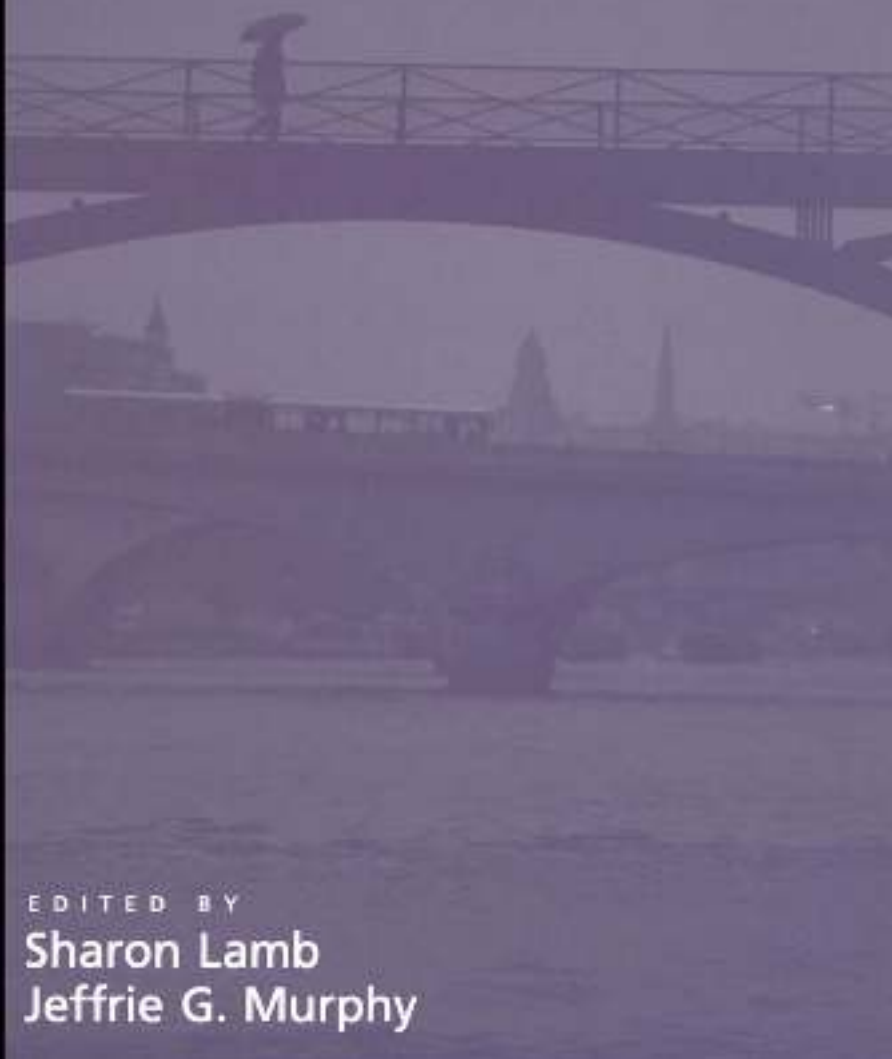


# Before Forgiving

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CAUTIONARY VIEWS OF FORGIVENESS  
IN PSYCHOTHERAPY



EDITED BY  
**Sharon Lamb**  
**Jeffrie G. Murphy**

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BEFORE FORGIVING

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*Cautionary Views of Forgiveness  
in Psychotherapy*

Edited by  
Sharon Lamb  
Jeffrie G. Murphy

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Norman S. Care, a distinguished philosopher and a gifted and compassionate teacher*

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## Preface

A few years ago I (a philosopher) read with admiration psychologist Susan Lamb's book *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility*. In my view, her book—although deeply sensitive to the genuine hurts experienced by victims—also advocated forcefully the case for victims responsibly taking charge of their own lives in order to transcend their victimhood rather than wallow in it. We live in a world, alas, where people are given strong incentives—often ideologically motivated—to remain stuck in their victimhood and let it define them. I found Professor Lamb's advocacy of strength and responsibility as an important corrective very persuasive.

