Self-Forgiveness, Shame, and Moral Development

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Gregory David Roberts's novel *Shantaram* is the riveting story of a fugitive from Melbourne, Australia who spends ten years in Bombay after escaping a maximum-security prison in his home country. Having divorced in 1978, Lin, the hero of *Shantaram*, lost custody of his daughter and became involved in a series of armed robberies to support his heroin addiction, crimes that ultimately landed him in prison for nineteen years. In 1980, after staging a daring escape from the maximum-security facility with a fellow inmate in broad daylight, Lin eventually makes his way to the city of Bombay, India. Over the next ten years, the novel follows the trials and tribulations of Lin as he forms many connections and friendships in Bombay, learns to speak Hindi and Marathi, establishes a free medical clinic for slum-dwellers, and becomes heavily involved with one of the city's major crime mafias. *Shantaram* is the story of a man with a checkered past on the run who is desperately trying to redeem himself and do good deeds even as he faces odds and obstacles that most people would consider overwhelming. It is the remarkable account of Lin's battle for freedom, meaning, and forgiveness, a heroic struggle to come to terms with his past and present crimes and to chart a future that can perhaps grant him some sense of purpose and dignity.

Inspired by Lin's struggle in the novel *Shantaram* to forgive himself for his past transgressions and become liberated from his criminal history, my goal here is to *makes a case that forgiving oneself is significant to moral development*. The question at the heart of my analysis is: How can self-forgiveness be morally beneficial? In what follows, I first examine Hannah Arendt's notion of forgiveness and show that, for her, forgiving oneself is not really possible since forgiveness depends on the fact of plurality and the presence of others who are necessary to absolve us of our transgressions. Next, I present an alternative, more nuanced conception of self-forgiveness based on some contemporary literature while also drawing

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on Lin's example from *Shantaram*. I highlight the central role that experiencing shame plays in acknowledging one's wrongdoings and in facilitating the process of self-forgiveness. The final part of this essay explains how forgiving oneself is related to and can enhance one's moral development.

ARENDT, ACTION AND FORGIVING

Arendt laid out her understanding of the power to forgive in the context of her discussion of the human faculty of action, a faculty that she first elaborated in depth in her book *The Human Condition*. In this book, Arendt characterizes action as the actualization of the human condition of freedom and as the realization of our capacity to initiate something altogether new together with other human beings. Political action, she holds, is often "stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative."[1] Arendt explains that to act is to insert ourselves into the world with words and deeds together with other people. Yet this insertion is neither moved by necessity like labor, nor prompted by utility, like work. Action, she believes, should be viewed outside of the means-ends category, precisely because it has no end. The strength of the action process can never be reduced to a single deed with a definite outcome, but on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply.

Shifting now to forgiveness, we can see that Arendt's understanding of the power to forgive is derived from her notion of political action—that capacity to act together with others in the public arena in order to bring about constructive change, yet whose outcomes are always unpredictable and uncertain. She writes that

> without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not

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> unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.[2]

From this perspective, forgiveness is that capacity that enables human beings to change course and be released from their actions and transgressions; without this capacity, we would be doomed to merely *reacting* to every form of trespassing we experience in a potentially never-ending cycle of violence.

For Arendt, forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance since the latter is a type of reaction against a perceived transgression, a reaction that, because it remains bound by a cycle of violence and retribution, might go on forever. Unlike vengeance, which she considers a kind of automatic reaction to transgression, the act of forgiving often comes as a surprise and cannot easily be foreseen before it happens. "Forgiving," Arendt writes, "is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven."[3] The import of the power to forgive is in its ability to stop the natural progression of events and forge a new path for the future.

Yet, Arendt makes a further claim about the power to forgive that I believe is more difficult to defend. First, she asserts that forgiving, much like promising, depends on the fact of human *plurality*, that is, on the presence and action of others who come together in the political arena in order to bring about change and initiate new beginnings. Second, Arendt notes that since both forgiving and promising depend on the presence of others, "*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] However, 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] Although Arendt doesn't clarify her position here, I take it that the reason she believes that we cannot forgive ourselves is that she assumes that in politics as in our personal lives our actions typically have significant impact on

others. Thus, Arendt's point seems to be that we cannot forgive ourselves when we intentionally or inadvertently harm others; when a transgression happens, it is up to the injured parties, not the trespassers, to grant or withhold forgiveness.

