

Forgiveness and Moral Exemplars with Myisha Cherry

{music}

Christiane: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Forgiveness is a big, complicated topic. We often see stories about forgiveness play out in the media, and it probably plays a large role in our personal lives at some point as well. That's why we wanted to talk about it with philosopher and host of the Unmute Podcast, Myisha Cherry, who put a lot of thought into the ethics of forgiveness. On today's show, I talked to her about one particular facet of her work, the ethics of convincing victims to forgive. When people try to persuade victims to forgive, they often resort to using moral exemplars of forgiveness or models of forgiveness like Martin Luther King Jr, or Nelson Mandela. Myisha claims that when people try to persuade victims to forgive using these moral exemplars alone, to convince them, is wrong.

Myisha Cherry: When you tell me that I should forgive because someone else has forgiven, and that's the reason alone. What you have done to me is you basically said, "Hey, don't use your reason, just do what they do just do as they do." And what I wanna say is that that disempowers victims, it does not give victims the opportunity to use their own reason to figure out why, if, when, they should forgive.

Christiane: Stay tuned for our conversation about forgiveness.

{music ends}

Christiane: On today's episode of examining ethics, though Myisha Cherry's scholarly interests are vast and cover political philosophy and moral psychology, what I really wanted to talk to her about was forgiveness. I started our conversation by asking her to help me understand just what forgiveness is.

Myisha Cherry: There's several accounts of what forgiveness is. And I guess we can split this into what I would call the emotive account and what I'll call kind of the transactional account. So on the emotive account to forgive is to, forswear, to let go, to give up emotions of some particular type, So you may find some accounts that suggest that to forgive is to, forswear, to give up one's anger. More specifically, they use the term resentment, it's to no longer resent the wrongdoer, but then there's other accounts. For example, Macalester Bell suggests that can't be all that forgiveness there. So she wants to suggest that forgiveness also, uh, gives up contempt for the wrong door.

Joseph Butler wants to say that forgiveness is not the given up of resentment, but it's the

moderation of resentment. He wants to suggest that having anger is a good thing, but we can't have too much of it and perhaps not too little of it. So we should have the right amount of it. And he wants to suggest that in having the right amount of it, I desire, or I decide to no longer take revenge on the individual. I still look at the individual as part of the moral community. The moral community is still able to repair itself of some sort we're able to go forward. So there's a variety of counts in that regard. And then there's the transactional account. It suggests that it can't just be the giving up of anger. And it also requires in some ways, some type of response, some type of participation from the wrongdoer for lots of people, the transactional account kind of comes from the Christian account and the Jewish tradition to suggest that to forgive, at least the wrongdoer must come to me and confess in some kind of way, repent in some kind of way. So it's a transaction, right? I give you something, you give me something, et cetera.

Christiane: So there are a lot of other types and ways of thinking about forgiveness. Myisha told me that even her own definition is multidimensional. However, while the meaning of forgiveness might change, depending on the context, it typically involves something called a "moral practice."

Myisha Cherry: Forgiveness is not one thing all the time. It may be the case that when I forgive my sister, that looks totally different from when I forgive my friend. And when I forgive my friend, it's totally different from when I forgive my president. And when I forgive my president, it's totally different from when I forgive my former slaveholders. So it looks very different in different contexts. Um, but it does incorporate some kind of moral practice. In some regard, it may be a conversation that we have between each other. So there's a moral practice involved, but the moral practice it's gonna have one or three of these aims, either release for the victim, relief for the offender or repair between both.

Christiane: Myisha and other scholars have put a lot of thought into forgiveness. However, the general public understanding of forgiveness is still vague. This is especially the case when it comes to reporters in the media, talking about it, forgiveness has often portrayed as something to aspire to without exploring what it really means.

{series of news clips}

Speaker 3: We end tonight with one of the most potent powers on earth. It can change lives in an instant. Everyone has it. It's the power to forgive.

Speaker 4: No matter how serious the transgression, the choice to forgive. It's always a gift we give ourselves.

Speaker 5: Now, I personally get my inspiration from others who demonstrate forgiveness in incredible ways. So I think about that guy, Louis Zamperini, the Olympic runner turned war hero in *Unbroken*. And of course, I also think about the families of those who were killed in the horrific shooting in Charleston, who also forgave the person who murdered their loved ones. That's like

forgiveness hall of fame.

