author and the work apart. I resist discussing free-floating acts, which simply would not exist without moral agents. Why obscure an act's origin? I would think that a better strategy for proceeding into the future is to integrate the information about the wrongdoer into a wider story, so that his authorship is a part of what I know about him, neither ignored nor confused with his total identity.

In arguing (2) that the most 'morally salient feature of the offender is his intrinsic worth as a person,' Holmgren reveals a basic metaphysical commitment of the book which is highly interesting, and with which a reader may just have to agree to disagree. I suggest that the most morally salient feature of a *person* is his intrinsic worth, but I do not see that this is the most morally salient feature of offenders, in particular; what's most morally salient about offenders, versus just anyone, is that offenders are identifiably wrongdoers and authors of acts, not that they are persons. I do not go about forgiving everyone with intrinsic worth; I only go about forgiving offenders, so what it is about offenders that calls for forgiveness must be more than their personhood. More morally salient is culpability, for nothing less would seem to qualify as a candidate for forgiving as distinct from, perhaps, excusing, or educating, or medicating.

In the final two chapters, Holmgren turns her attention to retributive justice systems, especially that of the United States. Her criticisms of the effects of retributivism here are very

hard to deny and ought to make all of us uncomfortable, especially most philosophy professors who are usually among the comfortable; we should keep firmly in view the extent to which the punitive system is not, in practice, justifiable, even to the extent that it is in principle. It should break our hearts that the justice system is so widely and deeply problematic. But that heartbreak, although inescapable, is not sufficient to persuade me to chuck desert as morally basic. For my compassion for those offenders made worse by punitive prison systems coexists with my regard for victims of rape, abuse, assault and exploitation whose traumas and harmed capacities are due to some of those same offenders. I balk at Holmgren's suggestion that perhaps we justify incarcerating an offender 'to prevent greater and equal suffering for others' if he continues to be a future danger (197); I do not know if someone guilty of rape will rape again, and I do not believe I need to know this to justify his punishment for rape.

Given my criticisms, I should add that I was gratifyingly provoked by the arguments Holmgren offers. I recommend this work for its slightly polemical approach, as it aims for no less than 'a predominant attitude of real goodwill toward all beings' in the interests of facing momentous and global challenges (ix). Holmgren's is a less popular argument, advocating unconditional forgiveness in all cases, so it requires robust advancement and defense in order for it to be fully appreciated as an alternative to the dominant retributivist paradigm. If she does not convey every detail of opposing views, this is worth taking in stride in order to enjoy a different perspective. It is not a book for the lazy who wish to see their grudges affirmed. It is a book for exercising one's arguments, a service to philosophy. Her pressing of would-be retributivists to justify the centrality of desert rather than take it for granted is invigorating, and when I read Holmgren, she forces me to think harder than I ordinarily would about why I take desert to be morally basic.

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