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A Philosophical Exploration of Radical Forgiveness

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To be social is to be forgiving

- Robert Frost

Abstract

Forgiveness in its many forms is a remarkable individual and interpersonal achievement that can restore one's identity and reconstitute one's relationship with another. Forgiveness is important in rectifying social wrongs and can contribute to constructive inter-personal and inter-group relations. Existing decisional or emotional explanations for forgiveness do not fully account for the transformative experience of the most radical forms of forgiveness. Exploring personal identity from Buddhist and Western philosophical perspectives can help us locate a new understanding of this form of forgiveness. Some of those who forgive deeply do so by transitioning from one cognitive-emotional state to another radically different one. This reappraisal is mediated by the experience of the nonessential nature of the self and the other, and this realization, in turn, allows for a profound transformation in personal identity and interpersonal relations.

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Introduction: The Forgiveness Puzzle

Forgiveness is rare but its affects can be powerful and profound. Forgiveness can transform the meaning of past events and open the door to a new future. It can restore an individual's personal identity, repair an interpersonal relationship, and help rebuild entire nations.

Personal forgiveness, in its deepest sense, describes a process where one who suffers a grave and fundamental injury to her identity by another eventually stops holding negative thoughts and feelings, develops pro-social thoughts and positive emotions, and ultimately gives the other the gift of compassion and acceptance (Borris 2006; Worthington 2005). The term forgiveness can also be applied to lesser notions such as accepting an apology or relinquishing a right to further retribution.

Many believe that the term forgiveness should be limited to this latter form of attenuated logically modulated form of interpersonal forgiveness (Griswold 2007). In contrast, I am most interested in instances of forgiveness that transcend this narrow definition. Specifically, the focus here is on explaining those instances where an individual suddenly and without explicit preconditions forgoes wholly justifiable anger and resentment because of a felt connection with the perpetrator. One might call this "radical forgiveness."[1]

Forgiveness often occurs in loosely defined "stages: from recognizing the injury, feeling anger, and assigning blame; to questioning one's own contribution to the painful feelings and attempting to

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[1] It is important not to misconstrue the meaning of forgiveness. To forgive is not to forget an action. Indeed, remembrance is essential to forgiveness. To forgive is not to renounce the moral judgment that an action is wrong or to excuse or condone such an action. In fact, forgiveness requires a judgment that an act is wrong or immoral; otherwise there is nothing to forgive. Forgiveness is not incompatible with punishment or the moral equivalent of impunity. Nor is forgiveness a sign of weakness or naivety.

understand the context, motives, and shared human qualities of the other; to releasing anger and the desire for revenge; and, finally, to recasting oneself, the other, and the world in a new way. Radical forgiveness following grievous injury to one's person involves a self-transformation wherein one undergoes a change of heart (replacing anger with empathy), and a "metanoia," a changed state of consciousness (Arendt 1989; Shriver 1995). This form of forgiveness reshapes personal identity. In the end, one comes to see oneself as something other than a victim, and achieves a more complete and balanced identity and recaptures one's sense of choice and future alternatives (Enright et al. 1992; Fitzgibbons 1986, 1998; Hope 1987; Casarjian 1992; Tavuchis 1991).

Forgiveness occurs at many levels. In addition to restoring the self, at an interpersonal level forgiveness enables a victim to view the wrongdoer in a new more favourable and more holistic light, thus renewing their relationship (Hampton 1998). In an even broader sense, forgiveness transcends the specific relationship and incident and opens up an individual to the world in new ways. This deeper form of forgiveness reveals a new world of future possibilities. This empowering aspect of forgiveness contributes to its potency as a social force.

How is deep forgiveness experienced? Phenomenologically, radical forgiveness is often discovered after the fact, as a realization that one's identity has changed. Forgivers describe a shift in their perception and their understanding of themselves and their relationship to the other person and to the world. They experience a restoration of wholeness and inner direction and an ability to see other people and situations in their own right–separate from an ordinary egocentric view. "The future–an immediate sense of being or the verge of new beginnings–is again available where before it was not; the past, while not forgotten nor rationalized away, no longer defines their future" (Halling et al. 2006, 259).

