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978-0-521-11948-1 - Ancient Forgiveness: Classical, Judaic, and Christian

Edited by Charles L. Griswold and David Konstan

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## Ancient Forgiveness

### *Classical, Judaic, and Christian*

In this book, eminent scholars of classical antiquity and ancient and medieval Judaism and Christianity explore the nature and place of forgiveness in the premodern Western world. They discuss whether the concept of forgiveness, as it is often understood today, was absent or, at all events, more restricted in scope than has been commonly supposed, and what related ideas (such as clemency or reconciliation) may have taken the place of forgiveness. An introductory chapter reviews the conceptual territory of forgiveness and illuminates the potential breadth of the idea, enumerating the important questions a theory of the subject should explore. The following chapters examine forgiveness in the contexts of classical Greece and Rome; the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and Moses Maimonides; and the New Testament, the church fathers, and Thomas Aquinas.

Charles L. Griswold is Borden Parker Bowne Professor of Philosophy at Boston University. Among his books are *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge, 2007); *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1999); *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (1986); and an edited volume, *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (1988). He also serves on the editorial advisory boards of *Ancient Philosophy*, *Theoria*, and the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*.

David Konstan is Professor of Classics at New York University and Professor Emeritus of Classics and Comparative Literature at Brown University. His most recent books include *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge, 2010) and "A Life Worthy of the Gods": *The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus* (2008). He was president of the American Philological Association in 1999 and serves on the editorial boards of numerous scholarly journals.

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# Ancient Forgiveness

*Classical, Judaic, and Christian*

Edited by

CHARLES L. GRISWOLD

*Boston University*

DAVID KONSTAN

*New York University*



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*Susanna Morton Braund* moved to the University of British Columbia in 2007 to take up a Canada Research Chair in Latin Poetry and its Reception after teaching previously at Stanford, Yale, and the Universities of London, Bristol, and Exeter. She has published extensively on Roman satire, Latin epic poetry, and Roman perspectives on the emotions. She has translated Lucan for the Oxford World's Classics series (1992) and Persius and Juvenal for the Loeb Classical Library (2004).

*Page duBois* is Distinguished Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature in the Literature Department at the University of California, San Diego. Her most recent books are *Out of Athens: New Ancient Greeks* (Harvard University Press, 2010); *Slavery: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (I. B. Tauris and Oxford University Press, 2010); and *Slaves and Other Objects* (University of Chicago Press, 2003). Earlier publications include *History, Rhetorical Description and the Epic* (Boydell and Brewer, 1982); *Centaur and Amazons* (University of Michigan Press, 1982); *Sowing the Body* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), translated into Italian as *Il corpo come metafora* (Laterza, 1990); *Torture and Truth* (Routledge, 1991); *Sappho Is Burning* (University of Chicago Press, 1996); and *Trojan Horses: Saving the Classics from Conservatives* (New York University Press, 2001).

*Charles L. Griswold* is Borden Parker Bowne Professor of Philosophy at Boston University. His most recent book is *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). His publications include *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (Yale University Press, 1986), which was awarded the American Philosophical Association's F. J. Matchette Prize. He is also editor of *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1988).

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*Kathryn Gutzwiller* is Professor of Classics at the University of Cincinnati. Her most recent books are *Poetic Garlands: Hellenistic Epigrams in Context* (University of California Press, 1998), for which she was awarded the American Philological Association's 2001 Charles J. Goodwin Award of Merit; *The New Posidippus: A Hellenistic Poetry Book* (edited volume; Oxford University Press, 2005); and *A Guide to Hellenistic Literature* (Blackwell, 2007). She has recently received grants from the Institute for Advanced Studies, American Council of Learned Societies, and Loeb Classical Library Foundation to work on a critical edition and commentary for the epigrams of Meleager. She is also publishing a study of new mosaics from Antioch depicting scenes from Menander.

*Peter S. Hawkins* is Professor of Religion and Literature at Yale Divinity School. He has published widely on Dante, including his books *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, 1999), *Dante: A Brief History* (Blackwell, 2006), and *Undiscovered Country: Imagining the World to Come* (Seabury, 2009). His work on the history of biblical reception includes three coedited volumes, *Medieval Readings of Romans* (T&T Clark, 2007), *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* (Fordham, 2006), and *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives* (Sheffield Phoenix, 2009).