{news clips ends}

Christiane: While the definition of forgiveness is still unclear in the media. Myisha explained that what is clear is what people expect the results to be when they try to persuade victims to forgive. This is especially the case when the victim is a person of color,

Myisha Cherry: They know that one, a person forgives that they're not gonna commit revenge or, or participate in violence. So for example, if you take the recent cases of police brutality, state violence and, and, and white racism, and these press conferences in which the survivors, the mothers of these victims will ask, can you find in your heart to forgive, right? These questions that constantly came up in those cases of Trayvon Martin, for example, are Philando Castile. I'm not sure that the reporter really knows <laugh> what this victim ought to do - what forgiveness actually looks like. But I think that they are pretty clear about what they think forgiveness will achieve. They know that there's high racial tension and whatever forgiveness is, whatever that person does in private. I don't know what that is, but I know that once they do it, then they're not gonna break into race riots in the streets.

I'm not too clear that we actually know what forgiveness is. I think we're clear that it's perhaps a moral practice of some sort, but I think we're more clear that there's certain consequences, certain effects of forgiveness. And I think that's what we are after when we ask for someone to forgive. So when a cheating partner asks their partner to forgive, I'm not too clear that they know what the partner ought to do or undergo <laugh>, I'm not too sure, but they do know that if the partner was to forgive them, that perhaps they can get together. There can be peace in the household. They are very familiar with the effects. Uh, but I'm not too sure that we actually in layman's terms know what that, uh, process is that leads to those effects.

Christiane: Myisha told me that when victims are asked to forgive, the argument often involves the use of something called a moral exemplar of forgiveness. Moral exemplars are models of some aspect of morality. Martin Luther King Jr. is often held up as an exemplar or model of forgiveness. He famously and publicly forgave, racist and oppressors in the 1960s. And can therefore serve as an example of how to forgive. Maha explained to me that the philosopher Emmanuel Kant believes moral exemplars can be useful.

Myisha Cherry: So what Kant wants to say about what a moral exemplar is, is that in some ways they represent more excellence to us in some kind of way. They represent not only moral excellence, but they represent to us morality. When you see a more exemplary, particularly exemplars of forgiveness, we think about Martin Luther King Jr. We think about Mandela and these individuals, they practice forgiveness. They taught forgiveness. The reason why we would like to say that they are more exemplars of forgiveness is because they show to us in some ways when we should forgive, they show to us what we should forgive, they show to us how to forgive despite our, in spite of. So they give us an example, what is possible for our lives. Also

what Kant wants to say about more exemplars is that they encourage us. They give us hope. They give us inspiration.

But he also wants to say that moral exemplars are useful for what he calls moral education. And you think about when you're a young child for Kant you know, you haven't really developed your rational capacity. So the best thing for you to do is to just look at examples and say, "Hey, do that be like that." But also what Kant wants to say that even when we develop as adults and we're able to really use our rational capacities, even when we form that particular skill, he wants to say that still, we need this representation in the world to make sense of what we should do. Right? He says that, you know, we represent concepts through images. So we have these abstract concepts like forgiveness. Well, how do I understand that abstract concept such as forgiveness? Well, here's a moral exemplar. They're gonna make it very clear to you how, how to understand forgiveness, how to understand what forgiveness does in the world, how to understand the morality of forgiveness. So for Kant, that is what moral exemplars do. And particularly in the case that I'm interested in, that is what forgiveness exemplars do.

Christiane: So moral exemplars of forgiveness can be useful. However, Myisha argues that when forgiveness exemplars alone are used to try to convince victims to forgive, that's wrong, that's harmful.

Myisha Cherry: I think what is problematic about using forgiveness exemplars to convince particularly marginalized folks. And I'm talking about people in power, convincing marginalized folks to forgive by using moral exemplars. It's not that they're just strictly using moral exemplars, but they're using moral exemplars as the reason to forgive. And so that's what I find problematic. And I think this is problematic because when you do it in that particular way, it disempowers victims. You disempower them as rational beings.

Christiane: Myisha gave me a recent example of using forgiveness exemplars alone to convince victims to forgive. It's from a 2016 CBS news report.

{news clip begins}

Speaker 3: We end this week with a lesson in forgiveness from Steve Hartman on the road.

Speaker 6: It all went down on this block in Benton Harbor, Michigan back in '05. Jamelle McGee says he was minding his own business when a police officer accused him of and arrested him for dealing drugs.

Speaker 7: He's saying the officer made it up.

Speaker 8: Yeah, it was all made up.

