# The Philosophy of Forgiveness

Volume IV
Christian Perspectives on Forgiveness

Edited by
**Gregory L. Bock**
The University of Texas at Tyler

**Series in Philosophy of Forgiveness**

Vernon Press

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www.vernonpress.com

*In the Americas:*
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street,
Suite 1200, Wilmington,
Delaware 19801
United States

*In the rest of the world:*
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Philosophy of Forgiveness

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018955872

ISBN: 978-1-62273-454-2

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# Table of Contents

*Contributors* *v*

*Acknowledgements* *ix*

*Introduction* *Christian Perspectives on Forgiveness* *xi*
Gregory L. Bock

Chapter 1 **Divine Forgiveness and Legal Pardon** 1
William Lane Craig

Chapter 2 **Divine Forgiveness for Wronging Others** 23
John McClellan

Chapter 3 **Jesus' Presentation of God's Love and Forgiveness in the Three "Lost" Parables** 35
Melissa Chia-Mei Tan

Chapter 4 **Why Forgiving the Unrepentant is Not Demeaning or Insulting: A Reply to Wolterstorff** 47
David E. Wright

Chapter 5 **Forgiveness, Hope, and Loving Our Enemies** 59
Joshue Orozco

Chapter 6 **Nussbaum on Forgiveness: An Armenian-Christian Response** 81
Chad Bogosian

Chapter 7 **The Power of Loving One's Enemies: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Philosophy of Forgiveness** 99
William J. Devlin

Chapter 8 **"I Forgive You": A Pragmatic View of Afro-Christianity and Forgiveness** 121
Richard Thomas

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Chapter 9 | **What If I Can't Forgive? The Limits of Forgiveness**<br>J. Michael Cervantez | 135 |
| Chapter 10 | **Radical Forgiveness, Virtue, and the Development of the Moral Self**<br>Kathleen Poorman Dougherty | 147 |
| Chapter 11 | **How is Forgiveness Possible? Toward an Orthodox and Ascetic Answer**<br>Dylan Pahman | 159 |
| Chapter 12 | **Vicarious Forgiveness**<br>R.T. Allen | 179 |
| Chapter 13 | **Euporia: On Sorrow, Forgiveness and the Very Idea of the Unforgivable**<br>Raymond Aaron Younis | 189 |
| Chapter 14 | **Christian Formation in Humility, Forgiveness, and Justice: What Psychology Can Say to Philosophy and Theology**<br>Everett L. Worthington, Jr. | 207 |
| *Index* | | *229* |

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# Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to David Beadle, one of my UT Tyler students, for assisting me with the index and reviewing some of the early drafts. He did this work as part of a contract course in the UT Tyler Honors Program. David is a natural philosopher and has a great career ahead of him.

Most of all, I want to thank my wife, Heather Bock, for her deep love and for showing me what true Christian forgiveness looks like. I have needed it.

# Introduction
# Christian Perspectives on Forgiveness

Gregory L. Bock

Christianity is a religion of forgiveness. It teaches that God has forgiven our sins and that we should forgive those who wrong us, even our enemies. Forgiveness plays a central part in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," and Jesus expounds on this point immediately following the prayer: "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matthew 6:12-15). Yet we find a wide variety of perspectives among Christians about what forgiveness actually means and what is required of us. This is the reason for this volume.

*The Philosophy of Forgiveness, Volume III: Forgiveness in World Religions* included a few perspectives on Christian forgiveness, for example, Everett L. Worthington, Jr.'s "A Christian View of Forgiveness: Integrating Theology and Philosophy into a Psychological Approach" and Donald B. Kraybill's "Anabaptist Forgiveness in Cultural Context: An Amish Example." However, it became apparent that much more could be said and that Christian forgiveness needed its own volume.