*Jonathan Jacobs* is Director of the Institute for Criminal Justice Ethics, editor of the journal *Criminal Justice Ethics*, and Professor of Philosophy at John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York. Much of his work focuses on moral psychology and metaethics. He is also interested in topics in the philosophy of law. He is the author of nine books and many articles. His most recent book is *Law, Reason, and Morality in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

*Jennifer Wright Knust* is Associate Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Boston University. She is the author of *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 2005) and is currently completing a book on the transmission and reception of the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11). She is also editor, with Zsuzsanna Várhelyi, of *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

*David Konstan* is Professor of Classics at New York University and John Rowe Workman Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Classics and Comparative Literature at Brown University. He has published *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton University Press, 1994), *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), *Pity Transformed* (Routledge, 2001), *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* (University of Toronto Press, 2007), and *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea*



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(Cambridge University Press, 2010). He has served as president of the American Philological Association (1999) and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

*Kristina Milnor* is Associate Professor of Classics at Barnard College. She is the author of *Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus: Inventing Private Life* (Oxford University Press, 2005). She is currently finishing a book on ancient Roman graffiti entitled *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii*.

*Michael L. Morgan* is Chancellor's Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Jewish Studies at Indiana University (Bloomington). His most recent books include *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (edited with P. E. Gordon, Cambridge University Press, 2007); and *On Shame* (Routledge, 2008). His book *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* appeared in 2011. He is currently working on *Modern Jewish Philosophy*, with Paul Franks, for Cambridge University Press, and a book on contemporary Jewish philosophy, tentatively entitled *Jewish Philosophy and the Grounds of Normativity: Judaism in an Age of Naturalism*.

*Adam Morton* holds a Canada Research Chair in Epistemology and Decision Theory at the University of Alberta. His recent books are *On Evil* (Routledge, 2004) and *The Importance of Being Understood* (Routledge, 2002). He is working on a book on good reactions to one's limited rationality and is planning a book on imagination and the emotions.

*Ilaria L. E. Ramelli* has been Young Researcher in Late Antiquity and Assistant in Roman History and in Ancient Philosophy at the Catholic University of Milan, and Professor of History of the Roman Near East at D'Annunzio University. She received two Gemelli Awards (1996, 1997), the Gigante Classics International Award (2006), and two Mentions for Distinguished Scholarly Service (2010, 2011). She is the director of an international research project on Bardaisan, involving scholars from Europe and the United States. Ramelli is the author of many books, articles, and reviews in prestigious scholarly journals and series, on the topics of patristic philosophy, ancient philosophy, the New Testament, the reception of Scripture, and the relation between Christianity and classical culture. Her books include *Allegoria: L'età classica* (Vita & Pensiero, 2004); *Il Basileus come nomos empsukhos* (Bibliopolis, 2006); *Gregorio di Nissa Sull'Anima e la Resurrezione* (RCS Bompiani–Catholic University, 2007); *Hierocles the Stoic* (Brill-SBL, 2009), translated by David Konstan; and *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Gorgias, 2009). A history of *apokatastasis* is forthcoming.

*Zsuzsanna Várhelyi* is Associate Professor of Classical Studies at Boston University. She has published articles on Greco-Roman history and

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religion and is author of *The Religion of Senators in the Roman Empire: Power and the Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). She is currently working on a book on the varied contexts in which selfhood was created and experienced in the Roman Empire. She is editor, with Jennifer Wright Knust, of *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

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## Preface

Charles L. Griswold

Talk about forgiveness has reached astonishing proportions in the contemporary world. Forgiveness is said to do it all: it is the cure for wrongs both personal and political, the road to eternal salvation, and the secret to mental and physical health. Related notions such as apology, pardon, excuse, mercy, pity, sympathy, empathy, and reconciliation have also gained wide currency. One can hardly open the newspaper without reading about an apology being offered by, or demanded from, some organization, state, or prominent individual. We want apology and remorse from convicted criminals so as to decide how harshly to punish them; we praise South Africa's famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the path to forgiveness and civic unity; countless self-help and religious tracts urge us to forgive our enemies unilaterally and instruct us how to do so, promising that we shall thereby rid ourselves of toxic resentment. Forgiveness and related notions are now so thoroughly woven into the fabric of culture that it is hard to imagine a moral world without them.

The meanings of these terms – starting with forgiveness – are hard to pin down despite the ease with which the words are used. The shifting usages can be not only quite different from but even inconsistent with each other. At times, for example, “forgiveness” sounds very much like amnesty (however vengeful and angry the victim may continue to be) or else, on the contrary, like the giving up of revenge in an interpersonal rather than a political context. At other times, it is taken to consist in the unilateral forswearing of moral anger or else, on the contrary, in the forswearing of moral anger that is contingent on the offender taking certain steps. As this abbreviated list indicates, forgiveness and its related notions are often melded or

I would like to thank Caroline Griswold, Stephen Griswold, David Konstan, and Annice Kra for their comments on this Preface. David Konstan and I would jointly like to thank David Jennings and Robyn Walsh for their careful reading and copyediting of the entire manuscript, and production editor Brian MacDonald for his excellent work.

