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Review of "Forgiveness and Revenge"

William O. Stephens
Creighton University

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Book Review

Forgiveness and Revenge, Trudy Govier. London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. x + 205. Hardback. ISBN: 0-415-27855-4

A 'respect for person' ethic is the secular perspective adopted by Govier in this sincere, but often disappointing book. It contains a preface, an appendix on religious traditions on forgiveness (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism), an appendix on respect for persons as an ethical foundation, notes, a bibliography, an index, and eight chapters. Her thesis is stated in the preface:

> that seeking revenge is objectionable for both practical and moral reasons; that the desire for revenge is not deeply "natural" in the sense of being an elemental, culturally independent feature of human nature; and that even if revenge were to be natural in that way, such naturalness would not constitute a moral argument in its favor. (viii)

Govier conceives of forgiveness as "a process of overcoming attitudes of resentment and anger that may persist when one has been injured by wrongdoing" (viii). She offers an account of bilateral, unilateral, and mutual forgiveness. Her work has pronounced political import in that she argues that attitudes and dispositions can be attributed to groups, that groups can suffer harm, and that groups can be responsible agents of wrongdoing. As a consequence, Govier contends that groups can forgive. Her method is to employ a host of examples taken from recent (World War II and after) history, sprinkle in a few invented examples, and lay out long-winded and typically repetitive arguments. The result is an occasionally provocative and often overly one-sided treatment punctuated by earnestness.

Govier begins by attacking the defense of the moral appropriateness of revenge advocated by Jeffrie Murphy and Robert Solomon. Unfortunately, Govier is evidently unfamiliar with Seneca's gem *De Ira*, the arguments and insights from which could have greatly enriched her discussion in several sections. It is disappointing that Kant is the oldest philosopher Govier cites. The entries in her bibliography are limited to works of the last sixty years. She rightly observes that those who have wronged us and against whom we get our revenge are unlikely to concur in our perceptions of wrongs and retaliations (9). But Jean Hampton (1988), as presented by Govier, offers nothing original in arguing that hatred "is a poor strategy for showing up one's own self-worth" (9).

After discussing the empirical issues of obsessiveness, violence, escalation, and satisfaction connected with revenge, Govier advances the moral argument that "any satisfaction an avenging party might feel would be morally objectionable because it would amount to *satisfaction at having brought about the suffering of another human being*" (11; her emphasis). This criticism, however, would apply equally to any legal punishment; a punishment isn't a punishment unless the convict suffers by it. Govier's crypto-

Kantian objection to revenge is that using the suffering of a person to satisfy oneself is morally objectionable because it treats the person as a means only and fails to respect the person's human dignity. Govier is also Kantian in her speciesism since she asserts that morality is based on obligations to respect *human* persons, to further *human* welfare, and to limit *human* suffering (12; my emphasis). But while the 'respect for persons' ethic is to her liking, Govier finds distasteful the retributivist theory of punishment, also notoriously Kantian. In a note she writes that "although Kant was indeed a retributivist… I would argue that his respect for persons is incompatible with the 'eye for an eye' of unqualified retributivism. … Proportionality seems impossible to achieve in practical terms" (172). So when does Govier think punishment is appropriate? How are punishments to be decided on if proportionality is impracticable? Govier is silent on these basic questions. Kant believed that imposing as the just punishment on the criminal the maxim upon which he chose to act is precisely to treat him with respect as an autonomous agent. But, because of her selective Kantianism, this is hardly what Govier has in mind when she concedes that "respect is properly expressible in different ways" (167). She defends neither the utilitarian theory of rehabilitative punishment, nor any other theory of punishment. All she offers is the unhelpful remark that the retributive claim that wrongdoers deserve to suffer "has not been rejected here" (40). Readers curious about Govier's understanding of the value and practice of punishment are left in the dark.

A serious problem with Govier's respect for persons perspective is that she fails to consider conditions when one is justified in *losing* respect for a person whose moral character has declined. If a moral agent behaves in a blameworthy, selfish, dishonest way, and the virtues she once had have eroded over time to be replaced by growing vices, then that agent ought not to be esteemed as highly as she once was. Persons who increasingly rationalize their selfish and dishonest deeds are owed less respect. The fact that a certain kind of respect, in certain circumstances, must be earned and can be lost, is not recognized by Govier, to the detriment of her account.

