

Clearing Up Client Confusion Regarding the Meaning of Forgiveness: An Aristotelian/Thomistic Analysis With Counseling Implications

Robert D. Enright

Although the construct of forgiveness is popular in research and counseling, there remains considerable confusion surrounding this topic. This article examines the likely errors clients may bring to counseling regarding the meaning of forgiveness. The author uses an Aristotelian/Thomistic perspective to analyze error in understanding forgiveness and concludes that client misunderstanding and the resultant fear of attempting to forgive are oftentimes rooted not in understanding forgiveness itself, but instead in focusing on 1 of 2 vices surrounding that construct. The author recommends bringing this misunderstanding to clients so that they can better decide for themselves whether or not to forgive others.

Keywords: forgiveness counseling, Aristotle, Aquinas, vices

Since the late 1980s (see Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989), a host of books and journal articles have discussed the importance of forgiveness within the helping professions (e.g., Enright, 2012; Enright & North, 1998; Luskin, 2003; Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2001; Wade, Worthington, & Haake, 2009). A study by Freedman and Chang (2010) shows that despite this growing literature, people who are not psychologists or philosophers misunderstand what forgiveness is to a large extent, equating it with “moving on,” just “letting a situation go,” and even reconciliation. Such misunderstanding can lead to confusion and, more seriously, to what some call hasty forgiveness, not in the client’s best interest (Lamb & Murphy, 2002; McNulty, 2011; Murphy, 2005).

Because such misunderstanding can lead clients to fear forgiveness and to hesitate even discussing it, in this essay I explain, from a philosophical perspective, what the central misunderstandings of the term *forgiveness* might be and why they might occur. As counselors, if we can understand the errors clients are likely to present when thinking about or practicing forgiveness, then we are in a better position to recognize these and to help clients more clearly understand what forgiveness is before they either accept or reject it as a counseling strategy. The question, then, is this: What errors regarding forgiveness are clients likely to bring into counseling, and how

Robert D. Enright, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Wisconsin–Madison and International Forgiveness Institute, Inc., Madison, Wisconsin. The author wishes to thank Kevin Enright and Amber Fleisch for their helpful ideas. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Robert D. Enright, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1025 West Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706 (e-mail: renright@wisc.edu).

© 2014 by the American Counseling Association. All rights reserved.

can counselors better understand from where these errors originate? I will use as my philosophical foundation for answering this question a particular model for understanding any of the moral virtues, of which forgiveness is one: the Aristotelian/Thomistic framework. I chose this particular framework because it offers a clear understanding of human error (called *vices* in this model) when trying to understand and appropriate virtues. It also is a relatively simple framework, thus easy for a client to grasp.

I would like to take a moment to say what this article is not. First, it is not an attempt to create a general philosophical model of forgiveness, but instead to address one small but important issue: Why are people likely to misunderstand forgiveness, and when they do, what errors are likely to emerge? Second, it is not an attempt to review the philosophy of forgiveness, but instead to use one particular philosophy, the Aristotelian/Thomistic position, because it addresses, in a succinct and clear way, error in understanding any virtue. By placing the analysis of error into this framework, I am not assuming that other models are not viable. Third, I am not attempting to situate all of forgiveness within a Hellenistic and medieval Thomistic position. I am appropriating this model because it can address the central question of client error in understanding forgiveness. With these clarifications in place, I first delineate the Aristotelian/Thomistic framework and from there describe likely client error in understanding and appropriating forgiveness. The article ends with implications for the counselor.

The Aristotelian View of the Virtues

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses a number of virtues (with forgiveness implied under the virtue of magnanimity) in which he makes the following seven claims (drawn from Simon, 1986): All virtues are concerned with the good of human welfare; the one who practices a given virtue has motivation to effect the moral good (it does not just happen by chance or by mistake); at least to a limited degree, the one who practices a virtue knows that the expression of it is good even if he or she does not articulate a precise moral principle underlying the virtue's expression; moral virtues are practiced by the person and in the practice is growth toward the perfection of that virtue; the person practicing a virtue need not be perfect in the expression of it toward the other; different people demonstrate different degrees of the virtue; and the person who is practicing the moral virtue tries to do so as consistently as he or she can.

