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Jeffrie G. Murphy, GETTING EVEN: FORGIVENESS AND ITS LIMITS

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things that exist by the occurrence of modes, and Leftow applies this to the Persons of the Trinity, which are understood to be event-based in such a way that they are founded upon a substance (p. 374). Leftow thinks that the Trinity “arises” because God lives His life in three streams of events at once. Each stream is the life of a person, and each person exists as the occurrence of a Lockean mode. In order to make this claim plausible, Leftow appeals to temporary identity theories, and so is committed to a contingent identity thesis.

Overall, *Persons: Human and Divine* is a great anthology. The editors did a terrific job of drawing together numerous themes with far-reaching implications for ethics, philosophy of religion, philosophy of action, philosophical theology, and of course philosophy of mind.

Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits by Jeffrie G. Murphy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. ix + 138. Cloth \$22.95; Paper \$16.95.

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One approaches the task of reviewing *Getting Even* by Jeffrie Murphy with some trepidation. With a title like that, what if Prof. Murphy does not like the review and decides to get even? These worries are not entirely misplaced, since he states, “Speaking (as almost any Irishman can) from extensive personal experience as a rather vindictive person, I believe that I have often gotten even with people by actions that were moderate and proportional” (p. 24). But I will risk the review since this is a splendid book in which Murphy offers a defense of vindictive passions and a plea for a “cautious and critical commitment to forgiveness” (p. 38). From the title of the book, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*, one might think that he is simply offering a defense of vindictiveness and praise for getting even, but the overall tone of the book is more balanced—indeed, Murphy is careful to say that he is only offering two cheers (not three) for vindictiveness (p. 26), and his study of vindictive passions leads us into a deepened understanding of forgiveness. Murphy has published many pieces on forgiveness (including *Forgiveness and Mercy*, co-authored with Jean Hampton) and here he continues some of his previous themes and examines new ones as well. A strong bibliography, with some of the entries grouped topically, will also serve readers well.

Getting Even is framed in terms of the question of how we should respond to evil. Much of the book, as indicated in the title, is concerned with two possible responses to evil—vindictiveness and forgiveness—and their proper place and balance. While framing the response to evil in this way suggests that one is either entertaining vindictive passions or forgiving, Murphy recognizes responses to evil between those two options, for example simply being hurt or disappointed by wrong done to one (p. 3).

However, his concern initially is to see to what extent vindictive passions can be defended and to ascertain the role they may play in our individual moral lives and in the moral life of a community. His entry point is the matter of holding vindictive feelings and the question of how quickly someone ought to forgive a wrong, and indeed if forgiveness is always appropriate. After defending the rationality and moral legitimacy of holding vindictive feelings (at least as a possibility for a time), he moves to the virtue of forgiveness. Murphy defines forgiveness as the putting away of resentful feelings (an internal change in the one who has been wronged). He focuses on interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness but chooses not to give an extended discussion of corporate forgiveness (although the topic comes up occasionally, e.g., with references to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission).

Chapter five on “Repentance, Punishment, and Mercy” is particularly strong, and chapter six on “Self-Forgiveness” raises issues as to the coherence of self-resentment and the nature of moral hatred of oneself (following Jean Hampton). In this context, Murphy enriches his definition of forgiveness beyond the overcoming of inner feelings of vindictiveness/resentment and now includes feelings of “anger, hatred, loathing, contempt, indifference, disappointment, or even sadness” (p. 59). In chapter seven (“Forgiveness in Psychotherapy”) he advances the conversation about the role of forgiveness in psychological counseling (sometimes termed “philosophical counseling”) by raising significant concerns about developments in this growing field. One can see this chapter as an applied version of some of Murphy’s concerns expressed earlier in the book about “hasty” forgiveness (see the discussion of “hasty” forgiveness below). And he raises some hard questions about self-forgiveness with the comment “we might wonder if certain persons—by their horrible acts—have not forfeited forever their right to be ‘comfortable’ with themselves [a goal of therapy in forgiveness counseling]” (p. 84). He offers an extended analysis of the question of capital punishment (chapter nine) and its consistency with the Christian doctrine of love and the command to forgive (chapter eight). While his discussion is explicitly about forgiveness and Christianity in these chapters, in most of the text, and even in chapters 8 and 9, his discussion will be of interest to an audience broader than those who claim Christian faith.

