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978-0-521-19940-7 - Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea

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Excerpt

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What Is Forgiveness?

[F]orgiveness is a variable human process and a practice with culturally distinct versions.¹

There are ideas, even relatively simple ones, that seem self-evident until one takes a closer look, and then all sorts of complications arise. Saint Augustine famously asked: “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one who asks, I do not know” (*Confessions* 11.14.17: *quid est ergo tempus? si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio*). I am told that Jaakko Hintikka discovered a similar puzzlement in what might seem to be a far simpler question, namely, what is the height of Mount Everest? Most people are sure they know what the question means, but when asked whether the height includes the snowcap or not, and if so at which season, and whether it is measured from sea level, and if so at what place (as this varies), or rather in respect to the center of the earth, and so forth, perplexity sets in. Forgiveness too is subject to such confusion, or perhaps it is better to call it difference of opinion. In what follows, I set forth some of the features that are essential if an act of reconciliation is to be recognized as forgiveness; to the extent that my discussion lays any claim to originality, it is only in the emphasis on those aspects that are particularly relevant to distinguishing modern forgiveness from ancient practices of conciliation.

Let me begin, therefore, with what I take to be the most elementary and fundamental condition for forgiveness, which is nevertheless open to disagreement. I take it that one only forgives

¹ Walker 2006: 152.

someone who has done something wrong, and that one cannot forgive an innocent person. It sounds bizarre to say, “You never did me any harm, and I forgive you.”² Nevertheless, there are contexts in which this stipulation concerning guilt is not so clear. Take the case of executive pardon, where the governor of a state or the president of the United States exercises the right to waive a sentence: it is not necessarily presupposed that the person who is granted such clemency is guilty; it may well be that the bearer of executive authority is convinced of the individual’s innocence and intervenes precisely on those grounds. Yet it is not altogether contrary to ordinary usage to say that the person has been forgiven. Still more common is the locution that speaks of forgiving a debt, which has scriptural authority in the King James translation of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:12): “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Here, *forgive* means *remit*, that is, foregoing the debt; it does not imply that the debtor has wronged the creditor, though this would be the case if the debtor refused to make good on the loan or otherwise sought to cheat the lender. But the creditor is free to cancel the debt, and in this case, no harm has been done or intended, and yet we use the word *forgive* naturally enough (this example will occupy our attention at some length in Chapters 4 and 5).

This is not to say that our initial intuition about forgiveness and guilt or responsibility is wrong; we can simply recognize a kind of homonymy, in which the term *forgive* has more than one use in common parlance (I return to the variety of senses of forgiveness toward the end of this chapter). The sense I wish to distinguish, and on which I shall be concentrating in this book, is the one that involves commission of a wrong and a certain kind of foregoing in respect to the wrongdoer. In singling out this meaning, I do not deny that there may well be a significant relationship among the three uses of *forgiveness* already mentioned and others not yet discussed. I do maintain that the moral, as opposed to the economic and judicial or political sense of the term, is clear and distinct enough to constitute an independent object of investigation, and what is more that this sense figures importantly in modern ethics

² Cf. Downie 1965: 128: “If A forgives B, then A must have been injured by B: this seems to be a logically necessary condition of forgiveness.”

and psychology. I believe that there is sufficient agreement on this score to justify treating it as such, without mounting an elaborate defense or presuming too heavily on the goodwill of the reader. Thus, Charles Griswold writes, “To forgive someone ... assumes their responsibility for the wrongdoing,” and it occurs in a context in which the wrongdoer and wronged party accept “the fact that wrong was indeed done, and done (in some sense) voluntarily.”³ Again, Alice MacLachlan, in her doctoral dissertation *The Nature and Limits of Forgiveness*, writes, “the very act of forgiving – however it is expressed – makes a number of claims: that something wrongful was done, that the wrong has caused harm, and that you (the forgiven) are responsible, even culpable, for this harm” (MacLachlan 2008: 16). Yet, just in accepting this description, and the idea that guilt of some sort is an indispensable precondition for the possibility of forgiveness, we commit ourselves to a view that, as we shall see in the following chapter, drives a deep wedge between modern and ancient strategies for overcoming the anger and urge to vengeance that arises as a consequence of wrongdoing.

