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Before Forgiveness: Classical Antiquity, Early Christianity and Beyond

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Forgiveness is a virtue very much in vogue: but was it always? Did the modern conception of forgiveness even exist in ancient times? I am about to argue that it did not.¹ In its place, there were other strategies of reconciliation between an offending and an offended party. What is more—and perhaps still more surprising—I will maintain that interpersonal forgiveness was not developed as a concept even in the Hebrew and Christian traditions (divine forgiveness, it will emerge, was a different matter). The origins of forgiveness are far more recent—and the idea itself may be more transient than we suppose.

Let me begin with definitions. I take it to be a fundamental condition for forgiveness that you forgive only someone who has wronged you; in other words, we do not forgive people who are innocent. It sounds bizarre to say, “You never did me any harm, and I forgive you.” 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 in fact 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): καὶ ἄφεσις ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν (“Forgive us our debts, as we

¹ This paper is a slightly revised version of a talk that I gave first at the University of Illinois in 2010, and subsequently at Trinity University in San Antonio in 2011. It is drawn from my book, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), but differs from the book not only in detail and coverage but also in emphasis and order of presentation, including here original Greek and Latin citations accompanying translations, which are my own unless otherwise indicated. The essay appears in *NECJ* at the kind invitation of the editor, to encourage further discussion.

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, though no harm has been done or intended, we nevertheless use the word "forgive" naturally enough.

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 wish to single out, however, the sense that involves commission of a wrong. I do not deny that there may well be a significant relationship among the various uses of "forgiveness" just mentioned. But the moral sense, as opposed to the economic or political sense, is clear enough, and it is the prevailing concept in modern ethics, psychology, theology, and philosophical discussions. Thus, Charles Griswold, the author of a recent book on forgiveness, writes: "To forgive someone . . . assumes their responsibility for the wrongdoing," and both the wrongdoer and wronged party must accept "the fact that wrong was indeed done, and done (in some sense) voluntarily."² Again, Alice MacLachlan writes: "the very act of forgiving . . . 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."³ And yet, the mere idea that guilt of some sort is a precondition for the possibility of forgiveness raises doubts, as we shall see, about whether the concept of forgiveness was in fact part of the moral repertoire of classical Greece and Rome.

Even if we agree that forgiveness is a response to someone who has wronged you, there is still more to be said about it. For one thing, we need to be clear about what we mean by wrongdoing. For example, I have spoken of harm as well as of wrongdoing, but the two terms are not synonymous. For harm to constitute an instance of wrongdoing, it must be inflicted deliberately. As Alice MacLachlan puts it: "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."⁴ The requirement that the injury be intentional makes apparent sense, but should not be taken for granted. If there exist societies in which the distinction between intentional and unintentional acts is not drawn the way it is today, then an important element in what we understand to be wrongdoing may vary from one culture to another.

² Charles L. Griswold, "Plato and Forgiveness as a Virtue," *Ancient Philosophy* 21: 269-87 (quotation from p. 275); cf. Griswold's *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 1.

³ Alice MacLachlan, *The Nature and Limits of Forgiveness* (Dissertation: Boston University, 2008) 16.

⁴ MacLachlan (above, n. 3) 25.

In ancient Greece and Rome, at all events, the moral difference between voluntary and involuntary actions was clearly understood, despite doubts raised by a certain tradition of modern scholarship.

Of course, it is not always easy to distinguish between intentional and unintentional acts. Take the case of diminished responsibility, as when a person is deemed not to be fully capable of moral reasoning, whether on account of immaturity or mental incapacity. Is forgiveness relevant in such cases, or shall we say that, since such people are incapable of acting freely and deliberately, they cannot be held responsible for their behavior, and so there is nothing 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 a very dear person is being held hostage and menaced with death if you do not comply, to what extent are you guilty or responsible for your action? If we hold that, given the pressures brought to bear, a person cannot really be held accountable for the action in question, then forgiveness should again be irrelevant, since the wrong that was done was not wholly voluntary. So too, ignorance is a mitigating factor: we may do something unintentionally simply because we did not know all the information relevant to the case. Circumstances of this sort are not merely extenuating: they serve to excuse or exonerate the offender, and hence eliminate the possibility of forgiveness.

Before taking up forgiveness in antiquity, we must consider a few more points concerning the concept. We have said that forgiveness is granted not to those who are innocent of any wrongdoing, but rather to the guilty. Yet we do not typically grant forgiveness to people who insist that they have done no wrong: the attitude of the offender must also be taken into account. To put it another way, we do not simply forgive on our own: 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? And is it really necessary that you do?

Most recent commentators on forgiveness suppose that one must. 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."⁵ 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."⁶ And Charles Griswold states:

⁵ Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 63.

⁶ Emanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 19.

“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.”⁷ In other words, the offender must at the very least feel regret, as Bash puts it. But regret must mean more than the recognition that the outcome has been disagreeable. The demand is really for an acknowledgement that what the offender did was morally wrong, complete with the rejection of such behavior in the future: in other words, not regret but remorse. Concomitant with a sense of remorse, in turn, is the impulse to repentance, with its implication not just of grief over what one has done but a profound moral transformation. Penitence is an idea deeply rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The penitent not only offers compensation to the injured party, but manifests an inner change that is tantamount to having acquired a new identity. There are reasons to doubt that such a notion was present in classical society. Robert Kaster remarks, after an exhaustive study of the Latin *paenitentia* and related words, that the idea of “a change of heart that leads one to seek purgation and forgiveness” was unknown to pre-Christian Romans.⁸ So too, David Winston observes that “Greek philosophy generally had little interest in the feelings of regret or remorse that may at times lead an individual to a fundamental reassessment of his former life path.”⁹ To the extent that forgiveness involves a change of heart or moral state, the abandonment of one’s former ways, and sentiments such as remorse and penitence, it is all the more plausible that such an idea was absent in classical antiquity.

