

compos mentis

The Value of Withholding Forgiveness: An Intermediary between Violence and Forgiveness

Sidney VanMeter

Ball State University

ABSTRACT

While Frantz Fanon argues that violence is the best way to overcome victimization, the more popular view seems to be that of Charles Griswold. Charles Griswold argues that forgiveness is a virtue that requires a mutual relationship between the victim and their antagonist. In this paper, I will argue for a moral alternative that falls in the middle of the spectrum between Fanon and Griswold. I argue for withholding forgiveness as a moral alternative to either forgiveness or violence.

KEYWORDS

Forgiveness, Virtue, Morality, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Resentment is an issue well known to each of us. We have all been consumed by a feeling of bitterness or anger towards someone at sometime who has done us wrong. However, the way we ought to respond to this wrongdoing is still widely up for debate. For the purposes of this paper, moral transgression will be defined as an unjust action against another person. Within this definition, there will be two actors: the wrongdoer and the wronged. The wrongdoer is the person(s) who committed the moral transgression against another person, thus harming them in some way. The wronged is the person(s) who was injured by the moral transgression. In this paper, I aim to explore two opposing viewpoints on how victims should respond to moral transgressions. I will first explore the ideas of Frantz Fanon in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Here I will offer an interpretation of his ideas on violence and decolonization as a tool to overcome resentment and subjugation. I will then explore the more recent ideas of Charles Griswold on forgiveness as a virtuous way to let go of resentment. Finally, after exploring issues within these two theories, I will articulate my own view of overcoming the injuries caused by a moral transgression through withholding forgiveness.

ON VIOLENCE AND POWER

In the first chapter of his book, Frantz Fanon argues that it is necessary for subjugated people to use violence in order for them to fully recover and allow decolonization. His main idea in this chapter can be best encapsulated in the following quote:

At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence. Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic, and even if they have been demobilized by rapid decolonization, the people have time to realize that liberation was the achievement of each and everyone and no special merit should go to the leader. Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader. (Fanon 1963, 51).

For Fanon, the relationship between the wrongdoers and the wronged is one where the moral transgression has shifted the equity of power and moral worth

in favor of the wrongdoers, leaving the wronged in a place of subjugation and resentment. Although Fanon's focus is on decolonization and the subjugation of groups of people, I think his ideas can also be applied to moral transgressions in general.

In his theory, Fanon is advocating fighting violence with violence. This idea can be applied in other ways too. If you break Fanon's theory down, it is essentially the idea that to restore equity of power after a moral transgression has occurred, the response must work to counterbalance the transgression. So for example, if someone harms you and thus takes away some of your power and value as a person we could quantify that by saying that they hurt you in the amount of negative m ($-m$). Well, if you just forgive them or forget about the transgression, that does not remove $-m$. Fanon is saying that in order to remove $-m$, the victim must respond with a force of $+m$. Thus, in order for the equity of power and moral value to be restored, you must have $+m$ to counterbalance $-m$ and leave the balance back at zero so power has not been lost or gained by any person(s). This power balance seems to function as a way to restore status that was lost. When a moral transgression occurs, the victim's status is injured and they are subjected to the victim status and lose power. So rectifying this power imbalance is about restoring the lost status and power of the victim. For Fanon, this is the only way for the wronged to ever be able to be cleansed and move on from the moral transgression.

For example, consider three daughters with a narcissistic father who has emotionally abused them for his own gain. Their father committed actions against them that harmed their overall well-being for the rest of their life. He constantly manipulated them for his own selfish good. By doing this, the father subjugated his daughters to the victim position. This moral transgression shows the power balance discussed by Fanon. Now Fanon's "fight fire with fire" theory would mean that in this situation the daughters would need to react to their father's moral transgressions with forcefulness. They must in some way subjugate their father in order to restore the power balance and cleanse themselves of resentment for him. Without some kind of equal power against the father, the daughters will remain in the subjugated victim position, and the moral transgression will not be resolved. This eye for an eye justice mentality differs greatly from the forgiveness discussed by Charles Griswold.

