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Review - Forgiveness - Religion

The cover and subtitle of this book are somewhat misleading. While the author did publish a book in 1997 entitled, *The Moral Case Against Religious Belief* (London: SCM Press), the present volume is a sustained exploration of the psychology and ethical quality of forgiving others. Edited after the author's death by his widow, philosopher Lynne Sharpe, the book does suffer slightly from a lack of focus, but whatever arguments there are in it against religion are little more than tributaries of the main thesis. And these arguments have none of the stridency of the cover illustration of violence in Ramallah on the West Bank. Perhaps the publishers wanted to cash in on the recent spate of atheist tracts by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. But I would guess that these authors have never read the Christian ethical and theological literature as carefully as Sharpe seems to have.

Sharpe's moral theory eschews talk of obligation and duty in favor of a virtue ethics approach which explores such human moral capacities as imagination and caring. The central thesis of the book is that to forgive someone for a harm that they have done you is not a single act. The statement, "I forgive you" is not a performative utterance in the way that "I promise to do X" is. It may be that "I pardon you" expresses a single act, but such an act has a judicial character and can only fittingly be made by a person with juridical authority. Forgiveness is a process which involves the gradual renouncing of revenge, overcoming of resentment, and forgetting of the harm. It is a virtuous stance which requires a degree of self-reformation -- which Sharpe calls a "change of heart". Moreover, it is not appropriate to forgive someone for a harm that someone else has suffered, even if that someone else is, for example, one's own daughter. It is only the one who is harmed who can forgive the offence. It is at this point that one of the atheist tributaries of the thesis starts to form. If God has the qualities that theologians say he has, then he cannot suffer harm. Nor can he forget. It follows that he cannot forgive either. He might be able to pardon or show mercy, but forgiveness is a virtue which is
conceptually denied to him. Similarly, when Christians are enjoined to forgive their enemies, it cannot be the virtue, but the executive act which is being commanded.

What conditions make it possible to forgive someone? Do we need to understand their motivations or the causal influences that led to their offence? Would such understanding undermine the need to forgive if it led us to see the act not as motivated by evil intentions but as caused by unfortunate conditions? Do we forgive the act or the person? And if the latter, what do we understand by that person’s "character" from which the act stems? The explorations that these questions give rise to constitute a rich inquiry into moral psychology in the Humean tradition. Anyone interested in virtue ethics will find them rewarding. They also include another atheist tributary in which the idea of an eternal life after death is impugned as both nonsensical and unattractive. There is a gentle humor to this argument which suggests the kind of irony which it would be good for believers of all persuasions to have about their own positions.

The final chapter explores the object of forgiveness: the evil that people do. It begins by asking whether evils are commensurable: whether one might justify an evil such as torture by comparing it to the evil act of terrorism one hopes to prevent by resorting to it. While Sharpe rejects the kind of utilitarian calculus which such questions invite, he does admit that we can be caught up in moral dilemmas in which we have to choose "the lesser of two evils". In such cases comparisons have to be made. All this suggests that there are some evils that go so far beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior -- a concept he designates as "negative supererogation" -- that they are unforgivable, while there are others which circumstances may force us to and which are, therefore, forgivable. In such cases, however, we cannot choose what to do on rational grounds. We can only plump for one option or the other. Does it follow from this that evil is unintelligible? And if it is, can it be forgiving? Sharpe distinguishes between intelligible and forgivable harms that people do to one another and great crimes and atrocities. These latter should not be forgotten, excused or pardoned, and so should not be forgiven in Sharpe's rich sense of that term. The atheist tributary that flows from this argument is that theodicy is impossible. A theodicy asks us to compare the evil in the world with the good which is alleged to be that world's ultimate quality. But if evil cannot be measured no such comparison can be made.

Clearly written with a minimum of technical jargon, this book is recommended to anyone interested in moral theology, secular morality, and the ethical enigmas of contemporary life.

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