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REVIEW ESSAY

Is There a Duty to Forgive?


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In the Old Testament, forgiveness is a divine prerogative. Only God can forgive human beings for their sins; human beings do not forgive each other.¹ In the New Testament, forgiveness is presented as a divine model which must be imitated by humans in their dealings with each other; those who do not forgive their brethren do not deserve God’s forgiveness. In modern culture, forgiveness has been completely secularized; it is not even clear how God, who is assumed to be perfectly just, omniscient, and omnipotent can forgive (or, alternatively, cannot but forgive) since he cannot really be “offended”. Nevertheless, one can trace some of the original “superhuman” sources of forgiveness: it is a noble attitude, demonstrating magnanimity but also reflecting some element of superiority. The offended party has power over the offender by being able to grant forgiveness but equally to withhold it. Forgiving is a kind of giving and a gift is something one by definition cannot claim as a right.

The vast philosophical literature on forgiveness in the last few decades addresses both the analytic (meta-ethical) aspect of the concept and the normative (moral) one. On the analytic level, forgiveness appears to be more elusive than our common sense conception indicates: what is the difference between forgiving and forgetting? What does forgiveness involve phenomenologically? Should it be analyzed as a matter of utility, a virtuous trait of character, or as a matter of duty and supererogation? On the normative level the concept is highly controversial. Some view it as an ultimate good and treat it as a duty; others believe that it is not a duty but still a highly desirable attitude and hence of a supererogatory nature; yet there are also those who consider forgiveness—at least in some situations—as patently wrong and corrupting: one ought not to forgive acts that are really and non-trivially wrong. This latter view lies

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at the background of what has been coined as the paradox of forgiveness: the unforgivable cannot be forgiven, since the offense is either understandable and excusable and hence not requiring forgiveness, or so inexcusably wrong that no forgiveness can or ought to be granted.

Margaret Holmgren’s recent book on forgiveness is one of the most comprehensive and systematic treatments of the subject. It is an ambitious attempt to give both a detailed meta-ethical analysis of the concept itself and to provide a thoroughgoing justification for the moral duty to forgive. The book is impressive in offering the reader a theory of forgiveness in the sense of a consistent account of all the important aspects of the subject, both conceptual and normative. It is critical in the sense that it raises actual and possible objections to the arguments advanced by the author, drawing from the huge literature with which she is impressively familiar. The book becomes sometimes very polemical in the lengthy discussions of the writings of other philosophers, but these give critical depth to the author’s positive claims and may serve as a good introduction for the new researcher of the subject. A further theoretical merit of the book is that unlike most piecemeal accounts of forgiveness it does not shun addressing the underlying issues of personal identity, moral responsibility, the nature of punishment and other such general philosophical questions which are usually “taken for granted” in the writing on forgiveness.

The book may be described as radical and bold both in the analytic and in the normative chapters. Conceptually, Holmgren develops what she refers to as “the paradigm of forgiveness”, which she applies very widely so as to include not only interpersonal relationships (on the individual level) but also institutional treatment of citizens by the state. As the sub-title of the book indicates, forgiveness includes all types of “responding to wrongdoing”—both by an offended individual and by a crime-affected society. This, as we will see, is a far-reaching application of the concept of forgiveness which is theoretically challenging even though clearly going beyond the commonsense understanding of what forgiveness is about. And on the normative level, as the title of the book states, forgiveness is presented as a sharp alternative to retribution, the one totally excluding the other. This leads the author to an equally daring claim that forgiveness is an unconditional duty, a claim that most people are intuitively reluctant to accept. But since the author is interested in outlining a theory of forgiveness rather than simply articulating commonsense usage, her project is not only legitimate but a philosophically worthy project.

