An Encounter with:
Charles L. Griswold. *Forgiveness. A Philosophical Exploration.*
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GAËLLE FIASSE

The contribution of Griswold's book to philosophy is undeniable. It is a rich text in thought, precise analysis, breadth, and density, but also in virtue of the poignant examples Griswold uses to foster his philosophy. Forgiveness had not received the attention it deserves in moral philosophy; the concept was too often considered as “stained” with religion. Griswold quotes the famous sentence of Hannah Arendt lamenting this neglect, and notes that, as in case of Arendt, it is primarily political thinkers who have led philosophers back to this question. The last decades have seen increased philosophical interest, from both continental and analytic philosophy, in the theme of forgiveness. This re-examination is perhaps due to the offers of repentance from numerous political and social leaders. Griswold therein sets the tone. He argues for a secular approach towards forgiveness, although he does not want to restrict himself to a somewhat limited analysis by philosophers, in so far as theologians have heavily influenced philosophers on the concept. For instance, he discusses at great length the problem of forgiveness and resentment in two sermons delivered by the Anglican writer Joseph Butler. In footnotes or in the text itself, he does not hesitate to refer to examples from pieces of literature or psychological studies that serve to enliven the philosophical analysis while never once diminishing its accuracy. They are also conceived as illustrations of the developments Griswold proposes in

forgiveness, many of them originating from South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission or post-Holocaust writers.

The book starts with an analysis of forgiveness in ancient philosophy, and the footnotes also contain a brief comparison of the use of the term in the New Testament and in Greek tragedy and philosophy. By referring to the notion of *sungnômè* in Aristotle's ethics, Griswold claims that the Stagirite refers more to an attitude of excuse and pardon than forgiveness in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whereas his use of *sungnômè* in Book VII is positioned between excuse and forgiveness. Griswold's analysis has the distinct advantage of asking the question "Who is considered to be forgiving?". It is not clear in the text of Aristotle. The same could be said concerning blame, since Aristotle asserts that we blame an action, but he never actually explains whether the blame comes from the one who suffers from the action or from everybody who can judge it. It is perhaps regretful that Griswold does not go deeper into this analysis of *sungnômè* in Aristotle, and in particular that he does not delve into the problem of the relationship between involuntary actions and forgiveness. But he does refer to the sentence in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle asserts that it is more "pardonable" to be engulfed by *thumos* (translated by the author as emotion, and whose typical example is anger), than to indulge in sensible desires. The author highlights a point that is very often overlooked: the reason given by Aristotle. When Aristotle asserts that we forgive more easily somebody who follows the natural desires common to everyone, he explains that this is so precisely "to the extent that they are common." This assertion leads to the recognition that we forgive more easily those weaknesses and lapses that we can recognize in ourselves. Griswold thus makes explicit a threefold assertion concerning the process of forgiveness as he conceives it: 1) the degree of self-knowledge; 2) the ability to put oneself in another's place through imagination; and 3) the

recognition of shared humanity. In spite of this extrapolation, Griswold is not ready to admit that forgiveness really takes place in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; rather, he prefers to limit the discussion to the notions of excuse and pardon.

However, I contend that his rejection of translating *sungnômè* as *forgiveness* and his preference for the notion of excuse or pardon reflect a general contemporary agreement that makes too strong a distinction between excuse and forgiveness. Forgiveness can comprise a part of accepting the “excuses” of the other, if we take into consideration the double and somewhat ambivalent meaning of excuse. The first meaning is the reason put forward to mitigate or justify an offence, which, in the process of asking for forgiveness, would be quite offensive as far as it avoids acknowledgment of responsibility. But the second meaning is an apology, such as in the expression “Please, excuse me.” In French, the word “excuse” even refers to the regret that we convey to somebody who has been hurt by us when we knock on the door and say, “Je viens te présenter mes excuses.” That's why we may also say, “His attitude was unbearable. I demand that he excuses himself.” In this light, the less we understand, the less easy it can be to forgive, a point admittedly brought in by Griswold later on.¹ We thus might wonder if forgiving is as much separated from excusing as some scholars (and here Griswold) would like to see it. When they greatly emphasize the notion of “responsibility” in order to underscore the contrast with excusing, it leads to the unfavourable result that forgiveness becomes restricted to willed evils. There seems to be a problem with this. Scholars dissociate forgiving and excusing, and so tend to include the actions done by the incontinent in the realm of acts that can be excused. The implicit consequence is that we would only forgive “premeditated” evils. Griswold describes excusing as not holding the agent responsible and not taking a wrong act as a sign of the agent's inherent viciousness (7). For Aristotle, all incontinent acts are not a sign of the agent's deep character;