Sensing a degree of intellectual and moral kinship with Professor Lamb, I sent her a letter telling her how much I liked her book and enclosed a recent essay of mine, "Forgiveness in Counseling: A Philosophical Perspective." In that essay I expressed some skepticism about the current trend of forgiveness counseling in psychotherapy—a trend revealed both in serious scholarly literature and in countless popular books in the self-help and recovery sections of bookstores. In these books, we are generally bombarded on all sides with the advice that the road to recovery and mental and moral health is paved with forgiveness—both of others and of ourselves. Frequently these books make a persuasive case that we sometimes can transcend our victimhood through acts of forgiveness, but they often fail to show appreciation that forgiveness can also sometimes be an act of weakness and inactivity—a heavy suppression of anger and resentment when that anger and resentment are neither evil nor unhealthy but rather valuable testimony to our self-respect.

Although certainly not an enemy of forgiveness under the proper circumstances, I found much of this literature overly sentimental and enthusiastic in its boosterism for forgiveness. In particular, I thought that much of it tended to see only the good side of forgiveness and only the bad side of resentment and getting even. The purpose of my essay was to resist forgiveness as a universal prescription; it stated the case against and showed the dangers of hasty and uncritical forgiveness—a haste that fails to appreciate that there is such a

thing as evil in the world and that people who do evil may be, particularly if unrepentant, legitimate objects of resentment rather than forgiveness by those they have victimized. Forgiveness, in my view, is generally legitimate only if directed toward the properly deserving (e.g., the repentant) and if it can be bestowed in such a way that victim self-respect and respect for the moral order can be maintained in the process. Cheap and hasty forgiveness, what some have called "cheap grace," can only debase the real and valuable article—as former president Clinton's resolute, perpetual babble about forgiveness surely illustrates.

When Professor Larch read my essay, she wrote back that she shared my skepticism about the forgiveness movement in psychotherapy, and we began a correspondence about this and other matters that soon developed into such a warm relationship that Professor Larch (now Sharon) became the first person with whom I have developed a friendship totally through the Internet. We still have never met in person.

At some point in our e-mail conversations, one of us (I cannot remember who) suggested that it might be a good idea to put together a collection of essays expressing not opposition to forgiveness but some cautions about its hasty and inappropriate uses—particularly in the context of psychological counseling. Our thought was that forgiveness is not something to be jumped into but rather to be adopted, if at all, only after some rational thinking—hence the title *Before Forgiving*. We thought that useful discussion of forgiveness must be interdisciplinary in nature and decided to bring together the perspectives of our two disciplines: philosophy (with its careful conceptual analysis and reflection on values) and psychology (with its understanding of the human personality and clinical practice). Our plan was to tempt a mix of both psychologists and philosophers to respond to some of the concerns I had raised in my essay.

The present volume represents the fruits of that idea. It contains essays by philosophers (selected for the most part by me) and psychologists (selected for the most part by Sharon). Except for my essay and the essay by Norman Gale, all of the essays were written expressly for the present volume.

My goal (and, I believe, Sharon's also) for this collection is to enrich the discussion of the topic of forgiveness by setting it in a broad context where criticism as well as advocacy will be given a hearing. The purpose is not to reject or oppose forgiveness but rather to explore some cautions about it—in short, to throw a bit of the wet blanket over ready forgiveness boosterism. We have all heard the cliché, "to err is human, to forgive divine," but we need to hear S. I. Perelman's variation on this cliché as well: "to err is human, to forgive supine." The truth is probably to be found somewhere between the two.

August 2001  
Tucson, Arizona

Jeffrey G. Murphy

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*Jeffrey G. Murphy* is Reginald Professor of Law and Philosophy at Arizona State University. He is the author of numerous books and articles on moral and legal philosophy, including *Kant: The Philosophy of Right, Forgiveness, and Mercy* (with Jean Hampton); and *The Philosophy of Law: An Introduction to Jurisprudence* (with Jules Coleman). His third collection of essays, *Character, Liberty and Law: Kantian Essays in Theory and Practice*, appeared in 1998. His most recent writings on forgiveness and related topics are "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Responding to Evil," *Twelfth Street Law Journal*; "Two Cheers for Vindictiveness," *Punishment and Society*; "Moral Epistemology, the Relativist Implications, and 'The 'Clumsy Moral Philosophy' of Jesus Christ," in *The Business of Law*, ed. Susan Bandes; "Reparation, Punishment and Mercy," in *Reparation*, ed. Amitai Etzioni; and "Jean Hampton on Terrorism, Self-Hatred, and Self-Forgiveness," *Philosophical Studies*.