Because this shift in perception is so surprising, first-person accounts often describe forgiveness as a "gift" or a "revelation." As one

research team described it: "Forgiveness is not a superego phenomenon ... it occurs on a different plane than that of ordinary moral and psychological functioning, let alone a narcissistic level of self-preoccupation" (Rowe et al. 1989, 236). One subject of that research study aptly captured the paradigmatic shift and the fundamental perceptual change that characterizes the experience of forgiving another:

> [I saw] her this time as another human being who was struggling, and who did not basically mean me any harm. It is not accurate, [however], to suggest that I just thought that; it was more like an image that emerged for me, an image that was not so much seen as felt... Blame and anger vanished, and there was a larger dimension of this whole experience that I can only describe in religious language: a sense of transcendence, of the future opening up, of a sense of presence, not of personal being, but of being connected to something larger than oneself and yet still having an experience of myself as me (Rowe et al. 1989, 243).

Can we understand and explain this extraordinary experience in nonreligious terms? This article suggests that deep forgiveness is comprehensible as a phenomenon grounded in an individual's implicit, often ineffable, discovery of the shared ontological status of themselves and the other as ultimately "nonessential" and "unreal" in the philosophical meanings of those terms. For Buddhists, this experience is the realization of the no-self, and a powerful means of liberation from suffering of all kinds. This realization, whether registered consciously or not, mediates between two different personal identities and opens up the possibility of a redefinition of self and a recasting of one's relationship with the other and the wider social world. This experience enables some individuals to effect emotive and cognitive changes we associate with radical forgiveness.

The growing secular forgiveness literature does not reach to the source of this form of deep forgiveness. Prevailing approaches to forgiveness essentially offer two explanations for how individuals come to forgive: neither of which fully captures this change of perception, altered consciousness, and sense of interdependence with others. Psychologically, forgiveness is described as either as a "decisional" process whereby a person resolves that anger, hatred, and a desire for vengeance are harmful to themselves and that she should change her outlook and intention (DiBlasio 1998). Or forgiveness is described as fundamentally an emotional change (Worthington 2003). The emotive explanation suggests that we replace a set of emotional dispositions (anger, hatred, resentment, etc.) with another set of emotions (love, empathy, sympathetic understanding, etc.). In his encyclopedic work on forgiveness, Everett Worthington synthesizes the two approaches into one integrated understanding of the forgiveness process. He considers the question: "How is a victim's motivation transformed from righteous indignation and the desire for revenge to forgiveness?" For Worthington, "prosocial transformation comes about via changes in the victim's cognitive and emotional experiences: the victim essentially thinks through the causes and implications of the transgression, develops a more benevolent and less blameful understanding of the event, and concurrently develops increased compassion and caring for the perpetrator" (Worthington 2005, 195).

Although, both cognitive and emotive elements are at work during the various stages of the forgiveness process and this approach may explain some other forms of forgiveness, I suggest that the prevailing approaches fail to account fully for the realization of radical forgiveness. If decisional factors were the essence of forgiveness, then forgiveness would be a mundane and common matter of weighing costs and benefits of certain emotional states and behavioural options and rationally choosing forgiveness when it best satisfies our preferences. Clearly, radical forms of forgiveness are not impelled by reason alone. Likewise, the emotive explanation for forgiveness is

unsatisfactory. Emotions, understood as chemical and biological processes and experienced somatically as feelings, first require a "trigger," a change in perception or detection of something in our reality that is relevant to our emotional network, whether that perceptual precursor registers consciously or not (Damasio 1999; LeDoux 1998). The perceptual change may be something added to our perceptual stimuli or something absented from our prevailing perceptions. So, the emotive account only raises a deeper question: "if you hated a certain person in time period t, what changed in your perception of yourself, the other, or your environment such that you now feel love and empathy for the same person in time period t + 1?" "What have you perceived, that you did not perceive before, or what do you no longer see that you once saw, so as to trigger such a dramatic emotional transformation?"

