Before Forgiveness

The Origins of a Moral Idea

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> spiritual transformation from bad to good, but not implying his literal re-creation.... I suggest that far from removing the fact of wrongdoing, forgiveness actually relies upon the recognition of this fact for its very possibility. What is annulled in the act of forgiveness is not the crime itself but the distorting effect that this wrong has upon one's relations with the wrongdoer and perhaps with others.

It is true that no modern thinker – I daresay, not even Kant – conceived of the moral transformation in the offender who petitions forgiveness as a "literal re-creation" of the person. But the appeal to metaphor does not entirely remove the paradoxical quality of the change of self that is implied in the modern conception of forgiveness.

Meir Dan-Cohen has recently taken a close look at the notion of "revising the past" as a premise of forgiveness.[18] Dan-Cohen notes that "the standard account" of forgiveness "gives priority to repentance," and he adds, "Though there are a number of variants, the basic idea is the same. Repentance involves a change of heart in the wrongdoer" (118). Dan-Cohen identifies one version of this view, which derives ultimately from Kant, in Jeffrie Murphie's claim that wrongdoing "is an expression of disrespect toward the victim"; the repentant wrongdoer no longer holds the offended party in contempt and so merits forgiveness.[19] Another view, however, "makes a more radical claim: The change wrought by repentance may be so profound as to count as a change of identity." Dan-Cohen goes on to point out the paradox that North discovered in Kant's analysis: "Since the repentant individual is not the same one as the wrongdoer to whom we bore a grudge, the offender's transformation deprives the reactive attitudes of their object" (119). If there is no one left to forgive, what is left of forgiveness? Dan-Cohen suggests, accordingly, that we speak rather of a change of the boundaries of the self: "Revisionary practices give rise to a new version of the self from which the wrongful act is excluded. When this version is inhabited and enacted, it replaces the older one as superior or more authoritative" (129). But does this new description succeed in resolving the paradox of forgiveness?

The question is crucial, because the idea of an alteration of the self is, as we have seen, central to the modern idea of forgiveness

[18] Dan-Cohen 2007.
[19] Ibid., 118, citing Murphie and Hampton 1988: 26.

(deriving, as I argue, from the religious conception of conversion). Thus, Richard Swinburne, in an important study, argues that, for the complete removal of guilt, "the wrongdoer must make atonement for his wrong act, and the victim must forgive him." Swinburne explains that atonement "involves four components – repentance, apology, reparation, and what, for want of a better word, I shall call penance."[20] It is possible to compensate for some wrongs, at least, but not for the fact that "the wrongdoer has by doing the act made himself someone who has harmed the victim. He cannot change that past fact, but he can distance himself from it by privately and publicly disowning the act" (82). In so doing, "the wrongdoer makes the sharp contrast between the attitude behind the past act and his present attitude" (82–3). To be sure, "The final act belongs to the victim – to forgive," which results, we are told, in having the "guilt removed" (84–5). Forgiving, for its part, "is a performative act" (85) achieved by the very declaration. Such a description, however, bypasses the complex internal process that is the precondition for the act and renders it sincere: in short, why should a new attitude in the offender suffice to eliminate resentment for a past wrong?

There has been some discussion recently of the paradox of forgiveness in connection with the question of whether there are wrongs that are by nature unforgivable. We saw in Chapter 4 that, according to the Gospel of Matthew (12:31–2), sins against the Spirit are not forgiven.[21] The issue acquired a particular salience in the aftermath of the Nazi extermination camps, when there was perpetrated what many have considered to be the ultimate offense against humanity. With his customary flair for the paradoxical, Jacques Derrida pronounced that "forgiveness forgives only the

[20] Swinburne 1989: 81. Jones (1995: 150) criticizes Swinburne's view from a Christian theological perspective, arguing that repentance is not necessary for God's forgiveness: he observes, for example, that Jesus was willing "to forgive in God's name without requiring prior repentance," and he affirms that people "distort a Christian understanding of forgiveness by making repentance a prerequisite for forgiveness" (151). A prime instance of this misconception, according to Jones, is Kant, and he avers that "Richard Swinburne has extended the logic of Kant's argument for the prior requirement of repentance to forgiveness" (ibid., citing the passage in Swinburne quoted in the preceding text). On the much debated question of unconditional forgiveness in Christian thought, see Chapter 4, with nn. 36 and 44, and especially Ramelli 2010.
[21] For unforgivable offenses in the Jewish rabbinical tradition, Newman 1987: 164.