In her book *The Atrocity Paradigm*, Claudia Card attempts to explain Arendt's view on forgiving oneself, noting that it may be true that "self-forgiveness may be hasty when others who could forgive us have not done so or have not had the opportunity."[6] On this interpretation of Arendt, the possibility of self-forgiveness depends on being forgiven by others first. Most likely, as Card suggests, there is some truth in Arendt's claim that after we have owned up to our mistakes, apologized to the victims, undertaken some reparations and taken other steps, we might be in a better position to forgive ourselves and regard ourselves less negatively. Indeed, throughout his time in Bombay, Lin, *Shantaram's* hero, struggles to forgive himself for the crimes he has committed and for hurting his family and friends in Australia at least in part because he has no contact with them and hence no way of asking his significant others for forgiveness. Eventually, Lin comes a little closer to forgiving himself, but only after he has first forgiven people like Khaderbhai, his adopted father, and Karla, the woman with whom he falls in love, both of whom seriously betrayed Lin's trust.

Still, a closer look at the phenomenon of self-forgiveness seems to indicate that, contrary to Arendt's view, sometimes it is not only possible but also highly desirable to forgive oneself. Card captures this point well when she writes that:

> Some willingness to forgive oneself, even for evil deeds, may be needed to sustain motivation to fulfill our obligations and avoid repeating wrongs. Perpetrators need the sense that they are worth the effort that self-improvement will require. Some self-forgiveness may be requisite to that sense of self-worth.[7]

Here Card emphasizes an important point that Arendt may have missed, namely, that self-forgiveness is a significant achievement since one has to overcome hostility toward and develop some level of compassion for oneself in order for

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moral improvement to take place. Contemporary psychological research confirms this insight about self-forgiveness being a deliberate choice that requires a considerable amount of effort. For instance, Jacinto notes that self-forgiveness is a conscious choice to let go of "self-blame, resentment, anger, hurt and other negative feelings toward oneself."[8]

FORGIVENESS, SELF-FORGIVENESS AND SHAME

In order to comprehend the phenomenon of self-forgiveness, it is first necessary to adequately describe and contextualize the more general notion of forgiveness. A good place to start is to examine Douglas Stewart's fine essay "Thinking about Forgiveness: A Philosophical Preamble to its Cultivation in Schooling." In this essay, Stewart identifies some of the central features and characteristics of forgiveness, especially those that have ethical implications. For instance, Stewart describes the contexts that typically make interpersonal forgiveness morally relevant as

> those in which one person a (perpetrator) deliberately or through willful negligence offends, harms, or wrongs another (a victim) in word or deed and where the latter experiences negative or hard feelings in the belief that he or she has been wrongly or unjustly treated.[9]

On this view, forgiveness only makes sense in these cases: in which people harm others and not when they treat them well; in which the victims were actually (not falsely) hurt; when there was some intent to harm another; and finally, when the perpetrator acted with a sense of agency and was not forced by some external or inner compulsion.

Stewart goes on to describe what it means to forgive, to be forgiven, and to be a forgiving person. "To forgive," he writes, "is to let go our negative emotions or hard feelings and to adopt in their place a more generous and compassionate attitude towards our wrongdoers as *persons* or *human beings*, all the while condemning what they did and holding them responsible for it."[10] Forgiving, in other words, does not mean to absolve the perpetrators from being

accountable for their actions, but rather to accept the idea that all recriminations or acts of vengeance will cease. Being forgiven implies that the persons who harmed us will no longer be despised or viewed with contempt and that the negative feelings we held toward them will be supplanted by compassion and respect. Finally, Stewart points out that to be forgiving is to be the kind of person that does not typically hold on to grudges, one who considers revenge or retaliation to being maltreated as morally problematic responses.

Stewart's analysis of forgiveness is quite helpful since he clarifies some common misunderstandings about this phenomenon. For example, he emphasizes that to forgive is not the same as to forget since without remembering, forgiveness, as we have defined it above, would not even be possible. Moreover, to conflate the two runs counter to the experiences of those victims who have forgiven their perpetrators but not forgotten the suffering that they experienced. Second, Stewart reminds us that to forgive is not the same as absolving the wrongdoers of blame or responsibility for their actions; nor does forgiveness imply condoning or minimizing what the perpetrators did. In fact, to tell someone "I can't excuse what you did to me; it was wrong and hurtful, but I am willing to forgive you nonetheless" is something that happens quite frequently. Third, Stewart argues that "to forgive is not the same as to *reconcile* with one's wrongdoer, though a new and renewed relationship of mutual trust and confidence between victim and wrongdoer may at times be the upshot of forgiving."[11] In other words, forgiveness is possible without reconciliation and there are occasions in which some form of reconciliation can occur between two people who have hurt each other without forgiveness.