Each virtue is bounded by certain vices, representing roughly a shortage or an excess of that virtue. In the example of courage, the shortage is cowardice and the excess is reckless bravado. In the one case of shortage, the person practicing the vice could be passive, threatening the lives of others. In the other case of excess, the person practicing the vice could be intemperately active, threatening one's own life (e.g., a nonswimmer jumping into a river to save a dog) or the lives of others (e.g., a person panicking in a theater that suddenly catches fire).

The Virtue of Forgiveness

Forgiveness as a moral virtue is an aspect of mercy (in which the one exercising the virtue has compassion and clemency in the context of a certain power over the other; see Enright, 2012). Mercy is a part of charity or agape love (in which the one exercising the virtue is in service to others). See Brown (2009) for a discussion of the Thomistic view of forgiveness as centered in charity or agape love (see also Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). As a moral virtue, forgiveness also possesses the seven earlier-mentioned characteristics. The forgiver exercises the virtue out of good for others, is motivated to do good (not just to feel better for the self), knows it is good, practices the virtue, does so imperfectly, may do so even more imperfectly than others, and tries to be consistent in the practice.

Forgiveness, then, is more than a skill, a coping strategy, or a commitment. Skills can be devoid of moral content (e.g., hitting a tennis ball well), as can coping strategies (e.g., relaxation training). A commitment with its dedication to action and conscious choice shares certain features of a moral virtue but lacks the follow-through of actually performing the behavior connected with the motivation and decision to act. To commit to working in a soup kitchen does not fulfill the requirement of going there and dipping the ladle into the soup pot (see Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, for more on the Aristotelian analysis of forgiveness).

To forgive is not to condone (which is not a moral virtue), to forget (not a virtue), or to reconcile. Reconciliation is always between two or more people, whereas forgiveness, as a moral virtue, occurs within one person and is expressed as goodness by that one person. Thus, an unjustly treated person can exercise the virtue of forgiveness but then not reconcile with the other if he or she remains a danger.

The Vices Surrounding Forgiveness

To my knowledge, no publication has ever discussed the vices surrounding forgiveness. My first attempt here, then, should not be seen as definitive but instead as the beginning of the conversation. What vices might surround forgiveness?

I first turn to the issue of a shortage of forgiveness. One may get some hints by examining Thomas Aquinas's discussion in *Summa Theologiae* (written from 1265 to 1274) of the vice connected to charity or agape love, which he called *acedia*, a kind of laziness or sloth. *Acedia* is not only physical laziness or a decision not to act, but also an inner sorrow or weariness that accompanies the physical inactivity. *Acedia*, then, is a shortage of charity in which the person indulges in self-pursuits instead of serving others (*Summa Theologiae*, II.2, Q. 35.1, 10, 2; I-II, 74, 4). For forgiveness, *acedia* would take the form of indifference toward the other person. Not acknowledging the other as a person or willfully ignoring him or her in a broad and deep sense would be two examples. When a client who came to me for help heard that forgiveness and reconciliation need not occur together, she smiled upon

leaving. The next time we met, she proclaimed, "Well, since forgiveness can occur without reconciliation, I forgave my husband and then I walked out on him." This woman had a certain weariness regarding solving existing problems with her husband, and she admitted to self-interest in just being done with the relationship. She did not take the time to do the hard work of either forgiveness or an attempted reconciliation. We then had to spend time undoing her erroneous thinking about the interplay (or in her thinking, the dichotomizing) of forgiveness and reconciliation and exploring her interest in doing the necessary work involved in forgiving and reconciling.

Yet another possible candidate for a shortage of forgiveness is hatred. A popular quotation (based on the number of times it is quoted by scholars such as Kreeft, 1990, and others) by Aquinas is, "Love must precede hatred, and nothing is hated save through being contrary to a suitable thing which is loved. And hence it is that every hatred is caused by love" (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 29, Art. 2). The paradox here is that a shortage, in the case of forgiveness, occurs when there is an excess of a negative emotion (in this case, hatred).