unforgivable."[52] Derrida observes that the insistence on repentance places the victim in a position of sovereignty and reduces forgiveness to a kind of economic exchange; thus, as Mary-Jane Rubenstein observes, "A strictly conditional 'forgiveness,' even if it were possible, would merely reverse and repeat the original violence."[53] Only if an apology were not required could forgiveness "disrupt the specular economy that conditional forgiveness can only affirm" (Rubenstein 2008: 82).[54] Such a model of forgiveness, for Derrida, is more a dream than a reality, and Derrida hesitates to spell out the lineaments of such an ideal vision. The closest he came to it, according to Rubenstein, was at a seminar he gave (together with Avital Ronell) at New York University in October 2001, the proceedings of which were not published; there, Rubenstein reports, Derrida "offered his audience a sketch of what he called an 'authentic scene of forgiveness'" (83). In this fantasy, Derrida said, according to Rubenstein, that "one criminal would continually commit the same crime against one victim, and the victim would continually forgive him, knowing he would never apologize and never change. In such a scene, Derrida explained, there could be no possibility of forgetting or of reconciliation; rather, the two parties would exist in a perpetual and 'reciprocal fascination' with one another, the criminal remaining the criminal and the victim remaining the victim" (84). For all the apparent violence of this picture, to which Rubenstein duly calls attention, it is not entirely dissonant with Griswold's requirement that the forgiver must "commit to giving up resentment, or at least, to giving up the judgment that the wrong-doer warrants continued resentment" (2007b: 49; cited more fully in Chapter 1). My

[52] Derrida 2002: 32, cited in Janover 2005: 22. Cf. Friedland 2004: 338–47.

[53] Rubenstein 2008: 81.

[54] Arendt (1998: 241) describes forgiving as "the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven." It thus has something of the free and generous character that Aristotle ascribes to an act of kindness or *kharis* in the *Rhetoric* (2.7): "Let *kharis* ... be a service to one who needs it, not in return for anything, nor so that the one who performs the service may gain something, but so that the other may." Such a gesture, in turn, invites gratitude, which must not be construed as a debt or a requirement to return the favor, for this would deprive the original act of its altruism (see Konstan 2006: 156–68).

emphasis here is on the idea of committing, which requires that one retain at least a trace of the sense of injury caused by the original offense, even as one seeks to overcome it: it is what Griswold characterizes as forgiveness in the "present participle" sense, in which it is not completed but still "under way" (2007b: 17, 45, 70, 86). Forgiveness, so conceived, is an ongoing act – "forgiving" in the progressive or imperfective aspect, to use the grammatical terms – rather than the completed or perfective state of "having forgiven." Forgiving seems to lock the agent and recipient of forgiveness in a strange reciprocal dependency, like that which Hegel, in a famous chapter of *The Phenomenology of Mind*, described as obtaining between master and slave.

Apart, however, from the aporia raised by Derrida's dream of "pure forgiveness" and of the limits of the forgivable, there is the paradox inherent in predicating a self that is new, and so deserves to be forgiven, even as it remains the same, as the author of the offense. It is this stipulation that renders forgiveness so elusive an idea. Mona Gustafson Affinito, for example, seeks to define it by contrast with related notions: "forgiveness is *not* excusing, forgetting, condoning negative and inappropriate behavior, absolution, a form of self-sacrifice, a clear-cut one-time decision, approval of injustice, pretending everything is just fine when you feel it is not,"[55] nor is it a matter of accepting compensation or taking satisfaction in the punishment and suffering of the other. Instead, she offers the following definition (93): "Forgiveness is the decision to forgo the personal pursuit of punishment for the perpetrator(s) of a perceived injustice, taking action on that decision, and experiencing the emotional relief that follows." But this therapeutic conception, with its emphasis on overcoming subjective tension, ignores the interpersonal dimension of forgiveness. As Janet Landman states in the same volume, "Certainly, forgiveness is an inherently *interpersonal*, or relational matter.... It is a change of heart on the part of one person, the one harmed, directed at another person, the one who has done the harm"[56] – a change that is in turn motivated by a series of steps in which "the wrongdoer 'recognizes that he

[55] Gustafson Affinito 2002: 91. For a similar set of contrasts, see Rodrigues 2006: 35–55.