In her book *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing*, Margaret Walker discusses three essential features of forgiveness—overcoming resentment, restoring relationship, and setting a wrong to rest in the past. Walker's analysis advances our understanding of forgiveness when she states,

> None of these features need be present in every case plausibly seen as a case of forgiving, yet any one of these three features can be crucial in a particular case to achieving the resolution forgiveness is seeking. We should think of forgiving in a flexible

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> way, a way that shows why each of the three features favored by philosophers can matter in many cases, but that also shows why none of them is definitive in every case.[12]

Walker's analysis underscores the possibility that although there are some essential aspects of forgiving, we should not treat every case of forgiving as having the exact same features. Instead, as she insists, it is more fruitful to adopt a flexible understanding of this phenomenon, one that acknowledges that various cases of forgiving may have some similar features but also some important differences. More specifically, Walker suggests that different instances of forgiving can vary not only in whether or not all three features (overcoming resentment, restoring relationship, and setting a wrong to rest) are present, but also in the relative weight that these features have in each instance.

Another important point that Walker makes is that forgiving is aimed first and foremost at *repairing moral relations* and, as such, to forgive should be considered morally valuable and even admirable. She writes that forgiving "refers to a process with moral effects, even as it has social and psychological aspects and conditions. Everyone recognizes that *simply* being able to go on with a relation, to function in it, is not forgiveness."[13] For instance, a woman that was painfully betrayed in a marriage yet decides to merely "move on" while maintaining a sense of suspicion and mistrust and not holding her husband accountable has probably not forgiven him. Walker echoes the view espoused by Stewart that forgiving, because of its key moral dimension, is not the same as forgetting, condoning, or minimizing the actions of those who have harmed us. Both Walker and Stewart insist that contrary to these other ways of responding to being harmed, forgiving implies that something has to be set aright, "in a way that neither compromises, dulls or buries the sense that a wrong was done."[14]

Given this brief discussion of some of the essential features of forgiveness, we can now turn to an examination of self-forgiveness and its relation to the former. In an article entitled "Self-Forgiveness and Self Respect," Robin Dillon makes three salient points that are especially relevant for my discussion of forgiving oneself and moral development. First, is that a person who is able to forgive oneself is one who manages to *transform* "painful feelings of negative

self-assessment such as guilt, shame, deep disappointment with oneself, self-contempt, as well as remorse, anguish, despair, self-doubt."[15] Other researchers like Williston have also emphasized this quality of self-forgiveness, noting that forgiving oneself entails the ability to renounce self-directed negative attitudes like contempt, anger, and hatred— attitudes that arise due to an agent's belief in one's own moral failing.[16]

Second, for Dillon, it is important to recognize that personal shame is at the core of the negative attitude that one who is struggling to forgive oneself needs to confront. "To say that shame is at the core of the negative stance is to say that even when the stance is prompted by wrongdoing or the terrible consequences of one's actions, its object is one's self."[17] On Dillon's view, 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. Williston echoes this view when he argues that an agent "must have experienced significant moral shame before legitimately coming to the judgment that she may forswear self-directed negative attitudes."[18] Both Dillon and Williston assert that people who have seriously wronged others need to experience personal shame and take responsibility for their actions before attempting to forgive themselves; otherwise an attempt at self-forgiveness is not likely to be meaningful.