But let me return to the more basic question of guilt and responsibility. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle briefly mentions that συγγνώμη—the Greek term most commonly rendered as “forgiveness”—is appropriate when people act either under external compulsion, or else in excusable ignorance of the facts or circumstances (1109b18-1111a2). Aristotle begins by observing:

τῆς ἀρετῆς δὴ περὶ πάθη τε καὶ πράξεις οὔσης, καὶ ἐπὶ μὲν τοῖς ἐκούσιοις ἐπαίνων καὶ ψόγων γινομένων, ἐπὶ δὲ τοῖς ἀκούσιοις συγγνώμης, ἐνίοτε δὲ καὶ ἐλέου, τὸ ἐκούσιον καὶ τὸ ἀκούσιον ἀναγκαῖον ἴσως διορίσαι τοῖς περὶ ἀρετῆς ἐπισκοποῦσι.

since virtue concerns emotions and actions, and praise and blame are due in the case of voluntary acts, whereas συγγνώμη, and sometimes pity, are due in the case of involuntary acts, it is obligatory for those investigating virtue to define what is voluntary and what is involuntary (1109b30-34).

⁷ Griswold, *Forgiveness* (above, n. 2) 49.

⁸ Robert Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 80-81.

⁹ David Winston, “Judaism and Hellenism: Hidden Tensions in Philo’s Thought,” *Studia Philonica Annual* 2 (1990) 1-19 (quotation from p. 4).

He adds at once that (1109b35): δοκεῖ δὴ ἀκούσια εἶναι τὰ βίᾳ ἢ δι' ἄγνοιαν γινόμενα· (“it is believed that involuntary acts are those that occur either by force or through ignorance”). Both actions performed under compulsion and those done in ignorance admit of various descriptions and evaluations, and Aristotle does not shy away from these complexities. Thus, if one’s ship is driven astray in a storm, or pirates take over the vessel, no one would accuse a passenger of voluntarily changing course, for she or he has not contributed anything at all to the result, whether actively or passively. But in the kind of case I mentioned earlier, in which one acts out of fear, as when a tyrant who has power over one’s parents and children orders one to commit a shameful deed, then there is some ambiguity as to whether the act is voluntary or not. Aristotle says that μικτὰ μὲν οὖν εἰσιν αἱ τοιαῦται πράξεις, εἰκόσσι δὲ μᾶλλον ἐκούσιοις (“such actions are mixed, but they rather resemble voluntary ones,” 1110a11-12). Even so, an act may be worthy of praise if one has submitted to something disagreeable for the sake of what is great and noble, though, as Aristotle concedes, it is not always easy to judge precisely what should be chosen in exchange for what (1110b7). Aristotle then notes:

ἐπ’ ἐνίοις δ’ ἔπαινος μὲν οὐ γίνεται, συγγνώμη δ’, ὅταν διὰ τοιαῦτα πράξη τις ἢ μὴ δεῖ, ἢ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν ὑπερτείνει καὶ μηδεὶς ἂν ὑπομείναι.

in some cases, praise is not given, but συγγνώμη may be, when someone does things one ought not to do on account of circumstances that are beyond human nature and which no one could endure (3.1, 1110a23-26).

So too, Aristotle later observes that we are more inclined to grant συγγνώμη to people who surrender to the kinds of desires that are natural and common to all human beings (7.6, 1149b4-6), since they are presumably irresistible.

Aristotle’s discussion of involuntary action in the case of ignorance is equally nuanced. For example, if one commits a wrong in ignorance, but later feels no regret (ἐν μεταμελείᾳ), then the act hardly counts as unwilling, since one would have done it even had one been fully aware; Aristotle labels such an act, accordingly, οὐχ ἐκούσιον (“not voluntary”) as opposed to ἀκούσιον (“involuntary,” 1110b18-23). So too, wrongs done when one is drunk or in a rage are in some sense done unawares, but are not genuinely involuntary. As opposed to such character-based or generalized ignorance, Aristotle specifies that what renders an act involuntary is a lack of knowledge of particulars, and this is the kind of situation in which there arise pity and συγγνώμη (1110b33-1111a2). One might, for example, mistake one’s son for an enemy, or mistakenly strike someone with a deadly weapon when one had reason to suppose that it was harmless, and such cases will naturally result in regret afterwards.

This is about all that Aristotle has to say about συγγνώμη in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is significant in itself. But far more to the point is that Aristotle's conception of συγγνώμη fails to meet the minimal condition for forgiveness, as set out above. For leaving aside any question of confession, remorse, repentance, or change of heart, of which Aristotle takes no account, μεταμέλεια clearly signifies in this context simply regret over what one has done unwittingly, and not guilty compunction; the kind of action that induces συγγνώμη is specified as involuntary in the most strict and narrow sense of the term. But truly involuntary acts do not count as instances of wrongdoing, but are innocent. Oedipus makes the point himself in Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus at Colonus*, in his reply to the reproaches of Creon, insisting that he murdered his father and married his mother unwillingly (ἄκων, 964). Since he did not know what he had done or to whom, one cannot rightly blame an action that was on these grounds involuntary (976-77; cf. 983, 986-87). If it is true, then, that we do not forgive people who are innocent, since there is indeed nothing to forgive, then the term συγγνώμη in the above passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* cannot signify "forgiveness."