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John Deigh: "Emancipation," in *American Philosophical Quarterly*; and "Criminal Children," in *Law and Philosophy*.

*Jennifer Scherer* was a research intern with Fern Marx at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College when the analysis for chapter 3 was undertaken. Ms. Scherer graduated from Wellesley College in May 2000 with honors in psychology and women's studies. She now works at a strategy consulting firm in Boston and plans to commence graduate studies for an M.S.W. and an M.P.A. in the fall of 2002.

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**BEFORE FORGIVING**

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# Introduction: Reasons to Be Cautious about the Use of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy

Sharon Lamb

Forgiveness is in the air—public figures making public apologies, movies depicting loving kindness offered to murderers, and psychotherapy programs promoting forgiveness in individuals as well as in marital couples. It is a gift, an offering, a blessing, a cleansing event. Professionally speaking, within the field of psychology the literature on forgiveness has arisen with little criticism and developed without the generally accepted process of hypothesis testing in a neutral context. Rather than neutrality, there has been an almost wholesale acceptance of forgiveness as a virtue and, because of this, little concern about advocating forgiveness in psychotherapy.

Indeed, this trend is in line with other trends in psychology that have been promoted by American Psychological Association president Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2009) on "positive psychology." In a recent article, the two define the field of "positive psychology at the subjective level" as being about valued experiences such as "well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)." ("Flow" is a term coined by Csikszentmihalyi to describe the feeling of well-being a person derives from mindful engagement in an activity he or she loves to do.) They go on to describe what positive psychology means for the individual: "The capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom" (p. 5).

I believe forgiveness has become a popular notion among therapists today (see chapter 10) because of this new "positive psychology" which is indeed an extension of the three-decade long growth of cognitive-behavioral methods. The step-by-step process toward forgiveness, the encouragement of benevolent attitudes, and the reframing of negative thoughts that are a part of many forgiveness counseling goals today have their roots in the cognitive-behavioral methods originated by Albert Ellis, Albert Bandura, Aaron Beck, and Martin Seligman. These men all researched and advocated a form of therapy that asked patients to change the way they *think* about their problems in

order to change the way they feel and behave toward them. In a sense they oversteer the humanistic psychology movement of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow in the 1960s, which emphasized acceptance of feelings and self-discovery, and replaced it with a more directive approach to therapy, with homework assignments and sometimes even argumentative therapists whose goal is to show clients the errors in their thinking. Although, like all therapies, cognitive-behavioral therapy originated in the clinical setting, it aspires to be a more scientifically based practice and positions itself in opposition to "softer" (less scientifically based) practices like humanism and psychoanalysis. Indeed, cognitive-behavioral theorists like Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) frequently belittle humanistic psychology in particular, saying it spawned a "myriad of self-help movements," a psychology of "vicinology," a legacy of "crystal healing, aromatherapy," and books that help one find one's inner child.

Many forms of forgiveness therapy follow this cognitive-behavioral track in psychology. Advocates believe that if one changes the way one thinks about one's pain, one's perpetrator, and one's injury a person can forgive and that this act, this change of heart, this new way of thinking about one's injuries can bring about happiness and contentment. The belief is that a person has the freedom to choose to forgive, to think differently, and to feel differently. As in Beck's therapy for depression, Ellis's therapy for life's problems, or Seligman's optimism, through challenging old thinking patterns and old ways of responding, a person can free him or herself from responding to the past.