At this point in the analysis of forgiveness, social and psychological explanations reach their limits and religious and spiritual accounts of forgiveness take over. In the aforementioned psychological study by Rowe and her colleagues, for example, they conclude, "because of the transforming nature of forgiveness, coupled with the experience that this involves more than one's own will, we are suggesting there is a spiritual dimension to forgiveness" (242). Similarly, psychologist Eileen Borris' treatment of the forgiveness process describes the emergence of "spiritual sight" at the moment of forgiveness (7-8, 95). Theological treatments, in turn, describe the experience of forgiveness as contact with God's grace, as being in the presence of God, or as spiritual communion with God and the other (Petersen 2002; Volf 1996; Degruchy 2003). Speaking from a Christian perspective, Jon Sobrino concludes that the only "explanation" for forgiveness that the New Testament gives, when we come right down to it, is God's love (Sobrino et al. 1994). Similar explanations for forgiveness can be found in many religious traditions.

Although a religious account might be a necessary and sufficient explanation for some, many people today are not persuaded by religious explanations. Further, there are ample possibilities that any

particular religious explanation would be acceptable to one set of believers while remaining unacceptable to those of a different religion. In view of these difficulties, it is worthwhile to search for a humanistic, philosophical explanation of forgiveness that parallels these religious insights.

A Philosophical Look at Radical Forgiveness and Identity Transformation

Can philosophy East and West help us understand radical forgiveness? Does it offer an explanation for what triggers the emotive changes and the subsequent cognitive and behavioural responses that are part of radical personal identity transformation and engagement with former adversaries through forgiveness? There are good reasons to ask. Philosophers, in contrast to social and psychological thinkers,[2] have explored more fundamentally the nature of personal identity—its construction, continuity, and change—and they offer a wider range of explanations for the self, including some that help us understand the experience of forgiveness.

The *social* self consists of social recognition; it is the person's position within a social structure. Extrinsically, what determines the self is how the self is related to everybody else, beyond how it appears to the individual psychically (James 1890, 291-292). Intrinsically, an individual's self-concept is derived from a person's perceived

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[2] The *psychological* self focuses more on the intrinsic dimension of identity creation, continuity, and change. The psychological approach says that some psychological relationship is either necessary or sufficient (or both) for the self to exist. These psychological attributes or mental features that comprise the psychological self include things such as personality traits, beliefs, memories, emotions, and expectations. John Locke is perhaps the most recognized progenitor of the psychological approach to personal identity (Locke 1694/1979)

membership in social groups (Hogg and Vaughan 2002). Furthermore, individuals tailor their various social selves, consciously or unconsciously, to meet various social requirements through a "psychodynamic" process (Erikson 1960). Putting together the intrinsic and extrinsic dimension, we can say that different social contexts trigger an individual to think, feel, or act on the basis of his familial, professional, national, religious, or some other group-based sense of self depending on the degree to which the individual identifies with a particular social self and the role of that particular social self in her integrated personality (Turner and Tajfel 1986).

To appreciate what philosophy brings to the discussion, it will be necessary to fit my argument within a broad sweep of philosophical approaches to the self and self- transformation. Admittedly, this whirlwind tour of approaches to the self and personal identity cannot do justice to the many complexities and nuances of the various philosophical approaches. Rather, this brief exploration into the philosophy of the self is meant to serve as a foil to define what is unique in my explanation of forgiveness. So, with the reader's indulgence, I briefly consider the various philosophical perspectives on the ultimate nature of the self to locate those philosophical insights that give us a better understanding of radical forgiveness. After reviewing the array of philosophical approaches to identity and identify change, I will take another step to consider the philosophical distinction between realism and anti-realism, because understanding this distinction will shed additional light on the process of forgiveness. Finally, I will discuss how the view of the other correspondingly changes as one moves along this philosophical continuum of conceptions of self.

