

Book Review: Cherry, Myisha. *Failures of Forgiveness: What We Get Wrong and How to Do Better*. Princeton University Press, 2023, 240 pp.

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Myisha Cherry's book *Failures of Forgiveness: What We Get Wrong and How to do Better* unpacks complex philosophical ideas on forgiveness, but articulates them in a way that even people with no training in philosophy would understand. The book's aim for the larger audience is clearly reflected in the title, "Failures of Forgiveness," thus positing forgiveness as a chimera which might never be possible to do in a perfect way. At the same time, the sub-text of "What we get wrong" and "How to do better" give us a hope that one can always aspire to learn more about these imperfections, thus improving our moral practices in the process. Despite being marketed as a "self-help" book by commercial websites, it is not difficult to make out that Cherry is also responding to a cohort of philosophers who, as she calls them out, hold a "narrow view"¹ of forgiveness. Thus, in the larger philosophical debate on forgiveness, Cherry contributes significantly to the defense of 'Elective Forgiveness' that sees forgiveness as the prerogative of the victim and not as something which can be demanded from them.

Cherry's project is also informed by a sense of political urgency in responding to what she terms the problem of "forgiveness culture" which poses forgiveness as the solution to resolve any conflict situation, in any place. What I found intriguing about the book was Cherry's ability in relating our personal ideas on forgiveness to the larger politics of it. The book opens with the case of Dylann Roof, a white supremacist involved in the shooting of nine Black churchgoers in June, 2015 at Charleston, South Carolina (p.1). Cherry builds her arguments from this case and comes back to it again and again throughout the book. She succinctly points out that while forgiveness of family members of the victims of shooting is motivated by their own personal reasons, the way forgiveness is asked from them reflects embedded power relations. Why it is mostly Blacks and women who are often expected to forgive? How often is the forgiveness question posed to the White victim of a crime committed by a Black person? Cherry's objective in asking such questions, I believe, is to point out the political implications of our moral practices. She shows how forgiveness, when asked for in the wrong way, or in the wrong context, can actually undermine what it hopes to achieve – healing for the victims and reconciliation for the parties involved.

There are five ways in which Cherry's account of forgiveness deviates from the "narrow view" and gives us a fresh insight into the philosophy of forgiveness based on

¹ Cherry defines "narrow view" as: "To forgive is to let go of negative emotions, like anger and hatred, and replace them with more positive emotions, like compassion and love" (pp.11-12).

our everyday practices. First, Cherry poses a major challenge to the standard accounts² by pointing out that forgiveness is not just about feelings but has other behavioural and ritualistic (to only name a few) components as well. Thus, it is not just about how we feel, but also what we do and the different ways in which we do it (p.19). Second, Cherry targets the root of the problem (in terms of what we get wrong about forgiveness) in pointing out that reconciliation is not the only aim of forgiveness (as the “narrow view” believes). It can have various reparative aims besides reconciliation like relief and release for the victims as well as the wrongdoers (p.22).

Third, Cherry’s “broad view” is broad not only in terms of what forgiveness is and what it hopes to achieve but also in terms of who it includes in the process of forgiveness. In contrast to the “narrow view” which sees forgiveness as only involving the victims and the wrongdoers, Cherry argues that forgiveness is not only the burden of the victims but of the entire community. I believe that this point is especially crucial in the context where forgiveness is demanded from the victims of structural wrongs like racism. It acknowledges such wrongdoings not as isolated incidents of inter-personal wrongs but as moral wrongs that have social meaning for the entire community and therefore responding to them also becomes the responsibility of the entire community (p.96).

Fourth, the book’s aim is to finally convince us that forgiveness will always be imperfect. This, according to me, is the most significant contribution of this book to the corpus of philosophical literature on forgiveness. In contrast to the views which show forgiveness as something “magical” that will lead to something new and drastic, this book convinces us that nothing will ever be restored to its past form and a wrongdoing can never be overcome in its entirety. Fissures will always remain, and forgiveness is about accepting these imperfections and learning to live with it. According to the author, “The idea of imperfect forgiveness is that forgiveness does not take place on ideal conditions or create ideal outcomes.” (pp.193-194)

Finally, Cherry’s “how to do better” argument culminates in the concept of “radical repair.” Cherry’s idea of “radical repair” centres on addressing the root of the problem, in a way which is a deviation from the norm and involves teamwork as its most crucial component (pp.174-190). In extrapolating this argument, Cherry draws an analogy with Formula One

racing to argue that radical repair requires constant innovation. This innovation is required in knowing exactly which “reparative toolkit” will fit the current situation. Thus, while forgiveness might be part of a reparative toolkit in responding to a “post-apartheid” regime in South Africa, it might not be appropriate in responding to the murder of a Black victim by the police brutality in US. Most importantly, and this is what I find “radical” about radical repair, Cherry’s broad view recognizes that sometimes, somethings and some relationships just cannot be repaired. As Cherry argues, “Sometimes the most creative thing we can do is to recognize and admit that something cannot be repaired.” (p.187)

