

## **Defining Forgiveness**

### **Some Reflections on David Konstan's *Before Forgiveness***

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In *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea*, David Konstan, Emeritus Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at Brown University, brings his vast knowledge of classical Greek and Roman literature to bear on the subject of forgiveness. The results are mixed. His careful probing of the classical literature he has so evidently mastered yields fresh and valuable insights into the ancient meaning and practice of reconciliation and its components, and especially into the differences between ancient and modern understandings. Some of his findings are skewed or limited, however, by his definition of forgiveness.

Konstan is admirably clear about the case he intends to make. In the first sentence of his preface, he writes,

The thesis of this book is easily stated: I argue that the modern concept of forgiveness, in the full or rich sense of the term, did not exist in classical antiquity, that is, in ancient Greece or Rome, or at all events that it played no role whatever in the ethical thinking of those societies.<sup>[1]</sup>

This thesis really does guide his work throughout.

When Konstan speaks of “the modern concept of forgiveness, in the full or rich sense of the term,” he means forgiveness as

a bilateral process involving a confession of wrongdoing, evidence of sincere repentance, and a change of heart or moral perspective—one might almost say moral identity—on the part of the offender, together with a comparable alteration in the forgiver, by which she or he consents to forego vengeance on the basis precisely of the change in the offender. <sup>[2]</sup>

If we accept this definition for the moment, Konstan seems entirely successful in demonstrating that no such concept of forgiveness existed in ancient Greece and Rome. In

two long, satisfying chapters, he roams across centuries, situations, and types of literature to show that the Greek word *sungnômê* and the Latin *ignoscencia*, often translated as “forgiveness,” generally indicate something rather different than what he understands as the “modern concept of forgiveness, in the full or rich sense.” In particular he is concerned to show that in the ancient world, while estranged parties may be reconciled and victims may forego vengeance, these do not happen because of the perpetrator’s repentance, or moral transformation. Of the many fascinating stories analyzed, one may serve to illustrate just how different from modernity were the ancient Greek and Roman cultures that Konstan knows so well. Herodotus tells a story concerning Croesus, sixth-century BCE king of Lydia, and the death of his son in a hunting accident. The man who killed Croesus’ son with a javelin was Adrastus, who had not only been particularly entrusted with the son’s safety but was also indebted to Croesus for kindnesses granted earlier. “Overcome with sorrow,” says Konstan, “Adrastus hands himself over to Croesus and begs him to butcher him on the very corpse of the boy.”<sup>[3]</sup> Here the modern reader is likely to interpret Adrastus’ readiness to pay the full cost of eye-for-an-eye justice as evidence of taking responsibility for his failure and of intense and sincere remorse, and so the question becomes, can or will Croesus forgive the repentant Adrastus for his catastrophic failure of responsibility? But in that culture, something quite different was happening. Croesus is indeed moved to forebear vengeance, but he does so not on the basis of Adrastus’ repentance, but because Adrastus was not responsible—Croesus had earlier been warned by a god that his son would be killed, and so it is the god who is responsible, Croesus declares. Adrastus, Konstan says, would have accepted that the god, not he, was responsible, and so Adrastus’ grief indicates not so much repentance or remorse, which would imply responsibility, as it indicates regret—a regret so intense that Adrastus chose to kill himself at the son’s tomb. In this and many other stories, Konstan persuades his readers that the ancient Greeks and Romans occupied a moral world sometimes radically different from modernity.

Defining forgiveness—and every related concept, starting with reconciliation and repentance—is a messy task, ridden with contradictory claims made by people sometimes not even aware of alternatives and with no court of appeal.<sup>[4]</sup> It’s not quite a Wonderland situation, but to some extent “forgiveness” means just what we choose it to mean—neither more nor less—and so Konstan is at liberty, as are the rest of us, to define forgiveness as he wishes. That said, different definitions have varying strengths and weaknesses, and there are

good reasons to challenge the adequacy of Konstan's definition.

The first problem with his definition is simply a matter of objective fact. From beginning to end, Konstan identifies his definition of forgiveness as an expression of "the modern concept of forgiveness, in the full or rich sense of the term"; he is discussing forgiveness in the "strict or ample sense of the English word," "the modern paradigm," "the fully evolved notion," "as it is basically understood today."<sup>[5]</sup> In other words, he gives the impression that there is some modern consensus about how to define forgiveness. No such agreement exists, however, as revealed by even a quick survey of the contemporary literature. In *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, psychologist Sharon Lamb puts it bluntly: "one initial problem" in researching current literature on forgiveness "is that there is no consensus with regard to defining forgiveness."<sup>[6]</sup> While Konstan has every right to define forgiveness as he wishes, he is wrong to assert that there is a single, dominant modern paradigm of forgiveness.

In fact Konstan's definition would be contested by many scholars. In her discussion of definitions of forgiveness, Lamb identifies as the first problem that "some authors advocate forgiveness only after a perpetrator has made amends and others advocate forgiveness no matter what the response from the perpetrator."<sup>[7]</sup> This is of particular interest, because Konstan not only takes the position that forgiveness can only follow the perpetrator's amends, he asserts that this is an essential feature of the modern concept of forgiveness: "most recent commentators on forgiveness suppose that one must" have earned forgiveness.<sup>[8]</sup> Not so. A sampling of scholars who disagree with Konstan includes psychologist Robert Enright, philosopher Trudy Govier, ethicist Donald Shriver, and theologian Greg Jones. For them, forgiveness normally, or at least possibly, precedes or is independent of the perpetrator's repentance.