Philosophical Conceptions of Personal Identity and Identity Change

For philosophers, the self raises fundamental and enduring questions: "What is the ultimate nature of the self" and "What explains the persistence or change of one's identity over time:" the so-called

diachronic problem of personal identity or the search for the unity relations of persons. These questions have occupied many thinkers, East and West, for three millennia and their insights into identity and its transformation help us understand the process of deep forgiveness.

Philosophical approaches to identity can be viewed along a continuum beginning with "essentialist" approaches at one end of the philosophical continuum; to "reductionist" notions; to the doctrines of the self as illusory, non-existent, and lacking inherent existence at the other end of the spectrum. Some refer to these latter approaches as "eliminativism," but this term obscures the true meaning of the "no-self" approaches.

The Essentialist Self

One approach to the self, which has been variously labeled "essentialist," "non- reductionist," or "substantialist" suggests that we (persons) are separately existing entities, distinct from our brains and bodies and our experiences or, that we are wholly and solely our brain and our body. In the former case, the argument is that, in addition to the various parts that contribute to the psychophysical complex of the person, one extra part constitutes the core or essence of the system. Essentialists tend to refer to this special part as the "self": "whatever makes a person the 'unique individual' they are thought to be" (Siderits, 17-18). There are many candidates for what constitutes this non-reducible essence. For Plato, this essence was the immaterial and immortal soul. For Augustine, an immaterial soul and material body makes one self, and, for others, some brute physical continuity (usually the brain) constitutes the self. For an essentialist, this self has genuine autonomous causal and explanatory powers that cannot be reduced to the causal and explanatory powers of its constituent parts. The latter notion, that is, the self as the total person, accords with our commonsensical notion that we simply "are who we are," a physical and mental system that persists as a single entity from one time period to the next, ending perhaps at death.

The Reductionist Self

Moving away from the notion of fixed, essential self, reductionism argues that one's existence or continuity as a person can be understood as reducible to certain other facts about physical or psychological connectedness that are ontologically more basic than the individual. Contemporary philosopher Derek Parfit refers to these facts as the "R-relation." A person is not something ontological separable from the R-relation. Hence, the reductionist claim is: a person's existence consists of "the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events" (Parfit 1984, 211). We may continue to talk of "persons" on grounds of convenience, but such references are not required to give a full account of reality. Instead, we learn to identify with a collection of past and future elements (experiences, memories, and intentions, for instance) because this approach is efficacious in reducing our pain and contributing to our survival and flourishing. Some reductionist approaches emphasize the continuity of the physical components of brain and body, and others, like Parfit (following Locke) stress psychological continuity. Mark Siderits explains, "For the reductionist, diachronic personal identity is all in the numbers. My being the same person just consists in there being sufficiently many of the right kinds of causal connections between the present set of entities and the earlier set. . ." (Siderits 2003, 45).[3]

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[3] This contemporary philosophical debate between essentialists and reductionists parallels the debate in classical Indian philosophy between Hindu philosophers who explained identity by reference to some form of enduring substantial self (*atmavadins*) and most Buddhist philosophers who denied the existence of such a self and took instead a modal view of reality (*anatmavadins*) (Perrett 2002). Matthew Kapstein summarizes this discourse: "On the Brahmanical side, leading philosophers argued that the psychological features of our existence inhere in some substance which they termed the 'self,' while the Buddhists for their part insisted that

The No Self

Toward the other end of the ontological continuum, there are a very few Western philosophers such as David Hume who reject the notion of self or personal identity. Like reductionists, "no-self" theorists like Hume do not posit a substantial self that exists beyond one's experiences. The difference between Hume and reductionists, however, is that while reductionists resurrect the self in terms of putative relations among psychological or physical events, no-self theorists are content to let the elements of the self lie where they have fallen. For Hume, the self is an illusion. Hume said that each of us is only "a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement." Hume argues that, although we are continuously aware of something we call the self, when we examine it more closely this belief is not substantiated in our experience. On examination, what we experience is not a fixed invariable impression that constitutes a self, but a continuous flow of perceptions that "pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations" (Hume quoted in Giles 1993, 175, 177).

