

Political Forgiveness

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The paper attempts to clarify the concept of political forgiveness, distinguishing it from individual forgiveness and illustrating its presence in contemporary politics. It proceeds to explore grounds for criticism of political forgiveness – an authority criticism, a specificity criticism and a temporal distance criticism – and suggests that, although these difficulties can be overcome, they provide ‘desiderata’ for genuine political forgiveness.

Political forgiveness delineated

Forgiveness has traditionally been viewed as a process involving an offender and a victim in which the victim responds to the offender’s repentance and apology by relinquishing justified indignation against him. Thus conceived, forgiveness is *moral* because the victim exercises the virtue of forgiveness; it is *individual* because it involves two individuals; and it is *temporally bounded* because it normally occurs within the lifetime and living memory of both parties.

Other conceptions of forgiveness have recently challenged this traditional understanding with three claims (see further reading). First, that forgiveness can occur between collectives as well as between individuals. Collectives such as states, nations, communities and families can wrong other collectives. Thus collectives can experience justified anger when contemplating wrongs they have suffered. Likewise, estrangement occurs between collectives as well as between individuals, making forgiveness and reconciliation between collectives both intelligible and possible, granted appropriate repentance and reparations.

Second, that collective forgiveness can be understood as a *political* as well as a moral concept. Aggrieved states, nations, and communities can both identify past wrongs which they have unjustifiably suffered and forgive collectives which have offended against them.

Third, that collective political forgiveness transcends temporal restrictions that constrain individual forgiveness because states, nations and communities enjoy collective, century-spanning political memories. Aggrieved collectives may intelligibly consider the suffering of previous generations as ‘their sufferings’: time has not destroyed the strong bonds of political identity which unite them to their wronged predecessors.

Thus to view forgiveness as exclusively moral, individual and temporally restricted neglects the conceptual depth of the virtue, limiting its scope and power. A collective concept of forgiveness ameliorates post-conflict situations, constructing better relationships between former enemies and healing wounds caused and suffered by former generations.

Consider three examples. In the 1960s Martin Luther King urged American Africans to forgive white Americans for the injustices of slavery and for the 20th century legacy of discrimination; on December 7th 1970 Chancellor Willy Brandt knelt at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial to ask for

forgiveness on behalf of the German people for the suppression of the Warsaw uprising of 1944; in 1994 the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, asked the Irish people for forgiveness for centuries of British wrongs against them. These brief examples sufficiently illustrate how attractive the concept of political forgiveness has become. It extends a familiar moral concept in striking ways and contributes to post-conflict political reconstruction, offering solace to individuals and comfort to nations.

However, the concept of collective political forgiveness has occasioned sceptical doubts, both general and particular. General doubts question the intelligibility of the whole concept of collective forgiveness; particular doubts concede the concept's intelligibility but query its practical significance. Now our common moral practices happily ascribe moral agency, praise and blame to collectives such as business corporations, professional groups and nation-states, so in the remainder of the paper I will presuppose the intelligibility of the concept and concentrate on problems created by particular sceptical doubts.

Particular difficulties in collective political forgiveness

Forgiveness is an important moral virtue and if its integrity is jeopardised by association with things political then the particular sceptical doubts which arise deserve close attention. Therefore, I will consider three such sceptical doubts. In each case I will contrast collective forgiveness with individual forgiveness, comment upon the difficulty raised by the contrast and identify 'desiderata' for satisfactory political forgiveness. Of these problems and 'desiderata' the first is the most serious and will yield the most important insights concerning the possibilities and limitations of collective forgiveness.

1. The authority difficulty.

With individual forgiveness authority issues can normally be straightforwardly resolved. A victim has been wronged and, appropriate conditions having been satisfied, the victim forgives the offender. 'I was wronged ___ I have received the offender's apology ___ I have reconsidered the situation ___ I have decided to forgive.' The authority to forgive belongs to the offended person.

With collective political forgiveness the situation

is different. Here each member of the collective was, in some sense, wronged and so each member of the collective has feelings of justified anger. Is any individual member of the group entitled to forgive on behalf of the whole group? If so, how is representative authority created and exercised? Under what conditions is a putative act of collective forgiveness to count as a genuine case of collective forgiveness? These questions raise difficult issues about the conditions under which a collective may, qua collective, forgive on behalf of the group. I will argue that collective forgiveness can be genuine and effective and the issue of representative authority satisfactorily addressed but it is necessary, first of all, to distinguish between different kinds of collectives and the ways in which they function.

In his writings on collective responsibility Peter French distinguishes between aggregate and conglomerate collectives and argues that the latter can perform roles which the former cannot play. His distinction turns on identity conditions. The identity of an aggregate collective consists in the sum of the identities of the persons who comprise the membership of the collective. Therefore, every change in the membership of the collective changes the identity of the collective. Thus if one member of an aggregate collective ('AC') had not been a member component of AC, the meaning of statements about AC would have been different. Consider, as an example of aggregate collectives, such groups as 'the people who travelled on the 9am bus from Glasgow to Edinburgh on 1st August, 2009'. This phrase refers to a conjunction of definite, nameable individuals.

By contrast, a collective is a conglomerate collective ('CC') if the identity of the collective does not consist of the identity of the persons who are its members; the same collective can exist even if the members change and even if they change continuously. Thus if statement S1 is true of CC1 at T1, then it would still have been true of CC1 even if one or more of the members of CC1 had been different from what they were at that time. The expressions 'the Board of Executive of Coca-Cola' and 'the Senate of the University' refer to collectives which continue to exist, which act and which preserve their identity even though their membership changes over time.