ON THE VIRTUE OF FORGIVENESS

In his book, Charles Griswold offers up a response to moral transgressions that is completely opposite that of Fanon. Griswold argues that forgiveness is a virtue that requires the wronged to let go of resentment completely. Griswold says:

“The transformations that the offender and victim undergo are mutually dependent, in our paradigm case of dyadic forgiveness, and they are asymmetrical. Both of these features lend forgiveness highly unusual, if not unique, characteristics as a virtue” (Griswold 2007, 47).

To unpack this, Griswold is laying out the basics of his requirements for forgiveness. Griswold’s idea of forgiveness requires a communicative relationship between the wrongdoer and the wronged after the moral transgression that occurred. In this relationship, both the wrongdoer and the wronged must meet certain prerequisites before forgiveness can be achieved. For the wrongdoer, these prerequisites are as follows:

the wrongdoer must take responsibility for the action,

the wrongdoer must admit the action was wrong,

the wrongdoer must feel and show regret for the action,

the wrongdoer must commit to change through action and word,

the wrongdoer must show an understanding of the injury done to the victim from their perspective,

and finally, the wrongdoer must give a reasonable story as to how the moral transgression came to occur and why they are now worthy of forgiveness (Griswold 2007, 49-51).

Once these requirements have been accomplished by the wrongdoer, then forgiveness is possible.

However, in Griswold's theory, forgiveness also has certain requirements for the wronged to complete. These requirements for the wronged are as follows:

the wronged must indefinitely refuse to seek revenge,

the wronged must abate their resentment for the wrongdoer,

the wronged must commit to eradicating resentment completely,

the wronged must change their view that the wrongdoer is a villain,

the wronged must change their view that they are morally superior to the wrongdoer and acknowledge their equal value as human beings,

and finally, the wronged must declare to the wrongdoer that they are forgiven (Griswold 2007, 54-58).

These rules can also be applied to the daughter example in the previous section. In this case, each daughter would have an individual relationship of forgiveness with the father. For forgiveness to then occur, the father would have to acknowledge the feelings of each daughter, take responsibility for wronging each daughter, commit to change, and ask for forgiveness. Then each daughter would individually need to let go of resentment, acknowledge that their father is not a villain, and then offer forgiveness. This kind of forgiveness is a team effort, that emphasizes letting go of resentment as an important part of the response to a moral transgression.

SIMILAR GOALS AND PROBLEMS

Despite their major differences, Griswold and Fanon's theories have some similar goals. Griswold's theory requires that the wrongdoer must apologize and take responsibility for the harm done, and at the same time the wronged must acknowledge that they are not morally superior to the wrongdoer. In this way, Griswold is also displaying the role of a power struggle in moral transgressions. These requirements seem to be an attempt to make the wrongdoer and wronged

equal in their standing as moral agents. In this way, Griswold makes an attempt to restore the power balance back to zero in the same way that Fanon's theory does.

In addition to these two theories having the common goal of returning the power balance between wrongdoer and wronged back to neutral, both theories have the goal of ending lasting negative emotions after a moral transgression. In Fanon's theory, his aim is to propose a way that colonized peoples can break free and cleanse themselves of subjugation and inferiority. For Griswold, his aim is to eliminate resentment. While these are noble and important goals, these theories fall short of perfection in a few areas.

One big issue with Fanon's theory is its potential to make the wronged act immorally. By fighting violence with violence, the wronged put themselves on the same level as the wrongdoer. Responding to a moral transgression with violence or other harmful means only allows the negativity to spread. There is the old saying that "with an eye for an eye the whole world goes blind", meaning that if everyone responds to wrong by doing more wrong, eventually everyone will be a wrongdoer. So Fanon's theory doesn't seem to have enough moral boundaries to ensure positive change through moral action. Griswold, on the other hand, has too harsh of boundaries. By calling forgiveness a virtue, Griswold implies that victims ought to forgive. Griswold then creates all kinds of requirements that must be met for forgiveness occur. It is problematic to morally obligate a victim to forgive, but then make it such a daunting task for the person who has been harmed. Justice seems to be lacking here because the wrongdoer is not receiving a real punishment for the wrong they committed. In this dyadic forgiveness, the wronged has to put in as much work as the wrongdoer, which makes it seem as though the wrongdoer is getting away without any real punishment for the moral transgression they committed. While these two theories have similar goals, they fall on opposite ends of the spectrum and are problematic in their own ways.