{news clip ends}

Christiane: Jamelle McGee ended up spending four years in prison for a crime. He didn't commit. Eventually the police officer was caught falsifying reports and went to prison for a year later. Later, the two men crossed paths again at a rehabilitation program, in a coffee shop where the officer apologized to the man he had framed. McGee forgave. The officer at the end of the story, the reporter addresses the viewers saying,

News reporter from clip: And clearly, if these two guys from the coffee shop can set aside their bitter grounds, what's our excuse?

Christiane: Myisha says that Jamelle McGee is being held up by the reporter as a forgiveness exemplar. The idea is if this person who has been through so much hardship can forgive, why can't you forgive too? Myisha says that using forgiveness exemplars in this way makes forgiveness too tidy and uncomplicated.

Myisha Cherry: They're not talking about the messiness of forgiveness and what should be done to go about it. They're not even addressing if forgiveness is what one should do or when one should do it in one particular case. Uh, why should one forgive? None of that has happened. What is being argued is because someone has forgiven, that gives us reasons alone to also forgive. And it's that argument that I don't buy. And that I think that we should not accept as well.

Christiane: I asked Myisha to explain why using moral exemplars alone is unacceptable.

Myisha Cherry: I argue that it disempowers victims. And so the question is, what do I mean by that disempower empower? So we go back to Kant here, right? So Kant is known as an individual who really argues for the rationality of individuals, right? He wants to say the thing that makes us distinctly unique is our ability to use our reason. And he wants to argue that when it comes to moral concerns, we shouldn't even use our emotions. Reason alone should be the deciding factor and morality is revealed to us through reason. So if you had any sense of rationality, you would know what to do. You would know and comprehend the moral law. However, when you tell me that I should forgive because someone else has forgiven, and that's the reason alone, what you have done to me is you basically said, "Hey, don't use your reason, just do what they do, just do as they do." And what I wanna say is that that disempowers victims, it does not give victims the opportunity to use their own reason to figure out why, if, when, they should forgive. And so that's what I mean, that it disempowers the victim. It doesn't give them their power to use their rationality as a human being, uh, to actually decide for themselves, given other reasons, given decisive reason, given rational reasons, given practical reasons, if they should indeed forgive.

Christiane: Myisha explained that employing forgiveness exemplars can sometimes lead to using one of two types of arguments. One of them, she calls the "authority move" and the other is called the, "their suffering is worse than yours," move. Myisha says that neither of these types

of arguments respects the victim's capacity to reason for themselves.

Myisha Cherry: So how does that happen? Or how does that manifest in the authority move? They say, well, they employ these exemplars like Gandhi, like Martin Luther King, because they know in some ways that these exemplars, these are very specific forgiveness exemplars. This is not your mama. This is not your uncle. This is not Peter down the street. These are individuals that have some kind of authority in the moral community, in some sort, they are appealing to this particular authority to suggest that given who this individual is, I don't need any other reason to convince you <laugh> in logic, we'll call this kind of move an appeal to authority, which is a fallacy. That's fallacious reasoning, because you have not provided me a practical or a moral reason or a rational reason to do as that particular exemplar has done. Right? You've only told me to follow that particular individual.

And just because that particular individual has forgiven still doesn't provide me with rational reasons to do as they have done as well. So that's what I see going on in the, in the authority move. And then in the, their suffering is worse than yours move. So I see this all the time when Christians utilize Jesus, as an example, they think about, you know, Jesus died and the cross, all your friend did was not return your text message. Jesus suffered worse than you. So you have no excuse, but to forgive. So that's another move that's kind of made that the, the exemplar they suffered worse, but still they were able to forgive. So you have no excuse, but still that person has not given me a reason to forgive yet.

Christiane: Myisha says that these are the wrong types of arguments to use when trying to convince someone to forgive. It's part of why using forgiveness exemplars alone can be problematic.

Myisha Cherry: And I think the problem with appealing to, uh, these exemplars is to take the victim as an immature human being is to take the victim as someone who can't comprehend morality. So they only need an exemplar. So what I want to encourage is to give me an argument <laugh> and I think that's what should be persuasive. So what do I mean by that? So in argumentation, we may give reasons for someone to accept the particular conclusion. This is not to say that there's no use or no benefit of using exemplars, because I can argue for, let's say for someone to be vegan. So I can say, "Hey, eating meat particularly in the United States is, is the way that it's prepared is very unhealthy." Number two, "but even if it was healthy, uh, studies show that the less meat you have in your diet, the longer you're able to live."