However, the counter-intuitive nature of some of Holmgren’s arguments may serve as a starting point for a critical examination of the theoretical foundations and structure of what might turn out as an over-stretched concept of forgiveness. The rest of this review essay will be devoted to a critical discussion of some (inevitably selective) major issues discussed in the book.
Victim and Perpetrator

Most discussions of forgiveness from the Bible to the present day focus on the victim, since he or she is the (potential) forgiving party. The equal concern with the wrongdoer, the (potential) forgiven party, is one of the original contributions of Holmgren’s book. Forgiveness is an attitude which is the outcome of a well-defined process that must take place in both parties. In the victim this process consists of six conditions which must be satisfied in order for the forgiving attitude to be genuine: recovery of self-esteem, a clear recognition that the act from which the victim suffered was wrong, the acknowledgment of her true feelings about that wrongful act, a rational assessment of the potential of the offense to be repeated in the future, the possible expression of her feelings about the offense to the offender, and finally the decision whether she wants to seek restitution for the harm done to her. A parallel set of conditions is listed for the process undertaken by the offender: acknowledgment and assumption of his responsibility for the wrongdoing, recognition of the victim’s status as a person, acknowledgment of the feelings following the act (regret, compassion for the victim, guilt), understanding the motives and behavioral patterns which led him to the wrongful act, an attempt to make amends for the wrong, apologize to the victim and make a commitment to try not to repeat the offense (108–10).

Holmgren defines forgiveness as “a change of heart in which an initial attitude of resentment is overcome and replaced with a positive attitude towards the offender” (32). The reader may raise the question, how can the same process take place in the victim and the offender? After all, only the former is called to undergo such a change of heart towards the offender. Forgiveness is not a mutual change of attitude since the relations between the two parties are typically asymmetrical. Holmgren’s (surprising) answer is that in a sense the two parties have to pass a similar psychological and moral transformation since the offender must also overcome the resentment he feels towards himself! In order to be genuinely forgiven, one must first forgive oneself. But can one forgive oneself? The use of moral concepts in reflexive mode is risky and should be carefully examined. Acts such as undertaking an obligation or promising, tolerating or even giving (in the sense of making a gift), presuppose another person who is not only the recipient of the act but someone who can release the agent from the obligation or the promise, or who can express gratitude by reciprocal toleration or gift. I can make New Year’s promises to myself to lose weight only in the sense of a strong determination or commitment, but not in the sense of creating a right in another party (in this case, myself). If I buy myself a fancy gadget that usually I do not tend to do, it is still
not a “gift” in the sense of free (in contrast to required) giving and there is no one to say thank you for the act of giving.

This suspicion about reflexive uses of moral attitudes or relations as being merely (although naturally) metaphorical applies also to forgiving. There is no relevant difference here between giving and forgiving. The forgiving and the forgiven parties must be two distinct persons, since otherwise the dependence of the forgiven party on the forgiving one would be lost. From the point of view of the recipient, there is and must be something arbitrary in the relation: the act of giving and forgiving may take place but it equally may not. From the point of view of the promisor, the recipient (promisee) may but equally may not release him from the promise. These conditions do not apply to the reflexive cases of self-forgiveness or obligations to oneself. So, yes, as against Holmgren’s warning and according to the logic of these concepts, the perpetrator is in a serious sense “hostage” to the victim in his expectation to be forgiven as is the promisor to the promisee in his expectation to be released or excused from the promise or the recipient of a charitable gift to the donor. And one cannot be hostage to oneself in the sense of being dependent on the contingency of another’s will.

Therefore, although the conditions or “steps” in the process undertaken by the wrongdoer according to Holmgren make perfect moral and psychological sense and may even serve (contrary to Holmgren!) as conditions for deserving to be forgiven, they cannot be described as leading to self-forgiveness, let alone a resolution of the moral problem created by the offensive act. The absurdity of self-forgiveness is best revealed in the well-known extreme case reported by Simon Wiesenthal in *The Sunflower*, where according to Holmgren the obscenity of the SS officer’s expectation to be forgiven by the poor Jewish youth is explained as simply the mistake of asking the victim of the horrific wrong to forgive him instead of undergoing the five-step process mentioned above and achieve self-forgiveness, reconciliation with the crime, and peaceful death (116–17).

