ANCIENT FORGIVENESS

Ancient Forgiveness: Classical, Judaic, and Christian. Edited by CHARLES L. GRISWOLD and DAVID KONSTAN. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xv + 260. Hardcover, $90.00/£47.50. ISBN 978-0-521-11948-1.

Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea. By DAVID KONSTAN. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xiii + 192. Hardcover, $89.00/£61.00. ISBN 978-0-521-19940-7. Paper, $28.99/£18.99 ISBN 978-1-107-68020-3.

An exceptional combination of philosophical depth and cultural interest marks these two new volumes on the history of forgiveness, both published by Cambridge University Press. Though different in important ways, the two works have in common an aim to add a historical dimension to the academic discussion that has recently developed around the act of forgiveness and the process of reconciliation. Both books consider in detail some important differences among a range of ancient and modern assumptions about how reconciliation is effected between human agents after one has seriously harmed or offended the other, with most depth of coverage in Greco-Roman literature and history, ancient Judaism, and early Christianity. In so doing, each work exposes some of the tensions within certain prevalent modern notions of forgiveness, especially unilateral and unconditional forgiveness, as a universal means of conflict resolution and personal growth.

Griswold and Konstan first engaged in serious discussion of the issues these works address in academic year 2004–5, when Griswold was engaged in writing *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge, 2007) and Konstan was working on *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto, 2006). Recognizing the interdisciplinary interest of the topic, Griswold subsequently organized a 2007 conference, "Liberty, Responsibility, and Forgiveness," the papers from which now appear in expanded form in *Ancient Forgiveness.* Although appearing later, *Ancient Forgiveness* is thus in a way prior to Konstan's monograph, and his familiarity with the twelve papers collected there is part of what enables him to offer his own more unified historical narrative.

In accordance with a methodology thoughtfully worked out by the organizers, *Ancient Forgiveness* treats its subject not as a single clearly defined notion but

rather as a "forgiveness terrain" encompassing a whole range of interrelated and overlapping terms: from the side of the perpetrator remorse, excuse, atonement, and self-exoneration, and for the offended party pardon, mercy, clemency, and other forms of restoration. This bottom-up approach provides room for individual authors to work with the concepts and issues that are most salient in the periods and texts they study without presupposing any necessary relation (whether of sameness, difference, or historical connection) between ancient and modern concepts. Following an introductory essay by Adam Morton, sketching the methodological and philosophical issues, the volume comprises three segments: "Forgiveness Among the Greeks," including papers by Konstan on a variety of ancient texts, Page duBois on Homer and Sophocles, and Kathryn Gutzwiller on Greek New Comedy; "Forgiveness Among the Romans," including papers by Susanna Braund on Seneca, Kristina Milnor on the role of women, and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi on divine clemency; and the longest section, "Judaic and Christian Forgiveness," comprising papers by Michael Morgan on ancient Judaism, Peter Hawkins on the Prodigal Son in Luke, Jennifer Knust on early Christianity, Ilaria Ramelli on patristic texts, and Jonathan Jacobs on Maimonides and Aquinas.

Among the points argued by this impressive assemblage of contributors, a few stand out as pivotal for their collective intellectual venture. In her paper on Greek literature, Page duBois states with particular force a problem of translation that is alluded to in many of the papers: if we are too quick to render an ancient term, in this case the Greek *sungnōmē*, as "forgiveness" or some related term in our language, we merely create an anachronism, falsely imposing a modern emotional landscape upon an ancient culture and thus merely colonizing the past. The risks of such a procedure are made evident in the segment of the volume devoted to the Romans, where all three papers are quick to point out that *clementia*, the voluntary mitigation of penalties by a superior, is emphatically not forgiveness of one individual by another but rather a public demonstration of social and political power. As such, Kristina Milnor observes, it is also a prerogative of the male gender. Nonetheless, women of the early Roman Empire are sometimes seen participating in *clementia*—the paradigm is Livia mediating Augustus' clemency toward the conspirator Cinna in 16 BCE—and their participation is key to the emperors' reformulation of their acts of clemency from a gesture by a victorious general (think Caesar) into an act of healing by a father figure in his domestic sphere. More often, though, it is the participation of the divinity that sets ancient conceptions of forgiveness apart from their modern counterparts.

