

## REVIEW

**David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ISBN: 978-0521199407**

David Konstan's *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* is a thoroughly convincing, enjoyable defense of two theses: first, that "the modern concept of forgiveness, in the full or rich sense of the term, did not exist in classical antiquity... or at all events that it played no role whatever in the ethical thinking of those societies"; second, that "[forgiveness] 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; [and that] 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." (ix) These two theses, in turn, support a third: "the absence of forgiveness in these ancient cultures... involves a sharp distinction in ethical outlook, and may even be said to reflect differences in the ancient and modern conception of the self." (ix)

The clarity with which these theses are stated is characteristic of the book's lucidity as a whole. There can be no mistaking either Konstan's position, or, I think, the success of his defense. The first chapter presents conditions for "forgiveness in the full or rich sense of the term." (ix) Subsequent chapters demonstrate its absence in Greek tragedy, Aristotelian ethical thought, ancient prose narratives, the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, and the writings of the Church Fathers. A final chapter traces intimations of it in the early modern period and its more or less full emergence in Kant. The tradition of thinking about forgiveness perhaps most familiar to readers of this journal—the one that runs from Arendt and Levinas through Derrida—does not figure prominently in the exposition.

What is this "full and rich" sense of forgiveness? Konstan says it "is a bilateral process involving a confession of wrongdoing, evidence of sincere repentance, and a change of heart or moral perspective... on the part of the offender, together with a comparable alteration in the forgiver, by which she... consents to forego vengeance on the basis precisely of the change in the offender." (21) These conditions are said to distinguish forgiveness, in this full and rich sense, from other responses to wrongs—on the one hand, from merely "forgetting" or "put-

ting [them] out of mind” and, on the other, from unilaterally absolving another, even in the absence of confession, repentance, and a commitment to sin no more.

Of the conditions listed above, it is the first three—confession, evidence of repentance, and a change of heart—that are most absent from the ancient Greco-Roman evidence. We have accounts of aggrieved persons giving over their anger but never, on Konstan’s telling, because the offender has confessed and demonstrated such a change of heart. Offenders—in the Greek legal context, especially—rather express prostration and testify to the superior power and status of the offended person. This could effect reconciliation of some sort, but it does not amount to forgiveness. Aristotle might be thought to muddy the argument somewhat, since in his discussion of the quasi-emotion “calmness or calming down”—*praotês*—he says that anger is diminished towards those who admit wrongdoing and show regret. (*Rhetoric* 1380a 14) Konstan notes, however, that the remainder of the discussion of *praotês* is focused on relatively different concerns: humbling oneself is the order of the day, not confession. At one point Konstan suggests that “Aristotle’s discussion of the appeasement of anger is... focused *entirely* on relations of status and power,” a conclusion he moderates slightly when he says that it “has *little* to do with begging for forgiveness for an admitted wrong.” (25, 26; my italics) I prefer the latter formulation, which seems more measured, and also registers the fact that admitting wrong is the first reason Aristotle gives for why someone might “calm down” (outside of a realization that the offense was involuntary). Either way, Konstan’s central point in these opening chapters is secure: Greco-Roman antiquity had an importantly different mechanism for restoring relations between injured parties.

So too for the Hebrew Scriptures which, Konstan claims, also lack evidence of the “full and rich” conception of interpersonal forgiveness articulated above. Forgiveness in the Hebrew Scriptures belongs almost exclusively to God. Interpersonal forgiveness is quite rare, and any forgiveness that issues between persons is less an attempt to restore relations between them and more an attempt to restore relations with God. Interpersonal wrongs, that is, are ultimately wrongs against God, whose mercy structures any and all conciliation. Joseph’s forgiving of his brothers near the end of *Genesis* comes closest to modern, interpersonal forgiveness, but even here Konstan doubts whether the criteria of confession and repentance have been completely fulfilled.

