Before Forgiveness

The Origins of a Moral Idea

In this book, David Konstan argues that the modern concept of interpersonal forgiveness, in the full sense of the term, did not exist in ancient Greece and Rome. Even more startlingly, it is not fully present in the Hebrew Bible, nor in the New Testament or in the early Jewish and Christian commentaries on the Holy Scriptures. It would still be centuries – many centuries – before the idea of interpersonal forgiveness, with its accompanying ideas of apology, remorse, and a change of heart on the part of the wrongdoer, would emerge. For all its vast importance today in religion, law, politics, and psychotherapy, interpersonal forgiveness is a creation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the Christian concept of divine forgiveness was finally secularized. Forgiveness was God's province, and it took a revolution in thought to bring it to earth and make it a human trait.

David Konstan was the John Rowe Workman Distinguished Professor of Classics and the Humanistic Tradition and Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University. In 2010, he began teaching at New York University. Among his most recent books are *Friendship in the Classical World* (1997), *Pity Transformed* (2001), *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* (2006), and *"A Life Worthy of the Gods": The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus* (2008). He has also served as president of the American Philological Association and on the editorial board of journals in several countries.

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For

Larry and Marian

Michael and Carolyn

and to the Memory of

Catalina Hernández Hernández

Contents

Preface

The paucity of ethnographic references to remorse and forgiveness suggests either an appalling oversight by generations of anthropologists, or it could alert us to the modernist and western nature of the concepts under consideration.[1]

The thesis of this book is easily stated: I argue that the modern concept of forgiveness, in the full or rich sense of the term, did not exist in classical antiquity, that is, in ancient Greece and Rome, or at all events that it played no role whatever in the ethical thinking of those societies. What is more, it is not fully present in the Hebrew Bible, nor again in the New Testament or in the early Jewish and Christian commentaries on the Holy Scriptures; it would still be centuries – many centuries – before the idea of interpersonal forgiveness, and the set of values and attitudes that necessarily accompany and help to define it, would emerge. This is not to say that there were no other ways of achieving reconciliation between wrongdoers and those who are wronged, just that forgiveness in the modern sense was not among them. The absence of forgiveness in these ancient cultures is not merely a matter of terminology or theory, moreover, but involves a sharp distinction in ethical outlook, and may even be said to reflect differences in the ancient and modern conception of the self – a term that is often vague in its reference but in connection with forgiveness has a specific and clear use, and one that helps distinguish modern from

[1] Scheper-Hughes 1999: 145.

classical conceptions of ethical identity. The topic of forgiveness is thus a particularly fruitful notion on which to focus as it goes to the heart of some crucial divergences between modern moral ideas and those of classical antiquity – ideas that are often taken to be largely commensurate with each other.

Clearly, much depends on definitions, and I begin by providing a description of what I understand as forgiveness in the full modern sense of the word. In so doing, I shall also be obliged to examine a cluster of ideas that are not only closely associated with forgiveness but also essential to an understanding of it: for forgiveness is not a simple notion but is part of a constellation of ethical and emotional concepts, including remorse and personal transformation, that together constitute one aspect of modern moral consciousness. As will appear, these related ideas too are absent in classical thought or, if not wholly missing, play nothing like the role they do in relation to forgiveness today. The first chapter, then, is devoted to setting forth just how forgiveness is conceived, in the abstract and in practice, in our contemporary world.

The second and third chapters, in turn, focus on classical antiquity and seek to demonstrate that forgiveness is not among the basic ethical concepts of ancient Greece and Rome. This will involve showing that philosophical, legal, and literary texts that ostensibly give evidence of forgiveness of an offender on the part of a person who has been hurt actually manifest other kinds of reconciliation, in which anger has been appeased by other means or for different reasons from those that pertain to forgiving. In the process, I touch on the attitudes and sentiments that typically support or subtend forgiveness and show that they do not play the kind of role in the appeasement of anger in classical texts that one might expect them to play today. The second chapter, more particularly, looks at texts in which terms that are commonly translated as "forgiveness" or "forgiving" are defined or illustrated in Greek and Latin texts; here I analyze as well various passages in which these words appear, determining their meaning from the specific context. Needless to say, I cannot provide an exhaustive survey of all uses, although I have attempted to collect and consider every instance of these terms in classical literature; instead, I discuss selected examples illustrating a variety of situations and point up how and why translations employing "forgiveness" or similar

expressions go astray. In the third chapter, I consider in greater detail several passages or entire works in which the fundamental elements of forgiveness in the modern sense – confession of guilt and apology, remorse, change of character, and the like – seem to be present, irrespective of whether the specific Greek and Latin terms commonly rendered as "forgive" or "forgiveness" occur. My purpose here is to show that what may appear to be forgiveness is better explained in other ways, in accord with classical ideas of anger appeasement and reconciliation of differences.

