

Dissertation Abstract

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Two commonly accepted theses are that we ought to get what we deserve and that it is good to forgive. Aristotle's account of the nature of blame, however, highlights a tension between these two claims that is often overlooked in contemporary discussions which challenges whether we can really affirm the value of both blame and forgiveness. I argue that we can, but this will require us to re-examine the value of demanding what we are owed.

The tension arises because when we forgive, we stop blaming on some basis other than desert. After all, if an agent doesn't deserve to be blamed, we might excuse her, but we don't forgive her since blame was never justified in the first place. But according to Aristotle, honor demands that the wronged agent continue to blame the wrongdoer until the wrongdoer remedies the condition that warrants blame. An agent who stops blaming on grounds other than desert accepts less than what she is owed, which is servile behavior that implies that she underestimates her own worth and condones the wrongdoer's lack of respect. The honorable person on Aristotle's account, however, knows what she is worth and expects to receive what she is owed. To do otherwise—to accept less than what she deserves—would undermine her own honor and indicate a lack of self-respect. Thus, Aristotle's response to the tension between desert and forgiveness is to reject forgiveness as dishonorable.

Against Aristotle, however, I argue that rejecting forgiveness would undermine the possibility of flourishing for the wronged individual and not just the wrongdoer, since cultivating the disposition to be forgiving promotes the forgiving agent's control over her own peace of mind, agency, and contribution to communal life. Contra Aristotle and contemporary critics who contend that forgiveness undermines self-respect, I argue that forgiveness can be a powerful tool for protecting self-respect and affirming the value of one's own judgments. In many circumstances, forgiving may be the only way of taking back agency that has been lost since forgiveness does not depend on the offender or on luck, but rather on the harmed agent's choice—she may forgive the offender no matter what he does. Rather than reflecting a lack of self-respect, forgiveness is actually a vehicle through which it is preserved.

The choice to forgive and let go of what one deserves does not entail that honor is relinquished. For Aristotle, maintaining honor requires that a wronged agent must always demand her due since her honor depends on both getting what she deserves and on her relative status. However, unlike outwardly-mediated Aristotelian honor, I defend an alternative account of honor in which honor lies not in demanding what is deserved but instead in a commitment to an identity on which an agent's own coherent and compelling ethical values are central. On the account I defend, an agent's honor is undermined only when she fails to live up to her own commitment to be a certain sort of person, and thus cannot be undercut if she fails to receive what she deserves from other people. My account thus both reconciles Aristotelian blame with forgiveness and explains what is compelling about honor even in our modern world.