While current practices of forgiveness in therapy follow this model, recent forgiveness theorists and researchers have not ignored the philosophical history and the religious underpinnings of the concept of forgiveness. And there is now an extensive literature in the field, the bulk of which is reviewed in Worthington's *Disputation of Forgiveness*, published in 1998, and in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, a book of edited chapters by McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen published in 2000, as well as Enright and Fitzgibbon's most recent manual, *Helping Clients Forgive*. In spite of these extensive reviews of the philosophical, religious, and scientific dimensions of forgiveness, few have challenged the idea that forgiveness is a virtue to be endorsed and taught in a variety of circumstances. This virtue is borne of two fundamentally but differently responses in this literature: one from a philosopher concerned that psychologists were not taking seriously the philosophical questions that arose in their promotion of forgiveness, and the other from a feminist psychologist who saw problems specific to women as well as problems for psychologists whose goals ought to be the exploration, understanding, and accepting of negative emotions as well as positive ones.

Jeffrey C. Murphy, from a philosopher's standpoint, has been long interested in issues of justice, retribution, forgiveness, and mercy, claiming, in disagreement with Jean Hampton in their coauthored volume *Forgiveness and Mercy* (1988), that in some situations forgiveness may be morally inappropriate and mercy a questionable substitute for justice. In my book *The Trouble with Blame* (1996), I took on the topic of forgiveness with regard to perpetra-

tors of sexual abuse, battering, and rape and made pleas for a judicial system that created better spaces for repentance, apology, and reparation in the lives of wrongdoers. Making no claims for victims and forgiveness, I argued that victims needed to look realistically at their perpetrators' as well as their own responsibility and refrain from either taking too much blame on themselves or forgiving their perpetrators too easily in an effort to get psychological relief.

Our interest in psychotherapy arose for several reasons. Over the past two decades, psychologists have no longer been content to philosophically argue points about forgiveness but have begun to advocate its use in psychotherapy. Along with the huge data that forgiveness will have psychotherapeutic benefits have come scientific studies showing the benefits of forgiveness to the mental and physical well-being of people, books giving pragmatic advice about how to do forgiveness therapy, and articles showing steps and stages that lead to forgiveness.

I have been a psychotherapist for over 20 years, working with children, couples, families, and adults with various problems, but also, in particular, those who have experienced abuse and victimization. I have also worked in both the psychoanalytic as well as the humanistic traditions and thus in traditions that generally do not sort emotions into categories of good and bad, nor encourage any particular feeling or set of feelings for a client to cultivate. Although McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen (2000) point out that Freud says nothing about forgiveness, he does, however, say quite a bit about guilt and aggressive feelings and the repression of each. Psychoanalytic clinicians welcome negative feelings into the therapy hour for exploration and insight, perceiving repression of guilt and aggression (as well as sexual feelings) at the heart of mental illness. The humanistic tradition welcomes negativity as well and holds out the expectation that in psychotherapy as well as in a client's life, all emotions are acceptable. Anger and vengeance are equally as important as joy and generosity, and the therapist refuses to direct a client toward a certain moral end. As Carl Rogers might have said, "How could I possibly judge for you what would be best for you to do?"

Murphy's interest in psychotherapy is less direct. Instead, he has worked primarily with those in the legal system to understand the place of moral emotions such as forgiveness, remorse, mercy, and vindictiveness in our laws and judicial system. I first came to admire his writings because of the practical examples he included to show how these ideas deeply influence the way we live our lives. A recent example of this is his essay "Two Cheers for Vindictiveness" (2000).

In looking at the literature that currently abounds on the practice of and hopes for forgiveness therapy, we found what seemed to us to be a surfeit of stage and step theories about how to forgive, with supporting theory that primarily was used to advocate for forgiveness therapy. Enthusiasm was so great that many theorists overlook or plow past some of the darker aspects of the theory, never demonstrating exactly in what way, for example, vindictive emotions are morally wrong. Although many of these theorists claim that they fully deal with objections to the advocating of forgiveness in psychotherapy,

Discussions are rarely given their due. There is no authored or edited book that incorporates naysayers or questioners in a serious way. In Enright's most recent manual (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), each naysayer is given short shrift; his or her work is discussed in a paragraph, and then dismissed as wrong.

That is why we saw the need for a volume such as ours, where together naysayers and proponents take seriously the issue of whether forgiveness should be *advocated* in psychotherapy; the problems of unilateral forgiveness; and concomitant issues.