I now focus on three of the many issues which Murphy presents in this excellent book: (1) Murphy’s attack on “hasty forgiveness,” (2) his position on repentance as generally a proper condition for forgiveness, and (3) the use of terms such as “getting even” and “vindictive feelings.”

The book targets a “hasty forgiveness” (p. 16) and a “thoughtless and sentimental commitment [to forgiveness]” (p. 38). One initially gets the impression that Murphy would be pleased if when we are wronged we first allow the feelings of resentment to build and even ferment a bit, taking clear stock of how we have been wronged, and then only slowly and carefully move to a consideration of whether or not we are willing to

forgive the perpetrator of the wrong we have received. Furthermore, all such cases might not need to end in forgiveness and that would be just fine morally. What exactly is the target Murphy has in his sights? It is “hasty” (p. 16), “premature” (p. 80), and “quick” (p. 80) forgiveness. Is there much of this type of forgiveness going around these days? Murphy correctly notes the growth in the “forgiveness” industry—texts, self-help books, and even claims for the physical benefits of forgiveness—and suggests that there is too much of this cheap forgiveness these days (one could also note that there is not enough forgiveness in another sense since longstanding grudges also seem prevalent). But I believe his use of “hasty” (his preferred adjective for the type of forgiveness he is targeting) is only on the surface tied to forgiveness in temporal terms. This becomes clear when Murphy discusses what is wrong with “hasty” forgiveness. “Hasty” forgiveness is bad for at least three reasons: it does not preserve one’s self-respect by taking seriously that one has been demeaned by the wrongdoer and therefore diminished by the wrong; it leaves one vulnerable to further attacks by wrongdoers; and it does not preserve the moral integrity of a society (p. 19). These are genuine concerns. Murphy is concerned that emphasis on “quick” forgiveness (or, closely related, the Christian analogue of a required giving of unconditional forgiveness) will result in a servile personality and the breakdown of proper moral responsibility in society. I believe Murphy’s real target is a claimed forgiveness which fails to take seriously the wrong that has been done and the damage it has inflicted to both self and community. One suspects that one could equally label the target as “pseudo-forgiveness” instead of “hasty” forgiveness. Proffered forgiveness which does not take the wrong done seriously is not really forgiveness (“hasty” or otherwise) because there is nothing to forgive.

To make sure that the forgiveness is not “hasty,” i.e., that the forgiveness is genuine (on my reading), Murphy focuses on the place of vindictive passions (this is his way of taking the wrong done seriously; there might be other ways of taking the wrong done seriously without possessing vindictive passions). And he is quite right that when one believes one has been wronged, and feels vindictive passions, the possibility of offering forgiveness is surely in play and that forgiveness would be genuine (i.e., non-“hasty”). Murphy also builds his definition of forgiveness (following the insights of Bishop Butler) on the overcoming of vindictive passions and feelings of resentment; forgiveness “involves a change in inner feeling more than a change in external action” (p. 13). Murphy mentions that “hasty” forgiveness (this change of inner feelings) might be associated with two types of persons—saints or servile personalities (those lacking proper self-respect)—and he focuses on the latter (something we don’t want to be or become) and so is concerned with the proper place for vindictive passions.

But consider briefly some thoughts on saints. “Hasty” (or “quick” or I might think of “prompt”) forgiveness may be in fact genuine forgiveness on the part of a saint. While saints are often acutely aware of their own sin-

fulness (and may experience vindictive passions), they are also characterized as those who (at times) do not internally feel the harm intended by the wrongdoer and are thus able to forgive quickly and naturally. Their moral character has developed to such a stage. Does this make them servile? I think not, since, as Murphy notes elsewhere (p. 78), someone's standing may be unshaken by the attack of the wrongdoer because they may find their deepest self-identity in a religious perspective of reality, or see themselves as God's children. Does the moral order of society break down if saints "quickly" forgive? Perhaps it may, but history also seems to suggest that saints function as a moral compass for society engendering reform among wrongdoers. It appears that we have, then, one type of "hasty" forgiveness which is genuine forgiveness and which perhaps also serves as a counter-example to forgiveness which requires a change in inner feelings. Saints may at least in some cases not experience the vindictive passions and yet their forgiveness toward wrongdoers certainly recognizes that wrong was done or attempted. On Murphy's original model, either the saints do not forgive (since they have no change in internal vindictive passions), or their claimed offering of forgiveness must be accounted for in some other way. One could respond to this counterexample, of course, and preserve the role of vindictive passions and forgiveness as change in internal feelings by considering that saints are a special class of persons who have grown in the handling of vindictive passions and the exercise of forgiveness such that the individual cases of having to deal with vindictive passions and the question of forgiveness have now become generalized into character patterns. What the rest of us seek to accomplish (to forgive) by taking time and effort in individual instances of wrongdoing, comes effortlessly to saints.

