

Reflections on Redemption: Rape and Other Wrongs

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I HOLD THAT THE IDEA OF REDEMPTION must be regarded as a possibility—something that is, in principle, possible. I do not think for a moment that most people who commit egregious wrongs ever redeem themselves. Nor, *a fortiori*, do I think that any victim of wrongdoing is obligated to hold out hope for redemption.¹

Now, I think that redemption is something that is earned—and not given. Persons wanting to redeem themselves must do so voluntary and, in every respect, of their own freewill. What is more, their doing so must be motivated by purity of heart, which entails at least the following two things: (a) They are motivated by a deep sense of contrition over the wrong they committed. (b) They are motivated by the desire to do good, and not by the desire for public admiration. Accordingly, a person who engages in redemptive behavior would behave in this manner, though no one in the world should learn about it. Redemptive behavior is not about gaining 15 minutes of fame. This was the point of saying in “Forgiving the Unforgivable” that Adolph Paul-Damascus made his charitable contributions to Jewish foundations anonymously. Doing so was not a publicity stunt for him. Likewise, for his turning himself to the Israeli court.

Now, one question that might be asked is whether there is a wrongdoing for which redemption is simply not possible? It no doubt seems to some women that rape is surely a case in point.

My concern in this regard is that it is somewhat disconcerting to maintain that for all other wrongdoing redemption is, in principle possible, but that as a matter of principle it is in possible in the case of rape. There is no denying the devastation of rape and the psychological scars it leaves. What is more, the depth of the pain of rape is surely tied to the fact that, as one student observed in private correspondence, sex is the ultimate way in which individuals give of themselves to

¹ The remarks in these reflections presuppose considerable familiarity with my essay “Forgiving the Unforgivable,” in *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust*, ed. Eve Gerrard and Geoffrey Scarre (Ashgate Press, 2003).

another. It goes without saying, then, that rape profoundly taints this form of giving.

Alas, this truth alone does not entail that redemption is impossible in the case of rape. At most, it entails what we already know, namely that redemption in this sort of case is extremely difficult to achieve.

But let us consider a person who is an analogue to Adolph Paul-Damascus. There is Opidopo. At the age of 26, he raped a woman—Jamillballu—and left her for dead, though she did not die. For his vicious crime he receives a sentence of 35 years. There are various rumors about what happened to him early on in prison. One story has it that he began reading the accounts written by victims of rape, both female and male, and that it turns out that one of the accounts was by his uncle who had been brutally raped and robbed. Another is that Opidopo himself was raped by a security guard. In any case, one thing is certain, namely that within 15 months there was a dramatic change of heart on Opidopo's part. Being extremely talented and articulate, he began changing the lives of men who were in prison owing to having committed the wrong of rape.

Naturally, people initially supposed that Opidopo was merely exhibiting good behavior in order to reduce his sentence. However, nothing of the sort was true. He completely accepted his sentence. If anything, it seems that he thought the punishment should have been more harsh.

In any case, 10 years have passed; and it is clear to all, inmates and security guards alike, that Opidopo takes himself to be on a moral mission with regard to helping people to see the wrong of rape—so much so that prison officials rely upon him to help new inmates grasp in a deep and emotional way the wrong of rape. Opidopo has been so effective in delivering his message that male-male prison rapes have dropped precipitously. Indeed, women from around the world attend his anti-rape lectures, which he gives in several languages (having learned them on his own).

To be sure, it is not uncommon for a woman in the audience to lambaste him, displaying righteous indignation over his rape of Jamillballu. Indeed, he has been told that he has no right to lecture anyone about the wrong of rape. However, his own demeanor in responding to such charges often effectively diffuses the anger. On one occasion he asked in tears, “What would you have me do: rape again, be silent about the wrong of rape, or be effective in persuading others not to rape”. Obviously, the third option is manifestly preferable to the other two.

I should no doubt have mentioned that he begins each of his lectures about the wrong of rape with a very vivid testimony about the rape that he committed. Thus, the charge of hypocrisy simply cannot get off the ground. No one ever gets to think that Opidopo is in prison for some other crime such as murder. Not at all.

You will notice that I did not say “a lesser crime such as murder”. That would surely be inappropriate. To be sure, a victim of murder is no longer alive. Hence, she or he is no longer suffering. But this does not deliver the conclusion that rape is worse than murder. To see this, imagine the parents of a young adult child who has been murdered and also imagine the parents of a young adult child who has been raped. Needless to say, it be would utterly despicable and morally hideous for the latter parents to intone “Well, at least your child was not raped, unlike ours”.

I do know of any moral calculus that would weight one of these wrongs above the other. Not only that, I cannot even imagine what the point of such an assessment would be. Certainly, it would not occasion any form of psychological relief on the part of one set of parents versus the other set. Any attempt to deliver the conclusion that one wrong is worse than the other constitutes what I would characterize as an invidious comparison—a comparison which by its very nature is entirely bereft of any moral justification.

