

Foreword

Our values, even our emotions, have a history: people in other times and places did not feel the same way we do. This is one of the reasons why I find my own profession as a classical scholar endlessly fascinating. On close inspection, a Greek or Latin word that is normally translated as “anger” or “pity” turns out not quite to fit my preconceptions of these ideas, and I start wondering what the ancients might have meant. When Aristotle says, for example, that we cannot be angry at people we fear, I ask myself: What does he mean by “anger”—or, more properly, by the Greek word that we, perhaps too casually, translate that way.

I had the same rather disorienting experience when I began investigating the ancient Greek and Roman notion of forgiveness. I thought I knew the meaning of the terms in question, but when I found Aristotle insisting that forgiveness is only for involuntary acts, something seemed amiss: if I have hurt someone unintentionally, I may try to excuse my action and explain how it came about, but surely we forgive people for deliberate offenses, not for those for which we are not personally responsible. Aristotle’s word must, I thought, mean something else—“pardon” or “exoneration,” for example, which applies precisely to involuntary acts, or perhaps he meant something like “understanding” or “sympathy.” But if this

was the case, and Greek usage in general indicated that it was, then how did the ancient Greeks speak about forgiveness as we understand the word? Or might it be the case that they did not think in terms of forgiveness at all, with all the baggage that the idea carries today—apologies, sincere remorse, signs of repentance, change of heart, the whole panoply of concepts and activities that are part and parcel of what we mean by forgiving?

I came to the conclusion that in fact the Greeks and Romans in the classical era did not regard “forgiveness” (in our sense of the word) as a fundamental precondition for reconciliation. There are, after all, other ways of resolving conflicts and healing injured sensibilities. But then there arose the question: when did our notion of forgiveness come into being? A likely candidate, of course, was the Bible—both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament. And indeed I did find forgiveness there, but there was, nevertheless, a catch: for the most part, it is God who forgives in the Bible, and what is more, he demands repentance (there is less concern with sincerity, since it is impossible to fool God). There are cases of human beings forgiving one another, but they turn out to be rare and subject to diverse interpretations. For example, when we are asked to forgive our debtors, we all recognize that “forgive” in this sense means something like “remit” or “cancel” the debt, and does not imply the moral dimension that we associate with the forgiveness of wrongdoing (as for sins, only God can forgive those). A debt is not a crime, and I can cancel it if I please, without demanding an apology or even an excuse on the part of my debtor.

Recently, forgiveness has acquired yet another aspect, which we may call its therapeutic value. Instead of focusing on the offender’s attitude toward the harm that he or she has done and the need for remorse and—it is fair to say—even a spiritual conversion, there is a tendency today to look to the benefits that forgiveness confers on

the injured party and the psychological need that we as victims have to “get over it” or “get past it,” to cease being plagued by feelings of resentment and fantasies of revenge and to get on with our lives in a healthy and constructive way. This is all well and good, but it threatens to denature the moral dimension of forgiveness, turning it into a purely individual (I had almost said egotistical) matter. Surely forgiveness should involve two agents who are morally responsible, not just one. If forgiveness is unconditional, in the sense of imposing no conditions at all upon the wrongdoer, it would seem to undercut or diminish the offender’s humanity: how can I atone for a wrong I have committed if you do not even care what I think or feel? Is getting over my guilt also merely a matter of getting on with it?

Tracing the history of forgiveness can help make us aware of some of the complexities associated with the modern idea, and even invite us to reconsider the premises of our ethical convictions. But given the role that forgiveness plays in the Bible, and the continuing authority of the Bible in matters of conscience for Jews and Christians and even for many who are neither, a historical approach to forgiveness assumes yet another aspect. It is not just a question of noticing that forgiveness, as it is popularly conceived today, may differ from ancient views; we may also want to know whether what we think of as Christian forgiveness really corresponds to what the Bible reveals about the idea. Does the Bible authorize a “therapeutic” conception of forgiveness, in which we are called upon simply to forgive, irrespective of repentance on the part of the offender? Or is biblical forgiveness in fact conditional upon repentance and remorse, and does it so oblige us to consider the moral responsibility of the wrongdoer?

In the brilliant and passionate book that is in your hands, Maria Mayo makes a powerful case for the necessity of repentance as a condition for forgiveness in the Gospels and the Bible generally. But

that is not all: she also illustrates the harm that a purely therapeutic conception of forgiveness can do and has done, both on the private level, for example in cases of domestic violence and abuse, and on the larger stage, as in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Demanding forgiveness when there has been no moral transformation on the part of the offender can serve to encourage battered women to accept their condition and even to blame themselves for the abuse that they suffer, as though they had not found it in their hearts to forgive fully (and by the way, by remaining with their unrepentant husbands they offer them new opportunities to sin). Indeed, even where the offender does apologize, there is the possibility of a cycle of mistreatment and ostensible remorse that leaves the victim perpetually vulnerable. On the world level, those who have been unable to forgive their oppressors are sometimes made to feel guilty for their lack of Christian compassion, as though their stubborn resentment were somehow a sign of moral failure. Again, the legal movement known as restorative justice places a huge value on the process of forgiveness between the offender and the victim, which can sometimes result in a diminished sentence for a crime. This may be to the good of society, or it may not, especially if forgiving is perceived as morally obligatory and hence acquires a coercive power. Thus, how we read and interpret the biblical examples of forgiveness is of urgent importance today.

Maria Mayo writes as a biblical scholar, as a moral philosopher, and as a woman who has suffered the kind of injury that puts the requirement of forgiveness into question. She takes on the really tricky problems in social justice and pastoral care and reveals the danger of a facile attitude toward universal and unreflecting forgiveness. This book will make you think hard about what forgiveness means, when and where it is deserved or has been earned,

and how it is represented in the Bible, which is so often taken as the fountainhead of forgiveness as a virtue. It is simultaneously a work of profound scholarship and practical ethics, and it offers both a challenge and a hope.

David Konstan
New York University