

**Cristian F. Mihut. *Gracious Forgiveness: A Theological Retrieval*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford University Press, 2023. viii + 198 pp. \$48.83 (hbk); \$46.39 (ebook).**

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According to Aristotle, the *Nicomachean Ethics* “does not aim at theoretical knowledge (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but that we may become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use)” (*NE* 2.2). The same could not be said of most works of ethics today, but it can be said of Cristian F. Mihut’s latest book *Gracious Forgiveness: A Theological Retrieval*. In this ambitious project, Mihut combines incisive philosophical analysis with practical spiritual insight to retrieve an understanding of forgiveness that reconciles justice and grace.

Whereas others have understood forgiveness primarily through the imagery of canceling a debt, blotting out a stain, or pardoning a sentence (images associated with the Hebrew word *kipper* for forgiveness), Mihut retrieves an understanding of forgiveness that gives priority to the imagery of bearing a burden or healing a disease (images associated with the Hebrew word *nasa awon*). In the first chapter, Mihut introduces the reader to his vision of forgiveness. Mihut depicts sin primarily as a disease that burdens God’s creation and God primarily as a curative forgiver who heals sinners and bears their infirmities. He contrasts this vision with what he calls the “classical picture,” on which sin is primarily an affront to God’s honor and God is primarily a cosmic legislator who restores justice through a mix of judgment, retribution, and occasionally mercy (14–15).

In chapters two and three of the book, Mihut traces the Biblical image of God as a curative forgiver in the Old and New Testaments. Throughout his survey, he argues that God’s forgiveness involves two commitments at the core of God’s agency: (1) a commitment to separate sinners from their sin, and (2) a commitment to absorb into God’s own self the consequences of their sins. Here and elsewhere, Mihut’s analysis of Biblical rituals, images, and narratives is astonishingly insightful, beautifully written, and so ardently appreciative of God’s character as to be almost devotional.

As lovely as these chapters are, however, I would have appreciated a bit more clarity on what exactly Mihut takes himself to be demonstrating. In some places, he portrays his project as the retrieval of one interesting, important image for God’s forgiveness amongst other central Biblical images (10). But in other places, he suggests that he is arguing for something stronger. He claims, for example, that his chosen image of forgiveness has “unique theological centrality” (15). As impressive as his analysis is, I am not sure that it is sufficient for some of his stronger claims; proponents of the “classical” view can line up their own array of supporting Biblical narratives. On the other hand, if Mihut is merely trying to show that curative sin-bearing is an interesting and important feature of biblical forgiveness, then it’s not clear why he offers such extensive analysis (other than the intrinsic value of the analysis itself).

One reason the “classical picture” of God as a cosmic legislator has gained so much traction is that it offers a straightforward explanation for divine justice, a theological reality which one might worry does not fit smoothly into Mihut’s picture of God as a curative, sin-absorbing forgiver. It’s helpful, therefore, that in Chapter 4, Mihut labors to reconcile God’s forgiving character with (non-retributivist) divine justice. Building on recent developments in the anger literature, Mihut argues that divine wrath expresses the wrongness of sin in a way that is ultimately ordered towards restorative justice. As Mihut explains, God’s anger expresses his solidarity with the oppressed, sorrow over the deformed character of the oppressor, and fierce desire for reform and restoration. As a result, divine justice is not only compatible with God’s labor to heal our wounds and bear our burdens but is in fact *part of* it, a point which Mihut brilliantly traces in several biblical narratives, including the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, the outcries of the prophets, and Jesus’s cleansing of the temple. Mihut’s analysis of these Biblical narratives is consistently stunningly instructive, not only for its philosophical and theological insights but also for its capacity to enlarge the affections and moral imagination of the reader.

Chapter 4 represents a remarkable solution to a formidable theological problem, i.e., the age-old tension between divine love and justice. I appreciate Mihut’s eagerness to tackle the problem head-on, his unwillingness to water down either feature of God’s character, and his attention to particular narratives, with all their complexity. I worry, however, that while God’s acts of justice might heal and restore in the narratives Mihut focuses on, there might be other narratives that don’t fit Mihut’s picture so neatly. Even within the narratives Mihut addresses, there are pieces that fit a bit awkwardly. Mihut argues, for example, that the Flood is a way that “God stands with the victim over against the offender” and attempts to “heal, restore, and reset nature in the face of noxious human exertions” (93). But while the Flood may have been healing and burden-bearing in some ways, it probably wouldn’t have seemed that way to the civilizations that drowned in it. To give another example, in his treatment of the Exodus narratives, Mihut argues that God’s actions against Pharaoh were ultimately oriented towards Pharaoh’s good. It’s harder to see, however, how the Red Sea deluge was ordered towards the good of each of Pharaoh’s soldiers who perished with him.

In Chapter 5, the “centerpiece” of his project, Mihut offers a philosophical account of what he calls “curative forgivingness.” According to Mihut, the virtue involves two interrelated layers. First, following Roberts (1995), Mihut understands curative forgivingness as involving a skillful, multi-faceted attunement to certain blame-reducing, forgiveness-promoting considerations. Second, going beyond Roberts and drawing on the biblical backdrop he has established, Mihut understands curative forgivingness as involving a narrative conception of oneself that justifies and motivates the same two core commitments as the ones Mihut discussed earlier in connection with God’s character, namely the commitment to separate sinners from their sin and the commitment to absorb into one’s own self the consequences of their sins.