The appeal of the book is in its addressal of various contexts and spaces in which we tend to think about forgiveness. Cherry’s own motivation in writing the book comes

² Standard accounts of forgiveness place emphasis on forgiveness as the “emotional transformation” of the parties involved. Such ideas can be found in works of Griswold, Charles: *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2007; Murphy, Jeffrie: “Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Responding to Evil: A Philosophical Overview” in *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, Vol.25, No.5, 2000, pp.1353-1366; Hieronymi, Pamela: “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 62, No.3, 2001, pp. 529-555.

from her inter-personal context regarding her own difficulty in forgiving her step-father for his wrongdoing, as well as from the context of wrongdoings against Black people followed by public requests of forgiveness from them or their family members. The book addresses practices of forgiveness in different spaces, ranging from political forgiveness in the context of South Africa TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) to its demand in case of inter-personal wrongs in family as well as workplace. The book also responds to a very prevalent practice of celebrities issuing public apologies for their wrongdoings and contrasts “cancel culture” to a “forgiveness culture,” developing a critique of both. By including a chapter on self-forgiveness (“Forgiving Yourself”), Cherry has ensured that her account responds to almost all moral dilemmas in the philosophy of forgiveness. The beauty of the book lies in drawing from real-life cases as opposed to only relying on hypothetical cases (which is often a practice in philosophical writing), succinctly capturing the messiness of our moral practices in everyday life. Cherry not only points out to this messiness, but also shows us a way to embrace it and accommodate it in our moral practices.

In the first two chapters of the book, Cherry outlines her central ideas and objective. In the “Introduction: Forgiveness and Magical Thinking” and “What to Expect When You Are Expecting Forgiveness” (Chapter 1), Cherry points out that book’s main objective is to “demystify” the idea of forgiveness for philosophers as well as for the general public. Her aim is to challenge the “narrow view” of forgiveness which sees forgiveness as overcoming of anger and resentment. And provide a “broad view” which recognizes that “there is a variety of ways to practice forgiveness. And these practices vary in their aims.” Cherry lists different components of forgiveness (not just emotional, as the narrow view believes) like affective, behavioural, performative, cognitive, relational, and ritualistic; and its various aims like relief, repair, and reconciliation.

In the next two chapters, “Forgiveness and Withholders” (Chapter 2) and “Making a Good Ask” (Chapter 3), Cherry wants to point out that there can be no universal conditions on “when” it is appropriate to forgive. Cherry attempts to defend those who forgive “too quickly” as well as those who refuse to forgive. She then outlines what are the right ways to request forgiveness for the wrongdoers. It is in these two chapters that Cherry’s idea of forgiveness as elective in nature comes out more clearly. As she points out, “what the victim decided to give in return of offender’s apology is their prerogative” (p.57). Apologies need to be rendered with the acknowledgement of difficulty of forgiveness and a possibility of its refusal.

In the chapters that follow (from Chapter 4 to 9), Cherry sees implications of her ideas in different contexts. In Chapter 4, “Forgiveness as a Political Project” she provides a detailed analysis of TRC project in South Africa and stresses the importance of giving a “choice” to the victims to forgive. Cherry points out that it is the element of choice that is more crucial here than forgiveness as it restores victim’s agency which was taken away by the acts of wrongdoing. In Chapter 5, “When Race Matters”, Cherry reiterates the same point in the context of race violence in the US. She provides a critique of “hurry and bury” ritual where forgiveness is publicly and quickly asked for from the Black victims. Cherry shows how such practices disrespect the victims and obscure wrongdoing; and provides us with the right questions to ask in such context.

In Chapter 6 and 7, “Home Improvement” and “The Business of Forgiveness”, Cherry points to the problems of forgiveness in our family and work life. Cherry points out that the pressure on victims to forgive for “protecting” family honour or for the sake of work productivity might result in inauthentic forgiveness and undermines agency and

autonomy of the victims. In Chapter 8, “Canceling Versus Forgiving”, Cherry supports the practice of canceling as a call-out and of seeking accountability from celebrities for their actions. She argues that canceling is compatible with forgiveness but argues against the idea of “cancel culture” or “forgiveness culture.” In Chapter 9, “Forgiving Yourself”, the book further expands on the broad view of forgiveness by broadening the scope of who has the standing to forgive. Cherry supports the practice of self-forgiveness as having a “self-directed” reparative aim but without the relinquishment of one’s responsibilities.

Finally, in Chapter 10 “Radical Repair: With or Without Forgiveness”, Cherry provides a detailed analysis of her concept of radical repair by contrasting it with superficial and thrifty repair. Cherry argues that “Engaging in radical repair is acknowledging that if anything is to be truly fixed, we are likely to have a role to play and a price to pay.” Cherry draws an analogy with F1 racing to outline what radical repair might entail in practice. This chapter, along with “Conclusion” highlights Cherry’s own unique contribution to the forgiveness literature.