Suppose that we allow that forgiveness involves a certain attitude toward a person who has wronged you – and note too that, in granting this account, we have also implicitly agreed that forgiveness is directed at people, and not inanimate entities or animals, though some may wish to extend moral responsibility, and hence forgiveness, to animals other than human beings. The nature of forgiveness is still far from settled or fully explored. For one thing, and this goes to the heart of the concept, it is necessary to determine just what is meant by *wrongdoing*. Thus, I have spoken of harm, as well as of wrongdoing: the two terms are not synonymous, and it is reasonable to ask whether one can forgive another for causing harm, even if the harm was not a matter of having done wrong. At first sight, this may seem a quibble: a person who causes you harm has wronged you. Purely accidental damage, like being struck by a bolt of lightning, does not count as an injustice, and accordingly does not elicit forgiveness; as I have said, we do not ordinarily speak of forgiving things (except incidentally, as in the usage by which we say, “I forgive you this insult,” by which we mean, “I forgive you for having insulted me”); as Griswold puts it [2007b: 47–8], “we

³ Griswold 2007a: 275; see also Griswold 2007b.

forgive the agent, not the deed”). What turns the harmful effect into a matter of wrongdoing is the deliberateness of the action on the part of the offending party. As MacLachlan states (2008: 25), “Typically, discussions of forgiveness have taken as a paradigm the straightforward case of singular interpersonal wrongdoing: an action committed by one individual against another and recognized by both as having directly and intentionally harmed the second.” The requirement that the injury be intentional makes evident sense but ought not simply to be taken for granted. There are societies – and it may be the case, as some scholars have held (though not I), that archaic Greece and Rome were among them – in which the distinction between intentional and unintentional acts is said not to be drawn with the same rigor that we recognize today. If this is true, and I believe that even now we sometimes feel justified in responding angrily to, and hence at least potentially finding ourselves in a position to forgive, injuries that may not have been deliberately or voluntarily inflicted, then an important element in what we understand to be wrongdoing may vary from one culture to another. This difference could conceivably affect, in turn, the way in which forgiveness or closely related ideas are inflected, and hence go some way to explaining why a notion like forgiveness in the modern sense may not have emerged in all times and places. In the periods in the history of ancient Greece and Rome with which we are concerned here, and for which we have reliable sources, however, the difference between voluntary and involuntary actions was clearly recognized, and a strictly involuntary act, although it might do significant moral and psychological damage to an individual – think of Oedipus’s unintended slaying of his father and marriage with his mother – was understood, as we shall see, to be different from the deliberate and unjust infliction of harm.

Yet, even so, the situation is not entirely uncomplicated, for it is not always easy to distinguish between intentional and unintentional acts. There are, for example, cases of diminished responsibility, as when a person is deemed not to be fully capable of moral reasoning, whether on account of immaturity, as with small children, mental incapacity, or temporary or permanent insanity. Is forgiveness relevant in cases of this kind, or shall we say that such people, or people in such states, are incapable of acting freely and