Conglomerate collectives have internal organisational, decision-making roles and

procedures through which collective policies are formed and collective action taken; aggregate collectives do not. Conglomerate collectives invest internal power and responsibility in positions not people, thus allowing specified people to exercise power through holding those positions; aggregate collectives do not. Conglomerate collectives have standardised ways, peculiar to the specific collectives, by which people become members of the collective; aggregative collectives do not. Finally, conglomerate collectives recognise standards of conduct for the collective thus allowing the development of collective traditions and collective character while aggregate collectives do not. As a consequence of these features some statements about conglomerate collectives, involving saying that CC1 did action A1 even though A1 was not performed by a particular individual member of CC1, are true. This final point is important, because – especially when it comes to issues of collective forgiveness – we sometimes do hear: ‘what authority does he have to forgive in my (our) name?’

French’s distinction makes clear how we should answer questions about the authority of specific acts of collective forgiveness: collective forgiveness can be conferred by people who are members of and appropriately sanctioned by conglomerate collectives. This is not possible for members of aggregate collectives. CCs can satisfy authority conditions much more effectively than ACs. Under appropriate conditions a CC can truthfully say: ‘This was our decision’ or ‘We accept responsibility’. CCs can satisfy authority conditions because they possess recognised procedures by which the authority to forgive is generated. A CC can then be justified in forgiving even if some members of the CC do not even want to have forgiveness on the table. None of these considerations apply to ACs.

The genuineness of collective forgiveness, however, is not an ‘everything-or-nothing’ affair; and so the condition should be rephrased more accurately: the genuineness of collective political forgiveness is enhanced the closer the collective and its workings approximate to the workings of a genuine conglomerate collective. This ‘desideratum’ allows for political and collective forgiveness spanning several generations provided that those who speak for the collectives are sufficiently representative of such collectives. This, then, constitutes the first ‘desideratum’ of genuine

collective political forgiveness.

2. *The specificity difficulty.*

The specificity difficulty arises when a putative act of forgiveness fails to specify the precise wrong that is being forgiven. Again, at the individual level there is normally no difficulty: an offender takes responsibility for a specific wrongdoing, recognises that wrong was done and is granted forgiveness by the victim when standard conditions of permissible forgiveness are satisfied. ‘I did it _ _ _ I was wrong to do it _ _ _ I’m sorry I did it _ _ _ I will not repeat the offence’: this sequence, though rarely reproduced in our imperfect world, makes specific the wrongdoing in question.

The difficulty with some instances of putative collective political forgiveness is that the offender and victim have different understandings of what offence is being forgiven and the context does not entirely clarify matters. Alternatively, the wrong may be left completely unspecified so that the ‘forgiveness’ only expresses the desire that future relationships will be better than before. At both individual and collective levels there is a big difference between expressing the desire ‘let us put the past behind us’ and genuine forgiveness. The significance of such desires, though often platitudinous, is not to be disparaged: they may represent at least a small step forwards. However, they can give rise to confusions, false beliefs about what forgiveness the victim has granted and what forgiveness the offender has received. Specificity helps to rule out such irrationalities. Specificity, then, constitutes the second of the ‘desiderata’ of genuine collective political forgiveness.

3. *The difficulty of temporal proximity and distance.*

A third difficulty concerns temporal proximity and distance. At the individual level temporal issues are often irrelevant, especially with recent offences. ‘I hurt your feelings by an unkind word’, ‘I broke my promise to come to the meeting’: in these contexts an apology offered reasonably quickly usually elicits forgiveness. Notice, however, how the passage of time changes things. Within the month an apology and forgiveness are expected and then we move on to other things. The apology and the forgiving word are less in order five years later; to remember and resent after five years is the moral fault which is typically committed by an unduly resentful person. ‘After all these years!’ expresses rebuke for the person who nurses a

grudge and will not let it go. To have too short a memory is a fault, but to have too long a moral memory is also a fault; the former underwrites the importance of the moral law, the latter undermines the moral law by turning it into a form of scrupulousness.

Time does not always makes a difference at the individual level. More serious offences should not be forgotten; to forget them is to show a lack of moral seriousness. People sometimes promise to take the memory of wrongdoing against them to their grave and sometimes they are right to do so. However, in some cases time does make a difference: in these cases the further from the event, the less one should remember.

This principle seems to apply to collective forgiveness, especially where national pride is at stake. The more remote in time, the less the collective should remember the offence. Consider the last time that the English were invaded and conquered by foreigners: on the 14th October 1066 William of Norman defeated the English King Harold. Suppose that a significantly cohesive community of Englishmen – Godwins and Gyths still roam the land – still nursed a sense of grievance and expressed a willingness to forgive. We would find this faintly ridiculous. The third ‘desideratum’, therefore, is temporal proximity: collective forgiveness should be sensitive to the issue of temporal proximity and distance.

Conclusion

Collective political forgiveness should not be dismissed as morally incoherent, but neither should each and every declaration of forgiveness be accepted uncritically. ‘Desiderata’ such as authority, specificity and temporal proximity provide some of the tools whereby we can evaluate the torrent of putative instances which currently grab newspaper headlines around the world. In this article I have considered these ‘desiderata’ from the standpoint of philosophical ethics, but clarity about such ‘desiderata’ are equally necessary to make clear the distinctive contribution that theological ethics might also make to the question.

For further reading

- Amstutz, Mark R. *The Healing of Nations, The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.
- Biggar, Nigel. *Burying the Past*, Georgetown University Press, 2003.
- Minow, Martha. *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, Beacon Press, 1998.
- Shriver, Donald W. *An Ethic for Enemies*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

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