And then I can say, number three, "an example of premise number two is that there was a vegan who lived until 121 years old, therefore one should become vegan." So you notice the uniqueness about that particular argument is that I give you rational reasons. And I only use the exemplar to make clear a previous premise, rational reason that I've already provided for you. That's very different from the argument as follows. "You should become vegan, because that 121 year old was a vegan." <laugh> right. I think those are two separate arguments. And what I think that has happened in the media, in our private relationships is that we only are content

with using argument number two. And when we do that, we ought to be very careful because what that implies is that the way that we view the victim is someone who's immature. Someone who doesn't have full rational capacities. Someone who's only able to do things when they're told. And to me, that disrespects and disempowers victims.

Christiane: When I spoke with Myisha, I wondered if good intentions made using forgiveness exemplars any better.

Myisha Cherry: So here's the thing about intentions. Sometimes when we utter certain things in the public sphere, we can have all good intentions of trying to curb violence or trying to make the world a better place. And we don't intend to like disrespect victims or we, we don't intend to disempower victims, but I wanna suggest that your intentions do not matter. It's the effects of what you do that matter. So someone can have the good intentions of, you know, what I want to, uh, write this article, uh, to encourage people to forgive. And I don't have any hidden motives about using any particular rhetorical strategy, right? I'm not that clever. I don't even know what argumentation is, but I just wanna encourage people to forgive what's wrong with that? And I wanna say, despite your intentions, there's still effects of one's actions. When we talk to each other, even in a private spirit, in a public sphere, our intentions don't matter. They have the effects that they do. And I, and what I wanna do is suggest that even when you have good intentions, think about, think about what's happening here. Even with good intentions, I say, or I suggest that we ought to do it with care, given that this is what can occur when you make this particular move. Even despite your good intentions, when you make these particular moves, this is what's going to happen in the world. So be very careful.

Christiane: Myisha told me that at the end of the day, using forgiveness exemplars is tricky and requires thoughtfulness.

Myisha Cherry: So the end result, I mean, there could be a good result and there could be a bad result. So if the individual is using moral exemplars alone to convince, you've already taken away the rational capacity of the victim, right? And so in some ways I wanna say that you are not giving the individual to be a full, rational, human being, to use their own reason and not giving them the opportunity to use their own reason. Like that's pretty, that's not a good thing, give people a choice. And the way that you do that is you give them premises. You give them reasons and allow them to accept or reject those reasons that will lead them to a particular conclusion. And when you use moral exemplars alone, as reasons you're not doing just that, if you do it in the right way, which you're also giving them reasons, and then you throw some moral exemplars in there, you are encouraging them. You're giving them hope. You're giving them inspiration. You're telling them how practical forgiveness can actually be. You're giving them someone to imitate, or someone to emulate. Those are all good things,

But those good things come about by giving them other reasons. And those good things do not come about when you're only giving them the moral exemplar as *the* reason to forgive.

Christiane: If you wanna know more about Myisha Cherry and her work on forgiveness, we'll have links to her articles and her website on our site, examiningethics.org. You can also hear from her every month on her excellent show, the Unmute Podcast, which you can find on apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

Hey, if you're a high school student, who's into ethics or, you know, a high school student who's into ethics, we wanted to let you know that the Prindle Institute is now offering ethics scholarships here at DePauw University. If you wanna know more information about our ethics scholarships, shoot us an email at examiningethics@gmail.com. You can also find links to information about those ethics scholarships on our webpage. That's examiningethics.org. Remember to subscribe, to get new episodes of the show, wherever you get your podcasts, but regardless of where you subscribe, please be sure to rate us on apple podcasts. It helps us get new listeners, and it's still the best way to get our show out there. For updates about the podcast, interesting links and more follow us on Twitter at [ExaminingEthics](https://twitter.com/ExaminingEthics). We're also on Instagram at [ExaminingEthics](https://www.instagram.com/ExaminingEthics) podcast and Facebook

Eleanor Price: Examining Ethics is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University, Christiane Wisheart and Eleanor Price, that's me, produced the show with editorial assistance from Sandra Burton. Our logo was created by Evelyn Brosius. Our music is by Blue Dot Sessions and can be found online at freemusicarchive.org. Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute and you the listeners. Thank you for your support. The views expressed here are the opinions of the individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or the Prindle Institute for Ethics.