For Govier, "to forgive is to renounce our rage and resentment of past wrongs and establish the basis for a renewed relationship with a wrongdoer" (42). She contends that in releasing us from the burdens of resentment and guilt, and in providing grounds for repairing relationships, "forgiveness is necessary for a sane and compassionate ethics and politics" (43). Govier makes a good point that no person can establish a moral identity as a solitary individual; to change one's moral reputation requires the cooperation of others. But she hedges in claiming that "We have an obligation to allow each other fresh starts, provided the wrongdoing is *not too* serious" (44; my emphasis). Govier suggests that "the capacity to overcome anger and resentment by forgiving amounts to a virtue" (44). Does she prefer virtue ethics or deontology? She explicitly denies that there is any obligation to forgive (45), but her ultimate allegiance to one rather than another of the major competing normative theories is never divulged.

Govier faults Robert Solomon's defense of resentment by complaining that "people do not *always* generalize from their resentment" (52; my emphasis) to reflect on similar wrongs suffered by others. She thinks that one's own case "is likely to be singular and unrepresentative" (52). Instead, she contends that resentment "sustains a sense of personal grievance, leading *often* to generalized bitterness and inappropriate blaming of others" (52; my emphasis). Can't we criticize Govier, as she criticizes Solomon, by pointing out that people do not *always* inappropriately blame others as a result of resenting being victimized by a particular person in a particular case of wrongdoing? Govier fails to be even-handed when construing Solomon's claims as universalizations vulnerable to a single counterexample, while at the same time offering her own generalizations as sufficient support for her own position, which is

similarly weakened by counterexamples. She finds Solomon guilty of falling into the 'Paradox of Resentment,' which she describes as follows: If resentment is so morally fundamental, then a person who forgives simultaneously overcomes his resentment and overcomes his own notions of injustice and justice. But a philosopher sceptical of forgiveness could turn Govier on her head here by arguing that to forgive seems to "overcome" the forgiver's own notions of injustice and justice. X wronged Y, but when Y forgives X, Y has set aside just condemnation of X's misdeed and no longer blames X for X's injustice. Is there any danger of promiscuous forgiving dulling a moral agent's sense of justice? The fact that the index lists eight pages on vigilante justice, two pages on transitional justice, and only six pages on justice, whereas the book proper is 168 pages in length, indicates the relative neglect of justice by Govier.

A deeper problem, perhaps, is that Govier doesn't recognize that her objections to resentment as an *impartial* basis for justice might equally be aimed at *forgiveness*. That is, forgiveness is just as partial, just as specific, as resentment is. One might well think it oddly inappropriate to consider forgiving wrongdoers who have harmed *others* rather than ourselves. A virtue ethicist worth her salt can defend both partial virtues (friendship, compassion, generosity) and impartial virtues (justice, fairness, benevolence, equity). Govier is no virtue ethicist. If she were, she could have sharpened her analysis of forgiveness as a virtue by comparing it with the classical virtue of *magnanimity*. Yet magnanimity is not discussed. A lonely adverb is the only occurrence to be found in the book, buried in a quotation of Desmond Tutu's praise of President Nelson Mandela (111). The magnanimous person is not engrossed in victimization, as Govier's forgiving soul seems to be prior to the attitude-transforming process of forgiving the wrongdoer who harmed her. The wrongs inflicted on the magnanimous person roll off her back like water off a duck. Forgiveness, as depicted by Govier, is a thin-skinned quasi-virtue in contrast to the thick-skinned, hearty virtue of magnanimity. Greatness of soul may be too robust, too sturdy a disposition of character for Govier's belabored self-cleansing therapeutic odyssey of forgiveness. One worry is that too much concern with forgiveness aberrates into reveling in self-involved, self-righteous condescension. Might obsessive forgiving engender feeling *superior* to one's wrongdoer and joy in *stooping* to pull him up out of his wicked morass? To be magnanimous, in sharp contrast, is simply to rise above any urge to feel victimized.

Govier argues that the Dutch, *as a group*, will be tolerant if 'all or most' Dutch individuals are tolerant (85). She declines to quantify what counts as "most" – 51%? A supermajority? Govier argues that the decisions of an elected executive of a larger group can be appropriately attributed to the group considered as a whole. This much is not troublesome. But she then moves on to consider more complex groups like Mobil Oil, the government of California, or the Labour Party of the United Kingdom (86). She is right to recognize such corporate collectives as "more complex groups," but she neglects to mention or reference research on the idea of corporate personality (e.g. John Dewey's 1926 paper "Corporate Personality"; Peter A. French, "The Corporation as a Moral Person," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 3, July 1979: 207–215). Study of French's article in particular would have informed Govier's account. Instead, Govier contends that President Weiszacher occupies an institutional role, and since it is likely that other members of an elected government *would* have been consulted about the content of the speech Weiszacher delivered in 1985 repenting Holocaust crimes, "it is plausible to attribute to the German nation as a whole the repentance Mr Weiszacher expressed so fervently in the speech" (86). Is this inductive generalization a bit hasty? Govier defends the plausibility of her inference provided that the sentiments weren't repudiated by "a substantial portion" of the German citizenry, provided that the speech is not disavowed by "significant numbers of people" (87). Would 20% of the German populace

count as ‘substantial’? Would 40% of the German citizenry constitute ‘significant numbers of people’?