AN INTERMEDIARY

Based on these two theories, there are two main ways to respond to a moral transgression. A person can either respond with violence or anger in order to wipe the slate clean, or the wronged and wrongdoer can work together to restore their equal standing and move on from the transgression. At the base of the problem here is the fact that a moral transgression has occurred that in some way harmed the power or standing of the wronged as a human being. This power

has been taken from the victim and transferred to the wrongdoer, making them have a superior standing. Therefore, a good moral theory in response to this problem must both acknowledge the victimization of the wronged while also aiming to restore the power balance in an ethical way. Griswold's theory fails to meet the first criterion because it does not fairly makeup for the victimization of the wronged, while Fanon's theory does not fulfill the second criterion because it fails to restore the balance in a morally acceptable way. That is why I propose an intermediary between the two that will achieve the goals of both while also avoiding the problems of both.

My intermediary solution is the option to withhold forgiveness. Griswold would most definitely disagree with this idea because he says:

We justly blame a person who is unable to forgive, when forgiveness is warranted, and judge that person as hard-hearted. The person who finds all wrongs unforgivable seems imprisoned by the past, unable to grow, confined by the harsh bonds of resentment. He or she might also strike us as rather too proud, even arrogant, and as frozen in an uncompromising attitude. (Griswold 2007, xiv)

This quote from Griswold represents the common conception about people who choose not to forgive. Contemporary cultures often elevate forgiveness to a moral pedestal as a virtue, especially Christian cultures whose religion is based on the radical forgiveness exhibited by Jesus Christ. However, I will argue that withholding forgiveness, under certain conditions, can occur without all of these negative misconceptions such as anger, arrogance, and resentment. When withholding forgiveness is used without negative misconceptions, it can restore the balance to zero in a just way.

In order to illustrate this point, I am going return to the example of the three daughters. In this scenario, the father is on his deathbed. He repents and asks for forgiveness from his daughters so he can die in peace. Daughter 1 harbors bitterness and resentment against her father, and she chooses not to forgive him. Daughter 2 also chooses to not forgive her father. She has grown to understand the underlying causes of his wrongdoings, and has moved on from bitterness and resentment, no longer feeling like a powerless victim. She believes forgiveness would not help her and would only be helping her father. Daughter 3, does choose

to forgive her father. She tried to let go of the anger but was unable to until she forgave her father on his deathbed and found closure.

From this example, several important things can be gleaned. First, it is important to note that all three daughters had their own response and relationship with the wrongdoer. In the example, both Daughter 2 and Daughter 3 were able to move on and set the power balance back to zero, thus accomplishing the goals of the theories studied in this paper. Daughter 1 is the only daughter who seems to be acting immorally. She is the definition of Griswold's bitter victim who denies forgiveness out of rage. By doing so, she does not solve the problem of the moral transgression. She continues to be subjugated by her father indirectly because of her feelings of anger and resentment.

Using this example, I would like to outline my premises on how to morally respond to a moral transgression by withholding forgiveness. They are as follows:

- (1) the choice to forgive is individual; it never requires all victims to collectively grant or withhold forgiveness,

- (2) the decision to forgive is completely autonomous of the antagonist and is a decision that can be made by the victim regardless of repentance,

- (3) both forgiveness and withholding forgiveness are right if and only if they are done without resentment and equalize the power shift caused by a moral transgression.