Dancing tango takes two, but in Holmgren’s analysis it seems that although the two must dance they can and should dance separately or side by side. Indeed, many writers on forgiveness simply ignore the offender and exclusively refer to the duty of the victim to consider forgiveness. Holmgren corrects this one-sided approach to forgiveness. But what is missing in her account is the mutual relation or even dialectic between the processes which the two parties undergo. Her view is that the two processes must be completed, each one independently of the other, or “unilaterally” (66). Once this is achieved, the victim must forgive the perpetrator and the perpetrator must forgive himself. This description seems to miss the deep dialogic nature of the process of forgiveness, the dependence of the success of each side on the other. It is usually thought that there is something wrong or at least suspicious in forgiving someone who has not repented or undergone the process described by Holmgren. It is equally wrong for the offender to let go of his guilt and ill feelings towards himself independently of the victim’s attitude towards him. Again, it is true that the
Nazi officer could hardly expect the young Wiesenthal to forgive him, but the alternative to achieving moral self-reconciliation could not be attained without any regard to the attitude of the victim to the perpetrator. It sounds as self-indulgent or even narcissistic to undergo a process of self-forgiveness independently of some moral interaction with the victim. This interaction is, as we shall see below in Jean Améry’s approach, crucial for the resolution of the moral imbalance created by the offense.

Virtue or Duty

It seems that Holmgren holds that the two processes in the victim and the wrongdoer may take place independently from each other since she views forgiveness in “aretaic” rather than deontological terms. Forgiveness is an “attitude” rather than an act and as such its major justification is ultimately self-regarding. Although Holmgren holds that after satisfying the conditions of the process that the victim is supposed to undergo, she ought to (unconditionally) forgive the offender, this “ought” is not typically of a deontological nature, since it is not derived from a justified claim or right of the offender to be forgiven. The whole point of an *unconditional* change of heart towards the wrongdoer is that forgiveness is a matter of the moral and psychological health of the victim rather than a transformation that results from some change in the wrongdoer (most typically, repentance). And indeed Holmgren admits that forgiveness is primarily of value for the forgiver rather than the forgiven party. Obviously, if the idea of self-forgiveness makes sense (which I doubt), it cannot be articulated in deontic terms (for the reasons I raised above regarding the difficulty in the concept of duties to ourselves).

Holmgren advances a powerful argument against the deontic understanding of forgiveness: since it consists of a “change of heart”, i.e., is an attitude, it cannot be commanded, mainly due to the “ought”-implies-“can” principle (52). We may have a duty to forgive only in a “performative” sense, that is to say, as some declaratory act or some change of behavior towards the offended person. The argument is convincing but only on the basis of the completely self-regarding conceptualization of forgiveness in term of virtue. Once we introduce the dialogical perspective and the inter-relationship between the offender and the offended, we make space for those behavioral and performative aspects that seem to Holmgren to be beside the point. The complex process in which the two parties are interlocked in an attempt to be reconciled with each other does necessarily rely on some declarations and acts of good will, some performative expressions of regret, apology, request to be forgiven, offers and acceptance of restitution. These are not always based on a change of heart but rather lead to such a change. The relations between the attitudinal and the performative aspects of forgiveness are more dialectical and complex than Holmgren’s analysis allows for.

