Forgiveness in classical Greece: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their background culture[1]

Abstract
In the Christian tradition that we have inherited, there is a two-stranded conception of forgiveness: forgiveness is both kindness and grace about wrongdoing, and also cancellation of wrongdoing. Moreover, the focal Augustinian articulation of this tradition works with a very special (and specially problematic) conception of what the wrongdoing is that the forgiver forgives.

None of these ideas are central to the classical Greek ethical tradition. Most of them are not there at all. In fact, we might plausibly say that in pagan ancient-Greek ethics there is not much evidence of *any* concept of forgiveness. The nearest approach is that there is *some* idea of gracious kindness towards those who do us wrong. But in its pagan Greek version this does not involve any contrastive narrative of moral or spiritual conversion or transformation; above all, there is in pagan Greek ethics no notion at all of the *kind* of wrongdoing that at least Augustinian Christianity later came to focus on.

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I

"This divine precept to forgive injuries and love our enemies," writes Bishop Butler (*Sermons* Preface, para.34, p.19), "tho' to be met with in Gentile moralists, yet is in a peculiar sense a precept of Christianity; as our Saviour has insisted more upon it than upon any other single virtue."

If anything, Butler here seems to understate the contrast between Christianity and "Gentile moralists", i.e. the non-Christian, and especially the ancient Greek, classical tradition of ethics. For the Christian ethical tradition is centred upon a thick ethical concept[2] of forgiveness that is essentially *narrative* in structure, and essentially *contrastive* in its characterisation. Christian forgiveness or redemption is a story of spiritual and psychic transformation, from complete lostness and wickedness to complete salvation and sanctification. To quote the hymn "Amazing Grace", it is a story about how (through God's freely-given kindness) some wretch was once lost (really lost), but now is found; was blind (really blind) but now they see. To allude to Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, it is a story about the difference between being, by one's own choice, an outcast and a downcast, eating husks in a pig-sty, and being a rich man's beloved son and heir, wreathed and feted at a homecoming feast. Or again there is the story of Zacchaeus the stature-challenged tax-collector (Luke 19.1-10); the tales of how Matthew (Matthew 9.9-13) and Peter (John 1.35-42, John 21.15-19) came to be disciples; and the Damascus road conversion of Saul/Paul (Acts 9). Preceding these Christian narratives, there are the many narratives of the Hebrew Bible where a straying and unfaithful people turn back in repentance to their God, who then restores them: see for example Nehemiah, 2 Chronicles 29 (King Hezekiah's reforms), 2 Chronicles 34 (King Josiah's reforms), and the religious-political polemics of many of the prophets' books, e.g. Jeremiah 11-12, Ezekiel 36, and much of Isaiah and Zechariah.

And what, on this Judaeo-Christian conception, is actually involved in the forgiving of sins? It is important to remember that English translations of the New Testament tend to create a misleading impression of lexical and therefore conceptual uniformity about "forgiveness". In the canonical English version, the King James Bible of 1611, and in every successor translation known to me, the New Testament has the single verb "forgive" (and noun "forgiveness") to stand for at least two importantly different Greek verbs, *aphiemi* (noun *aphesis*, "removal" or "cancellation") and *kharizomai* (noun *kharis*, "grace"), with a third verb, *apoluw* (noun *apolysis*, "dissolution"), sometimes appearing too. Now *aphiemi* means simply "take away", like *tollere* in Latin. And *apoluw* means, roughly, "dissolve", and seems to be little more than a verbal alternative to *aphiemi*. But *kharizomai* means "do a favour to", "treat kindly". In fact, despite all those translators, *kharizomai* does not necessarily mean *forgive* at all: it means "be gracious to" (*kharis*, grace), and forgiving someone is only one way to be gracious to someone.

The differences between *kharizomai* and the other two forgiveness-verbs seem both obvious and crucial. It is one thing for me to forgive someone who does me wrong, in the sense of being gracious or kind towards them. It is quite another for me to forgive someone, in the sense of taking away (*aphiemi*) or dissolving (*apoluw*) their wrongdoing. Grace and kindness towards each other when we get things wrong are, fortunately, commonplace in ordinary human life. But one might say that the power to take sins away, to cancel them or dissolve them, to make it as if they had not

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[2] In Bernard Williams' sense: see *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* pp.141 ff., and Pekka Väyrynen, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thick-ethical-concepts/

been committed in the first place, would have to be a miraculous power. Doing that might seem to involve altering the past, or the moral valence of the past; at the very least it seems to involve altering my own moral beliefs about, or stance towards, what is after all still the same misdeed. It is hard to see how anyone but God could do anything like that, and do it without some kind of injustice, or falsification of the moral record, or contradiction of his own previous verdicts.[3] It is not for nothing that when Jesus says to a man whom he heals "Your sins are forgiven", the Pharisees' response is to protest that "Only God can say that" (Luke 5.21).[4]

Nonetheless this idea of the *cancellation* of sin is central to the Christian (or Judaeo-Christian) narrative-contrastive concept of forgiveness. On that concept, God not only shows us grace and kindness (*kharizomai*) in respect of our sins; he expresses that grace and kindness by actually cancelling those sins (*aphiemi*). And so, in the Christian narrative of forgiveness, we go by God's grace from one contrastive extreme to the other: from the depths of sinful depravity, of "lostness in our sins" (Ephesians 2.1), to the heights of redemption in the "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5.17).

Compare here the history of forgiveness narrated by David Konstan, in his enthralling and already-classic historical study *Before Forgiveness* (CUP 2010). He argues that our modern notion of forgiveness has its sources neither in classical Greek and Roman ethical thought, nor in the mainstream Judaeo-Christian tradition, but rather in the time of Kant or not long before—the time, that is, when the autonomous secular individual became culturally central.

I have argued in Chappell 1995, and will continue to argue here (in Section VI), that our conception of forgiveness goes together with a conception of clear-eyed wrongdoing that is canonically formulated in the writings of St Augustine (following and developing St Paul in Romans 7.15-20). If I am right, then something like our conception of forgiveness has, *pace* Konstan, been around a lot longer than just since the seventeenth- to eighteenth-century Enlightenment. However, I suspect that Konstan is correct that until then the forgiver-forgivee relationship, at least as regards the *taking away* of sin, was paradigmatically the one between believer and God. Before that time, there was little or no thought that such a relationship was possible between two equal citizens in a kingdom (or indeed republic) of ends: as above, only God could forgive sin in the sense of taking it away, and it was an exercise of miraculous power to do so. No doubt the demythologising and bringing-down to earth of this alleged power not just to be gracious about sins, but to take them away, was as Konstan argues an effect of secularisation.

In the Christian tradition that we have inherited, then, there is a two-stranded conception of forgiveness: forgiveness is both kindness and grace about wrongdoing, and also cancellation of wrongdoing. Moreover, the focal Augustinian articulation of this tradition works with a very special (and specially problematic) conception of what the wrongdoing is that the forgiver forgives: more about that in Section VI below.

None of these ideas are central to the classical Greek ethical tradition. Most of them are not there at all. In fact, we might plausibly say that in pagan ancient-Greek ethics there is not much evidence of *any* concept of forgiveness. The nearest approach is that there is *some* idea of gracious kindness towards those who do us wrong. But in its pagan Greek version this does not involve any contrastive narrative of moral or spiritual conversion or transformation; above all, there is in pagan

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[3] See Kekes and Zaibert on "the paradox of forgiveness" i.e. the paradox that arises if some deed is truly blameworthy, and if forgiveness involves deciding or ceasing to treat it as truly blameworthy.