Like *Volume III,* I wanted to include many different, even contrary, perspectives so that readers could engage in comparative analysis and come to their own conclusions. The topics examined in this volume include, but are not limited to, the following: the nature of divine forgiveness, the basis for forgiving the unrepentant and our enemies, the limits of forgiveness, and the path to cultivating habits of forgiveness in our lives. The philosophical figures discussed in this volume include Aristotle, Aquinas, Derrida, and Nussbaum, among others.

The contributors to this volume come from different philosophical and theological backgrounds and represent different disciplines, such as Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology. I have done my best as an editor to allow their voices to be heard. In the following paragraphs, I provide short summaries of the chapters.

In "Divine Forgiveness and Legal Pardon," William Lane Craig argues that God's forgiveness of sin ought to be understood as a legal pardon rather than simply letting go of resentment. Contrasting Hugo Grotius and Eleanor Stump's views of the atonement, Craig argues that it is more helpful to con-

ceive of God along Grotian lines as Ruler, acting out of his official capacity and releasing people from their liability to punishment. It is not enough, Craig thinks, to conceive of God as simply an offended party in a private dispute. He explores the meaning and effects of a legal pardon and concludes that a pardon does not erase the fact that a crime occurred, but it does remove guilt, which Craig takes to be *liability to punishment*. Craig also considers whether a pardon is compatible with the satisfaction of divine justice and whether a pardon must be accepted in order to be effective.

In "Divine Forgiveness for Wronging Others," John McClellan focuses on divine forgiveness and raises the question of what would give God the standing to excuse one from punishment deserved for wronging victims other than God. McClellan argues that God's having suitable respect for victims other than himself makes it unlikely that he would allow retribution for the wrongs done against them to go forever unsecured. He then proposes that the Christian doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement—understood with a novel twist—offers a unique solution to this problem by enabling one to maintain that via Christ's suffering, God has already secured retribution on behalf of victims of wrongdoing and is thus free to allow their perpetrators to avoid punishment.

In "Jesus' Presentation of God's Love and Forgiveness in the Three 'Lost' Parables," Melissa Chia-Mei Tan uses a cultural-anthropological model of honor-shame to shed light on the meaning of Jesus' teachings in the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son. Jesus presents a way of living in light of the gospel that inverted cultural values and the themes that emerge are an inability to act, counting the cost, and celebration. She then focuses her analysis on the third of these parables, showing how both sons are in a position of dependence on the mercy of the father, how the father counts the cost of giving the younger son his inheritance, and how the father and the community celebrate the son's return. Then based on this analysis, she draws conclusions about God's love and forgiveness as depicted by Jesus in his masterful storytelling.

In "Why Forgiving the Unrepentant is not Demeaning or Insulting: A Reply to Nicholas Wolterstorff," David E. Wright argues against Wolterstorff's view in *Justice in Love* that it is wrong or impossible to forgive the unrepentant wrongdoer. In response to Wolterstorff's claim that it is impossible to forgive the unrepentant, Wright presents the case of Timothy and Hubert, which seems to show that one can forgive the unrepentant and take the wrong seriously. In response to Wolterstorff's claim that it is not morally permissible to forgive the unrepentant, Wright employs Trudy Govier and Colin Hirano's invitational model of forgiveness, in which the act of forgiveness serves as the impetus or "invitation" for reconciliation. To illustrate this, Wright presents the case of Timothy and Jake, which seems to show that forgiving the unrepentant can be respectful of both the victim and the wrongdoer.

Like Wright, Joshue Orozco considers some of the common objections to forgiving the unrepentant; however, in "Forgiveness, Hope, and Loving Our Enemies," Orozco is concerned primarily with forgiving one's enemies – someone whose unrepentant wrongdoing evinces an overall morally bad character. Orozco argues that forgiving our enemies is difficult to justify because their bad character is seemingly the "most salient feature in justifying our attitudinal responses toward them," and seemingly "overrides any other commonality one might have with them that would ground the unity required for friendship love." Using Aquinas' view of hope and love, Orozco explains that our love for God is the primary motivation of our love for others. We love God and what he loves. We can forgive our worst enemies because on the basis of God's love of them, we can hope for their moral and spiritual reformation.

