

Review

The worst vengeance

Georgios N. B^{1*}, Manolis E. Seferis², Phidias J. Cornelius³ and Hesiod H. Frangoulis⁴

¹Democritus University of Thrace, Greece.

²University of Peloponisos, Greece

³Byzantine Philosophy, University of Athens, Greece.

⁴Medical School, University of Athens, Greece.

Accepted 6 February, 2016

In classical philosophy as well as patristic thought, the human passions presented a moral but inevitably also an ontological, or else physiological, dilemma. The dynamic of human freedom, the drama of human, is precisely the right orientation of the innate human affections. Benefiting our enemy is the 'worst vengeance' we can give him; this is an old story that remains contemporary and beneficial for either our soul or our spiritual life in the ethical mode of being. We analysed the potential role of benefiting the enemy though from the Christian point of view. Throughout historical references, either clearly or indirectly, this study also attempted to formulate evaluations as to the depth of philosophical and theological thought. The strength of this work may be epitomized in the following remark: that love, through the actual forgiveness, is the supreme virtue in which a person finds the true meaning of his existence.

Key words: Offence, benefit, enemy, vengeance, forgive.

INTRODUCTION

Referring to man, his rights and the laws that he is subjected to still seems to be a successful method in dealing with various and often conflicting values and interests. However, the human character is a complicated combination of virtues and vices. One of them, vindictiveness, is an inherent characteristic in the human ontological and psychological framework.

In a historical perspective, we see in the Holy Bible that the most famous quotation is, probably, the one that refers to revenge in a very clear way: "But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand....." (Exodus: The Holy Bible). In the Bible, the Lord points out: "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay" (The Epistle to the HEBREWS: The Holy Bible, 1990). Thus, it is obvious that punishment belongs to the Lord.

In ancient Greek mythology, a vast number of cases are found where revenge plays a central role in the development of the story. Hera (Juno), the sister and wife

of Jupiter, was of a jealous predisposition. As Jupiter had got many adventures with all beautiful (mortal and immortal) women he met, Hera exercised her vindictiveness against them and even against their children. The most known episode is when she sent two enormous snakes in the cradle of Hercules with the purpose to kill him. But Hercules being already very strong, he suffocated the snakes himself (Richepin, 1953).

Almost all constellations in the sky and plants on earth are former victims of some Gods' vindictiveness, transformed in stars and flowers in order to avoid their revenge. Aeschylus in his tragedy "The Libation Bearers" asks: "May you not hurt your enemy, when he struck first" (Rhoda, 1978: 810)?

DISCUSSION

From the foregoing, it is obvious that vengeance „invents" evil in the sense of introducing a false experience, an anomalous vice in place of the healthy one.

Luminous minds however existed previously to the coming of Christianity. In Plato's Crito, Socrates (4th c. B. C.) claims that "One ought not return injustice, nor do

*Corresponding author. E-mail: georgios@ece.ntua.gr.

evil to anybody in the world no matter what one may have suffered from them" (Rhoda, 1978: 474). The attempted philosophical solution to the problem of vengeance is a genuine insight into the human nature, especially human morality for true virtue to be realized.

On the other hand, Alexander the Great was named "Great" not only because of his extended expeditions and victories, but because, although he was ferocious in battle, he was magnanimous, gentle and chivalrous to his defeated enemies (Plutarch lives, 1999). At the battle of Issu (333 B.C.), he took Darius mother, wife and two daughters as prisoners, who were naturally in great despair believing that Darius was dead. His treatment, offered to them, was royal and extremely chivalrous, increasing even their income; additionally, he sent Leonatus – one of his distinguished officers – with orders to tell them that Darius was alive and safe and they need have no fear of Alexander (Plutarch lives, 1999). It is very characteristic what Darius explained appreciating the treatment offered them by Alexander: "If a fated time of the Persians must cease, grant that no other man may sit upon the throne of Cyrus but Alexander" (Plutarch lives, 1999).

The Christian doctrine on the other hand, brought quite a new approach to ancient ideas about revenge. Christ, whose teaching was based on love from the very beginning astonished his audience when He said "whoever strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other as well" (Matthew: The Holy Bible, a, 1974) and "pray for your persecutors" (Matthew: The Holy Bible, b, 1974). In His own words, He is explaining that "For if you love those who love you, what is your merit" (Matthew: The Holy Bible, c, 1974)? Moreover, even when He was suffering on the Cross, He begged His Father to forgive His enemies. Christ's admonition to love our enemies is first and foremost an admonition to love. This may here be addressed towards a specific category of our fellow humans, our enemies. However, the spirit of teaching is not to adjust, modify or alter our ordinary ways of practicing love, when applied to their case. In fact the teaching itself would clearly be totally worthless to Christ, if it were understood as an incitement to love our enemies in ways unlike those by which we usually love our friends (Antonopoulos, 1994).

Initially, what Christ is putting forth here is a purely moral precept. All of these belong, moreover, in large Christological perspective, where love still constitute a crucial vehicle by which incarnational grace is embodied in the farthest reaches of the cosmic order of which human is the treasured microcosm. Because of His love, God the Father graciously deigns to create and save the world through the Economy of His Son in the Holy Spirit (Zizioulas, 2010).