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confused with one another. Redemption, spiritual rebirth, the demands of honor and self-esteem, and the moral imperative of peacemaking have also come to form part of this extended web of ideas, and they complicate the picture still further. One reason for this hodgepodge of both conflicting and overlapping meanings, which is characteristic of this cluster of notions, is historical: we are the inheritors of a variety of different traditions and ways of thinking about such notions, some religious and some secular, some modern and some ancient.

Investigation into the historical background of a notion such as forgiveness holds great interest because it may help to shed light not only on the different senses of the given term but also on the conceptual, moral, social, and political backdrop against which it acquires its distinctive meaning. Such an investigation illuminates the cluster of ideas in which this or that sense of forgiveness finds its home. What is more, the provenance of our current conceptions of forgiveness is debatable, and a historical investigation helps to make us aware of our assumptions. Indeed, we may be mistaken in believing that our assumptions derive from a certain historical context, a discovery that may challenge our current view. For example, Hannah Arendt claimed, without much argument, that “the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, others hold that our contemporary notion of forgiveness as unilateral (or, as it is sometimes also called, unconditional) not only is absent from the pre-Christian world but is a distinctive contribution of Christian thought. Is either claim accurate? If so, what notions exactly did Christian thought import that permitted these striking developments? Indeed, might forgiveness have a relevant history *within* the Christian tradition, such that the ideal of unilateral forgiveness is a relatively recent development? Is forgiveness also present in the Judaic tradition and, if so, how is it conceptualized? If the Roman era – to take another period discussed in this volume – knew little of what we now call forgiveness, what role (if any) did such things as forswearing resentment, compassion, apology, and reconciliation have in its moral outlook? Surprisingly little work has been done so far concerning the historical meanings and genealogy of this important notion, and it is a principal purpose of this volume to further this investigation.<sup>2</sup>

I first began to think about the historical context of forgiveness when writing a book on forgiveness, and I offered there a few relatively brief

<sup>1</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 238.

<sup>2</sup> See the relevant work by various authors mentioned in the Bibliography to this volume, for example, Dover, “Fathers, Sons and Forgiveness,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 16 (1991): 173–82; Krašovec, *Reward, Punishment, and Forgiveness: The Thinking and Beliefs of Ancient Israel in the Light of Greek and Modern Views* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Metzler, *Der griechische Begriff des Verzeihens: Untersucht am Wortstamm συγγνώμη von den ersten Belegen bis zum vierten Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1991); and Romilly, *Tragédies grecques au fil des ans* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995). See also the works referred to in the next footnote.

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comments on the status of forgiveness as a concept and virtue in the context of the “perfectionist” views of ancient philosophers.<sup>3</sup> I argued that, because perfect sages were assumed to be invulnerable to the sort of injury that would degrade their virtue – the only kind of harm that was considered truly damaging – and because such sages would certainly never commit an offense against another, they had occasion neither to forgive nor to be forgiven. Accordingly, forgiveness played a small role in the classical philosophical tradition (at least in that part of it oriented by such notions of perfection). This is just one example of the historical context of forgiveness. I did not dwell on it, or on investigating other such contexts, since my aim was to set out the conceptual backdrop against which forgiveness might be counted as a distinct virtue. The focus of the book was analytical rather than historical. Conversations about these topics with David Konstan during the 2004–5 academic year at Stanford University (where he was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and I was a Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center) led us both to realize that the historical dimension holds enormous interdisciplinary interest and that it would be well worth exploring that dimension in much greater detail. We therefore organized a colloquium on forgiveness and its history, with the support of the Liberty Fund, Inc., that took place in June 2007. Most of the contributors to the present volume attended, and the multidisciplinary readings ranged not only over Greco-Roman literature but also over Judaic and Christian sources. *Ancient Forgiveness* is an outgrowth of the conversations that unfolded at that wonderful conference.

The present volume makes no claim to comprehensiveness. Were a comprehensive discussion of the character and development of forgiveness in ancient Greece, Rome, and Judaic and Christian contexts possible, it would certainly consume many volumes. The task would be even more daunting were it – unlike the present volume – to move beyond the boundaries of what is commonly referred to as “the West.” We have sought to make a start by examining a broad selection of texts and authors from these traditions that would certainly form an essential basis for any comprehensive view of the matter, and we very much hope to spur others to carry the investigation forward. While no essay devoted to the Greek or Roman philosophers