The example of Lin in the novel *Shantaram* is quite illuminating with respect to the role that shame needs to play in facilitating self-forgiveness. Lin, who was addicted to heroin and committed armed robberies to support his addiction and consequently lost his family and friends in Australia, had never fully comprehended and taken responsibility for the wrongs he had perpetrated. Not even during his trial or the three years that he spent in prison in Australia did he feel any sense of guilt, remorse, or shame. Only years later, when he visits a remote Indian village, surrounded by his friend Prabaker and his family, does Lin begin to realize the enormity of what he had done and experience a deep feeling of shame:

> It was only there, in the village in India, on the first night, adrift on the raft of murmuring voices, and my eyes filled with stars; only then, when another man's father reached out to

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> comfort me, and placed a poor farmer's rough and calloused hand on my shoulder; only there and then did I see and feel the torment of what I'd done, and what I'd become—the pain and the fear and the waste; the stupid, unforgivable waste of it all. My heart broke on its shame and sorrow. I suddenly knew how much crying there was in me, and how little love. I knew, at last, how lonely I was.[19]

The case of Lin illustrates the point made by Dillon and Williston about the need to experience shame and take responsibility for one's harmful actions before the prospect of self-forgiveness becomes possible. Lin's example also demonstrates the idea that the shame felt by an offender is not only directed at one's past deeds, but also at oneself, at the type of person one has become. Roberts closes the chapter of *Shantaram* in which Lin first confides that he felt deeply ashamed at himself by noting that "some truths about yourself are so painful that only shame can help you live with them."[20] Thus, living with shame is necessary to enable people to endure those painful truths about themselves without which self-forgiveness and moral development would be impossible.

Third, Dillon underscores the point that to forgive oneself does not imply that one has extinguished all the negative feelings directed at oneself or ceased to engage in any self-reproach. As she puts it:

> Forgiving oneself means not that one no longer experiences self-reproach but that one is no longer in bondage to it, no longer controlled or crippled by a negative conception of oneself...This is possible even if one retains a measure of clear self-reproach, overcoming it without eliminating it.[21]

Dillon's point is that in order to forgive ourselves we do *not* need to completely eliminate every negative feeling about ourselves; this would amount to an impossible counsel of perfection. Rather, she emphasizes that forgiving ourselves means that we are no longer consumed or overwhelmed by self-reproach and a negative sense of self. In short, it is possible to forgive oneself and still view oneself with a demanding and critical eye.

SELF-FORGIVENESS AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

In her essay "Self-Forgiveness and Responsible Moral Agency," Margaret Holmgren argues that genuine self-forgiveness entails working through a rigorous *process* of coming to terms with one's wrongdoing:

> If an offender has worked through the process of responding to her own wrongdoing, she has acknowledged to herself that what she did was wrong. She also understands why it was wrong, as she has acknowledged to herself her victim's true status as a person. She has allowed herself to experience her grief and self-resentment at having injured her victim. She has also done her best to correct the attitudes that led to the harmful act and to make amends to her victim.[22]

To be sure, the steps identified by Holmgren as indispensable to go through in order to achieve genuine self-forgiveness are a very difficult and significant undertaking. Yet, for her, working through this process is necessary if the perpetrator is to respect herself, her victim, and her moral obligations.

Holmgren's account of genuine self-forgiveness as an emotional and moral process that one needs to work through sheds some light on why Lin struggles with this challenge even as he is able to forgive some of his closest allies in Bombay. My reading of *Shantaram* suggests that Lin was able to successfully negotiate through *part*, but not all, of this process. In particular, it seems to me that during the years spent as a fugitive in India, Lin was able to acknowledge the crimes that he had committed in Australia, the pain he inflicted on his loved ones, as well as what it meant to live a life in fear and destitution. Moreover, as demonstrated above, Lin was able to experience some negative emotions like shame, guilt, and grief on a profound and personal level. At the same time, at the end of the novel, he is still struggling to let go of the destructive attitudes

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and behaviors that led him to perpetrate the crimes he had committed.

Another reason that Lin struggles with this challenge is related to Holmgren's discussion of the relation between being forgiven by one's victims and self-forgiveness. Holmgren points out that there are cases in which

> an offender cannot make full restitution or adequate apology for the wrong, either because her victim is dead or otherwise unavailable, because a direct apology would do the victim more harm than good, or because the injury was so serious that it outstrips her ability to atone for it.[23]

This explanation seems to apply to the case of Lin in the novel *Shantaram* who, because he was a fugitive on the run, could not get in touch with his loved ones in Australia in order to seek their forgiveness and make restitution for his past transgressions.