In "Nussbaum on Forgiveness: An Armenian-Christian Response," Chad Bogosian reviews from a Christian perspective Martha Nussbaum's account of forgiveness in *Anger and Forgiveness*. He highlights what he finds questionable and incorporates what he finds agreeable into a Christian model of forgiveness, which he then applies to the question that Armenian Christians face in deciding whether to forgive the Turks for the 1915-1918 genocide, even though the Turks still deny the genocide took place. Citing Marilyn McCord Adams, among others, Bogosian argues that the process of forgiveness starts with prayer, leads to surrendering to God, and ends with the release of anger. He argues that this provides a way for Armenians to forgive the Turks even if forgiveness is ongoing and incomplete.

In "The Power of Loving One's Enemies: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Philosophy of Forgiveness," William J. Devlin explores King's account of forgiveness and argues that King synthesizes Christian ethics and Nietzsche's philosophy, bringing together both love and power. The reason, Devlin claims, that these two have been thought to be antithetical is that Nietzsche thinks that Christian love is a moral weakness and Christians mistake the will to power for selfish corruption. Devlin argues that King answers Nietzsche by showing that Christian love does not come from *ressentiment* but is a power directed at one's enemies, desiring to reconcile with them and create a unified community.

In "I Forgive You": A Pragmatic View of Afro-Christianity and Forgiveness," Richard Thomas uses the case study of the forgiveness of Dylann Roof (the Charleston shooter) by the victims' families as a springboard to explore the practice of forgiveness in African-American communities. Thomas blends the pragmatic principles of Charles Sanders Peirce and W.E.B. Du Bois to illuminate the subjective, communal and habit-forming dimensions of African-American religious life. Thomas argues that a pragmatic understanding of African-American identity and a survey of the teaching of black religious

leaders in the seventeenth century can explain the origins and theological justifications for the practice of forgiveness today.

In “What if I Can’t Forgive? The Limits of Forgiveness,” J. Michael Cervantez argues for the moral permissibility of unforgiveness in cases in which the victim and the offender were strangers before the offense took place. Cervantez argues that reconciliation – or restoration of a relationship – is the aim of forgiveness. In cases where there was no prior relationship, there is no reconciliation required and, hence, no forgiveness. He considers other conceptions of forgiveness that separate the act of forgiveness, or forswearing of resentment, from reconciliation but labels these views “inconsequential” because they do not affect the way that the victim relates to the wrongdoer. True *meaningful* forgiveness, he thinks, aims for reconciliation. He considers other possible objections to his thesis, such as certain biblical commands seeming to require unconditional forgiveness and forgiveness being beneficial for the victim, but concludes that while victims are, of course, welcome to seek a relationship with their offenders, nothing necessitates them doing so.

In “Radical Forgiveness, Virtue, and the Development of the Moral Self,” Kathleen Poorman Dougherty considers the case of the Amish forgiveness of the Nickel Mines shooter and asks whether Christianity requires unconditional (radical) forgiveness. She compares this act of forgiveness with the forgiveness found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, noting several differences between the two cases. She then turns to the concept of self-forgiveness, claiming that the concept of forgiveness that governs interpersonal relationships should also illuminate the forgiveness of the self, as well. However, she notes there are particular tensions between radical Christian forgiveness and self-forgiveness. For example, radical forgiveness of the self would undermine the development of moral character. Dougherty defends an Aristotelean account of moral development to resolve some of these tensions and suggests an alternative account of Christian forgiveness that is not so “radical.”

In “How is Forgiveness Possible? Toward an Orthodox and Ascetic Answer,” Dylan Pahman introduces a three-tiered schema of sin, justice, and mercy, grounded in the Orthodox Christian tradition in the writings of St. John Climacus, St. John Cassian, and others. Pahman applies this schema to the concept of forgiveness and shows how forgiveness is related to the three tiers. He then surveys social science literature, showing how the science supports and complicates the practice of forgiveness. Pahman suggests that ascetic spiritual practices, such as confession and watchfulness, can aid in the process of forgiveness.

