

forgiveness: a work of love?

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What difference would it make to our understanding of the process of interpersonal forgiveness to approach it as what Kierkegaard calls a “work of love”? In this article, I argue that such an approach—which I label “love’s forgiveness”—challenges key assumptions in two prominent philosophical accounts of forgiveness. First, it challenges “desert-based” views, according to which forgiveness is conditional upon such features as the wrongdoer’s repentance and making amends. But second, it also avoids legitimate worries raised against some forms of unconditional forgiveness. I argue that what we may call “love’s vision” has a crucial role to play in interpersonal forgiveness. Against the objection that viewing forgiveness as a work of love is problematic because love involves a certain wilful blindness, I argue (drawing on both Kierkegaard and Troy Jollimore) that a) love has its own epistemic standards, and b) *pace* Jollimore’s remarks on *agape*, his claims about romantic love and friendship can in the relevant respects be extended to the case of *agapic* neighbour-love. By developing this view—which I argue echoes important themes in Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*—I show the importance of understanding “love’s forgiveness” in the light of other virtues, especially hope and humility.

A prominent mode of discussing forgiveness—sometimes labelled “conditional” forgiveness—takes it to be something that has to be “deserved” or “earned”; something for which a wrongdoer must somehow *qualify* by meeting a set of

requirements, ranging from a sincere apology to some more extended list. (Supporters of this view differ on whether, once amends have been made, forgiveness is then *owed*, or whether offering it remains elective.) Charles Griswold's account of "paradigmatic forgiveness" serves as a prominent example of this approach.² Griswold offers various criteria required of wrongdoers to "qualify" for forgiveness: accepting responsibility for one's action; repudiating that action; experiencing and expressing regret; acknowledging the harm done; and convincing the wronged party one is capable of and willing to pursue appropriate moral self-improvement.³ By contrast, adherents of "unconditional" forgiveness hold that no such requirements are necessary before forgiveness can properly be granted.⁴ However, more radical claims have sometimes been made about unconditional forgiveness. Jacques Derrida's account, for instance (introduced in the context of a discussion of political atrocities), insists that the only true forgiveness is that which forgives "the unforgivable". What leads Derrida to this controversial view is his assertion that forgiving a repentant wrongdoer involves forgiving someone "no longer exactly the same as the one found to be culpable".⁵ What "true" forgiveness amounts to, he insists, is forgiving "both the fault and the guilty *as such*, where the one and the other remain as irreversible as the evil, as evil itself, and being capable of repeating itself, unforgivably, without transformation, without amelioration, without repentance or promise".⁶ It is in this sense that any act of forgiveness "worthy of the name" would need to "forgive the unforgivable". Anything less, Derrida alleges, would be a merely "economic" transaction, in which the wrongdoer pays back a debt through their repentance and amends-making.

As a dismissal of conditional forgiveness as a genuine kind of forgiveness, this is too quick: Griswold is right to object to the claim that only "undeserved and unjustified" forgiveness is true forgiveness.⁷ I do not wish to endorse the Derridean view, nor the related claim that only such forgiveness has genuine moral worth. Note, however, that the implications of what Griswold says for less radical claims about unconditional forgiveness are extremely modest. "To forgive someone undeserving of the honor", he writes, "under the banner of a 'gift', *may* condone the wrong-doer, and even provide encouragement to more offences."⁸ It also "*risks* undermining the agent's sense of her entitlement to warranted resentment".⁹ Perhaps so, but risks and possibilities are merely that. While we should take seriously Griswold's suggestion (against Garrard and McNaughton) that a forgiveness that requires *nothing* of the wrongdoer may communicate to her and others that she is not being held accountable, and that thus the "intrinsically

interpersonal character of (paradigmatic) forgiveness is lost”,¹⁰ all this offers a space for “love’s forgiveness”. This falls on the unconditional side of the divide: it does not insist that certain conditions have to be met—by the offender (in most accounts) and also by the forgiver (in some accounts, including Griswold’s¹¹)—before forgiveness can appropriately be offered. But nor is it unconditional *in the extreme sense to which Griswold objects*. There is a morally admirable forgiveness which neither endorses the Derridean view, nor communicates to the wrongdoer that no judgement is being made on her actions. But insofar as the forgiver does not set prior *conditions* for forgiveness to be granted, such forgiveness remains unconditional. We can understand such forgiveness better, I shall argue, by considering it as a “work of love”.