A second theme of interest is the relationship between repentance and forgiveness. Murphy offers as almost a mantra the claim that without repentance there is no forgiveness (even though he accepts the powerful results from some instances of forgiveness which precede repentance). The "saintly" forgiveness I have discussed above may fall into this exception category for Murphy. Murphy is surely right that paradigm cases of forgiveness have a genuine movement of repentance on the part of the wrongdoer and a genuine overcoming of vindictive passions on the part of the one wronged and may even include some type of (external) reconciliation between the parties. Why is he concerned about forgiveness being offered without, or prior to, repentance? Among other concerns, he wants to avoid the sense that the prior forgiveness might have coercive force on the one who has yet to repent. This is a significant concern, particularly in cases when the forgiver offers forgiveness and then seems to expect or even demand that the corresponding movement of repentance be given by the wrongdoer. But this worry can also be couched in terms of whether the forgiveness offered is only pseudo-forgiveness rather than genuine forgiveness (seen earlier with the issue of "hasty" forgiveness). One could argue that preemptive "coercive" forgiveness of

the type described is not genuine forgiveness since one's inner vindictive passions have only contingently altered, i.e., this "coercive" forgiveness may be seen as only "potential" forgiveness—"I'll alter my vindictive passions toward you as soon as you repent." But perhaps this is not genuine forgiveness.

Just as Murphy wants to steer clear of a "hasty" or "shallow" forgiveness, he also pushes us to think seriously about what constitutes repentance. Consider this insight, offered in the context of when mercy or pardon ought to be granted: "A truly repentant person, however, would normally see his suffering punishment as *proper* and might ... even seek it out" (Murphy's emphasis, pp. 51–52). I see his emphasis on holding on to vindictive passions (being aware of them, tasting the depth of the wrong one has received) in symmetrical balance with his emphasis on what true repentance really is (awareness of the pain one has inflicted and the appropriateness of suffering and punishment as a result). Thus, the emphasis on awareness of the significance of vindictive passions is equally balanced in his account by an awareness of the depth of genuine repentance.

Finally, consider Murphy's use of the terms "getting even" and "vindictive feelings." While Murphy admits that a range of responses not limited to vindictive passions are possible when one is wronged (disappointment, sadness, etc.), this work is focused on the vindictive passions. The phrase which is the title of book, *Getting Even*, and terms like "vindictive passions" seem to be used to stand in for a wider array of inner states. For example, can "anger" be separated off from the "desire to get even" or "vengeance"? I think so. Hence, it is curious that the cover of the book is from El Greco's *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple*. It seems odd to say that Christ is "getting even" with the money changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals in the temple. Is Christ angry with them and using violence against them? Yes. But is he exacting vengeance against them? Is he "getting even"? I am not so sure. Perhaps my intuitions have been too heavily influenced by common descriptions of the passage in the gospel of John which speak of Christ "cleansing" the temple. Purificatory actions which put the world right need not be vengeful or instances of "getting even." And yet, some of the power of Murphy's treatment of the subject of vindictive passions is precisely that he attempts to free terms like "getting even" and "vindictive passions" from the pejorative overtones which seem to be part of our (or at least my) intuitions.

This brings us back to the purpose of the book: "To render at least plausible my belief that vindictiveness and vengeance possess some positive value, to defend forgiveness in such a way as not utterly to deny that value, [and] to explore how repentance opens the door for legitimate forgiveness" (p. 95). Murphy has certainly made a strong case that attention given to vindictive passions will help one recognize cases of genuine forgiveness. What began as a book defending (to a point) vindictive passions can be seen as developing into a defense of a robust notion of forgiveness.