In “Vicarious Forgiveness,” R.T. Allen explores vicarious actions in general and acts of forgiveness and apology in particular. He argues that forgiving or apologizing *for* others is only possible or permissible if, usually, the other

person is incapacitated and the person acting for the other is closely related to him or her. To illustrate this, he uses three examples of apologizing: (1) apologizing for a subordinate in a formal organization, (2) apologizing for a child, and (3) apologizing for a parent. He then applies this account to the vicarious suffering of Jesus Christ in Christian theology, asking how God is able to forgive sins we commit against one another and what requirements we must meet in order to be forgiven by God.

In "Euporia: On Sorrow, Forgiveness and the Very Idea of the Unforgivable," Raymond Aaron Younis explores Bonaventure's account of forgiveness and outlines seven dimensions of forgiveness: *agapeic*, ontic, soteriological, messianic, epistemic, providential, and metaphysical. He then turns to Derrida's aporetic account of forgiveness in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, considering, in turn, a number of difficult questions it raises for the study of forgiveness. Younis concludes that Derrida's account suffers from several flaws, some of them potentially fatal. First, it does not account sufficiently for the various dimensions of the concept of forgiveness, and the complex contexts of forgiveness, as outlined in the discussion of Bonaventure's understanding of it. Second, forgiveness does not necessarily require absolute poles of reference. Finally, the notion of forgiveness, essentially or primarily as an impossibility, suffers from incoherence.

In "Christian Formation in Humility, Forgiveness, and Justice: What Psychology Can Say to Philosophy and Theology," Everett L. Worthington, Jr. explores the concepts of humility, forgiveness, and justice and argues that humility is central to the three because of its other-orientation. He examines several types of humility: general-dispositional, spiritual, religious, and relational and cites empirical studies that place humility at the center of the other-oriented virtues. He argues that psychology supports philosophy and theology by providing the empirical tools necessary to help the other disciplines put their insights into practice. Philosophy and theology help us know that we ought to be humble, forgiving, and just, and psychology can show us how to develop the corresponding emotions, motivations, and habits of the heart.

Chapter 1

# Divine Forgiveness and Legal Pardon

William Lane Craig

In this chapter, I wish to explore the analogy between divine forgiveness and legal pardon, particularly as it exists in the American justice system. There are at least two reasons for thinking that divine forgiveness implies a legal pardon of sinners on God's part.

### Divine Forgiveness as Legal Pardon

First, *God stands in a governmental relationship to human beings.* In his classic *A Defence of the Catholic Faith concerning the Satisfaction of Christ, against Faustus Socinus* the famed international jurist Hugo Grotius ([1617] 1889) identified Socinus' "fundamental error" in his critique of traditional atonement theories as his assumption that God is to be construed on the model of an offended party in a personal dispute, such as between a creditor and a debtor (II). For such a private person has no right to punish another. Certainly, God is offended by sin, but He does not act as merely the offended party in punishing it. Rather God should be considered to act as a Ruler. "For to inflict punishment, or to liberate any one from punishment. . . is only the prerogative of the ruler as such, primarily and *per* se; as, for example, of a father in a family, of a king in a state, of God in the universe" (II). God as Supreme Ruler is responsible for the administration of justice in the universe and so has the right of punishing and the right of forgiving wrongdoing. Although God has the right to forgive sins, Grotius thinks it would be unjust of God to let certain sins go unpunished, such as sins of the unrepentant. Therefore, it would be inconsistent with the justice of God that He should remit all punishment whatsoever.