But first, let us back up. Since there is some disagreement about the question of what forgiveness *is*, I should sketch the basic picture I shall be working with here. (I have space here only to state this, rather than to argue for it in full.) Though typically expressed in a speech-act (“I forgive you”), such speech-acts are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for demarcating forgiveness (since forgiveness can be enacted without being explicitly declared, and conversely, such a speech-act can fail in its expressed intention: I can say I forgive you, while my actions and attitudes reveal that I have neither done so nor intend to do so). I take it that forgiveness *qua* psychological process is a more important territory, and it is this that has attracted most of the philosophical attention. I broadly agree with those who have followed Bishop Joseph Butler in judging forgiveness to involve the forswearing of a spirit of revenge, such that part of what forgiveness involves is conquering the excesses - though not necessarily the *complete* overriding—of reactive attitudes such as resentment, indignation, anger or hurt.¹² The ‘such as’ here is important: I consider it to be excessively stipulative to insist that any *one* of these reactive attitudes must be the one conquered (this will vary from case to case). Forgiveness involves a ‘letting go’ on the part of the wronged party—but one that keeps the wrongdoer in view in such a way that one has towards them an attitude devoid of ill-will. Thus forgiveness is distinct both from forgetting, and from transcending reactive attitudes such as resentment or anger by replacing them with, for instance, contempt. But—as its etymology suggests—forgiveness is also a *gift*,¹³ typically from the wronged party to the wrongdoer.¹⁴ What the “gift” language connotes is that, even in cases where the wrongdoer repents and makes amends, forgiveness is still something beyond what the repentant wrongdoer “earns” by their repentance and amends-making. Finally, I hold that forgiveness is standardly of an agent rather than an act. Consequently, forgiveness is an arena

in which a version of the thought often attributed to St Augustine (to “hate the sin but love the sinner”)—or its secular analogues—does some important work. In such cases, one distinguishes the agent (who one forgives) from their deed (which remains morally condemnable).¹⁵

What of love in all this? According to Kierkegaard, part of what it means to love is to presuppose love in the person loved - and in this way to “draw out the good”; to “love forth” [*opelsker*] love (WL 216-7/SKS 9 219).¹⁶ This view—one of the most radical aspects of Kierkegaard’s view of love—has important ramifications for how he construes forgiveness. If the process of forgiveness *qua* work of love is to meet this stipulation, then integral to any such view is *hope*, of an at least two-fold nature. First, the loving person hopes for the wrongdoer being willing to repent, to return to the moral community and to make amends for the wrong (compare Griswold above).¹⁷ Second—since we are here treating forgiveness as a process—I suggest that it also involves hoping for one’s own ability *fully* to forgive. This has important consequences for accounts of forgiveness which talk of the wrongdoer “qualifying” for forgiveness, because such a hope will typically need to be manifested *before* the wrongdoer has “made amends” (at least in full). We might say: love takes a risk, in hope.

A possible objection to my general approach would be to say that it is simply a grammatical remark to claim that forgiving someone is a work, or expression, of love. But if one notes just how much discussion of forgiveness rests—either tacitly or explicitly—on a model whereby one qualifies for forgiveness by aiming to “wipe the slate clean” in some sense, then this objection fails. Note also that Garrard and McNaughton—two writers who given their overall position one might expect to be sympathetic to the claims of love in forgiveness—do suggest that forgiveness requires “an attitude of good will (or even love) towards the wrongdoer”.¹⁸ Yet—as the above quote suggests—even they seem cautious about going as far as to insist on the “love” claim.

Can “love’s forgiveness” be hopeful without just being naïve? Put another way, does such a view involve a certain *wilful blindness* on the part of love? And if so, is this a fatal objection? “Wilful blindness” is a familiar worry in the philosophy of love—often raised in the context of discussions about love and the ethics of partiality—and it is one that readers of Kierkegaard have certainly not missed. It is a question that perhaps arises for any “vision” view of love. In what follows, I shall compare elements of Kierkegaard’s view of love with a valuable contemporary

such view, namely Troy Jollimore's account of "love's friendly eye".¹⁹ While there is no explicit reference to Kierkegaard in Jollimore's book, I find aspects of his account strikingly Kierkegaardian.²⁰ The advantage of discussing Kierkegaard and Jollimore together, I suggest, is that each clarifies different aspects of "love's vision". Kierkegaard's is without question a "vision" view of love: he is quite explicit that loving involves a kind of seeing, and as commentators have noted, images of "blindness", "vision" and "seeing with closed eyes" abound in the text.²¹ However, I shall argue that much of what Jollimore says in defence of romantic love and friendship also applies, from a Kierkegaardian point of view, to *agapic* neighbour-love. In particular, Kierkegaard resists the common assumption that whereas romantic love and friendship are *particularised* in their focus, neighbour-love is just *generalised benevolence*. In stark contrast, Kierkegaard stresses the importance of attention to the particular in what it truly means to love one's neighbour as oneself. In doing so, he anticipates Jollimore's view that love has epistemic standards of its own. (As Jollimore talks of love's "friendly eye",²² so Kierkegaard speaks of love as a "lenient interpreter" (WL 294/SKS 9 291).) But in the context of forgiveness, Kierkegaard will add a focus on the importance of hope - including hope in the power of love to transform.