Either acedia, characterized by behavioral and emotional passivity, or hatred, characterized by overarousal of emotions and concomitant action, might be one of the important vices connected with forgiveness. I frequently encounter young adults, when abandoned by a parent, exclaiming, "Forgiveness! Why should I bother? He left me." The strong negative emotions block, at least for a while, even a civil discussion of what forgiveness is and is not. I find it helpful to point out to the client that he or she is likely angry at the other person and the situation rather than at the idea of forgiveness. Of course, it is always the client's choice whether or not to explore the concept of forgiveness.

To my knowledge, and importantly for the understanding of forgiveness, Aquinas and others in this tradition have not discussed a vice that represents the excess of charity or agape love. Perhaps this is the case because there is no such thing as an excess of agape love. It is boundless, and therefore when properly understood and practiced, does not become distorted in an excessive way.

Contemporary writers discuss "love burnout" (see, e.g., Kuriansky, 2001), but it seems to be more of an exhaustion rather than something analogous to an excess of love. The nuance here seems to be a lack of love, doing for others without a deep understanding of what love is or even a lack of the proper motivation (discussed earlier) to effect genuine love. Meeting others' needs continually without a motive of goodness toward them, not seeing such practice as good, and continual practice without refreshment (in other words, three distortions that are the direct opposite of what a virtue is) may lead to this burnout.

Rather than burnout (for lack of a better word), a vice that may be placed in the "excessive forgiveness" category is willful ignorance. Willful ignorance, a vice discussed by Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 76, Art. 1, a.3), occurs when a person refrains from gaining more or full knowledge about a circumstance or behavior. Willful ignorance occurs when a person knows something is a vice but ignores the evidence. An example is when a cigarette smoker deliberately ignores the scientific evidence of tobacco's harm or turns his or her back on the evidence with no attempt to quit.

In the case of forgiveness, such willful ignorance can take two forms. In the first, a person who has a negative emotional reaction to the topic fixates on a certain definition (e.g., to forgive is to reconcile, or to forgive is to condone wrong behavior) without further investigation, rejecting the virtue out of hand. The unwillingness to enter into dialogue about the virtue, about its specific difference with finding excuses, then, would characterize this vice of willful ignorance. In one example, not uncommon, a client kept resisting the idea of forgiveness until it came out that he thought he had to find an excuse for his parents' continual insensitivity. When his thinking was gently challenged (that he need not find an excuse for his parents' behavior but can label it as unjust), his fear of the forgiveness process diminished considerably.

In the second form, a person may distort, not forgiveness, but the injustice itself that has led to a decision about forgiveness. Here what is distorted is the understanding of what is right and what is wrong. A woman, for example, may "forgive" her husband and then go back into a physically abusive relationship because she has forgiven him, and so to be a good person she thinks that she must return to the relationship to fulfill her goodness, thus conflating forgiveness with hasty reconciliation. This, of course, would be an unethical practice if the counselor, upon engaging the client in the process of forgiveness, then insisted that she enter once again into harm's way. The idea of forgiveness-as-goodness would not hold in the context of this distortion.

Misunderstanding Persons and Misunderstanding the Virtue

When one examines the vices concerned with the shortage of forgiveness, one sees the primary characteristic as a misunderstanding of persons. To hate or to ignore a person is to not value that person's inherent worth (see Enright, 2012, for a discussion of inherent worth). It is a failure to see the person as who he or she actually is. The woman who left her husband in one of the earlier examples basically dismissed her husband without a great deal of thought. She acted on her feelings and not on who her husband was as a person, or who he is as a person to her.