[4] See also Konstan 2010: 100 (italics added): "The term employed for 'forgive' [in Lev. 4.13-20] is a form of the root /salakh/; *in the Hebrew Bible, only God is the subject of this verb.*"

Greek ethics no notion at all of the *kind* of wrongdoing that at least Augustinian Christianity later came to focus on.

I explain these claims further in Section II.

II

The most obvious place in ancient Greek philosophical ethics to look for evidence of forgiveness is, perhaps, the teaching of Socrates, insofar as we can access that (primarily via Plato). It is true—this is perhaps what Bishop Butler has in mind in my opening quotation—that Plato's Socrates tells us to do good to our enemies as well as to our friends (*Crito* 47c-49d, *Republic* 331e-336a), that we should not return evil for evil (*Crito* 49c), and that it is better to suffer injustice than to do injustice (*Gorgias* 469a-479e). These injunctions certainly sound like Christ's, and/ or Christian, teachings: compare, in particular, Matthew 5:38-48, Luke 6:27-36.

However, we might equally well say they sound like Buddhist or Confucian teachings, or indeed the teachings of any of the great religions where they have remained close to what C.S.Lewis called the *Tao*: see the useful appendix to Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, listing some near-universally-accepted ethical maxims. And for another, we should notice what Socrates does *not* say in these passages of Plato. Socrates does say that we should *harm* nobody and *do injustice to* nobody, irrespective of whether they are friends or enemies. But he does not say that we should *love* our enemies. Socrates does say that we should have a steady disposition of benevolence, or at least non-malevolence, to all people whatever, both friends and enemies. In some ways, no doubt, this is something like the Christian emphasis on gracious kindness to those who do us wrong. But the disposition that Socrates commends is indeed a *steady* one. There is no thought, for Socrates, of the dramatic narratives of transformation or conversion of disposition that are implied by the Christian concept of forgiveness and its companion-notion, the thick concept of repentance, and which, as above, we find repeatedly in the New Testament. Nor does Plato's account of Socrates give us any examples of such forgiveness narratives.

We see the same sharp contrast with the Judaeo-Christian tradition when we consider the long-established commonplace of treating Socrates as a Hellenic analogue of Jesus: like him a loving, prophetic, and peaceful martyr, a just innocent who accepts death—and only-posthumous vindication—as the price of his ideals and principles. Throughout his teaching ministry Jesus tells his followers repeatedly to forgive their enemies (Mark 11.25, Matthew 5.44, 6.14-15, 7.2, 18.15-22, 18.34-35; Luke 6.37, 17.3-4). Even on the cross, Jesus asks his heavenly Father to forgive his executioners (Luke 23.34). In the Christian tradition begun, shared, and spread across and beyond the Mediterranean world by Jesus' followers, the same exhortation to them to forgive each other and their enemies (mainly, I suggest, in the *kharizomai* sense, the *aphiemi* sense being seen as God's prerogative), is heard again and again: Ephesians 4.31-32, Colossians 3.13, 2 Corinthians 2.10. The centrality to the new Christian faith of our receiving forgiveness and transformation as the gift of God's grace is, if anything, given even stronger emphasis: Matthew 26.28, John 1.29, Acts 2.38, 3.19, Romans 5.10, 8.1, 12.20, Ephesians 1.7, Colossians 1.14-20, 2.13, Hebrews 8.12, 10.17, 1 John 1.9, 2.12, Revelation 1.1-20.

This stress on forgiveness is strikingly missing from the narrative that is supposed to be analogous to the passion of the Christ, namely the narrative of Socrates' trial and execution. Consider here this famous passage from the end of the *Phaedo* (116b-d):

The officer of the Eleven Tyrants arrived in the prison, and came to Socrates and said: "Socrates, I shall not find in you the fault that I find in other prisoners, that you are angry and curse at me when I give you the order to drink the poison—as I am compelled to do by our government. For throughout your imprisonment, I have seen that you are in every way the noblest and gentlest and best (γενναιότατον καὶ πρᾳότατον καὶ ἄριστον) man who has ever been in this prison. So I know well that you are not angry with me—because you know who is to blame, and you are angry with *them*. But now, since you know what message I have come with, farewell—and try to bear as easily as you can what you are compelled to bear."

He broke down and cried while he was speaking. He turned on his heel and left. And Socrates looked after him and said, "You fare well, too; we ourselves will see to it"—adding, to us, "How courteous (ἀστεῖος) the man is. All through my imprisonment here he has been visiting me for a discussion every now and then. He has been the best of men. And now, how nobly (γενναίως) he mourns for me! But come, Crito, let us do what he says. Someone go and get the poison, if it has been mixed. Or if not, let the servant mix it."

It is crucial to see that this is not a narrative of forgiveness. By that I do not just mean that the passage is not about *the Christian concept of* forgiveness; I mean that the passage is not about forgiveness at all. The officer of the Eleven does not accept that he is to blame for Socrates' death and ask Socrates to forgive him. Rather, he says that someone else is to blame, and that Socrates knows it (γιγνώσκεις γὰρ τοὺς αἰτίους) and is justifiably angry with them, not with the officer. What the officer asks for is not forgiveness, the lifting of resentment or of condemnation for an act responsibly done, but exculpation, recognition that it was *not* an act responsibly done.

Moreover, Socrates does not *forgive* him. The officer asks him, rather, to exculpate, and Socrates' response is indeed to exculpate: he responds like he has nothing to forgive the officer. And despite the officer's suggestion that Socrates is not angry with him, but with those who are to blame, Socrates shows no sign of blaming or resenting anyone else either. Nor do we get any sign of that in the *Crito*, where Socrates never even considers the monstrous injustice that has been done to him, let alone the question whether he should forgive it. Socrates' only concern there is to ensure that he himself does no injustice to anyone—and he argues that it *is* an injustice to disobey a legally obtained verdict, and so that it would be unjust for him to run away from execution—despite the fact that such evasion seems to have been commonplace in his time.

Of course, Socrates certainly displays what we might call *forgivingness*. The passage above illustrates this, with plenty of backup elsewhere in the *Phaedo*, the *Crito*, and the *Apology*. Even in the face of an undeserved and humiliating death Socrates is equable, humorous, impartially benign and indeed graciously kind to his accusers, to their mob of ignorant and prejudiced jurors, and to his jailer; just as he is to his friends and pupils—maybe even to his womenfolk, though they are dismissed from view with startling rapidity (*Phaedo* 60a, 117d).[5] But just as, in the Christian tradition, it is one thing to be kind and gracious to those who do me wrong (*kharizomai*), and another thing to take their wrongs against me to be cancelled or taken away (*aphiemi*), so likewise Socrates' *being forgiving towards* those who mistreat him is a different thing from Socrates' *forgiving* them. The latter he does not do.

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[5] Not the only place in Plato where he seems to imply that serious philosophy cannot begin until we have set aside feminine distractions: cp. Cephalus' quotation of Sophocles on sexual desires as "many crazed masters" that an old man should be glad to be rid of, *Republic* 329c-d. Plato is not of course deaf to the thought that sexuality might be something that needs to be integrated with the rest of the human psyche; but he apparently sees little chance, at least in a non-ideal society like his actual Athens, that this integration might involve *women*.