I. AGAPE AND ATTENTION TO THE PARTICULAR

Jollimore is clear that his primary focus is on romantic love and friendship (what Kierkegaard calls "preferential loves"), and is sceptical about *agape*. But much of what Jollimore says in defence of preferential loves also applies *mutatis mutandis* to *agapic* neighbour-love. Jollimore glosses *agape* as "God's love for us",²³ expressing scepticism both about whether humans are capable of feeling such love and whether it is a worthy ethical pursuit.²⁴ I take it as trivially true that humans are incapable of feeling divine love in any full sense—but no defender of *agape* as a human ideal need deny that. Typically what such a defender valorises is neighbour-love in the sense of the second biblical love commandment: that we should strive to love all, including those to whom we do not feel the kinds of attraction that characterise such "natural" loves as romantic love and friendship. It is unclear whether Jollimore is rejecting this notion of *agape* as an ethical ideal. What matters for my purposes is that Kierkegaard's view of neighbour-love is significantly at odds with the view of *agape* Jollimore expresses when he claims that it involves "no appreciation of or attention directed towards its object".²⁵ Perhaps the clearest account of this is to be found in the deliberation "Our duty to love the people we see" (WL 154-74/SKS 9 155-74), in which Kierkegaard argues

that genuine neighbour-love *does* require the kind of attention to the particular that Jollimore claims *not* to be *agape*'s concern. Here, neighbour-love requires us, in Jamie Ferreira's words, "to see the other just as he or she is, *in all his or her distinctive concreteness*".²⁶ Ferreira argues that this deliberation signals a crucial shift in the emphasis of *Works of Love*: a move from relative abstraction towards a focus on "vision" as a means of emphasising concreteness and particularity.²⁷ An 1843 discourse of Kierkegaard's, "Love hides a multitude of sins", anticipates this: "it does not depend, then, merely upon what one sees, but what one sees depends upon *how* one sees; all observation is not just a receiving, a discovering, but also a bringing forth, and insofar as it is that, *how the observer himself is constituted is indeed decisive*".²⁸

Whether the observer is *one who loves*, then, is crucial. This trails what will become an important theme in the second part of *Works of Love*: the differences in how attitudes of trust and mistrust, hope and despair, interpret ambiguous evidence about the people we encounter, as part of a gloss on what it might mean for love to "believe all things" and "hope all things".²⁹ But in each case, what is being commended is not some generalised attitude of benevolence, but believing and hoping in the context of a *particular concrete other*.

Kierkegaard, then, would agree with Jollimore that love has epistemic standards of its own—but he would also argue that this applies to neighbour-love as well as to preferential loves. With this in mind, we can draw on both Jollimore and Kierkegaard to show how love's "friendly eye" or "lenient interpretation" is a vital factor in sketching what a forgiveness that is a work of love might look like.

II. "LOVE'S FRIENDLY EYE"

On Jollimore's account, the lover must see the beloved "in the best possible light", typically minimising their weaknesses and flaws. This is, we might say—with a nod towards either Dusty Springfield or ABC (depending on our age)—the "look of love". As Jollimore recognises, there is a range of possibilities here, not all of them defensible. For instance, he approvingly cites John Armstrong, for whom to love "is to interpret another person with charity. It is to believe the best about them which is consistent with the facts".³⁰ The qualification is important: its purpose is to exclude outright "denial" or falsification of the facts (such as claiming your partner could not possibly have drunk a whole bottle of wine before driving home and narrowly missing that child, despite the fact that everyone else at the party

witnessed her do so). What I want to endorse is not such cases of self-deception, but cases where we don't "incorporate" the flaws "into the overall image".³¹ Such a view generates the objection that Jollimore considers: isn't such "blindness" about the beloved a *distorting* phenomenon?³² In the context of forgiveness, the worry would be that the "look of love" might be blind to the demands of justice, sliding into condonation or excuse (notions from which it is widely agreed that forgiveness needs to be distinguished).

Central to the argument of this paper is that Jollimore's response to this is ultimately the right one: to acknowledge that epistemic partiality *can* be a problem, but to insist that we should be careful not to exaggerate its importance. This is because love's own epistemic standards pose a threat to "the allegedly objective standards that are sometimes, wrongly, assumed to represent rationality itself".³³ I want to endorse Jollimore's central claim that "love suggests a certain kind of epistemic practice, one centred on close attention, empathy, and generosity of vision, one that tends to conflict with other sorts of epistemic practice, particularly those that take neutrality and detachment as their presiding virtues".³⁴ But—crucially—I am also arguing that this applies to neighbour-love as well as to preferential loves, and that this has important implications for interpersonal forgiveness. Let me unpack this.