What then does συγγνώμη mean here? The sense must be that a harmful or inappropriate act that was performed involuntarily is excusable or understandable, and does not count as a case of wrongdoing for which the agent is responsible. What is more, Aristotle is by no means alone in holding this view. In the later rhetorical tradition, there were divergent views on what constitutes συγγνώμη. One of the basic techniques for denying responsibility for an action went under the name of μετάστασις in Greek, or *transference* in Latin: this is the trick of passing responsibility onto another party, whether the accuser or someone—or even something—else. Now, Hermogenes (*On Issues* 6.69-75) reports:

Ἔτι τὴν συγγνώμην ἀπὸ τῆς μεταστάσεως οὐ τῶ ἀνευθύνῳ καὶ ὑπευθύνῳ ἐχώρισαν τινές, ἀλλὰ ἀπλῶς τὰ μὲν εἰς τι τῶν ἔξωθεν μεθιστάντα τὸ ἀδίκημα πάντα μεταστατικὰ εἰρήκασιν εἶναι, ἐάν τε χειμῶν ἐάν τε βάσανοι ἐάν τε ἄλλο τι τοιοῦτότροπον ἦ, τὰ δὲ εἰς ἴδιόν τι πάθος ψυχῆς μόνα συγγνώμης εἶναι ὠρίσαντο, οἷον ἔλεον ἢ ὕπνον ἢ εἶ τι τοιοῦτον.

some have divided off συγγνώμη from μετάστασις not on the basis of responsibility and non-responsibility [τῶ ἀνευθύνῳ καὶ ὑπευθύνῳ], but have simply called all those things that transfer the crime to something coming from without "transferences" [μεταστατικὰ], whether it is a storm and torture and any other such thing, and define only those things that transfer to some private passion of the soul [ἴδιόν τι πάθος ψυχῆς] as pertaining to συγγνώμη, for instance pity or sleep or anything of this sort.

Hermogenes comments that this may not be wrong, for διαφέρει δὲ οὐδὲν πλὴν τοῦ ὀνόματος τῆς συγγνώμης (“they differ in nothing but name from συγγνώμη”). Some time afterwards, Apsines (276.3-7) records a similar distinction, including among the reasons for συγγνώμη drunkenness and madness. Finally, Porphyry (3rd century A.D.) proposed to distinguish simply between crimes that are avoidable, which he listed under μετὰστασις, and those that are not, and which fall under συγγνώμη, for example the case of the ten generals at Arginusae who were absolutely prevented by the storm from retrieving the bodies (cited in Anonymous in *Rhetores graeci* 7.203.22–204.4).

It appears, then, that συγγνώμη, whether it includes such external pressures as storms and tortures, or is restricted to internal factors such as drunkenness, passion, or insanity, has nothing to do with asking forgiveness for a confessed wrong, but rather looks to denying or evading responsibility for the action, ascribing the cause to circumstances beyond the agent’s control. One can see why Malcolm Heath, in his translation with commentary of Hermogenes’ treatise on issues, renders συγγνώμη as “mitigation,” and explains that it comes under the category in which “an acknowledged *prima facie* wrong is excused as due to factors outside the defendant’s control, and not capable of being brought to account (or, according to some, due to internal factors outside the defendant’s control, such as emotion).”¹⁰ Michel Patillon, in turn, in his French translation of all the works that have come down under the name of Hermogenes, renders συγγνώμη as “excuse.”¹¹ Indeed, the latter comes closer, in my view, to capturing the sense of συγγνώμη in these texts, for the object in this kind of argument is not to diminish or extenuate responsibility for the crime, but to seek complete exoneration by virtue of something equivalent to what jurists call “force majeure” or, in Latin, *vis maior*. It is true that the deed is conceded, and the definition of the act as a wrong; but responsibility is wholly denied. Whatever συγγνώμη may signify in these documents, it has nothing to do with the rich sense of forgiveness that is common in modern discussions of the idea.

While I cannot provide the evidence here, I have examined all uses of συγγνώμη and related terms in Greek literature, as well as of *ignosco* and its cognates in Latin, and have concluded that Aristotle and the rhetoricians have got it right: what is commonly translated as “forgiveness” is better rendered as “exoneration,” the recognition that the other party was not responsible for the offense in question.¹² I should like to pause to consider one case that has sometimes been invoked to argue for the absence of a fully developed sense of moral responsibility in the Homeric epics. This

¹⁰ Malcolm Heath, ed. and trans., *Hermogenes On Issues: Strategies of Argument in Later Greek Rhetoricians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 256.

¹¹ Michel Patillon, trans., *Hermogène: L’art rhétorique* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1997).

¹² Further examples are given in *Before Forgiveness* (above, n. 1).

is the scene in the *Iliad*, in which Agamemnon excuses himself for having antagonized Achilles at the beginning of their quarrel:

ἐγὼ δ' οὐκ αἴτιός εἰμι,
ἀλλὰ Ζεὺς καὶ Μοῖρα καὶ ἠεροφοῖτις Ἐρινύς,
οἳ τέ μοι εἰν ἀγορῇ φρεσὶν ἔμβalon ἄγριον ἄτην,
ἦματι τῷ ὅτ' Ἀχιλλῆος γέρας αὐτὸς ἀπηύρων.

“I am not responsible [αἴτιος], but rather Zeus and Fate and the Fury that strolls through the air, who cast this violent madness upon my wits in the assembly, on that day when I myself took away Achilles’ prize” (19.86-89).