In a sense he does not need to. For to say that Socrates forgives his enemies would put us back in a narrative-contrastive framework. It would imply, roughly, that Socrates has, at some prior time, an attitude of condemnation or judgement towards those who do him wrong, which attitude he withdraws at some later time, perhaps because the malefactors ask him to, or otherwise show repentance or remorse about their earlier misdeeds. But Socrates' moral stance towards those who mistreat him is entirely unconditional on their moral stance towards him. It is, as above, a steady and unwavering benevolence, *quite irrespective of* whatever malevolence, confusion, or misdirected would-be "righteousness" they at any time weaponise against him. "The philosopher", says *Theaetetus* 174d, as part of a verbal portrait of someone strikingly like Socrates, "has nothing of his own to contribute to rhetorical denunciations of anyone, because he knows no evil of anyone; for he has never cared about that sort of thing" (ἔν τε γὰρ ταῖς λοιδορίαις ἴδιον ἔχει οὐδὲν οὐδένα λοιδορεῖν, ἅτ᾽ οὐκ εἰδὼς κακὸν οὐδὲν οὐδενὸς ἐκ τοῦ μὴ μεμελετηκέναι).

III

We do not have to go very far into Socrates' philosophy, and the philosophy that Plato develops from it, to see *why* Socrates takes forgivingness in this sense to be an important ethical value and thinks that there is in truth no evil to be known of anyone; whereas forgiveness in the Judaeo-Christian narrative-contrastive sense, both gracious kindness about and also the moral cancellation of people's genuinely evil past acts and dispositions, is never quite what is important to him. The explanation lies in a doctrine that is central for Socrates, and only marginally less central for Plato and Aristotle: the doctrine that "no one does wrong willingly" (*Protagoras* 358d, *Gorgias* 467c-468c, 509e).

Plato's first clear enunciation of the point is at *Meno* 77c-78b:

> *Socrates.* You really think, Meno, that someone can know that something bad is bad, yet still desire it? *Meno.* Yes, of course.
> *Socrates.* What do you think *desiring* is? When I desire, don't I desire something to come my way, or happen to me? *Meno.* Yes, that's it; what else could it be?
> *Socrates.* So does a person think that the bad things that he desires to happen to him, will do good to anyone they happen to? Or does he know that they harm anyone they happen to?
> *Meno.* Well, some think that bad things will benefit them, and others know that bad things will harm them.
> *Socrates.* And do you believe that those who think that bad things will benefit them, *know* that those bad things are bad? *Meno.* No, I don't believe that at all.
> *Socrates.* So isn't it clear that when people don't know that bad things are bad, they don't really desire those bad things? Rather, what they desire is what they *think* are good things, though really they are bad things. But if they are mistaken about those bad things, and imagine that the bad things they want are *good* things, then clearly, what they really desire is *good* things. Isn't it? *Meno.* Yes, that might be right about the people you describe.
> *Socrates.* What about those who (you say) desire bad things, and think that bad things harm the person who gets them? Surely they know that they will be harmed by the bad things that they desire. *Meno.* They must know that.
> *Socrates.* But don't they also know that when people are harmed, they are miserable in proportion to how much they are harmed? *Meno.* They must know that too.
> *Socrates.* And aren't those who are miserable, living badly? *Meno.* I would certainly say so.
> *Socrates.* Does anyone want to be miserable and live badly? *Meno.* I should say not, Socrates.

Socrates. Therefore, Meno, if there's no one who wants to be miserable and live badly, then there is no one who wants bad things. For what is it to be miserable, if not to desire bad things and get them? *Meno.* It looks like you're right, Socrates—nobody wants bad things.

Forgivingness is the right general attitude, because *vice is ignorance*. Each of us wants to be happy, not miserable, and live well, not badly. But desiring harm, and desiring bad things, means desiring to be miserable and to live badly. So no one desires bad things *as such*: they desire them only because they falsely believe them to be good things. So no one does wrong (or bad) things *willingly*, in the sense that no one chooses them under that description; the root of all "bad action" is false belief about which descriptions apply to what. Thus, in one sense of an ambiguous word, false belief is *ignorance*: within the genus *not believing what is true*, false belief is the species *believing what is not true*. Furthermore, since on Socrates' view wrongdoing always involves false belief, we may infer from one "Socratic paradox" to another: from "No one does wrong willingly" to "Vice is ignorance".

Hence there is nothing to be responsible for, nothing to blame, and nothing to forgive, except ignorance in the sense just defined. But as Socrates propounds the thesis that "No one does wrong willingly" in the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*, there is no obvious reason why we should say that anyone is *responsible* for their ignorance. Indeed, the whole idea of explaining how anyone can ever be responsible for doing bad things begins to seem threatened.

Perhaps we could say, as Socrates does at *Meno* 86b-c, that it is a matter of virtue—of courage and industriousness—to do what we can to acquire knowledge and wisdom, and shed ignorance and folly. (One point of the *Theaetetus* is certainly to *equate* knowledge with wisdom and ignorance with folly: see e.g. 147d7, and cp. *Meno* 98d-e.) So it is a matter of courage and industry to seek knowledge and/ or wisdom: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom" (*Proverbs* 4.7). In which case, the explanation of failures to seek knowledge must lie in the opposite vices— cowardice and laziness. But then, how are we to explain the presence of these vices, if no one goes wrong except through ignorance? The explanation must itself lie in a further instance of ignorance. Here we find no explanation how anyone can be responsible for wrongdoing; only a regress of non-explanation.

It is a fairly standard line in the scholarly literature on Plato on akrasia to say that Plato rejects these Socratic paradoxes. It is commonly claimed that in the *Republic* in particular, Plato finds a way of "accounting for akrasia"—that is, for explaining how someone can willingly and knowingly choose what they take to be wrong. The idea is that Plato allows for this possibility by admitting divisions within the soul: see e.g. *Republic* 430e-431a, and cp. *Phaedrus* 246a-b.[6]

The main question to consider here is whether this move makes any more room for wrongdoing that involves *responsibility*, culpability. To say it again: unless it does, Plato's view has no need for the notion of forgiveness strictly speaking. Unless it does, his is a view about exculpation, about the accepting of a reason why someone was not fully responsible for a bad thing that they did, not about forgiveness in the sense of accepting someone's apology for doing something bad that they *were* fully responsible for.

But there seems little reason to think that the partition of the soul does make room for responsibility in this sense. On the *Republic* picture, what happens to someone whose soul is disordered is that in them *logos*, Reason, is overwhelmed by *thumos* (Spirit) or by the *epithumiai* (Passions), or by both. (Cp. *Laws* 644d-645b for the rather similar image of the puppet who can

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[6] See Gerson 2003 for a discussion of divisions in the soul in the *Republic* and *Laws*. Gerson argues against Bobonich that the *Laws* does not reject the *Republic*'s account of these divisions.

be pulled either by the "noble, flexible, and golden" strings of virtue and reason, or by the "violent, rigid, iron" strings of the vices.) The key words here are *violent* and *overwhelmed*: when they are not enlightened by the wisdom that comes from contemplating the Form of the Good, the lower parts of the divided soul sometimes—perhaps most of the time—*compel* the reasoning part of it to act in line with them. This is not a picture in which someone fully responsibly chooses to do what they believe to be wrong, and therefore may seek to be forgiven for it. It is a picture in which choices of what is understood to be wrong are *compelled*, and therefore no more *willingly* made than they are for Socrates, for whom such choices are made *in ignorance*.

Certainly the picture of the psyche that we get in the *Republic* (especially Book 4)*, Phaedrus* (245c-249d)*, Timaeus* (86b-87b)*, Sophist* (228b), and *Laws* (863e-864b), is as usually presented a more complex one than that found in the "Socratic" dialogues. Yet the point of the complexities never seems to be to deny the "Socratic paradox" that "no one does wrong willingly"; to the contrary, this principle is restated verbatim even as late as the *Laws* (731c). In the Platonic picture, it is true, an agent can end up doing what the agent herself believes to be wrong. But that is just to say that in Plato *compulsion replaces ignorance* as the factor that explains the choice of what is known to be wrong. For compulsion too is a condition that undermines voluntariness, just as surely as ignorance does. But if voluntariness is undermined, then so is responsibility; and where there is no responsibility for wrongdoing, there is room for exculpation and excuse, but not, at least in the central sense of the word, for *forgiveness*.