At this point in the essay, it is important to note that the person who is forgiven appreciates his enemy's behaviour and receives this way an example and a lesson, which will make him a better human being. The

less one pays attention to the wrong one has received, the better for one's psychological health. Forgiveness will reveal to us the mysteries which lie at the root of „being“, giving us the impetus to surpass dark or irrational acts and to find ourselves. To know oneself is thus to learn the frontiers of one's nature, and in so doing, to push out those frontiers in the direction of higher virtue. Similarly in the Latin tradition, the philosopher and Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius vigorously defending the role of emotions such as fear, desire, joy, and sorrow, writes: "Reject your sense of injury and the injury itself disappears" (Rhoda, 1978: 474). Emphasizing this view, an old proverb says "no revenge is more honourable than the one not taken" (Rhoda, 1978: 549). This passage grounds the idea of the moral order, to the exercise of virtue.

In the end, it is useful to mention the high spirit and morality of the English people, who although being in the underground shelters, for days, during the worst period of the air raids in 1940-1941, "were more inclined to reject the idea that they should undertake reprisal raids against German towns" (Thouless, 1941). It will be really more edifying for humans to content themselves with forgiving those who wronged them.

Last but not the least, the problem of human freewill in relation to the presence of divine providence in human life, is a really main aspect in human relations, as it was indicated in the early seventh century, by Maximus the Confessor. The main points we attempt to illuminate, are concisely the following: (a) A human being has the ability, in a way analogous to the Persons of the triadic God, to realize life as love, that is, freedom, and not as a natural necessity; (b) God freely creates the world and reduces being to freedom, thus imposing a new frame to the virtually rationalistic necessity which in certain cases appears in the ancient Greek thought of the classical period; (c) The human being by nature above mentioned formulations - ontologically - possesses freedom of will, and thus by definition the right of personal freedom is reinforced and secured, independently of the way it will be comprehended and projected; (d) Human nature reaches its completion or the likeness to God by means of the freedom of person, since the latter itself used its free will for the realization of the Good. The above mentioned formulations are a clause which moves within the frame of an absolute symmetry, even though the first concept (Good) directly entails as well the presence of the second (Freedom) and vice versa. In this sense, the forgiveness is raising the human nature into a symmetry between the human and divine nature of being (Kapsimalakou, 2012).

The same issue, morally speaking, is repeatable nowadays in our family, in our social status of being, but mainly in our professional daily life. The list of themes can be condensed as follows: Is anybody able to imagine how much of our energy, strength, force and effort we are wasting daily for revenging, instead of orienting our

energies to creativity? What remains ultimately? Passion for our enemies but not for ourselves. Is this the case really for our soul? We do not have to go too far to find an answer to these questions. We are endowed with a self-determining human will, a self-determining human power of willing, by virtue of which we are able to choose between good and evil in a self-determining manner.

CONCLUSION

We conclude this paper by noting that benefiting our enemy, instead of revenging the offence he did to us, is the "worst vengeance". This has rather a behavioural than an ontological meaning. Christ, even when He was suffering on the Cross, begged His Father to forgive His enemies. Consequently, Christ's famous teaching urges us to love our enemies. It is a moral command which we are simply free to fulfil. The term love can be extended over the semantic territory designated in our enemies. Obviously, for ourselves, the requested moral task is to soothe the passion for revenge and to forgive and benefit our neighbours. In this way, we are „inspiring“ them in attaining transformation and perfection in God, through love and unrestricted offering. In any other situation, the evil is inside us and definitely is our egoism. On the basis of this interpretation, the importance of forgiveness should not be underestimated to the extent that it grapples with a historical problem of Christian anthropology and ethical issues.

REFERENCES

- Antonopoulos C (1994). Comprehensive doubts, contrastive terms and the linguistic attack on Scepticism. *Skepsis, J. Philosophy Inter-disciplinary Res.*, 5: 133-159.
- Kapsimalakou C (2012). Thesis: "Freedom and necessity in Maximus the Confessor: towards an ontology of the person" University of Patras. Philosophy Department.: <http://hdl.handle.net/10889/5482>
- Matthew: The Holy Bible. (1974a) The Gideons International. Edition. 712; 5: 39
- Matthew: The Holy Bible. (1974b) The Gideons International. Edition. 712; 5: 44
- Matthew: The Holy Bible (1974c). The Gideons International. Edition. 712; 5: 46
- Plutarch lives. Alexander (1999). Harvard University Press. (ISBN: 0-674-99110-9) pp. 223-439.
- Rhoda ThomasTripp (1978). Aeschylus: The International Thesaurus of Quotations. Penguin Reference Books, 1: 810.
- Rhoda Thomas Tripp (1978). Marcus Aurelius: The International Thesaurus Quotations. Penguin Reference Books, 15: 474.
- Rhoda Thomas Tripp. (1978). Spanish proverb: The International Thesaurus Quotations. Penguin Reference Books; 21: 549.
- Richepin J (1953). *Elliniki Mythologia*, 1: 94.
- Socrates: The International Thesaurus of Quotations. (1978) Compiled by Rhoda ThomasTripp. Penguin Reference Books, 15: 659.
- The Epistle to the HEBREWS: The Holy Bible (1990). The New King James Version, p. 1180.
- Thouless RH (1941). Psychological effects of air raids. *Nature*, 148: 183-185.
- Zizioulas DJ (2010). Metropolitan of Pergamon, The One and the Many, Studies on God, Man, the Church and the World, Sebastian Press, Ed. Fr. Gregory Edwards, p. 32.