Some of the problems existing in this literature are discussed later, some are developed further in the chapters to come. One initial problem with this literature is that there is no consensus with regard to defining forgiveness (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000); some authors advocate for forgiveness only after a perpetrator has made amends and others advocate for forgiveness no matter what the response from the perpetrator. In addition, there is little justification for the stage theories that abound. A third problem in the literature occurs in discussions of examples of unilateral forgiveness, forgiveness that expects nothing from the perpetrator of the wrongdoing. Here authors tend to consider only the benefits to the forgiver and rarely the possible losses he or she might experience. The literature on forgiveness is rife with assumptions about negative emotions that remain unexplored and assumptions about the applicability of forgiveness goals to all kinds of people, to all groups, no matter how wounded or harmed. Finally, alternative practices have rarely been examined alongside forgiveness therapy, and other religious beliefs and cultural practices are either ignored or given a nod without serious attempt to incorporate them into a more universal view of forgiveness practice. We expand slightly on each of these and more in this introduction before introducing the individual chapters in this volume.

### Definitions

There is no consensus in the definition of forgiveness, although many theorists agree on what forgiveness is not. Those who advocate unilateral forgiveness try to make it clear that forgiveness is not "rationalizing" or "excusing" or "forgetting" or "denying" (Enright & Coyle, 1998). Baumeister, Exline, and Solomon (1998), however, have shown that in actual practice, forgiveness expressed often fails to communicate to an offender this essential promise, that he or she is not excused or the behavior is not condoned. Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998) define forgiveness as a "willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly hurt us, while fostering the undesired qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love towards him or her" (pp. 46-47). Exline and Baumeister (2000) call it a canceling of a debt by the person who has been wronged or injured. Patton (1985) writes that forgiveness is not doing something, but discovering something, "that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them" (p. 16). Others embrace the religious aspect more fully

in their definition. For Pargament and Rye (1998), it is a method of religious coping and a religious pursuit. For McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997), the essence of forgiveness is a change in one's motivation toward the offending person.

The central problem with definitions of forgiveness is not so much whether one theorist calls it the canceling of a debt and another a gift, but that these terms differ in their implications and are not always compatible. Although theorists may claim that forgiveness does not absolve or excuse the wrongdoer, their definitions can imply that it does. A gift, it could be argued, offers a modicum of absolution. If one cancels a debt, the other need not pay back the wronged person in terms of making reparations. Definitions also differ in terms of whether they portray forgiveness as other-focused or self-focused. If the purpose of forgiveness is the benefit to the self, a gift, as it were, that one gives oneself, is the good it does another a fortunate byproduct? These problems are addressed in the chapters that follow.

### Stage Theories and Twelve-Step Programs

Many forgiveness theories agree that there is no easy path to forgiveness and warn against "parental forgiveness," or forgiveness that comes too easily. Perhaps this is why there is an abundance of stage theories implying a longer, step-by-step process. Stage theories became popular in the 1970s as cognitive-developmental theorists built newer interpersonal theories onto Piaget's stages of intellectual development in children and adolescents. Kohlberg is perhaps the most famous of these stage theorists. Others include Robert Keegan, Robert Selman, and Carol Gilligan, all of whom showed a natural progression from one stage to the next, tying socioemotional changes to intellectual changes through scoring hypothetical and real-life discussions of moral and social issues. During the emergence of such stage theories, it was generally accepted that proof of the existence of developmental stages relied on several assumptions: that the stages follow one another in a standard progression and that people move through them one at a time in a similar fashion; that people do not go back to earlier stages once they develop or progress to a higher stage; and that people generally function at their highest level of development.

The stage theories that abound in forgiveness research and counseling generally do not follow these requirements for developmental stages. Instead they use the terminology of stage theories without reference to or an understanding of the methods and qualifications that developmental psychologists have in mind when they develop stage theories. In the heyday of cognitive-developmental stage theories, researchers needed to defend stage progression as the natural way in which development progressed. They went to this through systematic interviews of children and adults of different ages over time (longitudinal methodology). Forgiveness theorists put their stages together using clinical observation (Fenrich & Coyle, 1998), neither defending



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