As a moral about Plato, this conclusion is reinforced by the striking fact that Plato—like many ancient Greeks, especially those influenced, as he apparently was, by Pythagoreanism—believes in reincarnation, and with it in a doctrine much closer to what Buddhists call *karma* than to anything like the Judaeo-Christian notion of forgiveness and redemption. In the myth of Er that concludes the *Republic* (614a-621d), there is—just as in Buddhism and Hinduism—an afterlife reckoning for the misdeeds that people commit in their present incarnations; moreover, your deeds in the present life determine your position on "the great chain of being" in the next life. What there is not is any question of forgiveness or redemption in the Judaeo-Christian sense. The parallel with the Indian religions is striking:

> Karma is not based in transactions. It is based in evolution. Patterns of behaviour set in motion by our actions in the world continue to evolve and shape our perception and predispositions. That process does not stop until we change our relationship with those patterns... There is no grace in the operation of karma, just as there is no grace in the operation of gravity. The only way to stop the evolution of reactive patterns is to change our relationship with those patterns.
> Ken MacLeod, "Forgiveness is not Buddhist", *Tricycle* Winter 2017: https://tricycle.org/magazine/forgiveness-not-buddhist/

There is no grace in Plato either. There is, in the myth of Er, no hint or suggestion that sins will, in the language of the Bible, simply be "taken away" or "forgotten" or "washed clean" or "removed". On the contrary, every misdeed has its price. And that price is both high—it is a tenfold penalty, says Plato—and inevitably paid (*Republic* 615a-c):

> For all the injustices they had ever done to anyone… they paid the penalty ten times over for each injustice, over the space of a hundred years for each, since that is the length of a human life; so that the punishment might be worth ten times what the crime was worth. Thus, for instance, if some were responsible (ἦσαν αἴτιοι) for the deaths of many, or had betrayed cities or armies, or had brought people into slavery or been complicit (μεταίτιοι) in other bad actions, they were to receive tenfold pains for each and all these crimes. If, on

the other hand, they had performed beneficent deeds out of beneficence, and had been just and holy people, they received what they deserved in the same proportion.

In Platonic justice there are no amnesties, only expiation; there is no forgiveness, only forgivingness. There is a benevolent willingness to understand how it is that people cannot help doing bad things, because they are ignorant or irrational, or are overwhelmed by untamed or negative forces within them. But there is no approach to the Christian idea that someone might *first* be knowingly and intentionally committed to doing evil, *then* repent of this commitment, replace it with a commitment to the good, and by being forgiven, be absolved of guilt for the earlier negative commitment. In this sense, forgiveness is not even on Socrates' or Plato's ethical map.

IV

Nor is it on Aristotle's. In *Nicomachean Ethics* 3 Aristotle gives us a ground-breakingly clear and explicit account of the voluntary, which he begins with these words:

> Virtue is about our affections and our actions. But praise and blame only arise about things that are voluntary; with things that are *in*voluntary, what arises is sympathetic understanding (συγγνώμη), and sometimes even pity. So, for those who are inquiring about virtue, it is presumably necessary to define the voluntary and the involuntary; which will also be useful to legislators, with respect to honours and punishments. (NE 1109b30-35)

Lexicographical questions do not always make compelling arguments: Bruno Snell famously argued that Homer had no word for "intention", and therefore had no concept of intention—but then, it is more or less right to say that Homer had no word for "the". Aristotle too has been said—by Anscombe among others—to have no concept of intention because he has no word for it; her argument seems questionable to me for the same reasons as Snell's.

Nonetheless it is clear, I think, that Aristotle has neither the word nor the concept of forgiveness: not in the Christian tradition's narrative-contrastive sense, as delineated in section I; and not really in any looser sense either.

The commonest most relevant word in Aristotle's writings is συγγνώμη. But "forgiveness" is not what συγγνώμη means. What it means is, as LSJ puts it, "fellow-feeling, forbearance, lenient judgement, allowance", and so also "judg[ing] kindly, excuse, pardon". (The Broadie & Rowe translation of 1109b32 uses "feel sympathy with"; Rackham's Loeb translation has "condone".[7]) In fact συγγνώμη in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—the word occurs seven times, with a further six occurrences of cognates—means exactly what we might expect it to mean, given its composition from συν and γνώμη: it means what we mean in English by *being understanding*. So Aristotle defines συγγνώμη in passing at 1143a23-24, during his discussion of γνώμη, as "a right-judging understanding of what is appropriate", apparently meaning "what is an appropriate reaction *to someone else's fault or misdeed*"—roughly speaking, how angry one should be about it.

There are close and obvious connections here with Aristotle's interesting discussion in NE 4.5 of the virtue that he calls *praotes,* mildness, which is a mean for the emotion of anger. (*Praotes* is one

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[7] If the most usual Latin word for "to forgive", ignoscere came from gnoscere with the in- prefix that means "in", then ignoscere would be literally "to know in", "to have an internal understanding of", and would look closely parallel to συγγνώμη. However, the scholarly consensus, as represented by Lewis' and Short's dictionary, seems to be that the in- prefix in ignoscere is the negative one, so that "ignoscere" is more like "ignore" than "understand from the inside".

of Socrates' words of praise for the jailer, as quoted above from *Phaedo* 116b-d. The word occurs in the New Testament too, where, apart from Matthew 5.5, it is usually a Pauline word: *2 Corinthians* 10.1, *Galatians* 5.23, *Ephesians* 4.2, *Colossians* 3.12, *1 Timothy* 6.11. But in Paul's thought *praotes* is not a mean of anything; it is a Christ-like extreme of gentleness and meekness.) At NE 1126a2 Aristotle tells us that the person with the virtue of *praotes* (so by implication, the overall virtuous person) is *syngnwmonikos*. Here too we should apply the same distinction that I have already made about Socrates: this is not about *forgiveness* but about *forgivingness*. Indeed it is about a quality that in English—for reasons that go back to the NE via Cicero—we sometimes call *magnanimity*, or more colloquially being "big enough" to overlook a slight or get past a grudge. The basic point is not that I forgive you your misdeed, your injury done to me, because my heart is full of Christian love towards you. It is that I am untouched by your misdeed, because I am above being affected by such trivial things. At 1125a3 Aristotle has already enunciated this point as a thought about *megalopsychia*:

> [The great-spirited man] is not a grudge-bearer (*mnesikakos*) either; for it is not a great-spirited person's part to keep a record of other people's deeds, especially not their misdeeds; but rather to overlook them (*paroran*).

To *overlook* other people's misdeeds is, obviously, not to *forgive* them; rather it is to think them unworthy of my attention. (So for example in the *Rhetoric*, 1408b, Aristotle says that when anger provokes an orator into hyperbole, this is a flaw in his oratory, but one that evokes *syggnwme*—it's an understandable flaw, one that we shouldn't waste time on, one that it is beneath us to pay much heed to.) That is in line with the rest of what we hear about the character and personality of the *megalopsychos*, who, so far as he can, simply regards bad people as beneath him. This is perhaps Socrates' attitude to his accusers, too: it would help to explain his tendency to mock them (see e.g. *Meno* 90b-95a, where Socrates exposes and ridicules Anytus). It is certainly a mindset familiar from Stoicism (and something similar sometimes comes across in expositions of Buddhism), where the consistent message is that bad people, and bad things, are in truth too insignificant to affect a good person in any *real* way at all.