How then do we account for the everyday perception of a self? Hume explains that we misconstrue this flow of diverse perceptions as an enduring identity because the many independent experiences resemble each other. When successive perceptions resemble each other, it is easy for us to imagine that the first simply persists. Our imaginative propensity to misconstrue an identity from diversity begins in infancy and continues unabated without our awareness of the misperception.

For Hume, discussions about the self are merely verbal exercises. The self then can be addressed at two levels: on ultimate or

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psychological continuity does not presume any such bearer" (Kapstein 2001, 114).

metaphysical terms where we should recognize that there is no self; and on a conventional, verbal, or grammatical level of social convention, where it can be convenient or useful to designate a self (Hume 1739/2000).

This notion of the dual nature of the self (ultimately unreal, but conventionally acceptable) did not begin with Hume, of course. Its origins in the East appeared over 2000 years earlier in the Buddha's doctrines of the "no-self" and the "two truths." In Buddhism there is no self. The individual at any given moment is in fact made up of various physical and mental elements (aggregates) and the notion of an enduring self is illusory, albeit an illusion that is hard to dispel. The mind links together closely related mental and physical states to fabricate the notion of a self that continues across time. Dismantling this artifice of self requires sustained analysis and contemplation. In the end, the self dissolves into ontologically real "atoms" of existence or, under some schools of Buddhist thought, all elements of existence dissolve into emptiness. Either way, once an individual self is dissolved conceptually, one has reached the ultimate truth of the no self. Once the ultimate truth of no self is realized, one is free to use the notion of a "self" as a social and narrative convention, however. This conventional or grammatical existence of the self is the second truth of the self in the doctrine of the two truths.[4]

Is the Self Real?

As to whether the self has any ontological basis at all, the division between realism and anti-realism may help clarify the question of whether the dissolution under Hume and Buddha stops at elemental particles (atoms of existence) or extends "all the way down." Realism is our ordinary understanding of the world and of people whether defined reductively or essentially. Realism maintains that a person,

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[4] The *conventional* truth of the self is the reason the term "eliminativism" is an inappropriate description for the no-self doctrine.

whether conceived of as an irreducible essential or as a collection of simpler elements, exists independently. A person or its parts have an inherent or intrinsic existence from their own side, independent of the minds that perceive them and independent of other entities. To say that an entity has an intrinsic nature means that some aspect of the entity is essential and qualitatively unchanging, that is, its intrinsic nature is real and enduring. "The realist understands the world as 'what is there anyway,' and this 'anyway' is meant to express a certain sort of mind- independence that is central to the realist conception of objectivity" (Siderits 2003, 114). For most purposes, this viewpoint helps us to navigate life's challenges.

Many ideas fall under the banner of anti-realism. For our purposes, anti-realism means that, however persons or their elements might appear, in truth they lack inherent existence. Instead, all entities are ultimately indeterminate: a product of their causes and conditions, their parts, and the minds that perceive them. This notion of causal dependence is incompatible with inherent existence. For the anti-realist, any seemingly intrinsic element is decomposable under analysis. In Eastern philosophy, this is the doctrine of emptiness (of inherent existence) espoused by the Madhyamika Prasangika school of Buddhism often associated with the writing of Nagarjuna. Thus, anti-realism argues that the only absolute truth is indeterminacy, i.e., everything lacks (or is empty of) an inherent, fixed existence. Although things lack a fixed or inherent nature, we can, using the two truths doctrine, still usefully make reference to them by names or designations as long as we recognize that these grammatical constructions are only conventionally, not ultimately, real or true.