Most surprising are the discussions of the Christian Scriptures, which I had thought positively enjoined interpersonal forgiveness among the disciples. “Pray then like this,” says Jesus in Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount: “Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name... Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you.” And, equally, this instruction from Jesus: “if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” And most famously, in response to Peter’s “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I

forgive him? As many as seven times?", Jesus' reply: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (122)

Konstan, however, again cautions against calling this forgiveness in the full, rich sense of the term, since the forgiveness does not come in response to confession and repentance. It is hard to disagree with that conclusion, and it follows necessarily from the criteria for "full, rich forgiveness" established at the outset. But this is where the audience for this journal might raise an objection. For one of the great contributions of both *The History of Sexuality* and *Abnormal*, the 1974-5 lectures at the Collège de France is Foucault's account of confession as a deeply historical phenomenon. We have *become* confessing animals, Foucault insists—so much so, in fact, that Konstan can claim that no moral repair deserves to be called forgiveness without prior confession. But perhaps we should say not that the Christian Scriptures lacked forgiveness, but that they lacked forgiveness predicated on confession.

Historicizing the phenomenon in this way also helps recover some of the wonder of Christian forgiveness, which Konstan, in accordance with the strictures of his "full, rich" paradigm, casts in an unduly thin light. Of the prayer to "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," Konstan says that it "has the character of a pact or reciprocal commitment: to receive indulgence of others, in this case God's, it is good practice to be similarly gracious toward those who are obliged to you, whether for money borrowed or for some other thing that is due." (114) And of the injunction to forgive "seventy times seven" times Konstan says that it "encourages a posture of general charitableness..." (122) Both formulations—the latter especially—strike me as a bit anemic, since the injunction to forgive "seventy times seven times" sounds like a radical demand, far in excess of some "general charitableness."

Konstan says that "Arendt... made the controversial... claim that the idea of forgiveness as a human capacity began with Jesus." (112) Konstan thinks she is mistaken since, as I said, he thinks interpersonal forgiveness does not appear until Kant. I would, however, put Arendt's claim differently. She does not strictly say—though she may well imply—that human forgiveness began with Jesus. She makes the different and, I think, provocative claim that Jesus was the "discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs," (*The Human Condition*, 238) and she insists that this is not so much a religious claim as it is a philosophical one. "Forgiving of those who trespass against us" has, for Arendt, a powerfully secular sense:

...Trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new. (*HC*, 240)

The argument here turns on Arendt's understanding of action and, more specifically, what Patchen Markell, in his wonderful *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, 2003), named action's "impropriety"—its irreversibility, its unpredictability, its tendency to out-run and escape actors' intentions. Were it not for forgiveness, Arendt argues in that wonderful last sentence, human life could not be lived freely. The possibilities for self-disclosure inherent in action would, without forgiveness, be stillborn. But, crucially, the forgiveness Arendt has in mind is not Konstan's "full, rich" forgiveness but rather Jesus' "seven times seventy times." This is all slightly orthogonal to Konstan's central theses, which he elegantly establishes. I mention Arendt only as a way of holding at bay the conclusion that "full, rich forgiveness" is the kind most worthy of admiration. Konstan never says this, but readers might take his language of "full and rich" to suggest as much.

In fact, Konstan ends the book with the suggestion that the ancients' mechanisms for "restoring... a moral relationship" between a wrongdoer and her victim were "more candid," "more coherent," and less fraught with ambiguity than our own. (165) The central ambiguity arises from our demand that the wrongdoer, in repenting, show that she has become something like a new "self," and, precisely on those grounds, "deserves to be forgiven." (163) But if she is entirely new, what sort of connection does she have to her wrongs? Who, in effect, is being forgiven? If it is the new, totally-transformed person, why does she need forgiveness? If it is the same old wrongdoer, why does she deserve it? By not making repentance and transformation a condition of restoring a moral relationship, the ancients (mostly) avoid this problem—such as it is—altogether.

This is a thetic, careful, and convincing study. My only reservations were the two mentioned above: first, that Foucault's own historicizing work on confession could have enriched Konstan's slightly-too schematic account; and second, that Foucault helps recover the mystery and beauty of Christian forgiveness, as both a spiritual and secular phenomenon. How much forgiveness is required for these trespasses, if trespasses they are, is something Konstan will have to take up with his confessor.

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