The earliest versions of this are explored by Michael Morgan, who brings to light in the Mishnah and the Talmud a way of thinking in which the primary context for interpersonal reconciliation is the relation of human agents to God. In ancient Judaism, God is always the chief victim of the wrong, the one with whom relationship has been breached, and it is because of God's abiding interest in maintaining his covenantal relationship with the people of Israel that repentance is mandatory for the transgressor. Meanwhile the human victim acts as a kind of mediator: conditional upon the penitent's request, forgiveness is obligatory for him as an expression of the divine love and forgiveness.

A more disturbing conception of divine forgiveness emerges from Jennifer Knust's penetrating historical study of Luke-Acts ("Jesus' Conditional Forgiveness"). It is a startling fact that the words spoken from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," appear in only a few of the most ancient manuscripts of the New Testament. Whether or not the sentence was originally included by the evangelist, the discrepancy in the manuscript tradition suggests that the unconditional forgiveness it expresses was seen as problematic in Christian communities of the second and third centuries, as patristic sources indeed indicate that it was. Lurking behind Jesus' partially elided appeal for forgiveness is a wish for divinely ordained destruction of the non-Messianic Jews as well as an eagerness to claim for the persecuted Christian community the elite status implied in bestowing mercy and forgiveness. From here it is not far to the Nazi's "final solution"—and to the difficulties with the notion of "radical forgiveness" that is promoted by some of our contemporary theologians.

We turn finally to the second title under review. Konstan's *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* crosses the broad wake of *Ancient Forgiveness* with quite a different methodological imperative. As the title suggests, Konstan takes as given the specific model of forgiveness in the modern era which was delineated by Griswold's earlier analysis: for an injured party ("A") to forgive the perpetrator ("B") is for A to adopt a new way of seeing B as a changed person, one who is and remains culpable for a deliberate offence but who now repents and would not again commit any comparable action, such forgiveness being granted by A freely, potentially even without a request from B. This notion seems at first excessively stringent—do we not apply the word also to less well-defined cases?—but Konstan renders it increasingly familiar by comparison with a series of ancient paradigms or "scripts" which, he argues, are not forgiveness in this particular modern sense but are rather instances of exculpation, propitiation, mitigation of

penalties, or other forms of reconciliation. His survey moves with characteristic ease through an imposing range of sources, taking up in turn explicit philosophical positions, especially those of Aristotle and the Stoics; Greek and Roman narrative material; the Hebrew and Christian Bibles; and the Church Fathers. While touching on many of the texts and examples treated in *Ancient Forgiveness*, Konstan has much additional material to contribute, from Greco-Roman rhetorical theory and the anonymous *Life of Aesop* through the Epicurean scholar Philodemus to the Confession Inscriptions of second- and third-century Lydia and Phrygia and many others. Like several in *Ancient Forgiveness*, Konstan objects to Hannah Arendt's claim that the idea of forgiveness as a human capacity began with Jesus. He then offers his own linguistic analysis of the Lord's Prayer ("as we forgive those who trespass against us") and a series of other New Testament texts that allude prominently to forgiveness of sin, arguing that "even here a fully-developed conception of forgiveness as an interpersonal, human process is not yet present" (124). Nor does he find it, at least in any systematic way, in John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, or other Christian writers through Peter Abelard. With considerable subtlety, he teases out one historical conception after another in support of his main contention: that pre-modern strategies for reconciliation were noticeably different from the model of forgiveness with which we are familiar, and yet were entirely serviceable in their own times.

Konstan's account is most likely to meet with resistance in his brief concluding chapter, which turns again to the modern conception of forgiveness with some thoughts about its origins and its difficulties. After some brief reflections on Molière, Shakespeare, Butler, Kant, and Hegel, Konstan zeroes in on several versions of a supposed paradox that some contemporary philosophers find in our notion of forgiveness. In brief, forgiveness requires us to see our offender as still culpable for the offense and yet simultaneously as a new person who deserves to be forgiven. As an interpreter one is thus confronted with the old problem of continuity of persons through change—but in no more acute form, surely, than meets us in many other contexts; in the love of a parent for an adult child, for instance, whom she remembers nurturing even while rejoicing in his new independence. Our past selves, and the past selves of others, live on in our memories; they are no longer agents, and yet we remain responsible for them even as we make decisions for a changing present.

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