As I write this, American and British troops have invaded Iraq and removed Saddam Hussein from power. Yet anti-war protests in the U.S. were conducted for weeks prior to the March 19 invasion, and the protests continued during the military campaign. Would Govier consider George W. Bush the *duly* elected President of the U.S.? The 2000 presidential election debacle in Florida prior to the Supreme Court’s order to halt the recount of ballots led some Americans to question the legitimacy of Bush’s election to office. Most Americans who voted voted not for Bush, but for Al Gore. Govier would probably resist suggesting that American voters considered *as a group* wanted Bush in the White House as Commander in Chief. Though most Americans wanted Gore, we should at the same time be sceptical of the implication of Govier’s discussion, namely that the citizenry of the U.S. considered as a group wanted Gore. Given the international unpopularity of the Bush administration’s handling of Iraq, we should be suspicious of thinking that Bush (like Weiszacher) “is in a position to express” the attitudes of America (Germany) “given his position within the state” (87). Govier leaves too much room between ‘all’ and ‘most’ for uncertainty and slipperiness by eschewing any quantification.

Two importantly distinct responses are tendentiously conjoined when Govier writes that “To say that an act is from a moral point of view *absolutely unforgivable* is to say that it should forever be condemned *and that* the rage and resentment victims feel in its wake should never be overcome” (102; first emphasis hers; second emphasis mine). Surely enduring condemnation is both logically and psychologically separable from endless rage. Similarly, punishment should not be motivated by anger but by justice and the attempt to reform. And again: “…the judgment that perpetrators themselves are absolutely unforgivable is *more than* a statement of moral theory. It offers a blueprint for lasting hatred, ongoing conflict, and sagas of revenge” (106; my emphasis). This “more than” seems a dramatic exaggeration lacking justification. *Why* must the judgment of moral condemnation that some perpetrators are unforgivable *necessarily* explode into irate sagas of revenge? That they *could* and in a few historical cases *have* does not substantiate Govier’s insistence that they *must*.

The pivotal distinction Govier balances the heart of her argument on is between the person who performed a misdeed and the misdeed performed. The former, she insists, is a human being not reducible to the latter. Nietzsche believed that a thing is the sum of its effects. The relevant corollary in this context is that an agent is what she does. Govier is diametrically opposed to this view. She asserts that “There is not a compelling argument from the monstrous character of acts to the conclusion that the agent is a monster” (111). Yet surely a pattern of cruel, malicious, injurious acts warrants the moral judgment that the perpetrator may have a cruel, malicious, vicious character. Govier’s position seems to amount to the platitude that human beings remain human beings no matter what they do. Monstrous deeds do not, and cannot, Govier insists, make their doers monsters. How can we determine what *would* make a being a monster? Monsters are impossible in Govier’s moral universe. She is consistent in holding that there can be no saints either, but only a few ordinary people who sometimes “act extraordinarily well in bad situations” (117). An alternative hero to Govier’s Tutu and Mandela is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, who believes that whatever does not destroy him, only makes him stronger.

Govier argues that “moral transformation is a fact of life” (119). She inveighs against John Kekes’ position that there are people who are permanently malevolent moral monsters. She criticizes Kekes for “an absence of forward-looking thinking” and for “the erroneous inference of traits and character from *acts*” (123; her emphasis). While Kekes endorses a moral theory based on desert, Govier defends a moral theory based on development of human potential. And while she is right that “a person is *not wholly and*

simply his traits, habits, dispositions, and 'character'" (125; her emphasis), Govier sees no value in making moral judgments about meaningful differences in character from one agent to another. Instead, she thinks that all of us are affiliated, through our simultaneous memberships in various social, ethnic, cultural, and economic groups, both with perpetrators and with victims. In her zeal to emphasize respect for all persons, Govier radically underplays any motivation for differential moral judgments. Her appeal that human beings and moral agents are capable of fresh starts is unobjectionable. Yet her analysis would have been more subtle and more convincingly had she not offered as the only two alternatives hasty forgiveness or condemnation of a wrongdoer as permanently evil. This rings of a false dilemma.

Despite its weaknesses, Govier's analysis is interesting. Forgiveness and revenge play leading roles in the dramas we live, and they continue to deserve the attention they receive by Govier and others (for example, Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, "What Should 'Forgiveness' Mean?" *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36 (2002): 483–498).

William O. Stephens
Creighton University

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