Forum

On self-forgiveness and moral self-representation

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Nancy Snow's (1993) article, "Self-forgiveness," examined the nature of self-forgiveness and outlined the ontological and moral conditions for forgiveness in interpersonal contexts. She claimed that self-forgiveness (1) is aimed toward the goal of restoration of the self, (2) is necessary to restore our capability to carry on as functioning moral agents, and (3) provides a second-best alternative to interpersonal forgiveness when interpersonal forgiveness is not possible. While she nicely articulated many motivations and conditions for self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, she treats the notion of the self in a simplistic manner and places centrality on interpersonal forgiveness over self-forgiveness. I argue that self-forgiveness (1) is a primary intrapsychic act motivated out of conflict in moral self-representation, (2) is a necessary process in sustaining a cohesive self-image as a moral agent, and (3) has greater ontological and moral priority than interpersonal forgiveness.

Snow defined self-forgiveness as "a teleological process directed to achieving the end of self-restoration or self-rehabilitation" (pp. 75–76). This entails (1) acknowledging to oneself that one has committed a moral failing, and (2) sincerely seeking to improve one's moral way of being in order to restore the self to wholeness. Snow implies that the very integrity of the self is jeopardized after committing a moral transgression which leads to the inability to continue as a moral agent. Her claim suggests that by nature, the self is fragile, prone to stagnation, and lacks cohesion when one breaches a particular (self-defined) moral code. What Snow failed to delineate is the conceptual difference between the notion of the self and that of self-representation. By definition, the self, as a psychological structure, constitutes our totalistic wholeness which is relatively enduring, cohesive, resilient, and transcendental. This consists of cognitive, emotive, motivational, attitudinal, phenomenological, and psychic operations of which we may only be partially aware at any moment. Identity, on the other hand, is consciously defined and redefined by the subject via self-representations. Our moral self-image is determined by the preponderance and quality of moral self-representations (for example, how you represent yourself to yourself as a moral being).

I argue that the self does not become depleted of moral agency after moral transgressions, but only our conscious self-representation of ourselves as a moral person. Upon acknowledging a moral wrongdoing, our self-representation as a moral being is immediately challenged, which results in intrapsychic conflict due to the antithetical

clash between one's moral self-representation and the immoral action under question. In most cases, forgiveness is sought and our positive self-representation is restored. However, it is our self-image which is restored, not the self itself. If the self were to become so paralyzed or fragmented after a moral transgression, then this would most likely reflect developmental deficits or constitutional psychopathologies of the self (see Kohut, 1977).

Snow asserted that self-forgiveness is central in "restoring our capability for agency after we have wronged or harmed others" (p. 79). But we never lose agency. Agency is omnipresent and is the essence of our ontological existence. We can never not choose; we always have the capability of choice even if we consciously believe otherwise. Secondly, our ability to function as moral agents only becomes attenuated when we choose not to accept responsibility for our thoughts and actions (even if this choice is unconscious). Again, if someone feels unable to carry on and function as a moral agent, it is due to a conflict in the person's self-representation and identity as a "good" ethical person. Therefore, the teleological purpose of self-forgiveness is first and foremost an intrapsychic action aimed toward the amelioration of a depleted self-image as a moral being.

Snow also stated that "self-forgiveness can provide a second best alternative to interpersonal forgiveness in situations which full interpersonal forgiveness is not or cannot be achieved" (p. 75). I believe that self-forgiveness is a necessary precursor to interpersonal forgiveness and is not merely a second-best alternative. Snow gives weight to interpersonal forgiveness prior to self-forgiveness for moral wrongdoings. Therefore, self-forgiveness is conditional on interpersonal forgiveness or lack thereof. This places the locus of control with others and appears to be a denial of agency or a bad faith action. But interpersonal forgiveness is more meaningful and authentic only once self-forgiveness has been achieved. That is, we have accepted a moral failing which is a direct betrayal of our self-image as a moral being, have in good faith atoned to ourselves, and now seek to make good to another. If we do not initiate the process of self-forgiveness prior to interpersonal forgiveness, then we are placing responsibility on the other and refusing to accept radical responsibility for our ontological obligation. Self-forgiveness and moral self-representation requires a thorough and ongoing self-analysis of our moral way of being. As Snow nicely pointed out, this entails accepting our limitations, changing them if possible, and having the courage to be imperfect.

References

Kohut, Heinz (1977). *The Restoration of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.
Snow, Nancy E. (1993). "Self-forgiveness," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 27: 75–80.