<sup>3</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 1 [i]. For my replies to five critics of the book’s argument, see “Forgiveness, Secular and Religious: A Reply to My Critics,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 82 (2008): 303–13 (available at [http://secure.pdcnet.org/pdc/BVDB.nsf/journal?openform&journal=pdc\\_acpaprocc](http://secure.pdcnet.org/pdc/BVDB.nsf/journal?openform&journal=pdc_acpaprocc); see under “free content”), and “Debating Forgiveness: A Reply to My Critics,” *Philosophia* 38.3 (2010): 457–73 (available at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/b5405026451n8675>). The critiques to which I am responding are reproduced in those volumes as well. Discussion of the topic may also be found in my “Plato and Forgiveness,” *Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2007): 269–87; and in Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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(other than Seneca) is offered here, substantial discussion of their thought is present in a number of our essays. Certainly, a future volume might go through the writings of the philosophers more exhaustively. A thorough exploration of courtroom speeches, legal codes, and inscriptions would also be illuminating. Necessarily limited in scope though this book may be, David Konstan and I are nonetheless confident that it makes distinctive and original contributions to what we hope is an emerging area of interdisciplinary research: the historical, social, and political provenance of important moral ideas.

Contributors to this book represent the disciplines of philosophy, classical studies, comparative literature, and religious and theological studies. In assembling these essays, David Konstan and I made an important methodological decision. Instead of starting with a set definition of “forgiveness” and then asking the contributors to hunt for evidence of it through their respective literatures – a top-down approach – we chose an approach that, with an important qualification, may be characterized as moving from the ground up, that is, from context to definition. The qualification is this: we begin with an essay by a philosopher, Adam Morton, that sets out a number of distinctions and questions relevant to a definition of forgiveness, thereby offering an overview of what one might call the conceptual topography. All of the contributors had Morton’s essay in hand when writing their own. Morton emphasizes the complexities – both semantic and conceptual – involved in drawing hard and fast distinctions. The “forgiveness territory,” as he calls it, is deceptively hard to map precisely, and yet there are basic contours. For example, he points out that defining “emotion” is challenging and that some of the features it may involve (such as an affective dimension) may or may not be present when forgiveness takes place. Nonetheless, we rightly think of forgiveness as somehow tied to an emotion (say, as requiring the forswearing of resentment), and that would seem to remain central to any discussion of the matter.

Another complex aspect of the territory involves the extent to which forgiveness is bilateral; in some contexts it seems to be private, something one can do on one’s own, and in other contexts not. Further, forgiveness and legal pardon share overlapping features, even though they are also distinct. The same may be said about forgiveness and divine mercy. Forgiveness seems to have something to do with empathy or compassion; but fleshing out that linkage, as Morton again points out, requires recognition of the inherent complexity and variability of the core notions involved, even as those notions *are* identified as core. As he notes at the end of his piece, “Forgiveness has many varieties, all of which can come about in many ways.” But this is not to say that just anything will count as forgiveness. At a minimum, the scene must include two people, one of whom has intentionally harmed the other and who is thus responsible and blamable for the wrong (putting aside the problematic case of self-forgiveness for wrongs

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one has done to oneself). In sum, Morton presents us with an interplay between conceptual linkages and boundaries, on the one hand, and variability of context and meaning, on the other, while also articulating key questions relevant to an account of the topic.

All of the contributions to this volume are informed by this common framework of questions and distinctions. At the same time, contributors were free to investigate whether and how terms that might be understood as “forgiveness” are explicitly or implicitly at work in the texts they elected to examine. Working in this way “from the ground up,” each contributor took into account the particularity and nuances of the historical and literary context in which forgiveness, or whatever notion was closest to forgiveness, took shape. Moreover, the approach we have adopted accommodates the obvious semantic challenges: our contributors are working with texts in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, among other languages – while seeking to articulate the results in English. And because forgiveness forms part of a complex web of ideas (pardon, apology, sympathy, empathy, and so forth), the approach we have adopted is especially suited to discerning the ever-shifting connections between these ideas from context to context. Thus, many of the essays in this volume end up engaging in a species of dialogue with their texts. Rather than stipulate a meaning against which the ancient writers are to be measured, they ask what characteristics the several candidates for “forgiveness” possess, and thereby interrogate what – if anything – would seem to count as forgiveness and why, all the while working from a common set of distinctions, linkages, and questions.

This interplay between conceptual and historical inquiry pervades this volume, often implicitly. A large question about the relation between conceptual and historical analysis no doubt looms behind reflections of this nature. It may be understood as a question about the independence of philosophical analysis of a concept from its historical context or, conversely, about the independence of analysis of historical context from a timeless conceptual structure.<sup>4</sup> Is there such a thing in principle as getting “forgiveness” right once and for all? Is it possible to set out the necessary and sufficient conditions that define what it is? Or must we rely on a historically positioned hermeneutic process that is revisable but not arbitrary? Although it is not our aim here to work out an answer systematically, we hope that the essays in this volume offer an illuminating approach to the long-standing philosophical question about the relation between conceptual and historical inquiry.

<sup>4</sup> This question is explored in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), especially in the essays in part I.