My theory focuses on keeping the wronged in mind. Because they were the ones who were victimized, they should be thought of first when it comes to responding to moral transgressions. The goal of my theory is to provide the victim with options. The goal is to solve the problem of the power balance caused by moral transgressions without further victimizing the wronged. By giving the wronged complete autonomy over the choice to forgive or not forgive, some power is restored back to them.

Withholding forgiveness is often seen in a negative light. However, forgiveness being withheld in this case can be a mechanism for justice. Using the example above, the father was repenting only because he is dying. He may be genuine in his apology and fulfill all of Griswold's six requirements, but that doesn't

change the fact that he tormented his daughters throughout their whole life. In a situation like this, Griswold's theory of forgiveness would be continuing to give the wrongdoer power. Morally obligating the victim to work with their antagonist benefits the wrongdoer more than it benefits the wronged. It does not bring the power balance back to zero because it sympathizes more with the wrongdoer and does not account for histories of injustice. By withholding forgiveness in this example, Daughter 2 has not allowed her father to subjugate her one last time. She has given him a just punishment for the moral transgressions he has committed, and she has done so without malice or resentment. Withholding forgiveness needs to be seen as a valid moral alternative to forgiveness because it is the best healing mechanism for a lot of victims. Forgiveness and withholding forgiveness are not mutually exclusive either. A wronged person could choose to withhold forgiveness, but at a later point decide forgiveness is a better option for them. Either option works as long as the wronged had found a way to end resentment and feel empowered again. Based on this explanation, withholding forgiveness can be defined as a temporary or permanent refusal to grant forgiveness as a way to maintain independence and prevent further subjugation from a wrongdoer. Withholding forgiveness requires the wronged to not harbor resentment, and to use the withholding of forgiveness as a way to gain empowerment and end their own subjugation as a victim. This does not require the victim to have empathy or understanding for the wrongdoer. In the example above, Daughter 2 has come to understand the causes of her father's behavior. But there could be some cases of withholding forgiveness that lack this understanding element and manifest more as detaching oneself from the wrongdoer as a form of self-preservation. The main point of withholding forgiveness is to give the victim options and not give the wrongdoer any more power over them. That is why the only real requirement for withholding forgiveness is that it empowers the victim by helping them let go of resentment. Additionally, it is important to note that the thoughts and opinions of people other than the victim should not play a role in the victim's choice to forgive or not to forgive. Some might object to withholding forgiveness because they may view it as a form of revenge. But withholding forgiveness, as defined here, is not a form of vengeance or anger. Rather, it is a moral way for victims to stand up for themselves and feel empowered. It is not an attack against the wrongdoer; it is a redemption for the victim that allows them to be free of the tyranny and subjugation caused by the wrongdoer.

CONCLUSION

By arguing for withholding forgiveness, I am by no means conceding that forgiveness is an invalid option. I argue that what is best for the victims and solves the power balance is the best option. This can vary on a case by case basis, as shown by the comparison of Daughter 2 and Daughter 3. The goal of my intermediary is simply to give the wronged a second option other than obligatory forgiveness. For some wronged, forgiveness does not set the power balance back to zero. For some wronged, forgiveness is a continuance of subjugation and giving in to their wrongdoer. For others, forgiveness gives them the power and closure needed. Because of this difference in the disposition of the wronged, our opinion of withholding forgiveness needs to change. It should be viewed as a valid means of restoring power to those who have been victimized. Withholding forgiveness is not violent, it does not harm anyone. Rather, it is a way for victims to accept what happened to them and take a stance they feel comfortable with. If forgiveness is a virtue, then withholding forgiveness should be too because it is courageous. By withholding forgiveness, a victim stands up for themselves in a positive and impactful way. Allowing forgiveness and withholding of forgiveness accomplishes all the things Fanon and Griswold are aiming for. It helps solve the power imbalance Fanon worries about while also providing a morally acceptable response to wrongdoing that Griswold is seeking. For this reason, it is a perfect intermediary between the two theories.

REFERENCES

- Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Griswold, Charles. 2007. *Forgiveness A Philosophical Explanation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.