On the contemporary scene, legal philosopher Jeffrie Murphy has made a similar distinction between the private and public spheres in an effort to carve out conceptual space for exercises of mercy consistent with the demands of retributive justice. Distinguishing between a creditor in a civil lawsuit and a judge in a criminal case, Murphy maintains that as a litigant in a civil lawsuit, the creditor occupies a "private role" and so does not have "an antecedent obligation, required by the rules of justice, to impose harsh treat-

ment" by demanding repayment of the debt owed (Murphy 1988, 175–76). He is, therefore, free to show mercy without prejudice to justice. By contrast, a judge in a criminal case "has an *obligation* to do justice—which means, at a minimum, an obligation to uphold the rule of law. Thus if he is moved, even by love or compassion, to act contrary to the rule of law—to the rules of justice—he acts wrongly" (Ibid., 175). Murphy thinks that the judge *qua* judge cannot, like the creditor, act mercifully without prejudice to the demands of justice. Like Grotius, Murphy thinks that the executive power can exercise mercy but only within the limits of individualized justice.

Given God's status as Judge and Ruler of the world, it is more accurate to think of divine forgiveness on the analogy of a legal pardon by a Ruler rather than on the analogy of the forgiveness extended by a private person. The philosophical literature typically treats forgiveness as a subjective change of attitude or judgement on the part of the person wronged, a determination to put away feelings of resentment, bitterness, or anger, a relinquishing of the desire for revenge. But God's forgiveness accomplishes much more than a change of attitude toward sinners on God's part.[1] Kathleen Moore has made the point forcefully by observing that when people ask God to forgive their sins, they are clearly hoping that God will not inflict the full measure of punishment they know they deserve. "These people would discover the seriousness of their conceptual confusion if God forgave their sins and punished them nevertheless–which is always an option for God" (Moore 1989, 184).

The work of contemporary Christian philosophers exhibits a discouraging Socinian tendency to think of God in terms of a private person involved in a personal dispute so that they miss the legal character of divine forgiveness as pardon. For example, Eleonore Stump's approach to the doctrine of the atonement is based entirely on construing God on the analogy of a private person engaged in various personal relationships rather than as a Judge and Ruler (Stump, forthcoming). She frequently compares God and human persons with two friends Paula and Jerome, who have to deal with wrongs committed by one against the other. Focused as she is on private, interpersonal relationships, Stump overlooks entirely the character of divine forgiveness as legal pardon. In fact, Stump's characterization of forgiveness in subjective terms implies that God's forgiving sinners is compatible with His exercising retributive justice by punishing those

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[1] For a helpful survey of the literature on the nature of divine forgiveness, see Warmke (2017a and 2017b). Taking divine forgiveness to entail pardon does not preclude taking God to experience a change of attitude as well.

# Index


## A

acceptance, 4, 19, 20, 35, 110, 152, 168, 210, 223
Adams, Marilyn McCord, xiii, 89, 90-94, 96
affective, 163-164, 172-173, 224
African Methodist Episcopal Church, 121, 128, 131
agape, xv, 58, 95, 100-103, 105, 108-109, 113, 117, 192-193, 203, 218
Amish, xi, xiv, 147-152, 156-158
analogy, 1-2, 4, 28, 32, 44, 112
Anselm, 15-17
apologize, 55, 62, 84, 95, 147, 152, 166-167, 169,
apology, xiv, 83, 96, 139, 147, 166-167, 169, 177, 182-184, 196, 212
aporias, 195, 197-198, 201-202, 204, 206
Aquinas, Thomas, xi, xiii, 15, 21, 60, 72-77, 79, 205
Arendt, Hannah, 89, 97
Aristotle, xi, 153-155, 157
Armenian, xiii, 81-83, 88, 90-97
atone, 86
atonement, xi-xii, 1-3, 16-17, 21, 30, 33, 95, 159, 162, 180, 186, 190
Augustine, 74, 217
Austin, J.L., 125

## B

Bell, Macallester, 61-62, 71, 79
Bonaventure, xv, 189-194, 203-205
Buddhism, 173, 210, 216-217