Long ago I argued that forgiveness is a supererogatory act. It is
typically highly valuable yet not obligitory. Often its free nature is what makes it touching. In the non-trivial cases, overcoming the justified resentment felt by the victim involves an effort, is not an easy task and may even involve a sacrifice. It may start as a half-hearted change of attitude to the wrongdoer and only later, and gradually, become fully genuine – often following a positive interaction with the wrongdoer. Even if it starts independently of a parallel change in the wrongdoer, the forgiver expects that the act of forgiveness itself lead to such a change. This kind of analysis is rejected by Holmgren who believes that since the attitude of forgiveness is good for the forgiver it must come naturally and without real pain or other psychological obstacle: “It is both pleasant and beneficial for the injured person to reach this state” (53). Hence it is no more a duty to forgive than to take a vacation. Many people would find this characterization phenomenologically difficult to digest. Although I fully share Holmgren’s Augustinian distinction between the actor and the deed as the background condition for forgiveness, I believe that the shift from the judgment of the deed to the understanding (recognition) of the actor is supererogatory—that is to say, neither obligatory nor a self-regarding change of attitude of the victim. However, the separation of the actor from the act may raise a problem for Holmgren’s argument for unconditional forgiveness. Her (correct) assumption is that the offense is not a constitutive part of the subject / agent and hence the offender can be deserving of respect and compassion without having to condone the offensive act itself. But let us assume that the offender, exercising his free choice as an agent who can be separated from the wrongful act, chooses not to repent, apologize or offer restitution. Does not this choice demonstrate that he should not be forgiven? Can again this act of choice be separated from the subject / agent? Would not such a choice count against the initial plea for the separation of act from actor? It seems that there is a limit to the separation principle and that at a certain stage one’s deeds and choices stain the subject in a way which puts an insurmountable obstacle to forgiveness.

Finally, although Holmgren’s theory explicitly denies that the offender has a right to be forgiven, still—cannot he expect to be forgiven, or even feel offended if he is not forgiven? And would such a sense of second-order offense give rise to resentment in the offender which he would be expected to overcome by adopting a forgiving attitude towards the unforgiving victim?

Is Resentment a Morally Wrong Attitude?

We are getting to the heart of Holmgren’s moral justification of forgiveness. Since forgiveness is defined as overcoming resentment and since such overcoming is not only generally speaking desirable but a duty of the forgiving party to herself, it seems that Holmgren assumes that resentment is intrinsically bad, both psychologically and morally. Indeed,
there is much to be said for that quite intuitive assumption. Resentment is a hostile attitude which may cause suffering to its object but it is equally a troubling emotion which haunts the subject and makes her focus on the wrong done and the evil nature of the perpetrator. As Nietzsche was famous to comment in detail, resentment is the response of the weak, of those who cannot take actual revenge and win a fight with those who wronged them. It not only ruins the chance of reconciliation with the offender but also undermines the opportunity of the victim to overcome her trauma and proceed with her life in a positive way. But even if it is easy to see why resentment is bad for the person’s mental health and wellbeing, it is not so clear why it is morally bad or even why it is not called for as the right response to non-trivial offense, especially one involving humiliation. Some would argue that resentment is the only response which demonstrates moral integrity. Jean Améry’s famous essay on resentment is conspicuous in its absence from the otherwise wide-ranging and rich literature which Holmgren addresses. 9

Améry, originally a Viennese Jew, was horribly tortured after being captured by the Gestapo as a resistance fighter in Belgium in 1943 and then sent to Auschwitz (sharing the same barrack with Primo Levi). After the war, he was struck (and horrified) by the fast pace in which Germany was returning to the routine of normal life and the energetic, forward-looking attitude of reconciliation which gave rise to the “economic miracle” but was accompanied by the complete suppression of its recent evil crimes. His concern is not really political but personal. His unimaginable suffering and humiliation cannot be addressed by any forgiving attitude. Not only does he feel “resentment” (intentionally using the Nietzschean linguistic form), but strongly believes that this feeling ought to be maintained even under the natural psychological pressure to resolve the past humiliation and focus on the future. Améry’s point is that moral integrity means sometimes resisting the natural, psychologically easy and socially desirable inclination to overcome the past. Forgiving or forgetting is a betrayal of the moral requirement to “settle the account” with the perpetrator of the crime. And the only way to get that account settled is by the unnatural attempt to reverse time and meet the perpetrator - this time on the same level, without the humiliating superiority of the torturer. The goal (even if fantastical) of resentment is “that the crime become a moral reality for the criminal, in order that he be swept into the truth of his atrocity.” 10