they are voluntary, but not “premeditated” or “intentional.” If only the incontinent person had taken the time to deliberate more or to abide by the result of his rational deliberation, he would not have committed the wrong. While the person who commits the involuntary action is to be pitied (especially if he is totally forced and thus not responsible), the incontinent person would be more forgiven than merely excused if we compare him to the former. A wrong act, especially the act of an incontinent person, is considered to be a voluntary action, but is not a sign of the agent's viciousness, since he is able to regret it. However, the continent person is more forgivable than the vicious person (who would have planned the wrongdoing). Aristotle notices, as Griswold did not forget to mention, the continent person is more forgivable, especially in so far as he struggled against his bad desires. There is thus something to learn from Aristotle that our contemporary notion of “responsibility” does not render, which is the particular cases of incontinence and their relation to forgiveness, voluntary actions and the role of regret. Another way to contrast between excusing and forgiving would be to say that we excuse “minor wrongdoings,” while we “forgive” major ones, instead of insisting on non-responsibility, on the one hand, and willed evil, on the other.

Griswold asserts that nowhere does Aristotle praise forgiveness as a virtue due to “the character of his perfectionist ethical scheme” that also misses “the idea of the inherent dignity of persons.” The author grounds this judgment in his analysis of the *megalopsuchos*, which he interprets as having no need for being forgiven because of his moral perfection. However, such an interpretation could be counter-balanced by the weight that Aristotle gives to what we can consider as the capacity for forgiveness with respect to the person having the virtue of equity (VI, 1143a20; 11143a23). Furthermore, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle mentions that there is a relationship of justice and friendship with a slave, not as a slave, but as a human being.

Griswold, in this sense, attenuates his claims about the *megalopsuchos* in a footnote where he concedes to Aristotle an attempt “to articulate the notion of shared humanity.” In fact, the point that matters the most for Griswold seems to be the inherent equality and dignity of every human being in their capacities to do wrong. This is the light that fosters his view of forgiveness, more so than the regret and the consideration of a desire for the good that is common to everybody. That's why, in the comment on Butler, Griswold remarks that forgiveness understood as love is an affirmation of our commonality, “as human beings, with the morally worst amongst us” (34). If we compare it to the Aristotelian view, we thus have an inversion between loving what can be good or better in the person, on the one hand, and a recognition of the worst in her, on the other hand. However, the author also counters the unconditionality of forgiveness, and the arguments behind such a claim, in the name of common frailty. As he mentions, unconditional forgiveness could lead simply to the “acknowledgment of the universality of sin” (66), or even lead us “to hold ourselves and each other accountable by *not* forgiving” (94). Nonetheless in the section in which he disapproves of the notion of “moral monsters” by quoting a superb passage from Primo Levi, Griswold also underlines two aspects of the link between shared fallibility and forgiveness. The first one relates to what I characterize as a reciprocal element. In Griswold's term, it is “reasonableness.” “If I expect to be forgiven ... for injuring others, I ought to forgive the injuries caused by others.” The second aspect concerns the beneficial disabusing oneself of the conviction that one is decidedly superior. Correlated to it is another major point. Not recognizing human fallibility can lead to expect a moral standard so high that one turns to a “self-congratulatory ‘justification’ for resentment” (82).

Concerning the ancient authors, Griswold's footnotes are always interesting and generally even more prudently formulated than the core of the text. This chapter must not be

taken as the last word on the question, since a series of contributions on Ancient Forgiveness, edited by Griswold and David Konstan, is under contract for Cambridge University Press. In his book *Forgiveness*, the detour through ancient philosophy aims to call to attention the neglect of forgiveness as a virtue. The major reason for this dismissal is, for the author, the perfectionist ethics, which in a certain sense is common to Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicurus, and resonates later on with Nietzsche. Being immune from receiving injury or from doing injury, the perfected soul does not feel “resentment” and therefore does not need to forgive. She forgets or even overlooks wrongs. She is free from dependence on others and even has contempt for anyone capable of inflicting injury.