## C

Campbell, Bishop Jabez Pitt, 131-132
Caputo, John, 194, 206
civil disobedience, 99, 118, 136
civil rights, 5-7, 18, 99, 108, 110, 113, 116-117
community, xii-xiii, 35, 37-38, 41-44, 61, 63-65, 68-69, 81, 96, 109-111, 113, 115, 117, 122, 124-126, 129, 131-132, 147, 193, 220-221, 224
compassion, 2, 31, 45, 70, 73, 78, 84, 88, 148, 153-155, 190-191, 203, 212, 216, 218-220
conditional, xiv, 9, 19, 58, 84, 85, 95, 100, 111-112, 114, 139, 143, 152, 200-201
confess, 56, 84-85
confession, xiv, 45, 84-85, 171-172, 186, 196, 224
Confucius, 217
consequentialist, 8, 163, 168
criminal, 1-2, 5-8, 10-12, 14, 18-21, 159, 166, 180, 185, 202, 212

## D

deconstruction, 194, 203-204
Derrida, Jaques, xi, xv, 189, 194-206
disobedience, 27, 185
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 59

## E


emotion, xv, 21, 44-45, 48, 61-64, 66, 68, 70-71, 82, 84, 88, 94-95, 100, 105, 107, 113, 164, 172, 181, 212, 221-222
emotional, 52, 54, 59, 61, 63-64, 66-67, 71-72, 107, 113, 117, 144, 153, 176, 181, 186, 212, 215
enemy, xi, xiii, 59-63, 67, 70-73, 75-78, 87, 92, 99, 101-102, 105, 108, 110, 112-118, 126, 128, 136, 171
epistemic, xv, 136, 143, 193, 203
eros, 58, 100, 102, 117
ethics, xiii, 21, 58, 79, 99, 119, 141-142, 144, 147, 156-159, 174-175, 197, 206
evil, 29, 59-60, 83, 90, 94, 96, 103-104, 110-113, 115, 118, 130, 131, 136, 138, 161
exemplar, 33, 154, 156
expiation, 3, 190-191, 203-205


## F


Fitzgibbons, Richard, 167, 175, 224, 226
forgiveness, divine, xi-xii, 2-5, 17-18, 20-21, 23-24, 31, 33-34, 210
forgivingness, 118, 224


## G


generosity, 82, 84, 86-87, 90-92, 97, 118, 155
gift, 17, 46, 106, 109, 118, 172, 200-201, 206
grace, 4-5, 12-14, 17-21, 45, 78, 86, 93, 128-130, 140, 148-149, 152, 158, 160-162, 170-174, 190-191, 210, 212
Griswold, Charles, 49, 58, 67, 79, 84, 97, 136-137, 143-145, 158


## H


Hampton, Jean, 49, 54, 58, 61, 63, 68, 79, 137
healing, 86, 172, 175
Heidegger, Martin, 194
Hinduism, 216
Hughes, Paul, 63, 79, 137, 145, 152, 158


## I


impartial, 43, 181
impossibility, xv, 17, 197-198, 204
impossible, xii, 14, 16, 30, 42, 55, 110, 123, 142, 150, 154, 170, 172, 199-201, 204-205
injury, 66, 82-83, 86, 110, 170, 199
injustice, 13-14, 16, 25, 39, 48, 58, 83-84, 88, 91, 94-95, 111, 113, 124, 126, 128, 131, 161, 166-167, 169, 170-171, 210-212, 218, 226
interpersonal, xiv, 2, 48, 61, 91-92, 123, 136-137, 140, 144, 148, 151-152, 154-157, 177, 222
Islam, 195, 196, 204, 210, 216


## J


Jankélévitch, Vladimir, 194, 206
Judaism, 192, 195, 196, 204, 210, 216
justice, xii, xiv-xv, 1-5, 8-9, 12-18, 20-21, 24-26, 28-31, 33, 39, 47-48, 54, 58, 82-84, 93-94, 97-98, 101, 104, 107, 117-119, 122, 125, 126, 128, 130-133, 139, 142, 145, 157, 159-162, 164, 166, 168, 170-