If my analysis of the "excesses" of forgiveness is correct, then there is no literal excess of forgiveness. This pole, then, is characterized primarily by misunderstandings of what the virtue is. In the case of burnout, it is a failure to see, appreciate, and act on goodness. Instead, it is to see grim obligation rather than goodness, to act out of that grim obligation rather than loving service, and perhaps to be motivated by gain rather than love. In the case of willful ignorance, there are two failures. One is a failure to see any goodness at all in the concept of forgiveness; for example, to forgive is to continually find excuses for the other's harmful behavior. The other failure is to lack discernment about what is just or unjust behavior in others who have done harm; therefore, the one who "forgives" is subject to another's injustice because it is not seen as unjust. This kind of thinking, of course, needs to be corrected in counseling for the protection of the client as a person of inherent worth.

When a client distorts forgiveness through its shortage, and therefore acts out of hatred or sloth, the vice can be seen quite easily by counselors. Acting out of rage or indifference is not subtle. Yet, when clients see this vengeful or passive path as acceptable, then they might conclude that they are justified in clinging to negative emotions or justified in a certain passivity toward a wrongdoer, thus becoming trapped in negative feelings without motivation to change (indifference). Moving a client toward forgiveness would seem to be a positive step in these cases. After all, reducing rage by choosing a moral good such as charity and mercy through forgiveness is an obvious good when placed next to its alternative of hatred. Changing supposed indifference toward a wrongdoer is a good if the alternative is being stuck with smoldering and unconscious resentment. In these cases, forgiveness itself may be seen as a positive goal in counseling.

When a client distorts forgiveness through its excess and therefore acts out of grim obligation or willful ignorance, the vice is not so easily seen because the client might assess his or her decision to try to reconcile as noble. For example, for a woman in an abusive relationship, the first ethical task of a counselor is to protect the client, and if the client, supposedly in the name of forgiveness, is burning out or willfully going back into an abusive relationship, the first tendency in counseling may be to abandon all thought or practice of forgiveness. Under these circumstances, the client actually is not even giving herself the chance to try forgiveness counseling because of the distortion of the virtue with the corresponding vice.

Through this Aristotelian/Thomistic analysis, forgiveness is not always what it appears to be because of the vices surrounding this virtue. If one is not aware of the surrounding vices, especially the subtle vice of willful ignorance, one could easily reject the virtue as dangerous, inappropriate, or even immoral. None of these labels fit the virtue when one takes the classical approach to examining it.

I recommend that counselors interested in forgiveness counseling do the following.

1. When working with a client who shows an interest in forgiveness counseling, first determine whether the client understands forgiveness as a virtue or whether he or she is equating it with one of the surrounding vices. Maria (not her real name) was fuming at her father for abandoning her at age 6. Now a successful college student, she was indignant when her father wanted to be back in her life. Her strong negative emotions toward her father generalized to forgiveness itself, which she thought was inappropriate.

2. If the client is distorting the meaning of forgiveness, is it primarily a shortage of forgiveness or an excess of forgiveness? In Maria's case, she had what I am calling a shortage of forgiveness because she had hatred for a person that blocked clear thinking regarding the moral quality of forgiveness itself.

3. If the distortion is because of a shortage of forgiveness, then a first step may be to discuss the meaning of persons (prior to a discussion of forgive-

ness counseling). Do all people have inherent worth, not because of what they do, but in some cases in spite of what they do? An answer of no might lead the client to think that forgiveness is simply “letting something go” or “walking away from the other” with indifference toward him or her. This examination may help the client more accurately choose whether or not to proceed with forgiveness counseling in which he or she focuses intently (as part of the treatment) on who the offender is as a person. In Maria’s case, it took weeks before she was able to generalize this thought: All persons have inherent (built-in) worth. This includes Maria herself, and it includes her father, not because of what he did but in spite of it.

4. If the distortion is because of an excess of forgiveness, then a first step is to protect the client so that he or she does not, out of willful ignorance, go back into an abusive relationship, thinking that to do so is loving. A counselor also needs to protect a client from the excesses of forgiving from the position of grim obligation (rather than loving service to others) with the negative consequence of possible burnout. Michael (not his real name) felt an obligation to reconcile with his long-time girlfriend even though she had abandoned the relationship over a year ago. Her silence told the story: She will not return. Yet, Michael kept wanting “to hang in there,” even though there was nothing for which he could actually “hang in.” He was being willfully ignorant of the reality of the situation. He was not seeing the injustice (she would not talk with him at all) and its consequences.

