

# GLS 819: Mercy and Regret: An Inquiry into the Nature of Forgiveness and Apologies

**Introduction to Course.** What are we going to read? What kinds of assignments are required? What are some of the main issues we will discuss?

In terms of readings, I have asked you to read nothing for the first week. Some of you will have read Derrida on your own, but we won't really be talking about his work in detail until the second seminar.

**Week Two: A Hyperbolic Approach to Forgiveness.** I want to start with Derrida for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact that my own introduction to the subject of forgiveness was, to some extent, framed by his approach to two things: (1) the idea of a hyperbolic ethics; and (2) the concept of the unforgiveable. These are two ideas that can be hard to grasp in their entirety and we will likely return to them time and again as the course progresses.

Derrida, Jacques. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. New York & London: Routledge, 2001.

**Week Three: What about the apology?** How important is the apology in relation to forgiveness and other forms of conciliation? Why do we apologize? In fact, just what is an apology?

Nicholas Tavuchis. *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*. Stanford California, Stanford University Press, 1991. Read Chapters One and Two.

Aaron Lazare. *On Apology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

**Week Four: Forms of Apology.** Are there different kinds of apologies and if so, what can we learn about the nature of the apology by examining its sociological dimensions?

Nicholas Tavuchis. *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*. Stanford California, Stanford University Press, 1991. Read Chapters Three, Four, and Conclusion.

Murphy, Jeffrie. *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Read the *Introduction* and Chapter One.

**Week Five: Thinking about Conciliation.** What are some of the issues that are raised when thinking about forgiveness, conciliation, and regret? When we think about conciliation, are we inevitably trading justice for amnesty?

Tutu, Desmond. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday Books, 1999.

Bennett, Christopher. *The Apology Ritual: A Philosophical Theory of Punishment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Read Part 1, *Justifying Punishment*.

**Week Six: Apologies and the Nation-State.** The major issues of our day concerning apologies appear to be state-sponsored apologies. Why are they controversial? Indeed, are they even possible?

Sarat, Austin and Nasser Hussain, eds. *Forgiveness, Mercy, and Clemency*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007. Hussain and Sarat, *Toward New Theoretical Perspectives on Forgiveness, Mercy, and Clemency: An Introduction*, pp. 1 – 15. Linda Ross Meyer, *The Merciful State*, pp. 64 – 116.

Bennett, Christopher. Part 3, *The Apology Ritual*.

**Week Seven: Resentment.** By this point in the course you might be asking yourself whether or not people have an obligation to forgive. You might even be favoring the opposite notion, and wondering if there is an obligation to refuse to forgive. However, given that scholars from various disciplines argue that forgiveness has many benefits (including emotional, psychological, and even health benefits), how could anyone seriously argue against forgiveness? Well, that is what Jean Améry argues, and he does so rather persuasively. This is a powerful personal story of a holocaust survivor, so prepare yourself emotionally.

Améry, Jean. *At the Mind's Limit: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and Its Realities*. Translated by Sidney and Stella Rosenfeld. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1980.

Callard, Agnes. *On Anger*.

**Week Eight: Ancient issues in Forgiveness.** Are there underlying principles upon which all forms of forgiveness are based? What about different kinds of forgiveness historically? How do we make sense of the role of forgiveness in contemporary societies? [I haven't actually listed readings from Homer, but we will tackle a few of the sections from the *Iliad* as these relate to anger and forgiveness.]

\*David Konstan. *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Aaron Lazare. *On Apology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

**Week Nine: Conciliation and (Restorative) Justice.** Among other things, truth commissions raise the related matter of restorative justice, so we will devote a week to that subject. What models of restorative justice help us to better understand the principles underlying conciliation? Is it possible to get to the point of genuine forgiveness by reassessing our passion for justice?

Martha Minow. *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*. Boston: Beacon Books, 1998.

