For Shame: The Social Pre-Requisite Conditions of Self-Forgiveness

Kathleen Knight Abowitz
Miami University

Mordechai Gordon's essay explores the notion of self-forgiveness and its role in moral development through the plotlines of the novel *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts. In this response, I trace his thesis, evaluate the relevance of the ideas, and challenge him to consider two problems I find in his argument. My first problem is with the reading of Arendt put forward in the paper. In this response I am more sympathetic to Arendt's claim that self-forgiveness isn't truly possible. I think she's right about this. To argue this point, we need to turn to the second problem I find in this paper: the under-developed idea of shame. Shame is in the paper's title but needs a more central role in the argument. The issue of shame is important in considering self-forgiveness, because shame is the felt experience of the social conditions and norms necessary for re-evaluating one's own actions in the first place. In this short response, I can only point towards a fuller exploration of shame by John Covaleskie which could enlarge Gordon's work with this concept in the paper.[1] Finally, I want to suggest that while I agree with Gordon that the notion of self-forgiveness is worth exploration, I think that the significance of self-forgiveness to moral development is directly proportional to the severity of the harms caused to others. Thus, while *Shantaram* is a provocative novel through which to explore this issue, it provides an extreme case. I am not certain that its lessons are universally generalizable to the more mundane moral wrongdoing that comprise the stuff of moral development for many human beings, young and old. That said, it is likely an extremely relevant line of inquiry for particular issues and challenges facing moral development among some types of human experiences and populations.

Gordon states that his goal in the essay is "to make a case that forgiving oneself is significant to moral development."[2] He sets up this

argument against Arendt's discussion, in *The Human Condition*, that forgiving oneself is not really possible. Arendt discusses the power to forgive within the human faculty of action, which is the actualization of freedom, creating something new with others. Her argument here situates forgiveness within the political realm, the realm of natality and change. Forgiveness is to react, but in a new and unexpected way, "unconditioned by the act which provoked it."[3] Gordon takes exception with Arendt's further claim, however: "*no one can forgive himself* and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself; forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self." [4] Gordon states that "she says very little in order to substantiate this latter claim, other than to suggest that an isolated individual would never be able to forgive oneself because he or she 'would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive.'"[5] Arendt, in short, says because forgiveness requires human plurality, or "the presence and action of others who come together in the political arena in order to bring about change and initiate new beginnings,"[6] one cannot logically forgive oneself in any literal sense.

Gordon wants to show us why self-forgiveness is critical in moral development. He uses Claudia Card's work to explain how self-forgiveness is necessary for continuing to meet our moral obligations and avoid future wrong-doing, helping motivate us for the "effort that [future] self-improvement will require."[7] The paper also explores the concept of forgiveness through Douglas Stewart's work, and sets up a moral binary of forgiveness between victim and perpetrator.[8] To forgive is to let go of negative emotions and hard feelings, developing more compassion towards wrongdoers as persons, and seeing them—as human beings—beyond their wrongdoing though not forgetting it. Gordon discusses self-forgiveness as significant for the person who is able to *transform* "painful feelings of negative self-assessment such as guilt, shame, deep disappointment with oneself." Self-forgiveness, for Gordon, is about renouncing self-directed negative attitudes, particularly "personal shame." Gordon says that "shame is often directed not only at the perpetrator's past conduct, but also at some fundamental aspect of oneself

revealed in the undesirable conduct." He acknowledges that "people who have wronged others must experience personal shame and take responsibility for their actions before attempting to forgive themselves."[9]

By Gordon's argument, *Shantaram*'s protagonist can only begin to feel and then try to overcome his wrongdoing through human community in social life. It is only in the deep experience of a human community, in a small village in India, that the protagonist begins to experience the enormity of his past actions in Australia. Lin's heroin addiction, armed robbery, and family abandonment do not fully touch him until he is in a human community where he experiences connection. It is through this relational lens that he is finally able to "see and feel the torment of what I'd done, and what I'd become— the pain and the fear and the waste."[10] Lin is able to move towards self-forgiveness only because he has started to experience shame. Shame is the negative self-assessment based on one's feelings of disappointment and embarrassment that we have failed to live up to our own communal moral ideals. Lin does not experience shame until he is within a social, communal context which penetrates his consciousness, which shifts his perspective from that of an atomistic individual to one in intersubjective connection to other human beings.