Agamemnon launches on a lengthy narrative about Ate, and concludes:

ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ ἀσάμην καὶ μευ φρένας ἐξέλετο Ζεὺς,
ἄψ ἐθέλω ἀρέσαι, δόμεναί τ' ἀπερείσι' ἄποινα·

“Since I was mad and Zeus stole my wits away, I wish to please [Achilles] once more and give him numberless gifts” (137-38).

But this speech is scarcely evidence that Homer lacked the notion of personal responsibility. After all, when Poseidon was seeking to encourage the Achaeans to fight more resolutely, he reminded them of the shame of defeat and added:

ἀλλ' εἰ δὴ καὶ πάμπαν ἐτήτυμον αἴτιός ἐστιν
ἦρως Ἀτρεΐδης εὐρύ κρείων Ἀγαμέμνων
οὐνεκ' ἀπητίμησε ποδώκεα Πηλείωνα,
ἦμέας γ' οὐ πῶς ἔστι μεθιέμεναι πολέμοιο.

“But if the heroic son of Atreus, wide-ruling Agamemnon, was in truth wholly responsible [αἴτιος], in that he dishonored the swift-footed son of Peleus, there is nevertheless no way that we can relax from battle” (13.111-14).

Here then is a clear statement of Agamemnon’s responsibility for the offense to Achilles and the reversals suffered by the Achaeans. So why does Agamemnon shift the blame to Zeus and Ate?

If we consider this episode from the perspective of the ancient philosophers and rhetoricians, we can see why. In attributing his error to a god-sent fit of fury, Agamemnon is insisting that his offense against Achilles was involuntary, and so worthy of pardon. If no one can resist the will of Zeus, then what Agamemnon did was understandable and to this extent excusable—a fault common to all, as Aristotle puts it (*Nicomachean*

Ethics 7.6, 1149b4-6). This does not absolve him, in his own mind, of the obligation to make compensation to Achilles: in this respect, he recognizes his role in causing the conflict. Though the term does not appear here, what Agamemnon is seeking is συγγνώμη, not forgiveness in the modern sense; and for this, one wants precisely to disclaim full liability. The advantage of this interpretation of Agamemnon's self-justification is that it is consistent with ancient Greek conceptions of reconciliation, and does not introduce ideas of remorse and repentance that are extraneous to the epic—and to Greek moral thought generally.

There is a tragic instance of a reconciliation between parent and child in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Theseus, under the impression that Hippolytus has attempted to rape Phaedra, his wife and Hippolytus' stepmother, calls down a fatal curse upon the boy. In the end, Artemis, the goddess dearest to Hippolytus, reveals the truth—that Phaedra's deathbed accusation of Hippolytus was a lie—and she blames Theseus for having rushed to judgment rather than investigate the slander more closely. Theseus exclaims: δέσποιν', ὀλοίμην ("O Mistress, I am destroyed"), to which the goddess replies:

δείν' ἔπραξας, ἀλλ' ὅμως
ἔτ' ἔστι καί σοι τῶνδε συγγνώμης τυχεῖν·
Κύπρις γὰρ ἤθελ' ὥστε γίγνεσθαι τάδε,
πληροῦσα θυμόν.

"You have done a terrible thing, but nevertheless you can obtain συγγνώμη for it. For Aphrodite wished it to turn out this way, being filled with rage [θυμός]" (1325-28).¹³

Pardon is once again predicated on a transfer of blame, in this case onto a goddess, who herself has acted under the impetus of anger, so that even her action may be at some level excusable. In a deeply touching finale, Hippolytus exclaims that he suffers more for his father than for himself, and Theseus wishes that he could die in place of his son (1409-10). Artemis promises to slay one of Aphrodite's favorites in return (1420-22), and bids Theseus take his dying son in his arms:

ἄκων γὰρ ὤλεσάς νιν, ἀνθρώποισι δὲ
θεῶν διδόντων εἰκὸς ἔξαμαρτάνειν.

"you slew him involuntarily [ἄκων]: it is understandable [εἰκός] for human beings to err when the gods allot it" (1433-34).

She tells Hippolytus in turn to cease hating his father, for his death was fated. Hippolytus replies: "I revoke the strife with my father, since you ask

¹³ Cf. 1406: ἐξηπατήθη δαίμονος βουλεύμασιν ("he was deceived by the schemes of a goddess"); also 1414.

it of me” (1442). Once more, the basis of reconciliation is the negation of guilt, not forgiveness of blameworthy misconduct.

How, then, do you make up with someone whom you have offended, if forgiveness is not an available strategy? Aristotle indicates some of the ways in his treatment of the emotions in the *Rhetoric*, immediately following his discussion of anger. As he states:

Ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ ὀργίζεσθαι ἐναντίον τῷ πράυνεσθαι καὶ ὀργὴν πραότητα, ληπτέον πῶς ἔχοντες πρᾶοί εἰσι καὶ πρὸς τίνας πράως ἔχουσι καὶ διὰ τίνων πράυνονται.

Since growing calm is the opposite of growing angry, and calmness the opposite of anger, we must ascertain in what frames of mind men are calm, towards whom they feel calm, and by what means they are made so (2.2, 1380a6-8).