[56] Landman 2002: 235.

has done wrong ...,' experiences other-oriented regret or remorse for the wrong ..., resolves to reform," and so forth.[57] The premise of identity in renewal is intrinsic to forgiveness, and it is an enigmatic basis for a moral relation.

Even assuming that a radical change of self is possible, it is a precarious kind of reconciliation that depends on fathoming another person's sincerity. As William Miller observes in his delightful book, *Faking It*, "it is rarer to be really remorseful when we meant to harm someone than when we didn't." Miller allows that "people can and do feel genuine remorse for the wrongs they have intentionally done. Minds can change." Still, as he points out, the problem remains: "how does the wronged person know that the wrongdoer is not feigning his remorse, faking his change of mind? Or that his sorriness is not of a less noble kind than true remorse?" – that is, simply the regret that "we got caught."[58] Miller goes further in reducing the significance of what we think of as remorse: "Apology is a ritual, pure and simple, of humiliation. The humiliation is the true compensation" (88). Despite the apparent cynicism of this description, it accords well with Aristotle's views on how to appease anger, as we saw in Chapter 2; as Aristotle put it, we are placated by those who humble themselves before us, because this proves that they are our inferiors and that they fear us (*Rhetoric* 1380a24). Miller goes on to say (90), "Apology ceremonies, indeed many reconciliation ceremonies, don't disguise the fact that they are humiliation rituals; only in America could we think otherwise. In ancient Israel you rent your clothes, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly" – and not just in Israel, as Miller points out. In light of these practices, Miller concludes (94), "We will never properly understand apology rituals and their requirement of humiliation and compensation if we do not understand that the ritual form is largely necessitated by how easy it is to fake remorse, and by how hard it is to distinguish genuine remorse that arises as

[57] Ibid., 238–40; Landman bases her nine-stage process of forgiveness (foreshortened in my description) on North 1998: 230. Schimmel (2002: 162), observes that "Another focus of repentance is an even deeper and broader transformation of self that goes beyond changing a specific character trait. Sometimes, for example, a heretofore incorrigible sinner or criminal undergoes a conversion experience in which he becomes a new and different person, so to speak."

[58] Miller 2003: 81, in the chapter "Say it Like You Mean it: Mandatory Faking and Apology."

a moral response to the harm done to the other from the equally genuine amoral regret that arises from the discomfort the whole fiasco is causing the wrongdoer."[59]

The danger of hypocrisy is perhaps one motive for such rituals of contrition, but the role of self-abasement in various ancient practices of conciliation, and more particularly in Aristotle's advice on how to assuage anger, suggests that it may have a more basic function, namely that of restoring due respect for the status of the other where a slight or other offense has called it into question. In modern societies imbued with a democratic ideology, there is a tendency to disguise such marks of deference, but the ancient Greeks and Romans had fewer such inhibitions. They did not feel so great a need to verify the remorse of the offender, because repentance was not the principal condition for restoring a moral relationship with the wrongdoer. Their attitude in this was not only more candid, it was also, as I am inclined to believe, more coherent, in that it did not postulate the paradoxical notion of self-reform that lies at the heart of the modern understanding of forgiveness.[60]

I have been arguing in this book that forgiveness, in the modern acceptation of the word, did not exist in classical antiquity or in the early Judeo-Christian tradition, despite a new vision of divine absolution that was predicated on the repentance of the sinner and a turning, or returning, to the ways of the Lord. Rather, I have sought to show that the modern conception, which involves a moral transformation in the offender and a corresponding change of heart in the forgiver, is of relatively recent vintage as a moral idea and has its roots in large part in the revolution in ethical thinking heralded by Immanuel Kant. This new conception of the moral autonomy of the individual, and the requirement

[59] Ure 2007 applies a Nietzschean critique to Arendt's defense of forgiveness as a means of social reconciliation and concludes (68): "Christian *agape* defeats resentment only at the price of a radical denial of our own need for recognition."

