Review of “Moral Repair. Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing”

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Recommended Citation
Margret Urban Walker's book is, in the author's own words, "an examination of an unavoidable human task: moral repair" (6) and at the same time a contribution to timely themes of the moral emotions and attitudes involved in sustaining or reconstructing moral bonds: hope, trust, resentment, forgiveness and reparation. The main claims of the book are unfolding throughout the chapters, through many illustrations and discussions of individual examples, rather than being stated and then systematically argued for. This involves much repetition, the aim of which is to refine the arguments and avoid, to the highest possible extent, the loss or simplification of the variety of human experience related to harm and reparation.

People respond to wrong doing with a variety of attitudes, ranging from insisting on a tooth for tooth revenge to rejecting revenge, offering unconditional forgiveness and even accusing the revenging victims that they are turning into victimizers themselves. Walker's main interest is to think which of the actual responses to wrongdoing are adequate in achieving moral repair. Moral repair itself is understood as a process through which people restore – or, in some cases, create afresh – the conditions necessary to sustain moral relationships. The general task of the book is to give a rich account of precisely these conditions, which are the often unacknowledged background against which we can sustain moral relationships. The six chapters of the book are dedicated either to a general discussion of the moral repair (the first chapter), or to each of the elements it involves (mentioned above.)

As a consequence of wrongdoing people suffer many harms, one of which is the damage done to their ability to relate to each other as moral beings. What are the most successful ways of addressing this particular harm? One of the central theses of the book, and a point which its author repeats and emphasises in various contexts throughout the chapters, is the importance of having one's story of suffering wrongs heard, publicly acknowledged and, as a consequence, having the responsible people held accountable for what they did. If possible, seeing signs of repentance in these people is particularly healing and conductive to renewed moral connections. The actual infliction of adequate punishment on the perpetrators of wrongs seems to be of secondary importance to victims, once their story receives public recognition.

A particular strength of Walker's book, which makes it both interesting and original, is that she is constantly placing the discussion of moral reparation and its necessary components into the broader social context. Instead of focussing exclusively, or mainly, on the relationship between wrongdoer and victim, she is always paying special attention to the ways in which moral relationships between
individuals are socially embedded. This is particularly helpful, in more than one way: it allows us to make sense of many of the victims' moral emotions – for example people's sense that a lack of recognition of the wrongs they have suffered can be as harming as the wrongs themselves and most victims insistence on the public nature of all adequate reparation. Additionally, it helps readers see the many connections between the failure to repair moral relationships and different ways of (perpetuating) harms and injustices and it even draws readers' attention to so-far unanalyzed forms of injustice. Thus, for instance, Walker succeeds in showing why hope and trust, as essential components of moral relationships, are also socially produced goods whose distribution is a matter of justice; systematically undermining, or failing to restore them, therefore, can have implications for justice (more on this issue latter.) An upshot of the argument is that communities should be held responsible to the sufferers of injustice and wrongdoings and should take an active role in moral repair, as opposed to privatizing these issues – by portraying them as matters to be taken care of by isolated individuals themselves – or letting time alone heal the wounds. An interesting conceptual claim made by Walker, but only sketched in her book, is that a community is jeopardizing its very identity when it fails to achieve moral repair by upholding its moral standards and behaving responsibly towards its victims.

In the first chapter Walker outlines the various tasks of the book, explains the importance of communities achieving moral repair and emphasizes the importance of having one's voice as a victim heard – and one's story acknowledged. At the centre of the argument is an understanding of moral identities as having a strong narrative element: to make sense – including moral sense – of their lives, and repair the “moral fractures” that result from wrongdoing, people need to be able to share with others their histories of being betrayed, exploited, terrorised or otherwise harmed. Being heard is thus an essential part of the process of remaining in the moral community and necessary if victims are to avoid self-blame and to recover self-respect. Being heard gives victims what Walker calls “normative confirmation,” which is the symbolic expression of their community's commitment to protect and, to the extent to which it is possible, heal their victims. Repair is future-oriented, but in order to be effective it has to incorporate victims' own accounts of their past suffering. Moral repair is defined as “restoring or creating trust and hope in a shared sense of value and responsibility” and, according to Walker, it should accomplish six tasks: attribute responsibility correctly, acknowledge the harm to both victims and communities, recover the community's moral standards (when they have been shattered by the wrongdoing), recreate the trust in these standards, nurture hope in the trustworthiness of those who have to sustain the moral standards, and reconnect victims and perpetrators in moral relationships (when possible). (28) Here, as everywhere throughout the book, Walker prefers to outline the factors that contribute to, or favour, a particular moral process, rather than lay out necessary and sufficient conditions. Therefore, processes that do not fulfil all the above criteria may still qualify as successful instances of moral repair.

The second chapter, on hope, proceeds by outlining the value of hope as both an individual and a social necessity, its absence being thus conducive to both individual and social harms. Hopefulness in individuals or social groups has empowering effects: it promotes agency by sustaining motivation and the ability to stand losses, by giving structure to people's life plans and by helping them to cope with difficult circumstances. Conversely, hopelessness disempowers and undermines agency, which in turn may lead to the perpetuation of injustices, when people are not able enough to resist them. Since moral repair requires the recreation of trust, and trust itself requires that people are hopeful enough to take action towards creating links of trust, then moral repair requires (re)establishing
hope. Walker is careful not to overlook the dangers of hope (of placing it wrongly and wasting one's efforts) and for this reason she is clearly – perhaps too clearly – distinguishing it from different forms of wishful thinking. Thus, destroying hope – which is one of the moral consequences of wrongdoing that needs to be addressed in the process of moral repair – attacks the very moral texture of a community. Hope is a social good, of which some people are deprived; this constitutes a form of injustice. The chapter concludes by stating an obligation of moral communities to “nurture, protect, and restore the hopes on which human beings and moral relations depend.” (71)