independently, and because they cannot be held responsible for their behavior, they cannot be deemed guilty, and accordingly there is nothing that might count as wrongdoing for which to forgive them? Again, there are situations in which we may act under external compulsion, most obviously when we are physically constrained to perform an act but more commonly when we do so under the threat of violence or some other harm. If you assist in committing a crime because one of the people most dear to you – a child, for example – is being held hostage and menaced with death if you do not comply, to what extent are you guilty or responsible for your action? The law has developed sophisticated means of evaluating guilt and innocence in such circumstances; however forgiveness is not a matter simply of legal verdicts but has to do with personal reactions to wrongdoing: if we hold that, given the pressures brought to bear, a person cannot really be held accountable for the action in question, have we forgiven that individual? Strictly speaking, forgiveness should be irrelevant, because no wrong was done, inasmuch as wrongdoing must be deliberately and freely committed – and one can hardly speak of freedom in the kind of context just indicated. Finally, what of ignorance as an excuse or mitigating factor? There are times when we do something unintentionally, not because we are not in our right minds or because we have been forced by others, but simply because we did not know all the information relevant to the case: Oedipus's murder of his father is a classic instance of this kind of ignorance. We might sum up all these conditions as extenuating circumstances, and the question may then be phrased as follows: to what extent do such circumstances compromise the possibility of forgiveness, just to the extent that they excuse or exonerate the offender, and hence render him or her innocent? As in the case of the distinction between voluntary versus involuntary actions in respect to culpability, here again different societies may place unequal weight on these factors, and the extension of forgiveness, or the very nature of a person's responses to offenses, may vary accordingly. This last set of conditions, moreover, will prove to be highly relevant to our understanding of classical Greek and Roman practices of conciliation and the restoration of relationships.

To the premise that, for there to be forgiveness, the offense in question must be a voluntary and intentional wrong, there may be

added certain further conditions, without which we do not usually suppose that foregoing a grievance constitutes an act of forgiveness. We may divide these conditions for the sake of convenience into three categories: conditions relating to the forgiver; conditions relating to the forgiven; and behavior consequent upon forgiveness, which, if not manifested, calls into question whether forgiveness has really occurred. We begin with the first of these categories, the conditions relating to the forgiver.

At the most elementary level, a person who has been wronged may never have perceived the injury, either because the effects never became palpable during her or his lifetime, or because the offense was so slight in the view of the offended party that it was truly beneath notice. A wrong has been committed, it is agreed; there is no negative reaction on the part of the victim, but no one would say that the offense has been forgiven in such a case. Somewhat more complex is the situation in which a person has perceived that harm has been done, and deliberately so, but after a period of time has forgotten all about it. Here again, we are unlikely to say that the offense has been forgiven; as Griswold puts it (2007a: 276), “Forgiving cannot be forgetting, or ‘getting over’ anger by any means whatever.”⁴ Forgiving is a far deeper and richer

⁴ Contrast the view of Jorge Luis Borges: “I do not speak of vengeance or forgiveness; forgetting is the only vengeance and the only forgiveness” (“Yo no hablo de venganzas ni de perdones; el olvido es la única venganza y el único perdón”: “Fragmentos de un evangelio apócrifo”) (number 27), in *Elogio de la sombra* (included in Borges 1985: 357; first published 1969). Cf. Bioy Casares 2006, who reports that on June 30, 1966, in speaking of Job, Borges said: “With regard to offenses, the best weapon is forgetting. In forgetting vengeance and forgiveness coincide” (“Para las ofensas, la mejor arma es el olvido. En el olvido coinciden la venganza y el perdón”). The same sentiment appears in Borges’s poem, “Soy,” in *La rosa profunda* (included in Borges 1985: 434; first published in 1975):

Soy el que sabe que no es menos vano
que el vano observador que en el espejo
de silencio y cristal sigue el reflejo
o el cuerpo (da lo mismo) del hermano.
Soy, táticos amigos, el que sabe
que no hay otra venganza que el olvido
ni otro perdón. Un dios ha concedido
al odio humano esta curiosa llave.
Soy el que pese a tan ilustres modos
de errar, no ha descifrado el laberinto
singular y plural, arduo y distinto,
del tiempo, que es de uno y es de todos.

phenomenon, involving, as we shall see, much more reflection and interaction between forgiver and forgiven. So too, no forgiveness exists in which the ostensibly injured party treats the offense as negligible or unworthy of attention, as though it were committed by a child. Such an attitude of aristocratic disdain may manifest itself as indifference to an insult that a lesser person would have resented more deeply; many examples come to mind, including the superior cast of mind of the ancient Stoics, who maintained, with Socrates, that “a good man cannot be wronged by a bad man” (Musonius Rufus 10). But again, this is not forgiveness but the denial that an offense was truly given, as the offender was beneath contempt. There is more to be said about the attitude of the forgiver, including the spirit in which forgiveness must be granted, but before turning to those more subjective aspects, it is convenient to consider the second set of conditions, that is, those that concern the offender.