I think Arendt is correct in her view that "no one can forgive himself" but not in the literal sense in which Gordon interprets this phrase. "Forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and signify no more than a role played before one's self."[11] I read this passage as Arendt suggesting that we cannot forgive ourselves without first experiencing genuine or authentic shame about our actions, and shame comes from the presence of others, whether literal or symbolic via the shared norms of the plurality. Arendt seems to suggest that these norms emerge from the "web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together."[12] This web of relationships did not become real, for Lin, until he experienced a particular community in India after a great deal of suffering and self-reflection.

Shame gets a bad rap in our culture today, writes John Covaleskie, yet

it is critical for moral formation. "Shame is a powerful moral emotion, one that reminds us of our moral and personal ideals when we fall short of those ideals and gives us strong motivation to reform."[13] Covaleskie of course explains that shame can harm, too, when it is a response to a condition about which one has no control or when it is a response to society's incorrect evaluations of one's actions. I may be made to be ashamed of my identity as an older woman in a society that devalues the contributions of older people, but that is an inaccurate evaluation of aging. I may be made to be ashamed of my ethnic identity if I am Hispanic growing up in a racist community, but that is an incoherent response to an identity category over which I have no control.

The ways we get shame wrong, however, should not discourage us from seeing how shame is essential to maintaining moral communities and attending to our own moral development. Shame is a result of a conscience when, properly formed, is an internal voice but one "shaped by the social memberships we share and the ideals we hold" as a result of those memberships.[14] Shame is the negative emotion created when we evaluate ourselves to have fallen short of our ideals. It is a precondition to forgiving oneself for wrongdoing, as shame is itself the emotive recognition of that wrongdoing—the felt experience of disappointment, embarrassment, or sadness that I have not lived up to the moral norms of my community.

I would not disagree with Gordon's assessment that self-forgiveness is an aspect of moral development, but I think its significance is directly proportional to the harm caused to others by one's actions. Moral harms involving violence to others are distinct from other types of wrongdoing that are "victimless" in some important way. Moral crimes which involve violence to others, or major failures of our obligations to others (Lin's desertion of his family) are those likely to require major self-assessment to move beyond. I'm not convinced that more minor infractions require this level of self-pardon in order to learn from and move beyond them in one's life. *Shantaram* is based on a man finding his way out of a world of harm he has caused others in his webs of relationship across his life span. I think the notion of self-forgiveness, then, is less generalizable in terms of its retirement for moral develop-

ment than Gordon seems to suggest.

That said, I see the value of this thesis. After reading the essay, I sent it immediately to a scholar-friend who is working on a dissertation about prison education. It seems to me that notions of self-forgiveness and moral development could have, among other educational applications, important footholds with those populations who are seeking to find new life paths while grappling with significant harms done to others in the past. Explorations of self-forgiveness may also contribute to philosophical analysis of anti-racism and whiteness identities, wherein one's racial inheritances and privileges must be negotiated by those seeking forgiveness and redemption in anti-racist work.

---

1 John Covaleski, *Membership and Moral Formation: Shame as an Educational and Social Emotion* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2013).

2 Mordechai Gordon, "Self-Forgiveness, Shame, and Moral Development," *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020).

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 241, quoted in Gordon, "Self-Forgiveness, Shame, and Moral Development."

4 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

5 Arendt, 241.

6 Gordon, "Self-Forgiveness, Shame, and Moral Development."

7 Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 176.

8 Douglas Stewart, "Thinking about Forgiveness: A Philosophical Preamble to its Cultivation in Schooling," *Journal of Thought* 47, no. 1 (2012): 66-95.

9 Gordon, "Self-Forgiveness, Shame, and Moral Development."

10 Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003),

124.

11 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

12 Arendt, 184.

13 Covaleskie, *Membership and Moral Formation*, ix.

14 Covaleskie, 10.