Aristotle recalls his definition of anger as a response to a slight; in the definition, he specifies that it must be τοῦ ὀλιγωρεῖν μὴ προσήκοντος “on the part of one who is not fit to slight” one or one’s own (2.2, 1378a31-33), and explains that, since slighting is a voluntary act (ὀλιγωρία δ’ ἐκούσιον), our anger will abate if we are convinced that no slight actually occurred, or that it was done involuntarily. He adds that our anger is also appeased if we perceive that the ostensible offender acts toward himself as he has done to us: οὐδεὶς γὰρ αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ δοκεῖ ὀλιγωρεῖν (“for no one can be supposed to slight himself”).¹⁴ These are ways simply of demonstrating that there was no insult or belittlement to begin with, and so no reason for the other party to take offense. Aristotle goes on to point out ways of appeasing another’s ire when offense was legitimately taken. As he puts it, people grow calm

καὶ τοῖς ὁμολογοῦσι καὶ μεταμελομένοις· ὥς γὰρ ἔχοντες δίκην τὸ λυπεῖσθαι ἐπὶ τοῖς πεπονημένοις παύονται τῆς ὀργῆς.

also towards those who admit their fault and are sorry [ὁμολογοῦσι καὶ μεταμελομένοις], since they accept their grief at what they have done as satisfaction [δίκην], and cease to be angry.

Now, this looks very much like a petition for forgiveness, in which one accepts responsibility for one’s action, confesses it to the person who has been wronged, and manifests genuine contrition and a change of heart which guarantees that the offense will not be repeated. Thus, Charles Griswold explains: “The agent [of forgiveness] requires reasons in order to commit to giving up resentment . . . The first of these reasons consists in the

¹⁴ Further discussion in David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006) chapters 2 and 3.

wrong-doer's demonstration that she no longer wishes to stand by herself as the author of those wrongs. That is, she must acknowledge, first, that she was the responsible agent for the specific deeds in question . . . Second, she must repudiate her deeds . . . and thus disavow the idea that she would author those deeds again."¹⁵ Griswold goes on to add as a third condition that "the wrong-doer must experience and express *regret* at having caused that particular injury to that particular person," and fourth, that "the offender must commit to becoming the sort of person who does not inflict injury," and fifth and finally, "the offender must show that she understands, from the injured person's perspective, the damage done by the injury."¹⁶

This conception of forgiveness owes a great deal to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, although there are also important differences, as I shall indicate in a moment. Consider King Solomon's prayer to God in 1Kings 8:33-34: "When thy people Israel are defeated before the enemy because they have sinned against thee, if they turn again to thee, and acknowledge thy name, and pray and make supplication to thee in this house; then hear thou in heaven, and forgive [*or be propitious toward*: cf. the Greek ἵλεως] the sin of thy people Israel, and bring them again to the land which thou gavest to their fathers."¹⁷ In the hymn that concludes the book of Isaiah, we again find an emphasis on returning to the path of God (55:7) "let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." So too in Jeremiah, the Lord will accept the just and honest man (5:1), and reject the wicked, above all, those who have forsaken him (5:7); but those who return will find redemption. This idea found deep resonance in the later scriptural interpretation. As Kaufmann Kohler writes in the on-line *Jewish Encyclopedia*: "Atonement in Jewish theology as developed by the Rabbis of the Talmud, has for its constituent elements: (a) on the part of God, fatherly love and forgiving mercy; (b) on the part of man, repentance and reparation of wrong."¹⁸ Repentance is interpreted as "the expression of self-reproach, shame, and contrition" (ibid.). Kohler quotes the Jewish philosopher Philo (*De execratione* 8):

ἐὰν . . . καταιδεσθέντες ὅλη ψυχῇ μεταβάλωσι, κακίσαντες μὲν αὐτοὺς τῆς πλάνης, ἐξαγορεύσαντες δὲ καὶ ὁμολογήσαντες ὅσα ἥμαρτον καθ' αὐτοὺς διανοίᾳ κεκαθαρμένη τὸ πρῶτον εἰς τὸ τοῦ συνειδότος ἀψευδὲς καὶ ἀνύπουλον.

¹⁵ Griswold *Forgiveness* (above, n. 2) 49.

¹⁶ Griswold *Forgiveness* (above, n. 2) 50-51.

¹⁷ Translation is from the Revised Standard Version.

¹⁸ Kaufmann, Kohler, "Atonement," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 (1901-06) 275-84. Available on-line at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=2092&letter=A&Search=atonement>.

They must feel shame throughout their whole soul and change their ways, reproaching themselves for their errors and declaring and confessing all their sins with purified minds, so as to exhibit honesty and sincerity of conscience.

This concern with confession and remorse as the conditions for God's forgiveness is continued in the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark reveals a particular interest in the role of repentance (μετάνοια). Thus John the Baptist is described as having appeared in the wilderness, κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανόιας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν ("preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," 1:4; cf. Luke 3:3). Luke too affirms that repentance is essential for forgiveness: ἐὰν ἁμάρτη ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἐπιτίμησον αὐτῷ, καὶ ἐὰν μετανοήσῃ ἄφες αὐτῷ ("if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him," 17:3). Repentance is a crucial condition for forgiveness: there is no evidence in the New Testament that forgiveness is understood to be unconditional, although this is not always stated explicitly. Repentance itself, however, is often understood in spiritual terms as a recovery of faith, not just as regret over a specific action; in this regard, the New Testament looks back to the unique focus on God's forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible, with its almost obsessive concern with a fall from God's grace because of a failure to observe his commandments. Absent in the New Testament, however, is the Hebrew Bible's preoccupation with the transgressions of an entire people. The emphasis is rather on individuals, whose sins and faults are their own.

