Review of *Forgiveness and Revenge* by Trudy Govier

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Forgiveness and revenge are everyday stuff, in reality and fantasy. Reckoning with wrongs, however, has in recent years been the aim of large scale political projects. These projects include tribunals for war crimes and crimes against humanity, truth commissions that seek to establish a common and authoritative story in the wake of political violence, or reparations movements that seek apology, restitution, or material compensation for losses that have befallen groups of people due to genocide, conquest, oppression, forced migration, theft of land, or the knowing destruction of cultures. Whether the injuries and the actors are individual or collective, some common questions occur, even if answers might differ in personal and political cases. Must those who do wrong be punished? Does wrongdoing of certain kinds or magnitudes preclude reconciliation of offenders and those injured? Can only injured parties forgive? Can groups forgive or be forgiven? Does forgiveness depend on the acknowledgment and repentance of wrongdoers? Are some acts unforgivable? These questions, in their philosophical, practical, and political forms have produced a steady stream of recent writing about
the ethical, legal, and political processes through which human beings come to terms with humanly inflicted loss and those who inflict it.

Govier, the author of other widely read philosophical books on social trust, focuses in this book on the opposing alternatives of forgiving and getting even by seeking to understand their emotional, moral, and practical dimensions. She is not neutral between the alternatives. Rather, this book is an extended and persistent plea for the moral, psychological, and practical superiority of forgiveness and reconciliation rather than resentment and revenge, and of constructive vindication of victims rather than vindictiveness. She presses us to examine complacency about the naturalness and inevitability of needs to “get even,” skepticism about human capacities for compassion and transformation, and tendencies of individuals and groups to enjoy the moral high ground of victimhood without acknowledging their own wrongdoing to others. Lucid, lively, clearly reasoned and plainly written, Govier’s book is filled with concrete examples drawn from everyday life and politics.

The book begins with an argument against revenge, and a caution not to conflate revenge and retribution. Practically, personal revenge tends to be exaggerated in its enactment, unreliable in its results, anarchic in its applications. It is hard for those injured to know when to stop, or to foresee whether scores will be settled or new rounds of vengeance initiated. Revenge is easily misdirected at, or destructive to, third parties who may be blameless. Govier’s main objection to revenge, however, is that it necessarily seeks “satisfaction at having brought about the suffering of another human being” (p. 1), and intentionally seeking the suffering of someone for one’s own satisfaction is accepting and cultivating an evil desire, one that is incompatible with respect for persons. Throughout the book, Govier relies on this minimal neo-Kantian moral premise, which is discussed in a very brief appendix (along with another brief appendix that consider what religious traditions say about forgiveness). Govier also cuts off legitimation for revenge through its links to retribution. Retribution can plausibly be explained as “sending a message” through the unpleasantness inflicted on a wrongdoer, without any intention that the suffering thereby caused be caused in order to satisfy other parties. Govier concludes the argument with the story of Samuel Pisar,
an Auschwitz survivor who was not vindictive but who “vindicated” himself by a lifetime’s devotion to human rights and international law. If retribution sends a message of vindication, that is enough; if there are ways for victims to receive or achieve vindication without retribution, perhaps that is enough, too.

Ambiguity lingers on the question of the moral acceptability or desirability of retribution. Govier rejects revenge, while detaching retribution from it and suggesting that non-retributive vindication of victims is best. In a brief paragraph Govier offers without comment Jean Hampton’s view that punishment vindicates a victim’s worth (p. 19), and later says without elaboration that she has not rejected “the retributive claim that wrongdoers deserve to suffer” (p. 40). One wonders, if wrongdoers deserve to suffer, is someone obliged to see that they do? It takes an argument either way, and Govier does not offer one. Instead, the book’s argument is wholly in favor of restorative and conciliative approaches to wrongdoing. The issue about “hard dealing” with offenders resurfaces later and is joined by another, more troubling ellipsis, to which I return below.

