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Forgiveness and Moral Obligation

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The questions surrounding forgiveness produce varying thoughts in regards to the action. Is forgiveness a moral obligation? Is this moral obligation tied to religious duty? And, if forgiveness is tied to religious duty, then does it become a moral prerogative? In order to answer these questions, there is a need for much philosophical and theological debate. Rather than allude to the pretense that I know a lot about philosophy or theology, I intend to focus on forgiveness as a moral obligation—one that includes all of us."

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The questions surrounding forgiveness produce varying thoughts in regards to the action. Is forgiveness a moral obligation? Is this moral obligation tied to religious duty? And, if forgiveness is tied to religious duty, then does it become a moral prerogative? In order to answer these questions, there is a need for much philosophical and theological debate. Rather than allude to the pretense that I know a lot about philosophy or theology, I intend to focus on forgiveness as a moral obligation—one that includes all of us.

To begin, forgiveness may be viewed by some as moral prerogative. In this case, it would seem that only certain individuals, within a specific sect of a religion, practice the act of forgiveness. For example, Christianity—a faith I know well, for it is my own—practices the act of forgiveness. Within Christianity, certain denominations, or individuals within this faith, claim that in order to enter the Kingdom of God, one must be “saved.” In other words, one must ask God for forgiveness and be accepted into God’s grace to enter Heaven. What does this idea say about the rest of humankind? Perhaps without realizing that this is an exclusive practice, the act of forgiveness, at least in this case, has become a moral prerogative—an exclusive right for a certain group.

Moving away from the notion of forgiveness as prerogative, I would like to focus on forgiveness as an act of moral obligation, which may fall under religious duty and moral prerogative as well. However, the distinction here, is that forgiveness is inclusive of all persons. For example, in a secular society, when there is a wrong act committed against another individual, the offender may genuinely have a change of heart and seek forgiveness. Providing forgiveness, in this case, is necessary. It is a moral obligation.

Whether the decision is based on religious duty or another reason, it comes down to moral obligation. For the mere fact that it will make both persons stronger and healthier, forgiveness is obligatory. Although there may be some horrendous and some insignificant offenses that may not require forgiveness, I am not the judge of these. However, I do understand forgiveness as a necessary condition within our world. Without forgiveness, we will only produce hatred and hurt. Too many times we do not require or even expect the act of forgiveness, especially in cases of extreme hurt. In my opinion, which is perhaps tainted by the notion of religious duty, it is imperative that we anticipate and practice the act of forgiveness, especially in cases of extreme hurt. Forgiveness is an act of restoration. Without this restoration, not only is the wronged action causing hurt, but so too is the act of not letting go and not forgiving.

Forgiveness is a moral obligation because it requires growth and development of the human condition. It requires us to reach out to another person, even if that person caused us pain, and accept him or her fully. Forgiveness becomes an act of unconditional love—like a parent loving a baby. Often times, due to this nature, forgiveness is seen as a religious duty, and God is considered to be this unconditional love. Perhaps this is a prime example of the execution of forgiveness. However, focusing on ourselves and those surrounding us, we should strive to unite as one; and therefore, we must first learn to forgive. To live in a world without forgiveness, whether or not the forgiveness is generated from religious duty, is to live in a world full of dissent, mistrust, and anguish. Thus, forgiveness becomes our moral obligation. It becomes our duty, religious or secular, to preserve life.

By: Jodi Rowland