As Mihut himself suggests (10), curative forgiveness (along the lines of *nasa avon*) is not the only type or form of forgiveness. There are others (for example, those along the lines of *kipper*). So, I understand Mihut’s curative forgivingness as one form of forgivingness. I take the second layer Mihut outlines to be what distinguishes curative forgivingness from other forms of forgivingness. Mihut, however, is not explicit on these points and does not commit to a view on what forgiveness in general is. I would have found it helpful if Mihut had been clearer on the relationship between curative forgivingness and other kinds of forgivingness.

The centrality of narrative is a unique feature of Mihut’s account. Mihut often makes claims like the following, for example: “Christ-like forgivingness begins by incorporating

one's imagination and agency into the forgiving work of Christ through narrative immersion. That's how we become disposed to stretch and expand our capacities grace-ward" (104). I find it implausible that narrative immersion is necessary or sufficient for curative forgivingness; so, I read claims like this one as a description of one natural, paradigmatic, and perhaps somewhat normatively preferable way of cultivating the virtue. In many ways, Mihut's book is *itself* an extended exercise in precisely the sort of narrative immersion that he considers central to the development of curative forgivingness. All throughout the book, he re-presents familiar biblical narratives with startling freshness and insight. He refers to the Israelites, for example, as a "clan of oppressed slaves" (69) and Jacob as "the sapling trying to make his way out of the kitchen on the strength of his wits . . . a clever but sad teenager caught in the power struggle between mom and dad" (129). In addition to narrative immersion, Mihut also argues that friendship with Christ and the aesthetic appreciation of forgiveness are central to the development of forgivingness. These are two other unique features of his account.

One might worry that Mihut's account of curative forgivingness (with its emphasis on willingly absorbing the consequences of offenders' sins) is too aspirational to be applicable to many victims, such as victims of oppression. This worry is especially pressing given the flurry of recent work arguing that it can be virtuous (or, in some cases, even morally obligatory) for victims to harbor certain kinds of anger. It is to Mihut's credit, therefore, that in the final chapter of the book, he attempts to reconcile his account of forgiveness with a strong commitment to social justice. As far as I know, he is the only author in the literature to develop a demanding view of forgiveness and also explicitly address its tension with the goods of anger. Mihut argues that victims may virtuously harbor anger (or even "rage") against unjust systems and practices so long as they also embody curative forgiveness towards the individual actors that comprise those systems; on his view, they may virtuously "hate the sin," so to speak, so long as they "love the sinner" (154).

Doing so, however, is more easily said than done, or at least doing so without falling into double-mindedness or undermining the individual moral agency of the sinner. Mihut addresses this worry at length. Central to Mihut's solution is something he calls the "dramatic/dialogical self" (153). On Mihut's view, the self can hold in tension multiple metanarratives, self-interpretative scripts, sets of values, ways of seeing the world, etc. through something like an internal dialogue or conversation or dramatic performance; in such cases, the self is to be identified not with any particular personae but rather with the shape of the drama as a whole that arises from the interaction of the multiple personae (153–64). One of Mihut's main examples is the famous scene in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in which the parts of Huck that love his friend Jim wrestle with the parts of Huck that have been socialized to believe that it is wrong to help a runaway slave. Mihut identifies within Huck four "distinct and dissonant normative-motivational personae" that together yield a "healthy discord" between alternating "affective-evaluative ways of perceiving practical reality and structuring one's diachronic intentions" (155, 160). Mihut argues that, just as Huck can hold within himself multiple dramatic personae that are in tension with each other, so can victims of oppression.

One might worry that Mihut's dramatic/dialogical self is too disunified to recommend to victims as a model of virtuous human agency. Mihut offers several points against this objection. He persuasively argues, for example, that it is normatively preferable to maintain "a chorus of not necessarily harmonious voices" through the multiplication of selves than to sustain "an overly-integrated agential unity" through the "subtraction" or "repression" of selves (161). He also points out that the multiple personae in his model are more integrated

with one another than the multiple personae found in Multiple Personality Disorder (162) and that they do not exhibit the kind of double-mindedness discussed in the first chapter of James (163). But while the dramatic/dialogical self may be normatively preferable to some other selves, it still seems to me that it exhibits a problematic degree of disintegration. Huck, for example, is only able to help Jim after a remarkably anguished process of self-interrogation, culminating in his famous resolution, “All right then, I’ll go to hell!” (157). The kind of inner conflict Huck sustains seems admirable in certain ways, but I find it hard to believe that it is a virtuous ideal.

Despite my worries and differences, however, I find myself overwhelmingly delighted by Mihut’s dazzlingly ambitious and spiritually edifying project. Mihut describes acts of forgiveness as “making the world a more beautiful, hopeful, and worthwhile place to live” (142). The same is true of his retrieval of curative forgiveness.

## References

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