Aristotle also discusses *praotes* in *Rhetoric* 2.3, 1380a1 ff., where his general concern is the functioning of the passions relevant to oratory, and his particular question is how anger is roused or abated. In this discussion—where we should not take it for granted that the word is being used in precisely the same sense as in the *Ethics*—*praotes* is what results after a virtuous and reasonable calming-down of anger has been effected by competent oratory.

One way *praotes* arises is because we realise that something has been done involuntarily (*akousiws*). Another way is when people admit (*homologousi*) that they have done something wrong, and are sorry for it (*metamelomenois*): "for then we cease from anger, as if we had a punishment for the wrongdoing in their pain at what they have done" (1380a5; for *homolegein* as "admit", and the slightly different word *metanoia* for "repentance", cp. Matthew 3.2-6). But here too, the key point is not that I, the victim of some wrong that you have done, choose out of love to forgive you when you repent of your wrongdoing. The point is rather that it is a satisfaction for me to see you humbled:

> [People are mild] also towards those who demean themselves towards them (*tapeinoumenois pros autous*) and do not contradict them; for they seem to be admitting they are inferior, and those who are inferior are fearful—a fearful person slights no one. This point that anger ceases towards those who demean themselves is shown even by dogs, which will not bite someone who sits down at their level. (1380a6-7)

Repentance (*metameleia*) involves a loss of status, and a recognition that I have gone wrong and that because of my going wrong someone else is now, in a new respect, superior to me; it is essentially humiliating. Here we may find *some* echoes of the Judaeo-Christian narrative-contrastive account of forgiveness, which certainly involves the thought that repentance involves humbling oneself, and that being so humbled is a good thing. (*Tapeinophrosyne* and cognates regularly mean "humility" in the New Testament (see e.g. Luke 14.11, Matthew 23.12, Ephesians 4.2, Colossians 3.12, 1 Peter 5.5), but on the rare occasions when Plato and Aristotle use words with this root, the sense is something more like "humiliation", "abasement", or even "*de*basement": Plato, *Lysis* 210e, *Phaedrus* 254e; Aristotle, NE 1124b2, 1125a2.[8]) Certainly it is interesting to see this deployment of Aristotle's notion of *metameleia*, a word that means indifferently any kind of ethical disowning of a past deed or attitude—so any of (what we distinguish as) remorse, regret, and repentance (cp. NE 1110b19-23, 1111a21, 1150a21, 1150b29-30, 1166b25).

Overall, however, both here and elsewhere in Aristotle, the bottom line is clearly that Aristotle is talking about exculpation more than about forgiveness strictly so called, and about the fair adjustment and regulation of social hierarchies in the light of bad deeds, rather than about loving reconciliation between equals. If a single thought about the topic is basic for him, it is that a good person should be *above* resentment, anger, and bitterness; to be resentful or unforgiving or grudge-filled is *petty*. And this is why, to say it again, Aristotle's key thick concept in this area is not forgiveness but *syngnwme*: "being understanding" of how easily human affairs can go wrong, and reacting to others' mistakes not with bitterness or an urge for revenge, but with an urbane, sympathetic, and humane mildness of temper.

On this evidence, then, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle took it to be right and natural that one should lose and concede political, social, and ethical status when one admits that one made a mistake; and they valued amiability (NE 4.4), tolerance and sympathetic understanding, patient benevolence, and (in our sense) magnanimity—dispositions that overlook and minimise slights and injuries, and sometimes perhaps even claim that they are not truly *injuries* at all, first because, on the offender's side, "no one does wrong willingly", and secondly because, on the side of the person offended against, "nothing can harm the man of virtue".

<center>V</center>

One good way to understand why these are the emphases that we find in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on the subject of forgiveness or forgivingness, and why their emphases are so different from our own, is to think about their cultural background, and about what assumptions and prejudices that left them with: what was implicit for them, what they took for granted about forgiveness and forgivingness, without even mentioning it. We of course read the ancient Greek philosophers in the light of our own cultural background; it is almost impossible not to. But neither Socrates, nor Plato, nor even Aristotle was a twenty-first century middle-class liberal from Massachusetts or Morningside. Their cultural background was not shaped, as ours is, by the legacy of Judaeo-Christian and in particular by the narrative-contrastive conception that is central to that legacy that I sketched in Section I, and by the Augustinian thinking about wrongdoing and forgiveness that I shall sketch in Section VI.

The cultural background to the ancient Greek philosophers' thinking in this area was indeed shaped by narratives: but by different narratives. It is, after all, not like the ancient Greeks had no

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[8] I do not mean to say, as some have, that humility was not a virtue for the pagan Greeks—on the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere, it most certainly was. But I do mean to say that *tapeinosyne* was not their word for it, as it was for the authors of the New Testament. Cp. Chappell, "Humility among the ancient Greeks", ref.

idea of remorse, or reconciliation, or of the lyrical sadness of peace after war, or of the terrors of vendetta and unforgivingness, or of the crucial social and ethical significance of laying aside anger and overcoming resentment. Such themes are central from one end to the other of the canon of Greek literary art. And they are there from the very beginning. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is among other things a narrative of vendetta and how to end it; Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* is a beautifully nuanced and studiedly *un*-final study of how the blind and fatally disgraced ex-king of Thebes finds, before his death, a kind of almost Lear-like peace and acceptance of his own life story.

Indeed we might go even further back, to the *Iliad*, where we find two of the most famous reconciliation scenes in all Greek literature—indeed in all literature.

The first is in *Iliad* Book 19, where the Greek prince Achilles, seeking a rapprochement with his hated rival, the overall leader of the Greek army King Agamemnon, addresses him as follows (*Iliad* 19.56-70):

> "Did we not, Agamemnon, Atreus' son,
> both fare the worse, not better, for our strife,
> for our soul-consuming feud—and over *a girl*?
> The day I sacked Lyrnessus and raped Chryseis—
> if only archer Artemis had shot her then.   60
> So many Greeks have bitten dust for her
> at Trojan hands, all through the wrath of Achilles.
> This served the Trojans' turn; and long will Greece
> remember this our feud. Which now must cease,
> be thought of as past chance—though it still hurts;   65
> our tender spirits be tamed, because they must.
> So, here and now, I put my anger down.
> I must not, unrelenting, rage for ever.
> Come, then, Agamemnon: rouse Achaea!
> Summon up our shock-haired Greeks for war,
> and I will again put Troy to face-on test."   70

Homer's Achilles was probably one of Aristotle's, and certainly one of his pupil Alexander's, models of what it is to be a *megalopsychos*, a great-souled man. And what Achilles says here is not in the least that he *forgives* Agamemnon for dishonouring him way back in Book 1. It is, rather, that Achilles recognises that his feud with Agamemnon has now become disproportionately costly to maintain. No one is gaining from their feud except the Trojans. Apart from the matter of honour, which is always subjectively crucial to every Homeric hero, their feud never had *very* great objective justification anyway: it was only about a slave-woman, and she after all might just as well have been killed long before, as other slave-women routinely were. (The value-judgements here are of course Achilles', not mine.) Further, it has now become crucial to Achilles to avenge his dear friend Patroclus' death at the hands of the Trojan general Hector (at the end of Book 16). So, says Achilles, he is at last ready now—not to *forgive* Agamemnon, but to "put his anger down": νῦν δ᾽ ἤτοι μὲν ἐγὼ παύω χόλον, literally, and very simply, "So now, therefore, I cease anger".