Now, a number of questions arise regarding Opidopo. First among these is the issue of whether women can now trust him not to rape them. Well, we can get at the answer by doing a kind of stepwise comparison. Between trusting Opidopo and an upright man, say Schmuel, who has never even given the act of rape a single thought, surely Schmuel is preferable and easier to trust. At any rate, let us concede that for the sake of argument. However, there is Jeezuba who has committed two rapes over a period of 18 months. Surely, between Jeezuba and Opidopo, it is unquestionably the case that Opidopo is preferable and easier to trust than Jeezuba. It would be silly to maintain that there is no difference between Jeezuba and Opidopo because once a rapist always a rapist. Even if there is every indication that, on a moral plane, Jeezuba will one day become just like Opidopo, there is the indisputable truth that *that* day has not yet arrived for Jeezuba, whereas with Opidopo that day is in plain view.

But what day is that day? It is that point in time when a man has so distanced himself from the horrendous wrong that he committed that it is no longer plausible to impute to him even the tendency, lodged somewhere in his psyche, so to behave

still exists. I mean this has to be the correct characterization of Opidopo otherwise one has to maintain that in some way or the other he is a fraud—a masterful hypocrite.

Now, let us run the stepwise comparison with Jamillballu. She and Jeezuba and Opidopo are all victims of terrorism. They need to traverse a huge river. Two are needed to row the small rowboat; and the boat will surely sink with third a person, causing all to die in the river's swift and deadly current. The person left on the river's bank must wait 48 hours for another group of folks, who will arrive with marvelous gear for traversing the river. The one left will be hungry, but will not die from starvation. Jamillballu, I should add, is 6 months pregnant. It is too obvious for words which two should take the boat across the rough river.

Now, it is perfectly understandable that Jamillballu might be uncomfortable crossing the boat alone with Opidopo. However, this does not quite show that he is not trustworthy. In fact, her not being comfortable need not show that even she thinks that he is untrustworthy. After all, people are uncomfortable about lots of things even though they realize that their fear is in fact unfounded. Air turbulence during a flight is a case in point. There are very few planes that have fallen out of the sky owing to turbulence. Yet, it turns out time and time and time again that numerous passengers are rendered deeply uncomfortable by turbulence. It happens often enough that people have a worry that is not warranted by the facts.

Notice, then, we can ask whether (i) Jamillballu can actually trust Opidopo and whether (ii) she feels uncomfortable doing so. Significantly, the truth of (2) does not entail that (1) is false. That is, the truth of (1) does not entail that she cannot in fact trust him. Uncomfortable feelings often have their own life.

The past being what was and rape being what it is, there is no mystery surrounding the fact that Jamillballu feels uncomfortable in the scenario that I have described. Indeed, she herself might not ever feel comfortable being alone with or even in a room Opidopo. This truth would not in any way warrant a criticism of her. Yet, these feelings to the contrary notwithstanding do not change the fact that she would be justified in trusting him if, alas, she could bring herself to do so. To repeat: There can be reasons why we cannot bring ourselves to trust a person that do entail that the person is untrustworthy in the matter at hand.

The same line of reasoning applies to a Holocaust survivor vis à vis Adolph Paul-Damascus. Nothing on the face of this earth can change the fact that he was a

former Nazi. The issue, though, is whether there is any reason to believe *now* that he would be even remotely inclined to act in an antisemitic fashion. Likewise, for the case of a former KKK person who yells the epithet “fucking nigger” to a black person.

Recall the story that I told in class. This former KKK person sees me 10 or so years later. He introduces himself to me in the French café, Les Deux Margots, and profoundly apologizes, noting that since that fateful day he has committed his life to helping minorities. Here, too, nothing will change the fact that he was a former KKK member. The issue, though, is what has he become. If the former KKK member introduced himself to me in the way that have I envisioned and apologized with great emotion and contrition, pointing to his works of redemption, I could see myself embracing him. I could see myself forgiving him. For I hold a very simple view: A man who puts aside his KKK ways is preferable, any day, to he who remains unalterably committed and thus unapologetic for the KKK ideology that he embraces.

Of course, there is no comparison whatsoever between being called a “fucking nigger” and being raped. I am manifestly clear about that. What is more, I have not said anything to suggest otherwise. But we must not let whatever differentials there are between being called a racial epithet and being raped obscure the more significant question before us, namely the following: Can a racist or rapist become trustworthy with respect to either not being a racist or not being a rapist? This question can be answered affirmatively even if, as it turns out, that the victims themselves will never again feel comfortable with that person.

Human psychology is profound. And I allow that scars can go very, very, very deep. I allow that they can go so deep that no reasonable person could ever ask us to get beyond them. Being raped is surely a case in point. Losing a child, especially to a wrongdoing like murder, is surely another.