171, 174, 176-177, 181, 186, 202, 207-212, 216, 218-223, 225, 226

## K

Kant, 101, 117
King Jr., Martin Luther, xiii, xv, 83, 88-89, 99-104, 106-119, 136
Konstan, David, 158
Kraybill, Donald B., xi, 148-149, 158

## L

law, 2, 5-7, 9, 11-13, 16, 19-21, 22, 30, 36, 40, 54, 66, 110, 118, 132, 148, 160, 161, 164-165, 167, 174-175, 180-181, 185-187, 195-196, 199-200, 209-211, 216
letting go, xi, 83, 88, 92, 94, 142
love, xii-xiii, 2-3, 19-20, 23, 27, 33, 35-36, 39-48, 55, 58-60, 67, 69, 70-79, 83-85, 87-90, 93-95, 97-119, 124, 128-130, 136, 139, 144-145, 150, 160, 162-165, 168-169, 171, 173-174, 185, 190-194, 203, 205-206, 208-210, 212, 216, 218-219

## M

McNaughton, David, 61, 79, 105, 112, 114, 117, 136, 145
merciful, 15, 86, 162, 212
mercifully, 2, 12-13, 15, 218
mercy, xii, xiv, 1-2, 5-6, 11-17, 20-21, 23, 24, 26-29, 33, 39, 58, 62, 79, 87, 128, 145, 150, 159-160, 162, 164, 166, 169, 173, 175, 190-191, 193, 197-198, 203, 205, 210, 212
merit, 17, 30, 32, 164, 182, 199
Mill, John Stuart, 83, 89
moral, 11, 15, 21, 24-27, 32-33, 45, 49-51, 53-55, 57, 60-74, 76-79, 82-86, 89-90, 92-93, 95-96, 99, 101, 103-104, 106, 111-112, 114-117, 118, 124, 131-144, 147, 149-158, 160, 175, 182, 185, 206, 210, 216, 220, 225
morality, 15, 99, 103-106, 108, 116, 156, 174
mortal, 197-198
Murphy, Jeffrie G., 1-2, 13-14, 21, 49, 54, 58, 61, 63-64, 67, 79, 145, 212, 227

## N

Nickel Mines, xiv, 147-148, 152
Nietzsche, Friedrich, xiii, 99-100, 103-110, 114-118
Nolt, Steven, 148, 158
nonviolence, 101, 103, 108, 110, 116, 117, 118
Nussbaum, Martha, xi, xiii, 61, 79, 81, 97

## O

obedience, 30
offering, 3, 55-57, 169
obligation, 1-2, 14-15, 17, 25, 32, 34, 101-103

## P

pain, 14, 82, 86, 96, 106, 122, 127, 130, 150, 154, 181
painful, 81-82, 86
pardon, xi-xii, 1-22, 30, 128, 170, 186, 189, 192-194, 197, 202-204
peace, 14, 93, 97, 101, 110, 118, 186, 206, 228

Peirce, Charles, xiii, 121-126, 129, 134
penal substitution, xii, 16-17, 20, 30-33
penalty, 13, 14, 17-18, 181
penance, 17, 85-86, 191, 203
Peter (Apostle), 33, 141, 190, 201
Pettigrove, Glen, 23-24, 31, 34, 58, 61, 62, 66, 70, 79, 135, 145
*phronesis*, 155
politics (political), 4, 19, 21, 58, 173, 177, 195-197, 199, 200, 202-203, 226
prodigal son, xiv, 42-43, 46, 87, 111-112, 149-150, 156, 162
promise, 3, 56, 88, 193, 201, 203, 209
punish, 1-3, 16, 18, 25-27, 30-31, 62, 85, 87, 181, 185-186, 191
punishment, xii, 1-8, 10-16, 18, 20-33, 39, 48-49, 58-59, 68-69, 83, 85, 93-94, 110, 159-160, 162-166, 168, 174, 212
purity, 46, 199-200, 204