It is precisely this notion of resentment that becomes key to this study of forgiveness. This is why Griswold turns to the analysis of Joseph Butler—also quoted by Digeser, Murphy and Hampton—in order to consider the definition of forgiveness not as the “forswearing of resentment,” but as “the forswearing of *revenge*.” Resentment, rightly focused, “is the legitimate response to injury” (31, 35), or the correct reactive sentiment directed at the wrong. Griswold also insists throughout the book that to no longer feel resentment is not to be confused with forgiveness, even though many “religious authors and pop psychologists” do confuse these. Such an analysis of resentment, in my opinion, gives a realistic account of emotions, and avoids the mistake of rendering forgiveness something too idealistic. He mentions that forgiving means neither forgetting nor excusing, nor condoning or rationalization, nor ceasing to feel sorrow in regard to the injurer, nor feeling no disappointment with the offender. His insistence on the “aim” of forgiveness leads the author to consider that forgiveness is “to understand, to relinquish revenge and resentment, all the while holding the offender responsible” (47).

Griswold thus touches on many aspects of the phenomenon of forgiveness. The author highlights the component of truth-telling, which is an expression of respect, as well as the role of narratives in emotions—such as resentment, “a story-telling passion”—and in the act of forgiving (30).

These clarifications, elaborated through dialogue with select ancient and modern philosophers, lead the author to then reconsider the conditions that “qualify the offender for forgiveness and entitle the victim to forgive.” For Griswold, the paradigm used in the description of forgiveness lies in a dyadic interpersonal model of an offender and a victim. This binary dimension must be taken into consideration from start to finish. The offender must wait for the victim to forgive (48). The process of forgiveness “is not completed unless the injured party’s sentiments have changed” (48), and the implicit ends of forgiveness include restoration of mutual respect and recognition between the two parties. The fact that forgiveness is thus a virtue of a special kind, as it depends on two agents, shows for Griswold the shortcomings of the so-called “perfectionist ethics” described in chapter one, examining ancient philosophy and Nietzsche. This interdependence should not be considered as an imperfection, but as a characterization of our human world (49).

Another aspect pushing Griswold to take a distance from ancient philosophy is his insistence on Smithean sympathy. The agent can understand himself with respect to a moral community, be it even only notional. So the guilt that can push someone to ask for forgiveness relates to a desire to be accepted by the community. Griswold insists on what is needed for the agent to give up resentment against the offender. First, there must be acknowledgement of responsibility for the wrongful deed. Next, there must be repudiation of the deed and of future similar ones. Third, there must be an expression of regret. Accurate remembering, therefore,

proves essential and demonstrates the particular role memory plays in the process of forgiveness. Fourth, a concrete commitment must be made not to commit the same wrong action. In addition to this, there is a manifestation of sympathy by the offender towards the injured person and a taking of responsibility for emendation. Finally, a narrative account from the injurer on how he came to commit the wrong is offered. This narrative also must convey that his actions do not represent or define him, particularly since he has changed and is becoming worthy of consideration on the basis of his efforts of self-improvement. Added to these conditions is whether the nature of the injury and the injury itself are forgivable (59). To examine these conditions, practical wisdom and good discernment are required. For Griswold, the process of forgiveness does not require compensation, reparation, or penance, and it must be distinguished from the payment or the dismissal of a debt.

Given the dyadic paradigm, some conditions on the part of the victim are also required for forgiveness to take place according to the best scenario: the forswearing of revenge; the moderation of resentment; the commitment to let lingering resentment go altogether (54, 174); “a process of reframing,” that is not objectification of the agent as a wrongdoer; a reframing of one’s view of self; and, ultimately, communication to the offender that forgiveness is granted.

These conditions could seem too demanding for both the forgiven and the forgiver; they must hence not be understood as limited and necessary conditions. They refer more to the ideal situation that everybody would wish for when confronted with an offence. For instance, even thinkers who concede, contrary to Griswold, that there might be an inner act of forgiveness in cases where the injurer has not repented and will never do so, may nonetheless recognize that it would be “better” if things were different and, accordingly, if repentance had occurred. It is

hence in this sense that we must understand these strict conditions: as inclusive, but not necessarily exclusive.

Griswold also analyzes a question dear to the Post-Holocaust writers: whether or not there are acts and actors that are unforgivable. Since Jankélévitch's essay on the imprescriptible and Derrida's provocative answer that we only should forgive the unforgivable, this question has taken a particular weight. Here, Griswold distinguishes between two senses of understanding the question. The first refers to what is beyond one's ability to forgive, while the second is more deontological: namely, what is not to be forgiven in principle. The author further distinguishes between failing to meet all the conditions of a paradigm of forgiveness and meeting them all but nonetheless remaining unforgivable. His conclusion remains willingly "aporetic." With much nuance, Griswold shows in which sense the injurer may remain "unforgiven" rather than "unforgivable," but he also remarks how strongly forgiveness "remains bound to the imperfect context out of which it itself arises" (95). He counters the view that demonizes human beings by consideration of humanity as a status and not an achievement. Common humanity is thus assumed, but even that assumption does not entail the impossibility of unforgivable action in the sense that it can be humanly impossible to forgive.