However, for Holmgren, the fact that an offender is not able to get in touch with her victims is not in-itself sufficient reason not to attempt to forgive oneself. She writes that "in reaching a state of genuine self-forgiveness, an offender acknowledges her own intrinsic worth, which she retains regardless of her ability to make amends for the wrong."[24] That is, Holmgren is convinced that working through the multistep process of forgiving oneself is highly significant since it can lead perpetrators to moral growth, growth in the Kantian sense of the term—as coming to appreciate both their victims and themselves as intrinsically valuable. She writes that

> Genuine self-forgiveness is also *required* if we are to be responsible moral agents. When we do wrong, we must work through the process of responding to our own wrongdoing, drop the obsessive focus on our own past record of moral performance, and turn our attention to our moral and non-moral development.[25]

On this view, offenders' genuine self-forgiveness is a necessary condition for moral development to take place. For Holmgren, working through the process of self-forgiveness by addressing our own negative emotions, attitudes, and

patterns is essential prior to attempting to restore our relationships with others. Only once we are able to genuinely forgive ourselves, can we approach our loved ones as liberated and equal partners, as individuals who can contribute to the relationship in an ethical manner.

Holmgren's insights suggest that going through the process of self-forgiveness can not only liberate people who are prone to reproaching themselves endlessly, but also enhance their moral development and ability to relate ethically toward others. *Self-forgiveness is morally beneficial because it can facilitate the effort to acknowledge wrongdoing while simultaneously affirm one's value as a person*. Most people have experienced at least once in their lives a process in which they inflicted pain on another individual, followed by a recognition that their words or actions caused harm to this person, feeling ashamed at themselves for this transgression, and finally an attempt to apologize or make amends to the injured party. Yet, my analysis suggests that self-forgiveness should also be considered an essential part of this developmental process. If by education we mean (among other things) an enterprise in which moral development occurs, then acknowledging wrongdoing and experiencing shame followed by self-forgiveness are indispensable for successfully navigating that process.

The example of Lin indicates that since he is still negotiating the task of self-forgiveness, his moral development is "incomplete." In saying that Lin's moral development is incomplete, my intention is not to judge him, but to suggest that he is yet to resolve issues of guilt and shame, which hinder his moral development. Of course, to be in such a position is normal for someone who has endured as much pain and suffering as Lin. Yet, Roberts closes *Shantaram* by reminding us that Lin's struggles are not that different from our own battles, as individuals who are working through personal transgressions and negative emotions:

> For this is what we do. Put one foot forward and then the other. Lift our eyes to the snarl and smile of the world once more. Think. Act. Feel. Add our little consequences to the tides of good and evil that flood and drain the world. Drag our shadowed crosses into the hope of another night. Push

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our brave hearts into the promise of a new day.[26]

The point is that to be human is to be developing, on the way to accomplishing various projects, stumbling along and going forward, succumbing to and resisting temptations. And, like Lin, to be human is to transgress, experience shame, and strive to forgive.

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1 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 177.

2 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

3 Arendt, 241.

4 Arendt, 237, emphasis added.

5 Arendt, 241.

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

7 Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*.

8 George Jacinto, "Caregivers' Coping and Self-Forgiveness After the Death of a Care-Receiver," *Journal of Social Service Research* 36, no. 3 (2010): 206-215, 207.

9 Douglas Stewart, "Thinking About Forgiveness: A Philosophical Preamble to its Cultivation in Schooling," *Journal of Thought* 47, no. 1 (2012): 66-95, 68.

10 Stewart, "Thinking About Forgiveness," 71.

11 Stewart, 72.

12 Margaret Walker, "*Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 153.

13 Walker, Moral Repair, 161.

14 Walker, 161.

15 Robin Dillon, "Self-Forgiveness and Self Respect," *Ethics* 112, no. 1 (2001): 53-83,63.

16 Byron Williston, "The Importance of Self-Forgiveness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2012): 67-80.

17 Dillon, "Self-Forgiveness and Self Respect," 63.

18 Williston, "The Importance of Self-Forgiveness."68.

19 Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 124.

20 Roberts, *Shantaram*, 124.

21 Dillon, "Self-Forgiveness and Self Respect," 83.

22 Margaret Holmgren, "Self-Forgiveness and Responsible Moral Agency," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 32, no. 1 (1998): 75-91, 85.

23 Holmgren, "Self-Forgiveness and Responsible Moral Agency," 81.

24 Holmgren, 82.

25 Holmgren, 90.

26 Roberts, *Shantaram*, 933.

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