## R

reconciliation, xii, xiv, 21, 24, 42-43, 45, 52-53, 55-56, 62, 81, 84, 85, 88-89, 91, 93, 95-97, 114-115, 121, 130, 131, 133, 136-142, 144, 153, 168-174, 210, 212, 218, 228
repentance, 19, 38-39, 45, 50-52, 63-64, 69, 85, 88, 90, 147-150, 152, 169, 174, 186, 192, 196, 198-201
resentment, xi, xiv, 2, 4, 48, 57, 61-72, 78, 79, 82, 88, 93, 95, 97, 109, 111-113, 137, 139, 140, 145, 150-151, 155, 176, 186, 212
resistance, 99, 108, 116, 117, 126
responsibility, vi, 39, 54, 69, 97, 106, 112, 130, 132, 152, 182-184, 202, 219
responsible, 1, 33, 37, 40, 50, 54, 61, 63-64, 66, 128, 130, 158, 183, 199, 202
restoration, xiv, 35, 41, 46, 64, 94-96, 140, 151, 166-167, 186, 212
restore, 5-7, 10-11, 18, 38-40, 41, 43-45, 83, 93-94, 109, 111, 115, 140, 151, 166, 171, 183, 186, 193
retribution, xii, 13-14, 26, 28-29, 31-32, 67, 79, 82-83, 85-86, 94, 148, 155, 158-159, 180
Roof, Dylann, xiii, 121, 133

## S

Scanlon, T.M., 194, 206
self-respect, 64, 68-69, 86, 155, 157-158, 194
shame, xii, 35-38, 41-45, 127, 150, 167-168, 186
sin, xi, xiv-xv, 1-4, 11, 13, 15-18, 20, 23, 30, 33, 45, 49, 85-86, 97, 127-128, 130, 132, 141, 152, 160-165, 168, 180, 185-186, 190, 194, 197-198
Socinus, 1, 17-18, 20-21
standing to forgive, 23-24
suffering, xii, xv, 13, 14-15, 32, 86, 88, 93, 103-104, 106, 115-116, 121, 126-127, 129, 180-181, 184, 186, 191, 209, 210, 217-218, 221
supererogatory, 144
Stump, Eleanore, xi, 2-3, 17, 20-21, 25, 34, 77, 79
Swinburne, Richard, 95, 97

## T

third-party, 26, 166-167

trust, 24-25, 27, 52, 56, 64-65, 68-69, 95, 143, 162, 191, 212
trustworthiness, 212
Tutu, Desmond, 89, 171

## U

unconditional, xiv, 43, 52, 55-56, 58, 61, 64-66, 79, 84, 86-88, 91, 95, 100, 102-103, 105, 109, 113-114, 116-117, 136, 139, 141, 144-145, 147, 149, 152-153, 157, 199-201, 204-205
unrepentant, xi-xiii, 1, 3, 47-49, 51-58, 60, 63-70, 72, 141, 160, 170, 173
untrustworthy, 164
utilitarianism, 83, 90

## V

value, xii, 15, 29, 35-37, 64-68, 86, 89-91, 103-104, 106, 116, 124, 151, 158, 167, 185, 197, 203, 208, 212, 214-222
vice, 15, 72, 87, 97, 153, 155, 157, 175-176
virtue, xiv-xv, 11-12, 15, 24, 27, 61, 63, 74-75, 86-87, 90, 92, 99, 103, 109, 118, 137, 147-148, 154-157, 160, 176, 191, 207-210, 213, 216-217, 219-227
virtuous, 11, 154, 157, 171-172, 190
volitional, 61-63

## W

Warmke, Brandon, 2, 21, 49, 58, 145
Williams, Preston N, 108, 119
wisdom, 4, 93, 106-107, 155, 157, 221
wrongdoing, xii-xiii, 1, 8, 10, 23-25, 27-31, 47-48, 51-54, 56, 59-68, 71-73, 79, 82-86, 88, 95-96, 105, 111-117, 137, 147, 151, 155, 158, 189, 198, 206, 226