Perhaps this is as close as the pagan Greek tradition ever gets to an act of forgiveness that is a simple *cancellation*. But Achilles is not cancelling or taking away Agamemnon's misdeed against him. He is cancelling, or maybe just postponing, his response to that misdeed, in the light of a higher priority that has since appeared—which is itself an imperative of vengeance. There is no hint at all that Achilles *forgives* Agamemnon, any more than he forgives Hector. The point is just that there

are, as usual, only two available honourable responses to an insult: to avenge it, or to disparage it as not worth a man of honour's attention. In the light of Patroclus's death and the Trojans' subsequent successes, Achilles tells us, he wants to switch—as far as Agamemnon goes—from the first response to the other.

Agamemnon seems uncomfortable at Achilles' speech, as well he might. He is certainly facing what, at the end of Section IV, I called a "loss of status." As he prepares to reply before the assembled Greeks he first feels a need to tell his hearers not to heckle or interrupt Achilles—or himself. He is also nursing a wound that apparently makes it hard for him to rise to speak; or perhaps the wound is just a pretext. In any case, he remains on his throne, and he opens his long and studiedly discursive reply to Achilles like this (19.83-90):

> "I will declare my mind now to Achilles.
> You other Greeks, give heed, and listen well,
> you who talked again and again of this feud   85
> and blamed me for it. I am *not* to blame.
> Blame Zeus, blame Fate, blame the dark-wandering Furies,
> who placed a fierce delusion in my mind
> before the whole assembly of the Greeks,
> the day I took Achilles' prize away.
> What could I do? God works all things his way."   90

In these words Agamemnon comes as close as anyone in his cultural and political position perhaps could to an actual apology to Achilles, an actual request for forgiveness. But that is not close at all. Just as Agamemnon finds a way to avoid standing in his turn before the assembled army, which would be to lower himself to an equal level with Achilles, so also he finds a way to berate someone else—not himself or Achilles, but the unnamed "other Greeks", who have no standing in this debate and can't talk back—for daring to blame him. Above all, Agamemnon finds someone else to blame for his insult to Achilles: Zeus, Fate, the Furies, and *Atê*, Delusion, herself. For Agamemnon to say this is for him to distance himself from what he did. But it is an exculpation, not an apology or a request for forgiveness. Moreover, it is a transparently unconvincing exculpation. There is no reason to think that anyone present finds Agamemnon's explanation remotely credible, but that is not the point. The point is that he *gives* an explanation, to make it possible for him and Achilles to work together.

A second scene from the *Iliad* that is worth our attention when we are thinking about forgiveness and forgivingness is the encounter of the Trojan king Priam and the Greek warrior Achilles in 24.470-676. This marvellous passage, almost at the end of the *Iliad*, is built upon a striking piece of ring-composition, across a span of twenty-four books. At *Iliad* 1.12-32 the scared old man Chryses came to Agamemnon as a suppliant for the return of the live body of his daughter Chryseis, and was unexpectedly rebuffed; so now in *Iliad* Book 24 the aged Priam comes to the terrible Achilles in his tent as a suppliant for the return of the dead body of his son Hector's corpse, and is unexpectedly received. Priam's first plea to Achilles closes like this (24.503-512):

> "…Achilles, no; be humble before the gods,
> and pity me in honour of your own father.
> For truly, I need pity more than him,
> since I have dared what no mortal's ever dared: 505
> before my own son's killer my throat is bared."
> Priam spoke, and roused lament even in Achilles:
> his words touched Achilles' longing for his father,

Peleus in distant Phthia, too old for the war.
He pushed the old man back from his knees—but gently.
And then they remembered together, Priam and Achilles:
Priam wept to remember his manslaying Hector,
bitterly crying, sprawled at Achilles' feet;   510
Achilles wept for his so long unseen father,
wept as well remembering Patroclus' death;
the house was filled with the sighs of their tear-choked breath.

The King of Troy has risked his life to come to his chief enemy, to recover the body of his son, Hector, who killed Achilles' lover, Patroclus. The war has by no means stopped, and both of them will shortly die in it.[9] There is no question of *forgiveness* between them; yet even across the gulf of enmity in a terrible war, human contact and recognition remain possible for Achilles and Priam. When Achilles pushes Priam away from his knees, we recognise the gesture, because other warriors throughout the *Iliad* have pushed away other helpless suppliants: the same verb, ἀπώσατο, is used for example at 6.63, where Menelaus rejects the suppliant Adrestus, who is then immediately killed by Agamemnon. So here Achilles pushes Priam away too—"but gently".

A little later, the warrior and the old king simply *look at each other* (24.628-633):

Then when they had had their fill of food and drink,
the Trojan king gazed wondering at Achilles,
at his marvellous tallness and his beauty,   630
at how much like the gods Achilles was;
and Achilles gazed with wonder at King Priam—
to see his gentle face, to hear his voice…

One moral of these two scenes is certainly that the classical Greeks did not have our thick ethical concept of forgiveness. But another moral is how much they could have in the way of ethical resources even without that concept, and how vividly recognisable, and how touchingly human, they are to us, even without it.

VI

We may say then that pagan Greek ethical thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who inherited the deep and rich ethical resources of the Homeric tradition and its successors, had a thick ethical concept of *forgivingness*. What they did not have was our Judaeo-Christian narrative-contrastive concept of *forgiveness*, a concept that I illustrated in Section I by referring to what I take to be its main historical source, the New Testament, where we find plentiful examples of people whose sins are forgiven, in the sense of being taken away, by a God who comes forgivingly to them in gracious kindness. As before, if there is a point of contact between pagan Greek thought and Judaeo-Christian thought about forgiveness and related concepts, it is in this notion of forgiveness as gracious kindness (*kharis*) that we may find it; but also as before, for the Christian tradition all

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[9] Achilles' mother Thetis prophesies to him that his own death will follow very quickly after Hector's, *Iliad* 18.96, and Achilles' death is also prophesied in Hector's dying words, *Iliad* 22.359-360. The fall of Troy is prophesied by Agamemnon at 4.163-165 and (in the very same words) by Hector at 6.447-449.

notions of forgiveness are narrative and contrastive—they tell stories about journeys from moral benightment into "God's marvellous light" (1 Peter 2.9); and that is not so in pagan Greek thought.

What I want to point out next is that there is something deeply problematic about at least some versions of the Christian concept of forgiveness, as we have inherited it today. It is particularly Augustine's versions of forgiveness and related concepts that are in play here.[10] I shall register that fact by talking freely from here on of the *Augustinian* concept of forgiveness, repentance, and so on.

The central problem that I have in mind about the Augustinian concept of forgiveness is not far from the surface in these two familiar liturgical prayers of penitence, one from the Catholic Tridentine Mass, the other from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

> Confiteor Deo et beatae Mariae semper virgini… cum omnibus sanctis, et tibi patri, mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa peccavi: per superbiam in multa mea mala iniqua et pessima cogitatione; locutione, pollutione, suggestione, delectatione, consensu, verbo et opere; in periurio, in adulterio, in sacrilegio, homicidio, furtu, falso testimonio, peccavi visu, auditu, gustu, odoratu et tactu; et moribus, vitiis meis malis. Precor beatam Mariam semper virginem et omnibus sanctis et isti sancti, et te pater, orare et intercedere pro me peccatore Dominum nostrum Iesum Christum.[11]

> Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

Prayers like these prompt two questions to the penitent who offers them. First, if that is really where you were then, how come you have got here now? And secondly: if you are really here now, how come you were ever there?

On this conception of penitence, what I am asking for forgiveness *for* is that, at the time I committed my sin,[12] I was acting completely freely and voluntarily. I knew exactly what I was doing, I was not compelled, I was not in any way a victim of occluded rationality. And under those conditions I went ahead and sinned. And now, acting equally freely and voluntarily, I am asking for forgiveness for what I then did.