The New Testament engagement with repentance became the focus of much later Christian exegesis and theology. I take as my text here Saint John Chrysostom, who preached nine homilies on the theme of repentance in Antioch in the years 386-87.¹⁹ In the first, he admonishes his flock:

Δεινὸν μὲν γὰρ τὸ ἁμαρτάνειν, πολλῶ δὲ χαλεπώτερον τὸ καὶ μέγα φρονεῖν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἁμαρτήμασιν.

To commit sin is frightening; however, it is much more painful to be exceedingly proud [μέγα φρονεῖν] with respect to sin (1.2.19 = 49.280.41-43 Migne).

In the next sermon, John asks:

Ἄμαρτωλὸς εἶ; μὴ ἀπογνῶς, ἀλλ' εἴσελθε μετάνοιαν προβαλλόμενος. Ἥμαρτες; εἰπέ τῷ Θεῷ ὅτι, Ἥμάρτηκα . . . καὶ λέγεις τὴν ἁμαρτίαν, καὶ ἐξαλείφεις τὸ ἁμάρτημα.

¹⁹ Translations are based on Gus George Christo, trans., *St. John Chrysostom On Repentance and Almsgiving* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), modified for greater literalness.

Are you a sinner? Do not become discouraged, but come to Church to put forward repentance. Have you sinned? Then tell God, “I have sinned . . .” Admit the sin to annul it (2.1.2 = 49.285.11-19).

One has not just sinned: one is a sinner (ἁμαρτωλός). Repentance must result in a change of heart. Thus, in explaining why God relented toward Ahab for having murdered a man whose property he wished to possess (1Kings 20), John paraphrases God’s train of thought:

Μὴ νόμιζε, φησὶν, ὅτι ἀπλῶς συνεχώρησα αὐτῶ· μετερρῦθμισε τὸν τρόπον, καὶ μετέβαλον τὴν ὀργὴν μου καὶ ἀνέλυσα . . . εἰ μὴ μετέβαλε τὸν τρόπον, ὑπομεῖναι εἶχε τὰ τῆς ἀποφάσεως·

“Do not think,” He said, “that I forgave him without any reason [ἀπλῶς συνεχώρησα αὐτῶ]. He reformed his manner of living [τρόπος], and I changed my wrath and dissolved it . . . If he had not changed his character, he would have suffered the consequences of the decision” (Homily 2.3.20 = 49.289.27-30 Migne).

Forgiveness is not granted unconditionally, or on the basis of mere remorse; this must be accompanied by a reform of one’s nature. Although God can of course see into the soul of a person, an external sign of a change of heart is weeping, which is itself a cure—and indeed a pleasant one—for sin (Homily 3.4.20-23 = 49.298.3-5 Migne). Remorse is a kind of perpetual mourning: thus, τὸ πενθῆσαι ἐξαλείφει ἁμαρτίας (“grieving wipes away sins,” 49.289.36 Migne). Another method is fasting (the subject of Homilies 5 and 6); for the purpose is to cleanse the heart, and purge not just the action but the cause of the action, that is, the sinful state that corrupts our nature (6.2.8 = 49.316.26-29 Migne; cf. Basil’s two homilies *On Fasting* 31.164-197 Migne).

There are many roads to repentance (μετάνοια), according to John, and one of these is humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη, 2.4.21 = 49.289.38-41). Here again we have a concept that is characteristically Christian: the abstract noun itself does not occur in classical texts, and when cognates of it do appear they invariably suggest lowliness or inferior status rather than meekness as a virtue. For we are all stained by sin, and the only thing we can truly boast of is God, as when a person

μήτε ἐπὶ δικαιοσύνη τις ἐπαίρεται τῇ ἑαυτοῦ, ἀλλ’ ἔγνω μὲν ἐνδεῆ ὄντα ἑαυτὸν δικαιοσύνης ἀληθοῦς.

is not exalted by his own righteousness but recognizes that he is wanting in true righteousness.²⁰

²⁰ Basil, *On Humility* 31.525-40 Migne; quotation from 529.38-40; cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Five Orations on the Lord’s Prayer* 298.15-300.9 Migne; John Cassian, *Conference* 23, chapter 18.

Christian humility is the basis of repentance, for it permits us to recognize our status as sinners, and the need to turn to God for redemption.

Where such repentance differs from the modern conception, as outlined by Charles Griswold, is in its specific relation to God: it represents the acknowledgement, as I have said, of sinfulness more than the commission of a particular wrong against another. This is why the primary examples of unremitting mourning and self-abasement in atonement for sin are not reformed evildoers but rather the great saints, whose tears flowed from their deeper insight into the fallen state of mankind, themselves included.

Now, this kind of humility has nothing to do with the classical strategy of humbling oneself before a peer or a superior whom one has insulted, so as to appease their anger. Let us return to the passage from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, mentioned above. After affirming that we grow calm τοῖς ὁμολογοῦσι καὶ μεταμελομένοις· ὡς γὰρ ἔχοντες δίκην τὸ λυπεῖσθαι ἐπὶ τοῖς πεπονημένοις ("towards those who admit their fault and are sorry, since we accept their grief at what they have done as satisfaction"), Aristotle continues:

σημεῖον δὲ ἐπὶ τῆς τῶν οἰκετῶν κολάσεως· τοὺς μὲν γὰρ ἀντιλέγοντας καὶ ἀρνούμενους μᾶλλον κολάζομεν, πρὸς δὲ τοὺς ὁμολογοῦντας δικάως κολάζεσθαι παυόμεθα θυμούμενοι.