Contending Views of the Other

The proposed relationship between the self and other also changes as we move along the identity continuum. The movement away from an essentialist self toward reductionism and no-self implies "a drift toward impartiality and impersonality, a lessening of the gap between persons since my relation to others is not so significantly

different from my relation to my own past and future" (Perrett 2002, 375). By focusing more on a collection of experiences and less on an immutable self, we are able to view others and ourselves with greater equanimity. Moving along the continuum toward reductionism and no-self, a person experiences reduced egoistic concern and recognizes that the pursuit of his own welfare is not fundamentally different from his regard for the well being of others. Under these non-essentialist approaches, our responsibility to our future self instead rests largely on a utilitarian rationale: we are well situated to affect the well being of ourselves (and our intimates), and therefore should act to promote the welfare of those we are in the best position to help. Moreover, failure to look after our "self" would make us of little value to "others." This pragmatic concern, however, does not detract from our obligation to promote the welfare of others more distant from ourselves to the extent we have the opportunity to do so.

A Philosophical Account Radical Forgiveness

Returning to the central questions: "How do we account for personal identity transformation and this form of radical forgiveness?" "What do we experience that intercedes between the self that feels estrangement and enmity toward another and the self that feels empathy and compassion toward that same other?" Without ignoring the emotive and cognitive dimensions of forgiveness, a philosophical perspective allows us to see down to the wellspring of radical forgiveness. Specifically, I am suggesting that philosophical reductionism, no-self, and anti-realist insights can help investigators demystify the otherwise numinous phenomena of personal identity transformation and recasting of the other that is at the heart of some forms of profound forgiveness.

A philosophical approach suggests that some individuals able to forgive severe transgressions made against them and to construct a new, workable identity of themselves and former enemies, do so at the deepest level on the basis of a fundamental shift in their perception and felt ontological understanding of themselves and the

other. Those who can forgive seemingly unforgivable wrongs "see" a radically different reality. I suggest that what these forgivers experience is a sense of the reductionist self or selflessness and the absence of a fixed reality. For those who have forgiven severe transgressions, the particular mediating experience is one that allows the forgiver to realize (not just intellectually but at a deeper level) his or her shared humanity with the other and to sense that the differences between them are merely conventional distinctions, not conditions that are true in any ultimate and unchangeable sense.

A reductionist or no-self view, while exceptional, can emerge in extreme or cathartic circumstances, revealing to forgivers in a direct way, the radical flexibility and reconstructive potential of themselves and the other. I maintain that for some, forgiving injuries to self that to many seem unforgivable and converting former enemies into partners in a new future begins with a felt realization of the "non-essentialist" self (and the non-essential other). Whether this experience is best characterized as a separate perception or merely the cessation of our habitual perceptions is a question I leave aside for now, but for Mahayana Buddhists, this experience would be considered an awakening to our true nature, one that had been obscured by the delusion of self and self grasping. This experience allows those who have suffered grievous wrongs to their personhood to reconstruct themselves and their former adversaries in a new more interdependent and valued way and to move toward social re-engagement and a new identity. Radical forgiveness is not just a reasoned decision or minor emotional adaptation. Nor is it reached through philosophical analysis! Rather, forgiveness is grounded in a profound wisdom that operates on a deep level that may not register in consciousness until after the fact that one has forgiven (if at all). The core of forgiving another is a felt understanding that there is no transcendent self that "owns" the past injuries and therefore, one is able to both acknowledge and to release an event, experience, memory, or intention and replace it with another that allows for a different view of self and other without destroying oneself. This uncanny realization opens up the possibility of reconciliation and

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future engagement with a former adversary. A sense of the non-essentialist nature of the self permits some individuals to move from the narrow identity of victim or insurgent to a newer and fuller sense of self. Likewise, a non- essential view of the other permits the realization that one's own pain is not unique or uniquely important and reveals that others have suffered too, thus allowing one to transcend the constricted view of the other as mere perpetrator or repressor and see him in a new light.