The book comprises an interesting and original development on the narratives involved in the process of forgiveness, both for the offender and the victim. These developments aim mostly at emphasizing the importance for the injurer of recounting how he understands the suffering of the victim and how much he has changed in taking serious steps to be a better person. However, Griswold also mentions that "the offender who presents a request for forgiveness presents a narrative explaining how she came to do the injury" (104). We might wonder if such a claim does not conceal ethical obstacles. What if the victim does not know all the perverse intentions

behind the injury? Is it really necessary to present a narrative on the injury and to convey it to the victim? I would personally object that sincerity about past evils can be a subtle way for the injurer to clean her heart, as with a therapist, without adequate consideration of the effect on the offended. For instance, if an individual has discovered that his partner was unfaithful to him, does he really need to hear how she came to commit such adultery, even if she asks for forgiveness, after he has discovered it? Or even though, as Griswold mentions, the offender has to show that she is not “*just* a wrong-doer” and “is becoming her better self”? While I agree with the necessity to “enter ‘sympathetically’ into the narrative” of the other, it can seem a bit idealistic to consider that “each side comes to ‘understand,’ from an external standpoint, the perspective of the other” (105). I would thus have liked to receive more developments on this meaning of “understanding,” especially since Griswold, in a footnote that discusses the difficulties lived by victims of violence a few pages later, says that the point of narratives is not the illusions of coherence of the past. Can we not also object to him that, even at a less extreme level, injuries sometimes amount to mere jealousy and baseness, which in themselves are not always understandable? For instance, if somebody is deeply hurt by a lie, which is mean and totally unpredictable, can he ever understand this lie, especially if he does not have a propensity to lie and himself hates hypocrisy? Is it necessary to “understand” in order to forgive? Or can it be that even if the injured party does not understand the offender’s actions, she can nonetheless decide to forgive? These remarks should not shadow the long developments on narratives, which are in themselves extremely interesting. It is not difficult to see that such narratives are important for the dialogue with oneself, and in cases where the offence is not understood the same way by the two protagonists or where there are shared responsibilities, which very often happens with respect to couples or friends who mutually ask for forgiveness for reciprocal injuries.

Furthermore, Griswold's developments are also sustained by accurate concrete examples. For instance, the narrative the subject presents to himself mirrors the particular case of survivors of the Holocaust in a very interesting way.

In discussing the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness, Griswold distinguishes between two meanings of reconciliation, acceptance and affirmation. He responds to the often sugar-coated confusion of these terms by stressing that "there is no reason to think that forgiveness *must* lead to 'affirmative reconciliation'" (111).

After having analyzed forgiveness "at its best," the author turns to "imperfect forgiveness"; that is, "non-paradigmatic forgiveness" not following all the criteria he elaborated and summarized above. This chapter examines the different objections to forgiveness, centering on political forgiveness (third-party forgiveness), forgiving the dead, the unrepentant, self-forgiveness. Griswold wants to avoid the trap, repeated many times in the book, of the perfectionist ethics. That is why even his paradigmatic forgiveness is not equated with an ideal, exclusive type. "Forgiveness admits of approximation or degree" (114). Even though paradigmatic forgiveness remains the *telos* of these instances of non-paradigmatic forgiveness, three minimum conditions are put forward for them: 1) the willingness of the victim to forgive; 2) the willingness of the offender to take minimal steps to qualify for forgiveness; and 3) an injury humanly forgivable.

Griswold thus analyzes all the difficult cases widely spread in the philosophical literature on forgiveness. He insists on the injury done to oneself by the victim's injury, such as the murder of a loved one. Such a case is not therefore a matter of third-party forgiveness, since it concerns your own loss of the loved one. Then, he turns to more specific cases of third-party forgiveness. Contrary to the majority of authors, he thus insists on possible identification with the victim and

on the possibility of a third party forgiveness, but by putting restrictive conditions on any such forgiveness granted.