The punishment of slaves shows this: those who contradict us and deny their offence we punish all the more, but we cease to be incensed against those who agree that they deserved their punishment (1380a17–19).

As Aristotle explains:

αἴτιον δ' ὅτι ἀναισχυντία τὸ τὰ φανερά ἀρνεῖσθαι, ἢ δ' ἀναισχυντία ὀλιγωρία καὶ καταφρόνησις· ὧν γοῦν πολὺ καταφρονοῦμεν, οὐκ αἰσχυνόμεθα.

The reason is that it is shameless to deny what is obvious, and those who are shameless towards us slight us and show contempt for us: anyhow, we do not feel shame before those of whom we are thoroughly contemptuous.

Confession on the part of the slave is a sign of deference to the master, whose superior judgment is thereby acknowledged. The slave's expression of regret (μεταμέλεια) has nothing to do with a moral transformation, but is simply his recognition of the fact that he is in no position to have gone against the will and authority of his owner.

Aristotle goes on to affirm, further, that we feel calm

καὶ τοῖς ταπεινουμένοις πρὸς αὐτοὺς καὶ μὴ ἀντιλέγουσιν· φαίνονται γὰρ ὁμολογεῖν ἥττους εἶναι, οἱ δ' ἥττους φοβοῦνται, φοβούμενος δὲ οὐδεὶς ὀλιγωρεῖ· ὅτι δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ταπεινουμένους παύεται ἡ ὀργή, καὶ οἱ κύνες δηλοῦσιν οὐ δάκνοντες τοὺς καθίζοντας.

towards those who humble themselves [τοῖς ταπεινουμένοις] before us and do not gainsay us; we feel that they thus admit themselves our inferiors, and inferiors feel fear, and nobody can slight any one so long as he feels afraid of him. That our anger ceases towards those who humble themselves before us is shown even by dogs, who do not bite people when they sit down.

It could not be clearer: the purpose of humbling oneself, very different from the Christian notion of humility, is to demonstrate one's fear of the other, and by doing so to persuade him that one cannot have tendered a deliberate insult. The crucial thing in assuaging anger is not the recognition that one has done wrong, but a show of obsequiousness that effectively cancels the impression of a slight. Aristotle adds that we feel calm as well καὶ τοῖς δεομένοις καὶ παραιτουμένοις· ταπεινότεροι γάρ ("towards those who pray to us and beg us, since they are the more humble in doing so"). The petition, once again, is for a remission of anger, not for forgiveness. In addition to these conditions for the appeasement of anger, Aristotle declares:

καὶ τοῖς δι' ὀργὴν ποιήσασιν ἢ οὐκ ὀργίζονται ἢ ἥττον ὀργίζονται· οὐ γὰρ δι' ὀλιγωρίαν φαίνονται πράξαι· οὐδεὶς γὰρ ὀργιζόμενος ὀλιγωρεῖ·

people feel no anger, or comparatively little, with those who have done what they did through anger: they do not feel that they have done it from a wish to slight, for no one slights people when angry with them.

Aristotle's explanation for this curious statement is that ἡ μὲν γὰρ ὀλιγωρία ἄλυπον, ἡ δ' ὀργὴ μετὰ λύπης ("slighting is painless, and anger is painful"). He means that being angry and slighting another are contradictory states of mind, but the deeper point is that if you are angry, it is a sign that you have been diminished by the other, and you must first reestablish your position of equality before venturing to offer an insult in turn.

I have been contrasting the motive behind Aristotle's view of humbling oneself as a means of conciliating a person whom one has wronged or insulted, and the Christian imperative to feel remorse for one's sins, or sinfulness, and adopt a humble posture toward God. One might object

that the opposition is not entirely on a square footing, since pacifying anger and petitioning for forgiveness are two distinct modes of behavior, and invite correspondingly different responses. But, as we have seen, Aristotle nowhere investigates what we would call forgiveness; when he speaks briefly of συγγνώμη in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is to affirm that we extend such sympathetic understanding only when we recognize that an offense was involuntary, whether on account of ignorance or force majeure. Nor does Aristotle or any other ancient Greek philosopher pause to discuss repentance or remorse in any detail. The techniques that Aristotle recommends for assuaging anger take the place of or substitute for what for us is one of the principal strategies of reconciliation. To put it differently, forgiveness in the modern sense, with its associated ideas of repentance and a deep change of heart or character, simply did not exist as a form of social interaction in the classical world.

Now, it may appear that I have fulfilled only half the promise I made at the beginning of this paper, and the easier half at that. For even if one concedes that forgiveness in the modern sense was absent in classical Greek and Roman thought, I would seem to have shown that it was virtually omnipresent in Hebrew and Christian thought. And yet I claimed that interpersonal forgiveness was not a developed idea even in those traditions. The answer to this conundrum is that in all the instances of confession, remorse, and repentance that I have illustrated above, the penitent addresses not another human being but God, and so these are not examples of interpersonal forgiveness, but rather of divine forgiveness. We may illustrate the distinction by citing some passages from the Gospel of Matthew. When Jesus miraculously heals a paralytic man, the scribes protest at Jesus' affirmation: Θάρσει, τέκνον· ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι ("Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven"), regarding it as a form of blasphemy (9:2-3). Jesus first offers the evasive, or at all events ironic, reply: τί γάρ ἐστιν εὐκοπώτερον, εἰπεῖν, Ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι, ἢ εἰπεῖν, Ἐγείρε καὶ περιπάτει; ("For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?" 9:5), but he immediately addresses the substance of the scribes' objection:

ἵνα δὲ εἰδῆτε ὅτι ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας—τότε λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ, Ἐγερθεὶς ἄρῶν σου τὴν κλίνην καὶ ὑπάγε εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου.