This is a very powerful plea for “harboring resentment”, which is diametrically opposed to Holmgren’s view. It is admittedly persuasive only in the extreme circumstances of the atrocious crimes perpetrated by the Nazis and cannot easily be extrapolated to everyday offenses of the kind discussed by Holmgren. Yet it may be used to highlight some questions regarding the unconditional condemnation of resentment as a proper response to an offense. First, it is not clear why resentment is regarded by Holmgren as a kind of objectification of the wrongdoer. As Améry points out, the fantasy of a face-to-face meeting with the offender on an equal level, forcing the offender to directly address his crime, is the
epitome of a moral relation between two fully moral agents and responsible persons. We do not resent animals or very young children. Secondly, there is no necessary connection between resentment and vindictiveness, let alone revenge or even punishment. Améry is aware of the futility of vengeful action in the sense that it cannot undo the offense and strike out the humiliation. Resentment is the purely moral response to serious wrongdoing, in contrast to revenge which at most provides some psychological relief and in contrast to punishment which may have utilitarian social function (deterrence). Thirdly, not feeling any resentment towards the offender casts doubt on the sense of self-respect which for Holmgren herself stands at the core of our sense of being human individuals. Thus, the Dalai Lama, who is repeatedly introduced as a role model in the book, or—I would add—Dostoyevsky’s Alyosha Karamazov, do not need to overcome resentment since they do not feel it in the first place (32). But if such people exist, I am not sure they can be regarded as ‘‘forgiving’’ for exactly the reason that they do not have to overcome any conflicting emotion of resentment.11

Fourthly, and most importantly, from Améry’s point of view it is not clear why the offended party should at all try to overcome resentment. We should focus here for a minute on the fundamental ‘‘triad’’ of respect, compassion and good will (4), which Holmgren takes as the fundamental justification in her whole theory of responding to wrongdoing. Respect consists of taking the other, even after having suffered from his offense, as a human being, having an equal moral standing as a free and responsible moral agent. Compassion calls for identification, i.e. understanding what led the person to commit that offense and the particular circumstances which might make the offense either excusable or understandable. Good will is even more demanding: the victim is expected to wish the wrongdoer good and hope for his overall prosperity. Now, no one would argue against the first attitude: respect for a person as a human being is owed even to the worst criminal. Resentment, punishment and even revenge – all presuppose some form of respect to the object of these responses. But this Kantian principle is a kind of negative constraint on any moral relations. Compassion and good will are, in contradistinction, positive in the sense that they require a direct concern with the welfare of their objects. And one may wonder, as against Holmgren, why should the victim of all people try to identify with her offender and wish him well? It seems from Holmgren’s analysis that the victim should adopt these positive attitudes to the offender even more than towards some third, anonymous party. Why should I feel compassion and good will towards a person who harmed me when I find it sufficiently hard (or even saintly) to have those attitudes to the innocent sufferers of hunger and poverty in another continent? Unlike respect, which due to its ‘‘negative’’ character can be expected to apply universally, identification and particular wish to see another person prosper are naturally applied differentially.

Again, although Améry’s circumstances are untypically extreme, his case can teach us a general lesson concerning the difficulties in the ideal of forgiveness. The virtue-based analysis suggested by Holmgren is...
aiming at some perfect and coherent balance between the cognitive, affective and motivational dimensions of our response to wrongdoing. Since she defines virtues as “integrated attitudes” (26), her ideal of forgiveness is an attitude in which the three dimensions are in complete harmony rather than “conflicted.” However, it is not only an empirical fact that most cases of forgiveness express conflicted attitudes of the victim to the offender, but it may also be a constitutive property of forgiveness. For example, to forgive without forgetting creates an inherent conflict, for there is no way in which the memory of the offensive (though forgiven) act does not raise traces of resentment; or forgiveness may be genuinely driven by some motivational and cognitive recognition of what the right attitude to adopt is, yet, nevertheless, be accompanied by a negative affective attitude. Maybe only people like the Dalai Lama who do not feel resentment in the first place can be free from such “conflicted” and unharmonious attitudes; but then, as we have seen, it is doubtful that their “integrated” attitude can at all be called “forgiveness” (which reminds us of the difficulty raised in the opening paragraph of this review in God being forgiving). This conflicted element in forgiveness is better captured by the deontological analysis of the concept which recognizes the potentially paradoxical (or at least difficult) nature of the reconciliation with the perpetrator of a wrong. Yes, resentment may prove to be deleterious to the subject, even “poisonous”, but that does not mean that it is not the authentic moral response to a grave injury, especially if the injurer has not repented.

