'A Critique of Moody-Adams' Conception of Forgiveness as Unilateral'

PHIL10040 - Introduction to Ethics Assignment (Revised Version)

Lorcan Kelly

I. Introduction

Michele Moody-Adams frames the enigmatic concept of forgiveness as a both non-obligatory and unilateral revision of judgement (Moody-Adams, pg. 161). For the purpose of this essay, I will be defining 'unilateral forgiveness' as "a non-obligatory revision of judgement that may lead to reconciliation, done or undertaken by one person or party only."[1] For the sake of concision, I will be primarily focusing on Section One of this essay. I seek to accomplish two tasks; 1) to accurately and concisely summarise Moody-Adams' thoughts on forgiveness outlined in Section 1 and 2) to argue against the idea that forgiveness is unfailingly unilateral and make a case for bilateral forgiveness.

II. Moody-Adams on Forgiveness (Summary)

The article seeks to make a convincing, comprehensive case for unilateral forgiveness, rejecting the possibility that, in absolutely any case, the process of forgiveness can ever be bilateral. As philosophers, we can already instinctively sense some issues here. Generally speaking, most abstract concepts are not explained by catch-all theories and ideas, but we will give moody-Adams the benefit of the doubt, for now.

---

[1] I have combined Moody-Adams' definition of forgiveness and the Merriam Webster definition of 'unilateral': Merriam Webster – "Unilateral": https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unilateral (accessed on 04/10/2018)

In Section 1, Moody-Adams argues that the primary goal of forgiveness is to overcome "constricting narratives"[2] that, she argues, inevitably arise following the relevant harm done to the victim. In addition, the process of forgiveness involves replacing these narratives with more optimistic ones (Moody-Adams, pg. 166). Moody-Adams emphasises that all revisions of judgement should be *completely independent of the perpetrator*, regardless of any form of apology or response (Moody-Adams, pg. 166), and states that forgiveness cannot be couched in rational terms.[3] For me, the idea that forgiveness will always be unilateral is a short-sighted, overarching philosophical notion, which in my view reduces the complexities of *forgiveness* to the far less complex notion of *closure*.

Conflating these two concepts is, in my view, a poor philosophical practice; we are aiming for detailed precision here. I will be exploring the distinction between the two, and rejecting the idea of invariable unilateral forgiveness.

III. Criticism

I will now provide criticism of Moody-Adams' conception of forgiveness as invariably unilateral. Is the goal of forgiveness truly to overcome these constricting narratives? While Moody-Adams argues that forgiveness presupposes the possibility for reconciliation, I would argue that the goal of forgiveness is reconciliation itself. In my view, this is far more conducive with the optimistic connotations of forgiveness that Moody-Adams appears to purport, as it may be argued that reconciliation provides a far more concrete basis for positive, hopeful and fulfilling ways of life than mere presuppositions of it. In turn, this paradigm is indivisible from the case for bilateral

---

[2] Constricting Narratives: the negative moral, cognitive and emotional states of being post-injustice/crime. Moody-Adams elaborates extensively on the possible connotations of becoming consumed by these constricting narratives, arguing that one may assume a state of perpetual "settled and deliberate anger", warping one's life into an antisocial, dystopic existence (p. 166)

[3] She dubs forgiveness as a "view from nowhere." This is referenced again on page 170, in which Moody-Adams seems to deem any attempt by the wrongdoer to explain their side of the story as invariably "excuses disguised as explanations". To me, this does not allow for the possibility that the wrongdoer could be genuinely repentant.

forgiveness, as it is necessary for both victim and wrongdoer to engage in order to achieve meaningful reconciliation. Following this, I would argue that there is a phraseological inaccuracy with Moody-Adams' interpretation of forgiveness. She argues that we can forgive someone without seeking reconciliation (Moody-Adams, pg. 167). I disagree. I accept that the situation that Moody-Adams is describing is completely possible, but I take issue with the term "forgiveness" being used in the way that she does. I believe that Moody-Adams is conflating forgiveness with closure, and I believe that a more suitable phrasing of the notion is as follows; "One may *come to terms* with the reality of the crime done unto them without seeking reconciliation". There is a critical distinction here.

Let's look at an example. Suppose that somebody decides to break my nose for reasons that are not yet evident. The perpetrator is arrested and detained, and (in addition to a broken nose) I am left with a philosophical dilemma. If I decide to adopt Moody-Adams' conception of forgiveness, and simply think on the matter for a while without interacting with the wrongdoer, I might eventually be able to *come to terms* with the crime committed and reject constricting narratives. But I would be left at a loose end. I would still be left to wonder what I could possibly have done to deserve such an assault. If I maintain that the harm done was unjust, reject my resentment and anger, and adopt a positive, optimistic mindset regarding the perpetrator's future, then I have technically fulfilled Moody-Adams' goals of forgiveness. To me, this theory does not account for the possibility that one may seek to understand why this harm was done to them.

Interestingly, Moody-Adams references the case of Gee Walker (Moody-Adams, pg. 166), stating that forward-looking forgiveness is ultimately preferable to subscribing to restrictive narratives. Gee Walker's son was killed in a racially-motivated attack in Liverpool, England in 2005. Walker then went on to lead a campaign against violence and racism in England. What is interesting about this specific case is that eight years after the attack, Walker expressed her desire to meet with her son's killer (Liverpool Echo, 2018). I find this intriguing, as this leads me to believe that Walker

may have been left at a loose end as regards to the attacker's true motives. While she may have *come to terms* with the reality of the attack, she still may have not *forgiven* the attacker (despite her external insistence that she had). My nose may have healed, and I may have prayed for the perpetrator's salvation, but I am still in a state of confusion as regards to the perpetrator's motives.

The only logical path to follow from this is for me to seek answers. How? By approaching the wrongdoer directly. This is a condition upon which my forgiveness lies. While I may acquire versions of events from other sources (e.g. police officers detaining a criminal), this will almost inevitably be a filtered and thereby compromised conception of the motives/mindset of the wrongdoer. Accepting these versions of events will not provide us with the most accurate answers to our questions and will leave us to stagnate in this loose-ended position. It is my belief that "truth" in this instance must be as unfiltered as possible in order to achieve true forgiveness.

So, what can the wrongdoer offer me in order for me to forgive her? Her motives, the historical context of the altercation and whether or not she stands by her actions.[4] Following this, if I decide to (bilaterally) forgive the wrongdoer, I am guaranteeing reconciliation, because this means that I have judged that the motives of the wrongdoer were justified, while the action may still be amoral. In this way, it can be said that forgiveness is contingent upon the truth provided by the wrongdoer and is therefore not always unilateral.

IV. Conclusion

We have analysed Moody-Adams' position on forgiveness, and highlighted errors in phraseology and philosophical accuracy. We have refuted that forgiveness is not always a unilateral process, on

---

[4] This last notion is almost irrelevant. Ultimately, all that I seek is the unfiltered truth about the incident in order for my contemplation and subsequent judgement to be fully informed. I only included it to cover the possibility that the contrition of the wrongdoer may be genuine, though there is no way of telling one way or the other in that respect.

the basis that it is entirely possible for me to seek answers regarding the wrongdoer's motives, and forgive based on this condition.

(1301 Words)

Bibliography

1. Liverpool Echo – *'Gee Walker: Why I want to meet Anthony's killer'* (accessed on 04/10/2018): https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/gee-walker-want-meet-anthonys-6078902 - Published 23rd of September, 2013

2. *'The Enigma of Forgiveness'* – Michele Moody-Adams, 15th October 2014, Springer Science + Business Media Dordrecht 2014