\*Walter J. Dickey. Forgiveness and crime: The possibilities of restorative justice. In *Exploring Forgiveness*. Edited by Robert D. Enright and Joanna North. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, pp. 106 – 120.

**Week Ten: “The quality of mercy is not strained”: *The Merchant of Venice*.**

The subject of the forgiveness of debt is something I didn’t include this term, but here is a chance to have a bit of a break by watching an excellent production of Shakespeare and talk about the nature of debt. There is a great deal to read on this subject, but we will only look at one text.

**Week Eleven: Forgiveness and Reparations.**

Reparations are the third item on Martha Minow’s scheme for what happens between vengeance and forgiveness. But it is a highly contested notion in contemporary society. Some people argue that the past is the past, and revisiting injustices from decades or centuries ago simply makes old wound more painful; others contend that in order to heal those wounds meaningful actions are required, and through reparations such actions are possible.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *The Case for Reparations*. The Atlantic, 2014.

\*Walter J. Dickey. Forgiveness and crime: The possibilities of restorative justice. In *Exploring Forgiveness*. Edited by Robert D. Enright and Joanna North. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, pp. 106 – 120.

\*Elizabeth Kiss. Reflections on restorative justice. In *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*. Edited by Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 68 – 98.

**Week Twelve: Is Forgiveness and Ethical Value?** The question may seem too obvious to answer, and yet there are many ways in which we might view forgiveness as a suspect concept in relation to certain philosophic traditions. For Nietzsche, for instance, forgiveness represented a form of weakness (indeed, many conservative politicians see forgiveness and apologies in precisely that way today). So how do we conceptualize forgiveness in an ethical manner? We are only reading a single article this week as opposed to a complete book or two, but Jankélévitch’s is a challenging philosophical perspective that might lead you to question some of your basic assumptions about all manner of conciliatory gestures. Should we ever forgive anyone? The question seems nonsensical at first blush but wait until you read how Jankélévitch raises the many problems he believes that follow from such behavior.

Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Should We Pardon Them?* *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22 (3) Spring, 1996, pp. 552 – 572.

**Week Thirteen: Conciliation as a Therapeutic Practice.** I want to consider the idea that various kinds of conciliatory action – forgiveness, in particular – can be constituted as a quasi-therapeutic endeavor. This is theme that runs throughout the course, as you will have noted by this point, but there are some writers singularly devoted to the notion that we can achieve a beneficial psychological release by forgiving those who have wronged us.

Enright, Robert, and Joanna North, eds. *Exploring Forgiveness*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Govier, Trudy. *Forgiveness and Revenge*. London and New York: Routledge , 2002.

Engels, Jeremy David. *The Art of Gratitude*. New York: SUNY Press, 2018.

These are the books required for the course, but there will be a few articles also that I will make available via Canvas.

Améry, Jean. *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*. Translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1964. ISBN: 978-0-253021173-6

Bennett, Christopher. *The Apology Ritual: A Philosophical Theory of Punishment*. Paperback: 222 pages. Publisher: Cambridge University Press; Reissue edition (Sept. 30 2010). ISBN: 978-0-521-14700-8

Callard, Agnes. *On Anger*. MIT Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-946511-54-6

Derrida, Jacque. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. New York and London: Routledge University Press. ISBN: 0-414-22712-7

Engels, Jeremy. *The politics of resentment: A genealogy*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015. ISBN: 9-780271-06664-6.

Lazare, Aaron. *On Apology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. ISBN: 0-19-518911-6

Minow, Martha. *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*. Boston: Beacon Books, 1998. ISBN: 978-0-8070-4507-7

Murphy, Jeffrie. *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. ISBN: 0-521-39567-4

Regan, Paulette. *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*. Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-7748-1779-0

Tavuchis, Nicholas. *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*. Stanford California, Stanford University Press, 1991. ISBN: 0-8047-2223-4

Tutu, Desmond. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday Books, 1999. ISBN: 978-0-385-49690-2