Forgiveness in Law and Politics

 Forgiveness belongs to a larger group of conciliatory responses to wrongdoing, such as legal pardon, national amnesty, and inter-racial political or international reconciliation. The last part of Holmgren’s book is devoted to the articulation of what she refers to as “the paradigm of forgiveness” and its application to these forms of response to wrongdoing. While forgiveness on the personal level was understood as the alternative to resentment, on the political, state level it is contrasted with retribution. Accordingly, this part of the book is a detailed critique of retributivism—both as a theory of legal punishment and as a principle governing other political relations between social groups and between nations.

 But the project of “extending” the ideas of forgiveness and self-forgiveness from the personal to the public domain (166–7) faces an initial problem created by the virtue-based analysis of the concept on the personal level. For if forgiveness is an attitude rather than a performative act, how can it be ascribed to the state, the legislature, the judiciary or indeed to any institution. None of these entities can be regarded as having a sentiment of resentment and consequently an ability to overcome it. Self-respect does not apply to them and their operation cannot be said to be harmonious if the
cognitive, affective and motivational aspects of the operation fall in line with each other. Indeed, Holmgren is right in her critique of retributivism as fallaciously deriving the force of desert-based theory of punishment in the social domain from the pre-institutional view of moral desert on the personal level. But this critique can be turned against her own attempt to derive a non-retributive, justice-based principle of punishment from the paradigm of forgiveness which is equally “pre-institutional” and typically personal.

At a certain stage in her argument Holmgren admits that “the public response to wrongful behavior… does not involve forgiveness per se” (205), but insists nevertheless that it falls under “the paradigm of forgiveness” since governments no less than individuals ought to endorse “morally worthy attitudes”, and these include the triad of respect, compassion and good will—only this time applied to all people (under the relevant jurisdiction) rather than to the individual wrongdoer. Since the response to wrongdoing must take into account the way citizens in general (i.e., beyond the direct victim of the offense) are (indirectly) affected by the wrong and since the offender must not be punished beyond what the interests of the citizens require, the punishment must be based the balance of the overall concern of the institution to those who are subject to its jurisdiction. In this sense punishment should be justice-based rather than desert-based.

This argument is original and persuasive and it makes a lot of sense as an alternative to the retributive theories which have returned to vogue lately. However it is not clear why the otherwise convincing theory of punishment (or pardon or reconciliation) should be viewed as an extension of forgiveness or why its paradigm should be called “forgiveness.” It is true that justice (in contrast to desert) does not limit itself to the examination of the moral standing of the perpetrator of the wrongful act but chooses the proper social response in the light of the wider perspective of the group’s collective interest. But that does not mean that the punishing agency or system is instructed in any way by a forgiving attitude. Even though respect for persons is no doubt a principle which must guide the behavior of public officials like judges and government ministers, it is less obvious that compassion and good will should (or even can) do so. For institutions cannot “identify” with citizens, or show good will (unless this is interpreted as the duty to advance impartially the welfare of all citizens).12

