

Mercy and Modern Moral Philosophy (abstract)

With some notable exceptions, philosophers inspired by modern ethical theories have said little about mercy. Where mercy *is* a subject of reflection, the reader is likely to come away with the impression that mercy does not carry much normative weight for us. This is due to two claims over which these philosophers seem to be in agreement. First, mercy is not a matter of obligation. While merciful acts may be praiseworthy, failure to perform them is not condemnable. According to this view, acts of mercy are—to employ the customary parlance—supererogatory. Second, mercy consists in punitive leniency; that is, it involves the mitigation of punishment or—more generally—clemency. From this perspective, mercy appears to be relevant only in cases where a *legal* transgression has occurred.

I do not deny that there are some merciful actions that lie beyond the scope of obligation. Yet it is false that there are *no* merciful actions that are obligatory. And it is questionable whether mercy is really about punitive leniency, either exclusively or primarily. Not only does such a view distort the idea of mercy as it is traditionally conceived, it obscures the good reasons we have for including merciful acts in our repertoire of obligations.

In light of these worries, I wish to consider the account of mercy offered by Thomas Aquinas. He emphatically rejects the claim that we are never obligated to be merciful. Also, his view of mercy is not one that is restricted to legal contexts. On his view, mercy's scope is considerably broader as it concerns the needs and burdens common in ordinary human life. Such a view is preferable to what the current literature invariably offers, and it may enable us to retrieve an account of mercy that is a more salient fixture of our ethical lives. In my view, Aquinas's account of mercy—with its enduring concern for the particular, urgent needs of human beings—provides an ideal counterpoint to the often stale and overly abstract theories characteristic of the modern moral landscape.

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