"But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic, "Rise, take up your bed and go home" (9:6).

After the parable of the debtors, Jesus says of the woman who has anointed his feet:

οὐ χάριν, λέγω σοι, ἀφέωνται αἱ ἁμαρτίαι αὐτῆς αἱ πολλαί, ὅτι ἠγάπησεν πολὺ· ᾧ δὲ ὀλίγον ἀφίεται, ὀλίγον ἀγαπᾷ. εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῇ, Ἀφέωνταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι.

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven [ἀφέωνται], for she loved much; but he who is forgiven [ἀφίεται] little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven [ἀφέωνταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι]” (Luke 7:47-48).

Jesus is not arguing here that forgiveness of sin lies within the competence of ordinary human beings; rather, he is demonstrating the legitimacy of his claim to be God’s son, and hence his regent on earth, with authority to act on behalf of his father.

There is one particular instance of forgiveness on the part of Jesus that deserves special attention. At the moment of the crucifixion, Jesus exclaims: Πάτερ, ἄφες αὐτοῖς, οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν (“Father, forgive ἄφες] them; for they know not [οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν] what they do” (Luke 23:34). The text here is highly controversial, since these words do not appear in all manuscripts of the Gospel. Ilaria Ramelli, however, points to the close correspondence between this appeal and the passage in Acts in which Peter declares (3:17):

καὶ νῦν, ἀδελφοί, οἶδα ὅτι κατὰ ἄγνοιαν ἐπράξατε, ὥσπερ καὶ οἱ ἄρχοντες ὑμῶν·

And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance [κατὰ ἄγνοιαν], as did also your rulers.²¹

For Jesus’ words can be interpreted as a version of the excuse of ignorance, which, as Aristotle and the classical rhetoricians observed, effectively absolves the offender of the crime. The problem was noted by Peter Abelard in his treatise, *Ethics or “Know Yourself,”* where he wonders:

si talium ignorantia peccato minime est ascribenda, quomodo ipse Dominus procrucifigentibus se orat dicens: Pater dimitte illis, non enim sciunt quid faciunt . . . ? Non enim ignoscendum uidetur ubi culpa non praecessit.

if such people’s ignorance is hardly to be counted as a sin at all, then why does the Lord himself pray for those crucifying him, saying “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” . . . ? For where no fault preceded, there doesn’t appear to be anything to be excused (1.112).

²¹ See Ilaria Ramelli, review of Griswold *Forgiveness* (above, n. 2), *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica* 100 (2008) 658-662.

Perhaps the best-known passage on forgiveness in the Gospels is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in which he enjoins the people (Matthew 6:9-15):

Οὕτως οὖν προσεύχεσθε ὑμεῖς· Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου . . . Τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον· καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν· καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν, ἀλλὰ ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ. Ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος· ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οὐδὲ ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν.

Pray then like this: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . . Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive [ἄφες] us our debts [ὀφειλήματα], as we also have forgiven our debtors [ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις]; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." For if you forgive [ἀφῆτε] men their trespasses [παραπτώματα], your heavenly Father also will forgive [ἀφήσει] you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (trans. RSV).

The word for "debt" here is ὀφειλημα, meaning "what is owed"; the word for "forgive" (ἀφίημι), moreover, is a standard term for the remission of a debt. "Trespass," in turn, renders the Greek παράπτωμα, literally a "misstep" or "slip." In the version of the Lord's prayer in Luke, the language is slightly different, for there Jesus bids us pray to God:

καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν, καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν.

forgive [ἄφες] us our sins [or faults (ἀμαρτίας)], for we ourselves forgive [ἀφίομεν] everyone who is indebted to us (11:4).

The second term ("indebted," ὀφείλοντι) recalls the language of borrowing and owing. At the beginning of this paper, I remarked on the special use of "forgive" in the sense of "remit," in relation to debts. Human beings can forgive a debt in this sense: we simply cancel it, without reference to the attitude of the debtor, not to speak of remorse and repentance. What we cannot do is forgive another person's sin: that is the prerogative of God, or of God's son or his representatives on earth, that is, the priesthood in the Catholic church.

I suggest that it was precisely this sense that forgiveness was the special province of God that inhibited the development of a practice of interpersonal forgiveness within the Christian tradition, and one will look in vain for a discussion of such forgiveness in the great mediaeval

doctors of the church. It would be the height of arrogance to demand that another human being profess repentance before us. Of course, there were other ways in which people became reconciled with one another, if an offense was committed or perceived: the offender might make payment, or suffer punishment, or claim the offense was involuntary or unintended; the offended party might forget or overlook the injury, or simply forego vengeance out of a higher sense of purpose or out of love for the other person. But the modern conception of forgiveness, with its insistence that the offender express remorse and a commitment to change her or his ways, may be understood as a secularization of the Jewish and Christian idea of divine forgiveness. When did this transformation in the practice of interpersonal reconciliation take place? I venture to say that it is a post-Enlightenment phenomenon. Because forgiveness is so much a part of contemporary discourse, it is hard to believe that it can have been of such recent vintage. For my part, I am not sure that the absence of such a notion represents a flaw in the moral vocabulary of the ancients. There is much about the modern notion, indeed, that might give qualms. But that is a topic for another occasion.