Holmgren herself is sensitive to the “gap” between forgiveness and reconciliation of the type advocated by Desmond Tutu in post-Apartheid South Africa and tried in some other countries (48–9). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was satisfied with the admission by the authors of the Apartheid crimes and the willing of the group of its victims to build relations of cooperation and forward-looking commitment to a mutual respectful interracial life. But it did not require forgiveness since that could only be granted by the individuals harmed and humiliated by each particular violation. Similarly, the Allies’ policy towards Germany and Japan after 1945 (50) was not derived from a paradigm of forgiveness and did not express “good will” towards these countries but from either shrewd political considerations
or at most from a wish to build peaceful relations with the German people (which Holmgren seems to concede, 201). Israel accepted in the 1950s a certain mode of reconciliation with Germany (which included extensive reparations), but even theoretically could not have “forgiven” the German people for the simple reason that even if all Jewish survivors were willing to show good will and compassion to the perpetrators, the primary victims of the atrocities were dead and there was no indication that they would have been willing to undergo the necessary “change of heart”.

Beyond that, the recipient of the act of forgiveness (unlike that of reconciliation) must be personally identified rather than be an anonymous part of a group. To put it in technical philosophical terms, one can forgive a person only de re and not de dicto: I can forgive the murderer of my family relative only if he is personally identified. I cannot forgive “the person who is the murderer of my family relative” (whoever he is). But of course this claim is correct only if forgiveness is indeed dialogical in some way and that it is not unconditional in the sense that whoever the perpetrator turns out to be and however he deals with his own offenses—he is to be forgiven.

Comprehensive theories are naturally more susceptible to criticism and are more liable to inconsistencies than piece-meal, narrow-targeted analyses. But that should by no means detract from their philosophical value. Margaret Holmgren has offered scholars a daringly wide-ranging picture of forgiveness, both analytical and normative, applying it to both the personal and the public domains, grounding it in a meticulous study of metaphysical and normative accounts of personal identity, moral responsibility and punishment /C1 always with alternative views in the literature in mind. Consequently, the book will be a challenge in which all future discussions of forgiveness will have to deal.

Notes

1 Obviously, this divine monopoly over forgiveness does not characterize post-biblical Jewish thought. Forgiveness becomes a major virtue and even obligation in the Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature.

2 Margaret R. Holmgren, Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 59–62. Further references to Holmgren’s book will be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

3 I suggest the following analogy: in the same way that an act of revenge cannot succeed unless its object is aware of it and aware of it as an intentionally hostile action of the victim, so does the act of forgiveness depend on the awareness of its recipient as an act of good will and reconciliation. So at least in that sense, the act of forgiveness, or even the attitude of forgiveness, cannot be complete if it is unilateral and purely self-regarding.

4 I am indebted for this point to Merav Kaddar.

5 Strangely, when she gets to the public domain, Holmgren raises the possible “informal, face-to-face meeting between the offender and the victim” (258). But isn’t that the wrong place to insist on a dialogue between the two parties when society’s response to an offense is expected to be
impersonal, impartial, fair, and governed by rules?

6 For a nuanced discussion (not mentioned by Holmgren) of the interrelation between the performative act of forgiveness and the attitudinal change of heart, see Avishai Margalit, The Ethics of Memory (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), chap. 6.


8 The (post-biblical) idea in the Jewish “Day of Atonement” (Yom Kippur) is that repentance of the offending person is a condition for being forgiven—either by God (for sins against Him) or by another human being (for interpersonal offenses). There is a debate whether the act of forgiveness towards the repenting offender is a duty or just an option, but there is no controversy that repentance is a necessary condition.


10 Ibid. 70.

11 It seems that according to Holmgren, people who do not feel resentment in the first place are free from the call to undergo the cognitive and affective “steps” listed above for the proper change of heart of the forgiver. Does that mean that they are not called to recognize the wrongness of the act from which they suffered, or to “assess the situation with respect to the offender,” or to express their feeling towards the offender and decide whether they want to seek restitution?

12 I believe that Holmgren misinterprets Bernard Williams in appealing to his idea of identifying (rather than judging) people as supporting her attempt to extend the paradigm of forgiveness to the public domain (168). For it was Williams more than any other philosopher who insisted on the particular (partial) relations we have with close people and the morally justified preference we give to people with whom we have such relations.