On the other hand, there is no greater sign of strength of character than a victim of an egregious wrongdoing acknowledging that the perpetrator of the crime against her or him has indeed changed and become a righteous person, *given that this truly turns out to be the case as evidenced by the extensive redemptive work that the individual has done in the way characterized at the outset of these remarks*. This one can do even if it remains forever true that one can never feel comfortable with that person.

Another way of putting the preceding point is as follows: Our pain is never a reason to deny the righteousness that has come about in another even if it is true that owing to having been the object of that person's horrendous evil behavior we can never feel comfortable with that person again. A most important truth in this regard is that acknowledging that a person has become righteous is not in any way tantamount to condoning or minimizing the wrong that the person committed. We know that no one goes from being evil to being righteous overnight and we know that this sort of thing rarely happens. But it can. And we must not lose sight of this truth.

On my view: to deny righteousness is to turn bearing a grudge into a form of evil itself. Nothing can ever undo a vicious wrong that a person has committed, from which it does not at all follow that forever the only appropriate assessment to make of that person is that she or he is a wholly evil person who will always be disposed to commit acts of evil.²

I do not think that anyone is obligated to forgive another. This is why I hold that forgiveness is a gift. But from the truth that no one has an obligation to forgive another, what does not follow is that one is entitled to ignore or even deny that an individual has become a righteous individual, given that such a change has taken place in the manner that I have indicated.

I have tried to create some "moral space" if you will between forgiving and acknowledging that a person has become righteous. If the argument of this essay has been successful, then never having a reason to forgive must not be confused with never having a reason to acknowledge that a person has become righteous. The truth of the second does not follow from the truth of the first. One form of bitterness consists taking reasons for the first as reasons for the second. Clearly, if Susan murdered John's parents and, 15 years later, risked her very life to save John's three children, because she became a righteous person, then that difference needs to be acknowledged by John even if it is true, and understandably so, that he can never forgive her for killing his parents. Doing stands as the morally right

² In lecture I remarked, as an example, that the case of a father who had sexually abused his son. I maintained that the son would never be justified in trusting his children with his father, even if the son has forgiven his father. There are a lot of background assumptions at play here, not of the least of these being that in the typical case the father has not done anything that would count as redemptive behavior. He has done nothing to show that such tendencies have been entirely expunged from his psychic. His merely being sorry that he has abused his son hardly constitutes redemptive behavior or proof of having wrought a change in his character.

thing for John to do. The murder of his parents at Susan's hands does not stand as either an excuse, let alone a justification, for not acknowledging the truth about Susan's life 15 years later. I do not claim that such acknowledgement is easy. However, this tells us what we already know, namely that being morally upright can be most demanding. That, alas, is precisely why the righteous person is so profoundly admired.

A very poignant truth indeed may very well be that the redeemed among us who were once evil, if there be any, are not thereby *entitled* to our forgiveness. Yet, I do not see that forgiveness could ever be an entitlement.³

Now, there is a question that I have not answered that cries out for an answer: How do we present to others a once evil person who has gone on to live a saintly life for many, many decades? What say you?

³ I have been asked about the case of Tookie Williams. There are two fascinating issues here. One pertains to whether the death penalty itself is justified. In the European Union, the death penalty is strictly prohibited and stands a condition of membership in the Union. A moving discussion of the matter occurs in *Lettre ouverte aux Américains pour l'abolition de la peine de mort* (An Open Letter to Americans regarding the Abolishment of the Death Penalty) by Michael Taube (L'Écarte, 2000). Whether he or anyone should be given the death penalty is a different matter entirely from whether a person should be pardoned by the state for having committed heinous crimes. Moreover, my argument is about the attitude of the victims of a wrongdoing towards the perpetrator.

The other issue pertains to how much of one's wrongdoing must one own in order to qualify for redemption. It seems that at times Mr. Williams was reluctant to take full responsibility for the wrongs that he did, notwithstanding the fact that he came to be deeply opposed to gang violence. Suppose a woman "comes on" to a man. Surely no one thinks, for a moment, that this constitutes anything remotely resembling an excusing for his raping her. So it is even if it is true that had she not "come onto him", he would have merely gone home and pleased himself. His redemption in this regard would flounder if he could not resoundingly condemn his behavior, the woman's initial advances to the contrary notwithstanding. Against the backdrop of evil, redemption has to be manifestly plain on all fronts; and it is far from obvious that this can be said of Williams. But once more, so much of the debate would not have even gotten off the ground were it not the case that Williams was being put to death. At best his life and change of heart became a challenge to the moral validity of the death penalty and not to his remaining in jail. In a related matter, whether issue of whether the families of the victims might forgive him or not is entirely separate from whether he should remain in jail. That is, what surely does not follow is that if the families of a victim forgive a wrongdoer, then she or he should be set free from jail.