For research scholars like me, who have been working on the philosophy of blame and forgiveness, Cherry’s simple and compact articulation of “imperfect forgiveness” provides a novel way of looking at forgiveness without getting stuck in the debate of whether it can be demanded or not. Cherry closes the argument by totally denying its demanding nature, yet offering ways to wrongdoers in which they can “politely request” it and “express hopes” for it, without the risk of offending the victim. Cherry’s account also attempts at defending “withholders” of forgiveness, who are so often neglected in the forgiveness literature or looked down upon as “being stuck in the past” or vengeful. In the “narrow view” of forgiveness, if one fails to forgive despite the justifying reasons to forgive, then they undermine the moral status of the wrongdoer by forever associating their identity with their past act.³ A victim’s withholding of forgiveness, it is believed, assumes moral inferiority of the wrongdoer and does not take into consideration the moral worth of their reparative actions. However, as Cherry points out in her book, refusals to forgive are not always contingent on what the wrongdoer does, but are centred on what the victims expect from the process of forgiveness. Thus, Cherry’s arguments strengthen the idea of elective forgiveness without making it seem “unfair” for the wrongdoers who have apologised for their act.

While the book deals with complex philosophical ideas, it is aimed for the larger audience. This might give the perception of the book to those in philosophy as falling short of defending some key ideas in deeper philosophical terms. However, Cherry’s non-usage of some conventional philosophical terms should not be misunderstood as the book’s non-engagement with them. For instance, Cherry’s defense of withholding forgiveness is based on her dissociating the decision to forgive from the actions of the wrongdoer. However, this dissociation cannot be taken at face value since, as Cherry also points out at different places, victim’s decision to forgive is conditioned by the wrongdoer’s response, like their expression of remorse and guilt and offering of apology. This should not be read as a contradiction in the book. The central argument here is that while the fulfilment of certain conditions might enable forgiveness, they do not make it obligatory for the victim. Without using the conventional terms in the debate, like “justifying reasons” versus “requiring

³ Such views can be found in: Hieronymi, ‘Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness;’ Murphy, ‘Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Responding to Evil: A Philosophical Overview;’ North, Joanna: “The “Ideal” of Forgiveness: A Philosopher’s Explanation” in Robert D. Enright and Joanna North (eds.) *Exploring Forgiveness*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin 1998, pp.15-34.

reasons,”⁴ or “affective attitudes” versus “cognitive judgements,”⁵ Cherry engages with the debate on “elective” nature of forgiveness. Thus, for scholars of moral philosophy, the argument has to be sometimes extrapolated from careful reading of the text and might not be laid out in conventional philosophical terms.

Consider another example. In giving an account of why people hold back on forgiveness, Cherry lists various reasons from “unreadiness” and “self-protection” concerns of the victim to external barriers (pp.37-40). She argues that these are all “good reasons” to withhold forgiveness and further extends the argument saying that these reasons are “apt to find withholders justified for withholding forgiveness” (p.40). This is another instance where a scholar of moral philosophy might be left with wanting something more from the book. Cherry has confounded the reasons that “explain” unforgiveness with reasons that “justify” unforgiveness. She does provide a scope of justification by mentioning that these reasons do not intend to “make the offender suffer” but are rather “performed to gain ethical results.” But she does not expand much on what these “ethical results” could be, except for a brief argument that withholding forgiveness is a manifestation of some other virtues like honesty and courage. I believe that each of these arguments require further expansion if one were to provide a strong philosophical defense for withholding forgiveness.

Nonetheless, Myisha Cherry’s book provides some novel concepts to moral philosophy that might lead to better understanding of forgiveness. As she says, “Recognizing the limits of forgiveness is itself an important aspect of understanding forgiveness.” With her ideas of a “broad view” of forgiveness, that sees forgiveness as always “imperfect” and aiming for radical repair, Cherry contributes significantly to the debates on elective forgiveness. It is a must-read for scholars working on forgiveness for its deviation from the standard literature, not only in terms of its ideas but also the structure of writing and argumentation. It is an important read for scholars of moral philosophy also because it provides significant segues into further research on the nature and appropriateness of forgiveness in various contexts.

For the general audience, Cherry’s focus on “what we get wrong” is not just centred on the larger idea of forgiveness as a moral practice but also its subtleties that we often take for granted in our everyday practices. Consider how we often think that forgiveness is about how we feel or that it is just about not being angry and resentful anymore. Or that withholding forgiveness is not praiseworthy and forgiveness is a loving and selfless act in the context of family. Or the often-repeated maxim that forgiveness culture promotes work productivity. Cherry takes each of these assumptions, carefully unpacks them and challenges them with their own logic. And the book is always mindful of leaving us with alternatives since “how to do better” part is equally important. For those reading this book with no background in philosophy, this book not just problematizes (which is so often a charge against philosophers!), but also provides us with possible solutions.

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⁴ Milam, Per-Erik: - “Against Elective Forgiveness,” in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol.31, No.3, June 2018, pp.569-584.

⁵ Allais, Lucy: - “Elective Forgiveness,” in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol.21, No.5, 2013, pp.637-653.

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