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[10] For more detail about the relevant Augustine exegesis—and for the contrast with Aristotle—see my 1995 book, *Aristotle and Augustine on Freedom of Action* (Palgrave).

[11] Translation for non-Catholics: "I confess to God and to blessed Mary ever-Virgin… along with all the saints, and to you, Father, that through my fault, through my fault, through my most great fault, I have sinned: by pride in my abundant evil iniquitous and heinous thought, speech, pollution, suggestion, delectation, consent, word and deed; in perjury, adultery, sacrilege, murder, theft, false witness; I have sinned by sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch; and in my behaviour, my evil vices. I beg blessed Mary ever-Virgin and all the saints, and these saints and you, Father, to pray and intercede for me a sinner to our Lord Jesus Christ." The idea is presumably not, at any rate usually, that the penitent has committed sins in *all* these categories, but to give the confessor a checklist of categories in *some* of which the penitent before him may have committed a sin.

[12] "Sinning" is of course theologically-loaded language, but that language fits our context.

How are we to make sense of this? If I *then* thought it was just fine to do what I did then, how come I now no longer think that? If I *now* think that it was a terrible sin for me to do what I did then, how come I didn't think that at the time? Or was it that I *did* think that it was a terrible sin for me to do what I did then, yet that thought didn't stop me then? But if that thought didn't stop me then, why and how does it stop me now?

The obvious and natural response to this puzzle is to say that in some respect or other I was *not* in fact acting completely freely and voluntarily at the time I committed my sin: in some way or other, I was ignorant, or acting compulsively, or under conditions in which my rationality was somehow occluded. But the trouble with this response is that it changes the subject of our inquiry from the puzzle-cases to other cases that in the key respect are simply not the same. The whole point of the puzzle is that it reflects the evident datum of experience that, at least in some cases, there *doesn't* seem to have been anything wrong with me, in respect of my freedom to act with normal voluntariness, at the time when I sinned. I was just as free and rational an agent then as I am now; and then, the sin looked to me like the thing to do; and now it looks like a terrible thing to have done. How is this total switch in my volitional set-up even possible?

If this puzzle bites for us, that is presumably because we recognise it from our own experience; we know that we ourselves are like this sometimes. But if it *is* a datum of our own experience (as it unfortunately is of my own, for instance) that we switch volitionally in the sort of way that I have just described, then it is extremely hard to see how to explain this datum without explaining it away. Certainly any moral psychology like Socrates' and Plato's, that takes it as its founding principle that "No one does wrong willingly", is going to struggle with it. If no one does wrong (or "sins") willingly, then such total changes in ethical orientation cannot possibly be what they appear to be. There *must* be some element of compulsiveness, or ignorance, or irrationality *somewhere* in the picture, because without that, such changes are simply not possible at all.

This unclarity in the Augustinian notion of sin spills over to generate further unclarity in the Augustinian notions of penitence and forgiveness. It becomes hard to see exactly what it is to repent; and it becomes hard to see how or what I am supposed to do in forgiving someone who repents.

The problem can be made particularly vivid by thinking about apologies. Suppose someone comes to me and says "I'm sorry for snubbing you over lunch yesterday". In practice, this will often stand as a complete, and completely understood, apology in its own right. But suppose the apologiser then adds "I snubbed you deliberately". Now, given this addition, the apologiser's story is *not* complete, and something more needs to be said to make sense of it: maybe "That was because I thought you had written that libellous review of my book" (implying that the apologiser now realises that she was mistaken to think that), or maybe "That was because I was in a particularly foul temper" (implying that the apologiser was carried away by passion at the time, but now sees that it was wrong to be), or again "I was having one of my episodes" (implying that the apologiser's rationality was temporarily impaired by mental-health problems); or indeed "I was blinded by *Atê*" (implying that the apologiser was temporarily taken over by supernatural forces).

What will *not* make sense is for the apologiser to continue, for instance, like this: "I snubbed you deliberately because I was thinking how contemptible you are; *and I still think that*." Her apology needs to show that things have changed in her since her rudeness yesterday to me, the forgiver. An apology that does not show this, but insists on the contrary that nothing has changed at all since then, is not an apology at all, but a renewed insult.

Not only must an apology say something about how *things have changed* since the offence was committed. Moreover, that something needs to be intelligible. It needs to make sense of the change that has happened since the offence, and it needs to make sense of it in a way that provides the forgiver with some security that the offence won't be repeated. But if, in committing her offence against me, the apologiser really did act fully deliberately, fully rationally, and with no exonerating ignorance or compulsion, then she cannot appeal to any of those factors to exculpate herself. So then she needs to explain how what seemed like a good idea to her then—her deliberate snub to me, or whatever it was—now seems like a terrible idea. But if she had no false beliefs then, was not acting irrationally, and was not in some way acting under or on a compulsion when she snubbed me—then *what has changed*?

To speak here of what I have called a "volitional switch" seems unlikely, all on its own, to be much help. If the apologiser had the earlier volitional set-up that made it seem all right to snub me, and now has a different set-up on which snubbing me is *not* all right, then where is the apologiser's guarantee to me that she won't switch *back* again, at any random time, and snub me again in just the same way as before? Talk of volitional switches baffles explanation of the change in her. But without an explanation of that change, I as forgiver have no reason to trust her about the sincerity or stability of her repentance; indeed she as apologiser, or penitent, has no reason to trust *herself* about that.

As Augustine himself puts something like this puzzle about moral psychology in the *Confessions*:

> Now let my heart tell you, O God, what it was looking for there [in the theft of the pears]—that I should be so gratuitously wicked, that there should be no cause of my wickedness unless it was wickedness itself! …Who will untangle that most tortuous and involved knottiness? It is filthy; I do not wish to attend to it; I do not wish to see it. (*Confessions* 2.4, 2.10; quoted in Chappell 1995: 189)

The dilemma for the Augustinian conception of deliberate wrongdoing, and of penitence for such wrongdoing, is as follows. To cite the kind of factors that normally go into an apology is to cite factors that *decrease culpability* in one way or another, by providing an explanation either of how I failed to know the right thing to do through ignorance or irrationality, or of how I failed to do it even though I knew what it was, through compulsion of some sort. But central to the Augustinian account of forgiveness is the notion of (as I shall call it) *absolute culpability*: the idea that, in at least some actions, I have *no excuse at all* of any of these kinds, am completely and unabridgedly responsible for the bad thing that I do, and yet can intelligibly repent of it and be forgiven for it. In such cases nothing explains my wrongdoing—or my repentance of that wrongdoing—except a volitional switch. Yet the notion of a volitional switch is not an explanation of how I have come to see what was wrong with what I did. It is just a bare statement that I *have* so changed, which not only implies no explanation, but actually frustrates explanation.

As I have argued elsewhere (Chappell 1995), it is extremely hard to keep all these ideas in play together. But why, in fact, would anyone even try to? A plausible answer to that is that Augustinian Christianity has needed, or supposed it needed, the idea of absolute culpability, because Augustinian Christianity is committed to a free-will theodicy. Any attempt to explain how someone (call him "Adam") could be genuinely responsible for a fully freely-chosen wrong action must lay the blame for that action squarely and 100% on *Adam*. For to say that he was ignorant or irrational or compelled, and therefore less than 100% culpable for his misdeed, is to raise the question of how it came about that he was ignorant or irrational or compelled. And it is hard to see how to answer that without inculpating the only other relevant agent in the picture, namely *God*. But the whole point of a free-will theodicy is, of course, to explain how there can be evil in the world that

God created without blaming that evil on the creator. Or as Nietzsche more sardonically puts it, "Men were thought of as 'free' so that they could become *guilty*… Christianity is a hangman's metaphysics" (*Twilight of the Idols*, tr. Hollingdale, p.53; epigraph to Chappell 1995 Ch.5).