The author also insists throughout the book on the bilateral dimension of forgiveness and thus counters the idea that forgiveness is unconditional. To express an unconditional forgiveness, that is independent of any conditions (avowal, repentance...), would communicate to the offender and to other people that she is not being held accountable (64). However, we might object that there is a distinction between an inner forgiveness from the victim and a forgiveness externally exchanged, or, in this integral sense, accomplished. We might imagine a situation where the agent has forgiven but does not convey it to the offender, in order to not give her another occasion to wrong him. The author makes the claim that moral philosophy cannot always provide guidance and that literature is then better suited to describing the particulars. While there is no contestation to be made about the risk of building a moral philosophy about every particular case, such a distinction between, on the one hand, the victim's will and inner motion to forgive and, on the other hand, the possible acceptance of the offender's repentance might nonetheless be useful in order to clarify the difference with so-called "imperfect forgiveness," such as forgiving the dead or the unrepentant (chapter three). For instance, while it is certainly true that there is a risk to collude with or reinforce the wrong-doing if a victim conveys her forgiveness to an offender who did not repent, it is nevertheless difficult to deny that in some cases there exists an act of "inner" forgiveness remaining inside and never uttered to the offender. For instance, if a mother dies having forgiven her unrepentant son who never came back home and has never shown any sign of improvement, Griswold would not call it "forgiveness." The non-distinction between inner forgiveness and external or integral forgiveness leads Griswold to deny such a unilateral act of forgiveness. While examining the theme of self-forgiveness, Griswold mentions

that “it seems objectionable to make forgiveness altogether hostage to the injured party.” Can we not apply this argument in order to favor the recognition of an inner act of forgiving an unrepentant person? Is not denying such a possibility because the injurer never repented also to make the victim hostage to him?

After the analysis of ancient and modern forgiveness (chapter one), forgiveness at its best (chapter two), and imperfect forgiveness (chapter three), the author turns to political apology, forgiveness and reconciliation (chapter four). This chapter helps to clarify the many public apologies by political and religious leaders. Is there a public, civic or political virtue of forgiveness? Griswold does not deny that “reconciliation and something resembling forgiveness can and do take place at the political level,” but he prefers the expression “political apology,” and acceptance thereof, rather than “political forgiveness.” He thus calls for the distinction between political apology, economic forgiveness (the dismissal of debts), political pardon, and judicial pardon. Reiterating his assessment about the distinction between the ethical level and the political level, Griswold does not consider that public apology should entail financial reparation that could negate its moral content through self-interested business motivations. He prefers to use other words to qualify the individual to collectivity, or the collectivity to collective apologies, such as “appearance of forgiveness,” or “symbolic contrition,” while distinguishing the cases which in fact never involved a real apology but are more an apologetic gesture. The distinction between public apology and forgiveness allows Griswold to give the former more latitude concerning crimes against humanity, which are typically treated by public apologies. Several criteria are needed to qualify a political apology, namely: 1) recognition of the truth; 2) an expressed and clear statement that wrongdoing occurred, with identification of the guilty and the offended and recognition of responsibility for the wrong; and 3) a clear and expressed statement

that an apology is offered. Public apologies open the door for the forswearing of revenge and the possibility of cooperation, but do not address individual resentment as forgiveness does. The author also examines traditional rituals of reconciliation, such as those in Africa, and contrasts them with public apology and forgiveness. Like Derrida and Ricœur, Griswold warns against the confusion over a culture of apology and forgiveness by showing its risks and abuses. Many of his analyses of interpersonal forgiveness shed light on his view of public apology, such as the essential component of truth-telling or the use of narrative, and its distinction with story, all of which at the political level become the difference between the historical story and the historical narrative.

Griswold goes very far in his analysis of forgiveness. In his last chapter, he also penetrates other kinds of problematic phenomena such as the Vietnam Veteran Memorials, the goals it has attained, as well as its inherent weaknesses. This entire chapter indeed deals with truth, memory, and civic reconciliation without apology. Through the attention to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Griswold aims at describing the therapeutic and reconciliatory effects of memorials for civil wars, and wars that led to a defeat, but which also willingly avoid questions concerning the justice of the war, the responsibility of individual soldiers in participating in that war, and the apologies that are due. His analysis once again sheds light on the pros and cons.

Looking at the book as a whole, we can only thank Griswold for this exceptional contribution on the notion of forgiveness.

Notes

¹ I thus would like to challenge Griswold by asking if this is not what he meant by his reproach towards the *megalopsuchos* people who “have no interest in sympathetically grasping the situation and faults of non-virtuous persons” (8).