In contrast, essentialism, with its notion of the immutable self and its ethic of self-interest, while our working conception of our self and the dominant model for understanding much social behaviour, cannot fully account for the extraordinary behaviour of self-transformation and forgiveness. Self-interested theories of social behaviour assume an essential self and therefore view radical reconstruction of the self and re-engagement with the other in a process of forgiveness as anomalous behaviour.

An anti-realist perspective can also help us understand the bridging of the divide between self and other that is characteristic of radical forgiveness. Under anti- realism, because the distinction between self and other is only conventionally, not ultimately valid, this perspective frees an injured party to transcend a pre-existing identity when to do so reduces overall suffering (your own and others). Indeed, from some anti-realist perspectives, all our pain can be traced back to our deluded grasping at an inherent self, other, and world that ultimately does not exist.

Forgivers discover a way out of the pain by sensing a reality that is radically interdependent and a self that is not immutable, thus creating the possibility of reconnecting with others. The sense of the provisional nature of one's self also allows the injured to question the fixity of the passions of hate and anger and the objects of those emotions.

As applied to the issue of identity transformation and overcoming injury to identity, the experience of the self, the other, and one's

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world as lacking an inherent reality, frees one to make new interpretations; as all interpretation are necessarily provisional, contextual, and local.[5] The anti-realist perspective reinforces reductionist or no-self interpretations and helps to explain how individuals discover the power to forgive. A movement away from realism releases one from the limits of the past and allows for a reconstruction of one's reality that is what one chooses to make it. In some cases, experiencing this ontological shift opens the remarkable powers of empathy and mercy that some survivors have bestowed on former perpetrators. Although religious approaches possess a vocabulary for the transformative power of profound forgiveness, social scientific and psychological approaches to forgiveness, because of their underlying realist assumptions, cannot fully account for this remarkable behaviour.

One might argue that the redefinition of self that occurs in the process of forgiveness is, in fact, only a redefinition of the social self in response to changing environmental conditions, that the change is a limited one, part of the social adaptation or recalculation we perform regularly that does not reach the immutable self. Alternatively, one could suggest that forgiveness only involves a revision of memories, expectations, or emotions and is limited to these dimensions of personality. These explanations may indeed be sufficient for understanding how we overcome lesser slights and reach a level of tolerance or achieve forgiveness in the sense of the term of forgoing full retribution for harms received. But to forgive another for terrible wrongs to one's sense of personhood and to

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[5] This is not to argue that our identity is constantly changing–only that it can change. Identities are both susceptible to change and, nonetheless, relatively stable over time. Identity is a construct for managing and organizing information about oneself and one's relationship to the environment. As such, it must be resistant to constant change to be internally cohesive and useful. At the same time, it must be susceptible to modification in reaction to its environment to be efficacious (Erikson, 1960).

overcome the most severe transgressions against self and reengage in a positive way with the other, personal transformations may involve a more fundamental alteration in ontological perspective of the self and the other as the foundation for deep psychological healing and social adaptation.

Conclusion

Philosophy, both East and West, offers us a framework for understanding the profound and profoundly important phenomenon of forgiveness. Where emotive and cognitive explanations of forgiveness reach their limits, philosophy takes us to a deeper level of understanding. The philosophical approaches of reductionism, no-self, and anti-realism offer a means for fashioning an explanation for the fundamental shift in worldview and perspective that occurs in some profound forms of forgiving another. This exceptional perception allows us to depart from the conventional belief in a relatively fixed, real, and essential self and to appreciate a self that is transformable and that perceives the other, and indeed all reality, as interdependent and unlimited in its possible manifestations.

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