Govier adopts a fairly standard conception of forgiveness as a process that involves “overcoming resentment” and explores “bilateral forgiveness” as a kind of best case. In bilateral forgiveness a wrongdoer is repentant, acknowledges wrongdoing, and offers apology and amends, which helps the offended party to relinquish anger and rebuild trust, thus making reconciliation or conciliatory attitudes possible. But Govier (wisely) resists the idea the reconciliation is essential to forgiveness, instead seeing forgiveness as a process that can free the one injured from the burdens of resentment and can even prompt contrition in offenders who do not make the first move. In the chapters on forgiveness, including one that defends the claim that groups can be injured and that groups can forgive, many basic but helpful distinctions (forgiving and excusing; forgiving and condoning; forgiving and forgetting; bilateral, mutual, and one-sided forgiveness; primary and secondary victims) are installed with striking examples, such as Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, the responses of a murder victim’s family, outrage surrounding former President Reagan’s controversial visit to Bitburg where Waffen SS officers are buried.
The second half of the book is the more challenging, morally and practically, as Govier explores what we might call (but she does not) the limits of forgiveness. Here occur some of the most provocative questions: about what is unforgivable, about human character and possibility, about choice and accountability. Govier ponders “unforgivability” in moral rather than factual terms but initially transmutes the question of what is forgivable into a practical one: even in the face of monstrous deeds, people sometimes have no alternative to building a continuing life together. But Govier then unfolds a position on the redeemability of wrongdoers that is optimistic in its insistence on robust possibilities for moral improvement or transformation even in the darkest cases. Near the end of a chapter titled “Monstrous deeds, not monstrous people” she sums up concisely: “We should never give up on another human being” (p. 140).

These chapters are really the heart of the book, in both senses. Govier recognizes that practically and politically reconciliation with wrongdoers is not always possible or safe, yet she suggests that such resolutions are always to be sought and favored to the extent possible as a matter of moral principle. While not denying that some individuals will not repent or reform, she argues for “a kind of secular faith” (p. 137) which requires “a fundamentally hopeful and respectful attitude toward persons,” renouncing the idea that “some human beings are so much moral garbage, worthy only of being discarded” (p. 138). Persons, not deeds, however monstrous, are the objects of forgiveness; to hold a person unforgivable is to deny that person’s capacity for significant moral change (pp. 119–20). The alternative, correct in Govier’s view, is belief in “the universal possibility of moral transformation” (p. 120). While Govier believes this commitment can be defended on moral grounds of respect for persons alone, she buttresses the moral position with some lessons from social psychology. Human beings impute too much to character and not enough to situation, and tend to fall for The Myth of Pure Evil (p. 125) that ignores the uncertainties and ambiguities in human beings’ motivations and their vulnerability to luck. She offers a rather quick argument that attempts to close up the conceptual space in which responsible agents choose what is bad out of true depravity or hopeless indifference: if people are responsible at all, it is because
they remain capable of choice, and hence in principle of change. If they are incapable of change, then they are pathologically rigid, and so not subject to judgments of responsibility at all (pp. 122–25).

Here the author’s faith in moral transformation is stretched as thin as that argument. Govier’s case for the bare possibility of moral transformation in human beings does not connect with the need for personal, social, penal, and political practices in which we do, individually and collectively, have to deal with individuals who are dangerous, unpredictable, and perhaps borderline in capacities for responsibility. If their track records and stable traits do not suggest more than logical possibilities of transformation, do we necessarily treat them as “moral garbage” if we make sure they face unpleasant consequences for their actions, and put a priority on the well-being and safety of others? Reckoning with people retributively in measured, humane, and consistent ways is arguably affirming our respect for their agency, rather than denying it. The author’s early silence on the acceptability or desirability of retribution here returns as a question about what it makes sense, morally, prudentially, and practically, to do with very “bad” actors. For all who are absorbed by these perennial issues that are always as timely as the most recent personal betrayal, criminal violence, or political atrocity, Govier’s persistent defense of forgiveness and fresh starts is a demanding exercise in a highly readable form.