In its efforts to explain both this phenomenon of clear-eyed, freely chosen wrongdoing, and also the accompanying phenomena of repentance, apology, and forgiveness for such wrongdoing, Augustinian Christianity invests a great deal in a deepened notion of culpability; the extreme case of this is the notion of what I have called a "volitional switch", whereby without any abridgement of one's freedom of action, one simply comes to have different views about what is worth doing and what is not to be done; Augustine's own name for this phenomenon, or the part of it that most preoccupies him, is *mala voluntas*, "evil will". But this phenomenon is unknown to the pagan Greeks: from Socrates to Aristotle, they agree that there can be no such thing, because it is unintelligible.

Augustine in fact agrees that *mala voluntas* is unintelligible, but retorts that that is no reason to deny its existence. And his most basic arguments for taking this stance are two. First there is the theological point that Nietzsche is parodying above: the point that since God punishes, and God is just, his punishments must be deserved—which they can only be if humans are absolutely culpable (see *de Vera Religione* Ch.27; *de Libero Arbitrio* 1.1). And secondly, there is the simple evidence of phenomenology: it is *our own experience* that we freely and clear-eyedly do gratuitously bad things for which we have no exculpation at all. This argument from experience is, I take it, one of the points made by Augustine's long meditation on the theft of the pears in Book 2 of the *Confessions*, as quoted above; as I have already admitted, I personally find Augustine's account of his own experience only too recognisable.

In these ways and for these reasons, Augustinian Christianity has needed the notion that I have called absolute culpability. But you do not have to be Nietzsche to have your doubts about that notion, or about the Augustinian concept of forgiveness that I have been questioning here. Bernard Williams, for example, though he puts it rather less epigrammatically than Nietzsche, expresses the same sort of doubt:

> In some ways… the basic ethical ideas possessed by the [ancient] Greeks were different from ours, and also in better condition. In some other respects, it is rather that we rely on much the same resources as the ancient Greeks, but we do not acknowledge the extent to which we do… How much of a shift there has been, how much we do rely on changed ideas of such things as freedom, responsibility, and the individual agent, is an elusive question that cannot be fully answered; to answer it would involve drawing a firm line between what we think and what we merely think we think. [But just] as there is a "problem of evil" only for those who expect the world to be good, there is a problem of free will only for those who think that the notion of the voluntary can be metaphysically deepened. In truth, though it may be extended or contracted in various ways, it can hardly be deepened at all. What threatens it is the attempt to make it profound, and the effect of trying to deepen it is to put it beyond all recognition. The Greeks were not involved in these attempts; this is one of the places at which we encounter their gift for being [as Nietzsche said[13]] superficial out of profundity. (Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* pp.4, 7, 68)[14]

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[13] In the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Gay Science*; also in the Epilogue to *Nietzsche contra Wagner*.

[14] Williams and Konstan arrive at rather similar conclusions very independently of each other. David Konstan began his distinguished publication career in about 1994, the year after *Shame and Necessity* was published, and five years after the Sather Lectures at Berkeley on which Williams' book was based. It is nonetheless surprising that Konstan's *Before*

VII

The pagan Greeks, I have argued, and in particular Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, did not have our—or the Augustinian—concept of forgiveness, because Augustinian forgiveness is paradigmatically forgiveness of absolute culpability, and there was no such thing for them: that is the kind of "deepening" of the notion of responsibility that, as Williams says, makes it unrecognisable and unintelligible. But as I have already said, while they did not have this concept of *forgiveness*, they most certainly did have a thick ethical concept of *forgivingness*, in some ways comparable to the New Testament notion of forgiveness as gracious kindness, even if not comparable to the notion of forgiveness as the cancellation of sin.

The Augustinian concept of absolute culpability, and the accompanying idea that "gold standard" repentance and forgiveness must be repentance and forgiveness *for* absolute culpability, have had immense cultural influence and prestige in our tradition—despite being apparently so close to outright incoherence, in the kinds of ways sketched in Section VI. But it may be that we do not need the notion of absolute culpability if we do not wish to mount a free-will theodicy, and in particular if we do not want to see humanity as culpable in a way that might deserve absolute punishment—eternal punishment—of the sort that the Augustinian tradition of Christianity has been so fixated on. A milder and less starkly chiaroscuro version of Christianity might remain free to *agree* with the pagan Greeks that, in fact, apology is always to some extent exculpation, and that forgiveness, wherever it is fully intelligible, is something less than "gold standard" forgiveness—it always involves *some* level of acceptance that the person being forgiven did not act with *completely* clear eyes and free hands.

Perhaps there are shades of this milder, non-Augustinian Christian tradition in, for instance, Origen and Irenaeus, or again in modern times in John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*. Someone in this tradition (with which my own sympathies certainly lie) might even agree with Augustine that there is a kind of *asymmetry* about responsibility. Only the asymmetry is the other way up from Augustine. For (the later) Augustine, as evidenced for example in *de Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*, we are fully responsible only for our misdeeds, whereas our good deeds are solely due to divine grace. But on the asymmetry that I am proposing, no one would be fully responsible for their misdeeds, because, in the end, Socrates is simply right that "no one does wrong willingly"—not at least if "doing wrong willingly" means absolute responsibility. It would be only in our *good* deeds that we attain anything like full responsibility, because it is crucial to responsibility—to acting voluntarily at all, in fact—that what one does should be rational, should make sense; and it is only in our good deeds that what we do *does* really make sense.

We would have here, then, a picture somewhat like Susan Wolf's picture in her famous article "Asymmetric freedom". What place divine grace might have in this picture is a further question. But it should not be assumed that there is simply *no room* in the picture for grace. Especially not if we understand grace, as we should, as another name for love, and remember that no person ever truly acts alone, but always in relation to others; provided, of course, that they truly act at all.

What this milder tradition might also do is reflect meditatively on the full riches of both the Biblical tradition, *and* the pagan Greek tradition, as those two different traditions in their different ways supply us with narratives of reconciliation. As I observed at the beginning, the Bible (Old and New Testaments alike) supplies us with a narrative-contrastive account of forgiveness, which takes its

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Forgiveness mentions Williams only once (fn.38, p.169, a reference within a reference), and that Williams is not in the index or bibliography.

sharpest—but also its most extreme—form in Augustine's free-will theodicy: these are stories of a Kingdom of Darkness and a Kingdom of Light, and of passages from one to the other, which Augustine with his ruthless logic insists on seeing as mediable and intelligible only as volitional switches from *mala voluntas* to *bona voluntas*.

That perhaps is one-half of the background that we need in order to understand what the concept of forgiveness is for us—though it needs to be stressed, too, that Christians are not the only or even the first interpreters of the Hebrew Bible, and that the rabbinical tradition of Judaism has never seen either wrongdoing or forgiveness in anything much like Augustine's absolute way. The other half of what we need brings us back to the classical Greek ethical tradition. We have seen something about how they did without the Judaeo-Christian, and in particular without the Augustinian, concept of forgiveness. When we reflect both on what Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have to say, and also on what they do *not* say because they take it for granted—as with the Homeric resources that I discuss above in Section V—we may perhaps come to have some sense of what, lacking our Judaeo-Christian resources about forgiveness, they had instead; perhaps also to some sense of how we ourselves might find a place for those pagan-Greek resources, *alongside* our more dominant, and more familiar, Christian conceptions.

Bibliography