We have said that forgiveness is granted not to those who are innocent of any wrongdoing but rather to the guilty. This is not a sufficient condition, however, at least in the most common acceptance of the idea. For it will not do if the offender fails to acknowledge the wrong but maintains that she or he is innocent. In such a situation, we are not normally disposed to grant forgiveness. Here there arises a divergence of views that has great importance for the understanding of forgiveness in the modern sense of the word and of ancient moral conceptions. For forgiveness cannot, on the terms just indicated, be construed as a mere act of dismissal of the wrong, irrespective of the attitude of the offender. We cannot simply forgive on our own, without recognition of the party to be forgiven, nor a gesture on the part of the other party. Forgiveness takes two agents, not just two persons: if I forgive you, it is because you have earned my forgiveness. How might you do that? Is it really necessary that you do?

Most recent commentators on forgiveness suppose that one must, and that the process begins with an acknowledgment of

Soy el que es nadie, el que no fue una espada
en la guerra. Soy eco, olvido, nada.

I am grateful to Carles Garriga for bringing these passages to my attention. So too George Herbert Mead writes (1934: 170): “A person who forgives but does not forget is an unpleasant companion; what goes with forgiving is forgetting, getting rid of the memory of it”; cited in Miller 2003: 92.

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responsibility on the part of the offender, and this, not just in the sense that one has recognized the consequences of one's action, but also that one admits that the act was wrong. Thus, Anthony Bash, in his recent book *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* observes, "Some say that there should be no forgiveness until the wrongdoer acknowledges and regrets the wrong.... Others go so far as to say that forgiveness without repentance is morally irresponsible because it leaves the wrongdoer free not to accept that the action was wrong and so free to repeat the wrongdoing" (Bash 2007: 63). So too the Jewish existentialist thinker Emanuel Levinas writes, "There is no forgiveness that has not been requested by the guilty. The guilty must recognize his sin."⁵ Alan Thomas, in an essay on "Remorse and Reparation: A Philosophical Analysis," remarks that "The word 'acknowledgement' plays an important role" in the process of reparation (Cox 1999: 133), and Griswold states, "A failure to take responsibility ... not only adds insult to injury so far as the victim is concerned, but undermines the possibility of trusting that the offender will not turn around and repeat the injury. To forgive would then collapse into condonation" (2007b: 49).⁶ Now, not all agree that such acknowledgment on the part of the offender is a prerequisite for forgiveness: there are some, for example, who maintain that Christian forgiveness is universal, granted to all, independent of the other's own sense of wrongdoing and any gesture, such as apology, that gives evidence of it, and they base their argument on scripture and other ancient authorities. We shall examine this view in relation to early Christian texts in Chapter 5, but for the moment we may notice simply that classical Greek and Latin had perfectly available expressions for the idea of responsibility (e.g., in Greek, *aitios*; in Latin, *in culpa esse*), and speakers of those languages had no difficulty in assigning accountability for actions good or bad. If they were reluctant to accept blame for something that turned out badly, they were probably no worse in this regard than people are today.

But to be responsible for something in the sense of having a causal relation to the outcome is not all that is meant by the

⁵ Levinas 1990: 19; cited in Caputo, Dooley, and Scanlon 2001: 82.

⁶ On the distinction between forgiveness and condonation (and also mercy, clemency, and pardon), see Downie 1965: 130–3; Blumoff 2006.