Enright, director of the International Forgiveness Institute, has been studying forgiveness since the 1980s. He has defined forgiveness in slightly different ways, but this one is typical: forgiveness is a "willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly hurt us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love towards him or her."<sup>[9]</sup> Far from the victim's forgiveness depending on the perpetrator's prior repentance, the perpetrator will be treated with unearned kindness. Govier, an associate professor of

philosophy at the University of Lethbridge in Canada, has written extensively on the concept of forgiveness in light of the experience of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, often working in collaboration with Wilhelm Verwoerd, South African philosopher and a researcher and writer for the TRC. She distinguishes between three types of forgiveness: mutual, bilateral, and unilateral. Unilateral forgiveness<sup>[10]</sup> is the category of immediate interest because it arises from the idea that “a victim of wrongdoing has strong reasons to forgive a wrongdoer, reasons independent of the wrongdoer’s acknowledgment and remorse.”<sup>[11]</sup> Desmond Tutu often seemed to be advocating unilateral forgiveness,<sup>[12]</sup> and Govier interprets Nelson Mandela’s stance toward white South Africans, after his release from prison, as “a unilateral initiative towards bilateral forgiveness.”<sup>[13]</sup> Amends by the perpetrator are desired and sought after, but in a case like this, amends are not a condition for forgiving; instead, forgiveness is an initiative intended to inspire amends.

*An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*,<sup>[14]</sup> is the major work on forgiveness by Donald W. Shriver, Jr., president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary. However, in an earlier, briefer, and less well-known take on some of the same material, written for the Politics and Forgiveness Project in England in the 1980s, Shriver identified four main marks of forgiveness in politics—whether or not the word “forgiveness” is actually used. He had gathered these from participating in and observing the black civil rights movement in the United States:

1. Judgment against a wrong perpetrated.
2. Empathy for the humanity of the wrongdoers.
3. Refusal to exact a penalty from the wrongdoers in exact proportion to the wrong.
4. The ultimate aim of restoring the community relationship of all parties to this transaction.<sup>[15]</sup>

The amends of the wrongdoers are implicit in what will eventually be required to achieve “the ultimate aim of restoring the community relationship of all parties to this transaction,” but those amends are not necessary for Shriver’s first, second, and third features of political forgiveness. By Shriver’s account, as with Govier’s interpretation of Nelson Mandela, amends are more likely to be a consequence of forgiveness than a condition of it. Finally, Greg Jones’s *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, published in 1995, remains a

touchstone theological account. Jones, too, speaks of forgiveness as preceding amends, or repentance: “One of the crucial differences between Jesus and the Judaism of his day was Jesus’ willingness to forgive in God’s name without requiring prior repentance and, more determinately, his authorization for his disciples to do likewise”; we “distort a Christian understanding of forgiveness by making repentance a prerequisite for forgiveness.”<sup>[16]</sup> While Konstan makes no reference to Enright, Govier, or Shriver, he is aware of Jones and his approach to forgiveness. In fact I have taken the two Jones quotations above from footnotes in *Before Forgiveness*,<sup>[17]</sup> and this is where Konstan’s engagement with Jones ends.

Konstan’s understanding of forgiveness, then, far from being full and rich, in the sense of reflecting the range of contemporary thinking on forgiveness, is quite limited. His choice of definition imposed unfortunate constraints on his study. What he has shown us about how classical thought differed from one modern understanding of forgiveness is most valuable. How much more valuable his findings would be had he tested a more complex understanding of forgiveness against the ancient texts.

1. 1. David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ix.
2. 2. Konstan, 21.
3. 3. Konstan, 66.
4. 4. My own published work on definitions of forgiveness and related concepts can be found in Joseph Liechty, “Putting Forgiveness in Its Place: An Account of the Dynamics of Reconciliation,” in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, edited by David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), 59-68, and Joseph Liechty, “Forgiveness,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 44-53.
5. 5. Konstan, ix, 57, 73, 151, 170.
6. 6. Sharon Lamb, “Introduction: Reasons to Be Cautious about the Use of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy,” in *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, edited by Sharon Lamb and Jeffrie G. Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.
7. 7. Lamb, 6.

8. 8. Konstan, 7.
9. 9. Robert D. Enright, Suzanne Freedman, and Julio Rique, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness," in *Exploring Forgiveness*, edited by Robert D. Enright and Joanna North (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 46-47.
10. 10. Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 62-77.
11. 11. Govier, 64.
12. 12. Govier, 72.
13. 13. Govier, viii; see also 68-72.
14. 14. Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
15. 15. Donald Shriver, *Forgiveness and Politics: The Case of the American Black Civil Rights Movement* (London: New World Publications, 1987), 20.
16. 16. L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 150, 151.
17. 17. Konstan, 119, 161.