Trust and the consequences of damaging it are the objects of the third chapter. Walker examines both the virtues of trust as the necessary glue of social relationships and the vulnerability to which trustfulness exposes us. Like in the cases of all other conceptual analysis offered in this book, its author rejects the possibility of capturing, in a single definition, what trust is. Her analysis of trust builds on the insights of previous authors such as Annette Baier and Trudy Govier; Walker offers her own generic approach to interpersonal trust: “a kind of reliance on others whom we expect (perhaps only implicitly or unreflectively) to behave as relied upon (e.g. in specified ways, in ways that fulfil an assumed standard, or in ways so as to achieve relied-upon outcomes) and to behave that way in the awareness (if only implicit or unreflective) that they are liable to be held responsible for failing to do so or to make reasonable efforts to do so” (80). Thus her analysis is mainly concerned with the trust in the sense of “trusting somebody” (a two-place structure trust) rather than in the sense explored by alternative literature on trust, that of “trusting somebody to do something” (as three-place structure trust) – the second an arguably less demanding conception of trust. The most original and intriguing element of Walker’s analysis here is the argument that default trust is unequally distributed within societies; groups of people who suffer from unrepaired harms such as historical or systematic discrimination or oppression also tend to enjoy less default trust on account of their sex, race, religion, sexual identity, cast and so on. This in turn entails an additional forms of injustice, since trust itself is a form of capital. Another contribution Walker makes to the literature on trust is her ability to explain why the value of trust is not only instrumental (as a necessary component for all social relations) but also intrinsically moral. She argues that an ability to trust is essential for our capacity to be in control of ourselves and our lives – in other words, for our sense of agency. Like in the case of hope, undermining trust is itself a moral wrong which needs reparation and this is an essential step in the process of moral repair. And as in the case of all stages of moral repair, the failure of a community to publicly recognise the entire extent of the wrong suffered by victims is a further attack on everybody’s trust in shared moral standards.

The next chapter, on resentment, follows the philosophical tradition of understanding resentment as a natural and valuable reaction to wrongdoing, expressing allegiance to shared standards and a sense that one's security has been threatened. At the same time, however, it can signal moral divisions inside a community and give those who fell outside a community a common ground to form new alliances. Walker suggests a broader concept of resentment than usually employed in literature, not to be limited to a response to actual moral injury but rather to be understood as a response to perceived injury of oneself or another, whether or not such injury be morally objectionable or not. This wide understanding leaves more room for objecting to certain instances of resentment. The valuable function of resentment, according to Walker, is that it indicates an asymmetry in people's power to define and enforce shared norms, and the morally adequate attitude is to acknowledge and answer resentment – even exacerbated resentment (instead of simply ignoring it).
In the fifth chapter Walker rejects an essentialist approach to forgiveness, thus avoiding to exclusively define it through a feature or set of features that are necessary and sufficient for any instance of forgiveness. The most widely used definitions of forgiveness in literature, which include overcoming of resentment, releasing of the wrong-doer from debt, restoring a relationship, and seeing a wrong as resting entirely in the past are all, according to Walker, important facets of forgiveness. But, she argues, since there is no single process that (best) deserves to be called "forgiveness", none of these features is either necessary or sufficient. By contrast, there are several kinds of forgiveness which vary throughout cultures and different human practices. The chapter offers a rich discussion of three of these facets of forgiveness: overcoming resentment, restoring relationships and fixing wrongs in the past.

Walker's own original contribution to the understanding of forgiveness is seeing it as a process of restructuring, of moral reconstruction. Discussing forgiveness in the context of relationships is particularly important to her account, because forgiveness is effective as a form of reparation when it contributes to reviving trust and promoting shared moral understandings. Sometimes this goes hand in hand with restoring the relationship between victim and offender, and between the offender and the community. Other times, however, when the offender or the victim has died, when the wrongdoing is unforgivable, or when forgiveness is not possible precisely because the victim knows she or he will not have to deal with the offender again, forgiveness cannot reconnect the offender and the victim. In such cases, as in others, forgiveness plays the role of (re)establishing trust and hope in shared understandings and norms. As when analyzing other instances of moral repair, Walker insists on the importance of public acknowledgement of wrongdoing and getting the relevant community involved as part of the background which gives meaning and endurance to moral relationships.

The last chapter looks at making amends; minimally, they should consist in one accepting responsibility for the wrongdoing one has done. In line with the aim of her book, Walker's argument for restorative justice prioritizes the importance of bringing about moral repair, of “reweaving a moral fabric” – rather than seeing amends as aimed at doing justice with moral repair as a collateral consequence.

Throughout her book, Walker uses a variety of sources - fiction, philosophical literature as well as recent history - in order to illustrate her points and help the reader reflect on their relevance. Even more excitingly, I found her reliance on both fictional and empirical cases inspiring in getting me to think further, and in new ways, about issues connected to moral harm and moral repair. By writing this book, Walker has attempted to give full acknowledgement to the wide diversity of human experience, to the entire range of our emotional and moral responses to wrongdoing. At the level of style this translates into a liberal use of adjectives and concepts, as the author is more interested in capturing nuances and the relationships between various ideas and concepts than in outlining easily accessible arguments. The same characteristics which ensure the richness of the analysis make for a slow and difficult reading, that is however fully rewarding in the end.

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