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modern writers who insist on the acknowledgment of culpability. What is demanded at the very least is regret (as in the quotation from Bash in the preceding text) – the wish that one had not performed the act and that the outcome were different. Nor does regret quite satisfy the conditions imposed on the person to be forgiven in the modern paradigm, if by regret one means nothing more than the recognition that the event has been disagreeable and that one could have wished it otherwise. The demand is for a deeper awareness, which includes the acknowledgment that what the offender did was morally wrong, complete with the rejection of such behavior in the future: not simple regret but remorse. Remorse entails sorrow for harm unfairly inflicted upon another, as opposed to postfactum misgivings concerning actions that result in one's own discomfort. It is thus a fundamentally ethical sentiment, because it involves consciousness of wrongdoing, not just of unfortunate or disagreeable consequences that might have been avoided.⁷ As Michael Borgeaud and Caroline Cox put it, “*remorse* is inherently linked with an action for which the agent was responsible and for which there were no exonerating factors” (1999: 138). They quote Gabrielle Taylor (1996: 72): “The person who feels remorse sees himself as a responsible moral agent.” It is this sense of culpability, not just responsibility in the causal sense, that led Adam Smith to observe, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, “Such is the nature of that sentiment, which is properly called remorse: of all the sentiments which can enter the human breast the most dreadful,” precisely because it entails the deepest kind of self-reproach.⁸

⁷ Cf. the Puritan preacher William Plumer (1864: 214–15): “True repentance is sorrow for sin, ending in reformation. Mere regret is not repentance, neither is mere outward reformation. It is not an imitation of virtue, it is virtue itself... He, who truly repents, is chiefly sorry for his *sins*. He, whose repentance is spurious, is chiefly concerned for their *consequences*. The former chiefly regrets that he has *done* evil; the latter that he has *incurred* evil.” John Chryssavgis, in the introduction to his popular book *Repentance and Confession in the Orthodox Church* (2004), makes the same point in slightly different language: “Repentance is not to be confused with mere remorse, with a self-regarding feeling of being sorry for a wrong done.”

⁸ Smith 2002: 99. Miller (2006: 147) observes that in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, Little Bill feels no remorse: “He does, however, express a regret... But regret is a rather different sentiment from remorse. Remorse in the Christian moral scheme of penance is *the* central self-directed moral sentiment”; as he explains (148): “Regret, though, seems to occupy a largely amoral ground, the world in which, quite simply, our luck went bad.”

Concomitant upon a sense of remorse is the impulse to repentance, which involves not just grief at the action committed but also a profound moral transformation that seeks to reject the qualities of the self that were responsible for the offensive behavior. Penitence is an idea deeply rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions and will be discussed in greater detail later in this book. Here, we may note that the modern sense of repentance, which has wide circulation as a secular notion, entails a willingness to make reparation for the injury inflicted but does so in a spirit of self-reform. The penitent not only wishes to offer compensation to the one who has been wronged but also to manifest the inner change or transformation that has occurred, and that alters the person's life hereafter to such an extent that one can almost be said to have acquired a new identity. This acquisition of a new self is not immediately visible, but it must nevertheless be revealed to the injured party, if forgiveness is to be granted; for forgiveness depends on the conviction that the offender has truly had a change of heart. It is here that the idea of confession enters in, for confession, in the religious sense, involves not simply admission of guilt but (ideally) the declaration of an inner metamorphosis, an alteration so deep as to amount to a conversion. Confession of this sort is aimed at convincing the other that the inner transformation is not a pose, or merely superficial, but that it goes to the depths of one's being and is utterly sincere. Now, sincerity by its nature invites the associated ideas of falseness and hypocrisy, and so it has always to prove itself and be convincing. The strategies for persuading others of one's own honesty in a matter such as moral conversion, which is naturally hidden within, are complex and can all be feigned in turn. Of this, the ancients were aware, when they reflected on the difficulty of distinguishing a true friend from a flatterer or false friend. Thus, Plutarch, in his essay *How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend*, notes that flattery penetrates "every feeling and every gesture" and hence is "difficult to separate out" from friendship (51a). An accomplished sycophant knows that frankness is "the voice of friendship," and so he imitates that quality as well (51c). This makes it all the more challenging to discover the true friend.

But if the ancient Greeks and Romans were conscious of the difficulty in identifying the true sentiments and interests of someone