5. In the case of willful ignorance, it may be best for the counselor to ascertain whether the distortion concerns the meaning of forgiveness (e.g., the client equates it with excusing) or the meaning of justice (e.g., the client fails to see the wrong in the other’s behavior). In Michael’s case, he failed to grasp the injustice of ignoring and abandonment without an explanation. He understood what forgiveness is; he just could not see that his former partner’s behavior in this case was a serious injustice even though she left without explanation and would not engage him in conversation about her own thoughts and feelings. She was showing a pattern of deliberately ignoring, a theme identified as abusive in relationships (Hines, Mally-Morrison, & Dutton, 2012). Once Michael finally concluded that her process of leaving was unfair, he was able to acknowledge the considerable injustice and then to start a forgiveness process. Forgiveness, it was pointed out, would help with his negative emotions.

6. Following this, once a client works through the preliminaries of understanding the distortion of excess, another step may be to confront any fears that the client has about forgiveness. After all, if the client has spent years engaging in willful ignorance about what is and is not proper forgiveness or what exactly is unjust behavior on a partner’s part, for example, then the client may lack a sense of self-trust in determining what is and what is not appropriate and just behavior. Again, in Michael’s case, he needed cognitive exercises in which he stood firm in the acknowledgment that there indeed was an injustice, that it was not going away, and that forgiveness could help him adjust to the unfairness. He was then ready to engage in the process of forgiving.

Good counseling begins with clear ideas of what the goals are and how to progress toward those goals. Starting the process with distortions, in this case equating the virtue of forgiveness with vices, can only hamper the client's growth process. The purpose of this article was to bring the kind of clarity at the beginning of forgiveness counseling sessions that can better serve both the counselor and the client.

References

- Brown, M. (2009). St. Thomas Aquinas on human and divine forgiveness. *St. Anselm Journal*, 6, 1–8.
- Enright, R. D. (2012). *The forgiving life*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Enright, R. D., & Fitzgibbons, R. (2000). *Helping clients forgive*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Enright, R. D., & North, J. (1998). *Exploring forgiveness*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Enright, R. D., Santos, M., & Al-Mabuk, R. (1989). The adolescent as forgiver. *Journal of Adolescence*, 12, 95–110. doi:10.1016/0140-1971(89)90092-4
- Freedman, S., & Chang, W.-C. R. (2010). An analysis of a sample of the general population's understanding of forgiveness: Implications for mental health counselors. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 32, 5–34.
- Hines, D. A., Mally-Morrison, K., & Dutton, L. B. (2012). *Family violence in the United States: Defining, understanding and combating abuse*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kreeft, P. (1990). *A summa of the Summa*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.
- Kuriansky, J. (2001). *The complete idiot's guide to a healthy relationship*. New York, NY: Alpha.
- Lamb, S., & Murphy, J. (2002). *Before forgiving*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Luskin, F. (2003). *Forgive for good*. San Francisco, CA: Harper One.
- Maio, G. R., Thomas, G., Fincham, F. D., & Carnelley, K. (2008). Unraveling the role of forgiveness in family relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94, 307–319. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.94.2.307
- McCullough, M., Pargament, K., & Thoresen, C. (2001). *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- McNulty, J. K. (2011). The dark side of forgiveness: The tendency to forgive predicts continued psychological and physical aggression in marriage. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37, 770–783. doi:10.1177/0146167211407077
- Murphy, G. (2005). Forgiveness, self-respect, and the value of resentment. In E. L. Worthington (Ed.), *Handbook of forgiveness* (pp. 33–40). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Simon, Y. (1986). *The definition of moral virtue*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Wade, N. G., Worthington, E. L., & Haake, S. (2009). Comparison of explicit forgiveness interventions with an alternative treatment; A randomized clinical trial. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 87, 143–151. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2009.tb00561.x