[60] It is not necessary to conceive of remorse or a change of heart as constituting so radical a transformation of self; one may, for example, regard the self in a postmodern vein as a product of multiple, criss-crossing identities, which combine and recombine in response to different circumstances (I am grateful to Ellen Rooney for suggesting this alternative). Such a view, however, is not the basis of modern discussions of forgiveness, which are implicitly indebted to a tradition of repentance and conversion.

to treat human beings as ends in themselves, created the conditions for a secular notion of interpersonal forgiveness, in which remorse, and the inner change it presupposed, were directed not to God but, in a way that might have seemed blasphemous in an earlier age, to the fellow human whom one had wronged. However, the original, religious conception of conversion continued to inform this notion of a moral transformation, which, once secularized and rendered the basis for forgiveness, assumed a new and potentially contradictory form. For now it was no longer a matter of becoming "a new man" in the eyes of God, who was under no obligation to recall the disobedience of the old Adam; forgiveness, as we have seen, is not equivalent to forgetting or to a cancellation of the wrong that was committed. And here, precisely, is the rub.

To quote Chryssavgis once again, repentance "is an invitation to new life, an opening up of new horizons, the gaining of a new vision. Christianity testifies that the past can be undone. It knows the mystery of obliterating or rather renewing memory, of forgiveness and regeneration, eschewing the fixed division between the 'good' and the 'wicked,' the pious and the rebellious, the believers and the unbelievers. Indeed, 'the last' can be 'the first,' the sinner can reach out to holiness.... One repents not because one is virtuous, but because human nature can change, because what is impossible for man is possible for God."[31] Although the notion of a change of character so deep as to render us different from what we were sounds particularly Christian, however, it was not entirely foreign to classical thought. Plato, in the *Phaedrus* (241A), explains that when a lover has accepted reason and moderation as his masters, in place of passion and madness, he becomes "another person" (*allos gegonôs*). In Plato's *Euthydemus*, the sophistical Dionysodorus insists that for Cleinias to become wise rather than ignorant, it is necessary for him to become a different person: "Surely," he says to Socrates, "who he is not, you wish him to become, and who he now is, no longer to be" (283C–D). As Mary Margaret McCabe observes in a subtle study of the dialogue, the debate "focuses attention on the issue of personal identity. It invites Socrates to agree that who Cleinias is, is delimited by the character and properties that he

[31] Chryssavgis 2004.

has at some particular time; when once one of those may change, he is no longer *who* he was before."[32] The dilemma, as McCabe points out, is that "if identity is episodic, *I* cannot become wise; but if it is persistent, I cannot *change*" (122–3). The question of continuity of the self was evidently in the air but was regarded as a clever conundrum rather than a serious ethical possibility.[33]

Glenn Most has recently remarked upon a sharp contrast between modern and ancient ways of explaining character formation.[34] He illustrates the modern approach by way of Salman Rushdie's novel *Fury*, in which the uncontrollable rages to which the protagonist is prone are traced to the sexual abuse to which he was subjected in his childhood. Most writes, "no one in antiquity ever even hinted that Achilles' notoriously excessive anger might have been the result of his having had an unhappy childhood." Although there was ample material in Greek mythology that might have lent itself to such an explanation, such as the early separation of Achilles's parents or his disguise as a girl on the island of Scyrus, nevertheless, when the Greeks and Romans "imagined Achilles as a child, they imagined him as being just like the adult Achilles, only rather smaller." In general this is how the ancients understood the process of character formation – marked not by ruptures but by continuity, in which traits visible in childhood persist or become accentuated over time. Thus, in Plutarch's *Lives*, there is little attention paid to childhood experiences: "Already as a child, Philopoemen is the consummate soldier" (*Life* 3.2), whereas "Themistocles is already the perfect politician" (*Life* 2.1), Cato "the stern Stoic sage" (*Life* 1.2), and Alcibiades the same charming cad (*Life* 2.1–2).

[32] McCabe 2008: 118.

[33] Simplicius, in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 10.1066.3–4 and following (on *Physics* 7.3), discusses whether a change from vice to virtue means that a person has fundamentally changed (I owe this reference to Orna Harari). Sissa (2006: 48) argues that, on Aristotle's view of suffering and remorse (*lupê* and *metameleia*; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1110b17–22), "the agent does take responsibility and yet does not endorse the act, here and now, by a retrospective approval (or a careless indifference), which would create a sort of continuity – and thus complicity – between his present self and 'the one who did that.' Through a feeling of repulsion (*duscheresteia*) the agent has become somehow another, as the compound *metameleia* suggests, because he now detaches himself from an act which he has, however, done." But Aristotle does not cast the recognition of a past error as a change of self, and the agent, in the case of a nonvoluntary action, remains morally self-identical.

[34] Most 2008, English taken from Most's original manuscript, by permission (see now Most 2009).