In the following chapter, I examine passages in the Hebrew Bible, alongside translations into Greek and Latin, as well as the New Testament and the writings of church fathers and other religious thinkers in the first centuries after Christ; I argue that here too, despite the powerful emphasis on a merciful God, there is not to be found a fully developed account of interpersonal forgiveness in the modern sense. God's forgiveness, it will emerge, has special characteristics, such as the ability to cancel sin entirely, even when it is inherited from the original transgression of Adam and Eve and takes the form of an innate state of sinfulness – characteristics that distinguish it from ordinary human forgiveness; correspondingly, repentance tends to take the special form of atonement. In Chapter 5 I seek to discover the origins of the modern conception of forgiveness. To my own surprise, I was unable to identify a consistently articulated conception of forgiveness in texts of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, despite an occasional intimation, or even a fairly close approximation to the modern idea. Finally, in the last chapter I consider how and when the modern idea of forgiveness arose; its relation to new conceptions, inspired largely by Kant, of moral autonomy and the consequent possibility of a radical change of character; and some of the paradoxical implications of this new image of the self. For if modern forgiveness rests on a notion of self-transformation that may be incoherent, as some have argued, then the absence of such a notion in the premodern Western tradition may point not to a deficiency in their ethical or psychological understanding but rather to a problem in the ideology of forgiveness.

The inspiration for this project derives from conversations with my friend, Charles Griswold, during the academic year 2004–5, when we were both in residence at different research

centers in Stanford and Charles was writing his book, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, now published by Cambridge University Press (Griswold 2007b). It is thanks to these talks, and a careful perusal of his book, that I came to realize that not only had philosophers failed to examine the idea of forgiveness in ancient Greece and Rome, as Griswold had observed, but also that it was scarcely present as an idea or practice at all in classical culture – a point that seemed to have escaped the notice, or at least not attracted the attention, of other scholars. At that time, I was working on my book *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Konstan 2006), and so I was very much engaged with ancient ideas of anger and its conciliation. Thus, I was prepared to perceive the ways in which the pacification of anger or resentment caused by an offense in classical texts differed from the account of forgiveness that Griswold had compellingly elaborated. These divergences piqued my interest, and I subsequently had the privilege of participating in a symposium organized by Griswold on the topic of "Liberty, Responsibility and Forgiveness," sponsored by the Liberty Fund in June 2007, in which the focus of discussion was precisely on ancient versus modern views of forgiveness. Griswold and I have collected the papers from this colloquium, and they will be published in 2011 by Cambridge University Press (some are cited, with the authors' permission, in this book). From that time on, I began giving talks on forgiveness in antiquity, among other venues at the XII Congreso Español de Estudios Clásicos, held in Valencia in 2007; the Johns Hopkins University; the annual meeting of the Classical Association of Canada (2008); the fourth International Conference on the Ancient Novel, held in Lisbon in 2008; the Netherlands Institute in Rome; the II Congreso Internacional de Estudios Clásicos en México (2008); and a colloquium on "Displaying Wealth and Performing Status from Antiquity to the Middle Ages," held at the University of Bristol (2009). Several of these talks appeared subsequently in the publications of the respective conferences, professional journals, and the volume edited by Charles Griswold and myself. Questions and discussions in the wake of these papers were immensely helpful to me in clarifying and testing my ideas.

I wish also to thank some (I fear I shall fail to mention all) of the friends and colleagues who lent an ear to my musings and

kindly read parts or all of the present work in earlier forms. I am grateful to Alexandra Schultz, who as my UTRA (Undergraduate Teaching and Research Awards) assistant at Brown helped me collect and analyze much relevant material. Ilaria Ramelli shared with me her profound knowledge of ancient texts, including especially the church fathers, and at every stage helped me formulate my thoughts on forgiveness. I have already mentioned the encouragement I received from Charles Griswold. Nicoletta Momigliano, Vered Lev Kenaan, and Marco Fantuzzi read the entire manuscript in draft form and offered valuable suggestions and criticisms. Analise Acorn, Michael Satlow, and Laurel Fulkerson offered advice on specific passages dealing with modern law, Talmudic interpretation, and classical Greek remorse, respectively. Stavroula Kiritsi helped me find the cover image and offered various helpful comments on the text. I benefited greatly from comments by members of a seminar at New York University on "Conscience and Forgiveness," which I shared with Richard Sorabji in the autumn of 2009; enrolled in the course were Jeremy Brown, Scarlett Kingsley, Yekaterina Kosova, Kyle Johnson, Neeltje Irene (Inger) Kuin, and Calloway Scott. The two readers for the Press offered helpful comments and suggestions. My wife, Pura Nieto, bore with me as I struggled with the book. To all of these, I express my gratitude, and if I have neglected, by accident, to acknowledge a debt, I hereby beg forgiveness – or at least hope to appease any residual discontent.