As a preliminary, let us re-emphasise that we are dealing with a range of possibilities. When the faults are trivial or irrelevant to the circumstances, viewing them as lovable quirks³⁵ or outright "blindness" to them poses no significant epistemic problem. In other cases, what the "look of love" sponsors is that we do not *focus* on the faults, refusing to let them determine our overall view of the loved one. (This is what I take Kierkegaard to mean when he talks of the "closed eyes" of love's forbearance and leniency (WL 162/SKS 9 162).) We shall see the relevance of this in more detail towards the end of this section.

Jollimore discusses an example from a paper of Simon Keller's, which attempts to argue that good friendship sometimes requires epistemic irresponsibility.³⁶ It concerns the generosity you owe your friend Rebecca, who has ambitions as a poet and who asks for your support at a reading where she hopes to impress a literary agent. You have reason to believe that the poetry typically read at this venue is poor, and so ordinarily would have no reason to think Rebecca's will be any better. But on account of your friendship—so the argument goes—you owe her not only to turn up, but also to listen to her poetry with an openness and generosity that

would not be justified by what you know about the venue's standard fare. What is crucial in Jollimore's critique of Keller is the claim that the generosity of spirit you owe your friend does *not* constitute an epistemic fault. We have no obligation to assume, as Keller assumes, that "an ideal evaluator of Rebecca's work would aim at 'critical and dispassionate judgements' formulated from a detached point of view, or that 'to allow the poetry to strike him in the best possible light' and to 'actively seek out its strengths' would be to commit epistemic errors".³⁷ Indeed, Jollimore adds that "it is quite doubtful that a person who did not allow a poem to strike her in the best possible light, or attempt to actively seek out its strengths, would be able to find anything of value in the poem".³⁸

Note that the attitude Keller commends is strikingly similar to the attitude Kierkegaard describes as "mistrust" in "Love believes all things". Mistrust is said to believe "nothing at all" (WL 226/SKS 9 228), in the sense of withholding judgement until there is "proof", convincing itself that no conclusion is possible and thus withholding trust rather than taking what it sees as an unwarranted risk. But Kierkegaard argues that mistrust's "shrewd secret" is in fact a "misuse of knowledge" (WL 227/SKS 9 229): it wrongly infers from ambiguous evidence that the need to withhold one's trust follows as a necessary consequence. He suggests instead that this simply reveals something about the person making this judgement: "When knowledge in a person has placed the opposite possibilities in equilibrium and he is obliged or wills to judge, then who he is, whether he is mistrustful or loving, becomes apparent in what he believes about it" (WL 231/SKS 9 233).

Moreover, one feature of neighbour-love is to bring to each and every one of "the people we see" precisely the kind of openness and generosity of spirit we more naturally bring towards those we love "preferentially". Jollimore suggests that in pursuits where evaluators need to pay close attention in order to grasp what is admirable or innovative about a performance, "epistemic partiality would seem to demand, with respect to our loved ones, precisely the type of focused, generous attention that an ideal evaluator would lavish on everyone".³⁹

But—extrapolating from the specific example of performance—this ideal evaluator is precisely the goal for which neighbour-love strives. And though we will each likely fall short, we see something of such an attitude in Raimond Gaita's famous example of the nun he encountered in the psychiatric ward on which he worked in his late teens. Patients whose abominable mental conditions had led

them apparently to lose all dignity were treated like animals by some hospital orderlies. Those whom Gaita calls “noble psychiatrists” nevertheless insisted upon the “inalienable dignity” of these patients. Yet the attitudes of both the orderlies and the psychiatrists to the patients were brought into sharp relief by the attitude of a middle-aged nun who profoundly impressed the young Gaita:

everything in her demeanour towards them—the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body—contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.⁴⁰

I take it that the attitude described here is not one that treated each such patient *identically*. Insofar as she demonstrated true neighbour-love, the nun did not respond *only* to something generic in all humans (what Kierkegaard calls the “common watermark”). Rather, such love required seeing what *this particular* neighbour needed, in *these particular* circumstances. That is what the nun managed, which the psychiatrists, with their nobly intentioned but ultimately “condescending” talk of “inalienable dignity”, did not.

Beyond this particular example, we can say more generally that the all-inclusiveness of neighbour-love seeks *to extend the generosity of vision typical of friendship*—as described in the case of Rebecca’s poetry—to *non-friends*.⁴¹ The overall point here is that the worry about being too generous to friends and lovers is only one side of the story. While this is indeed a potential danger, “failing to be generous enough” can also be an epistemic error.⁴² So there is no reason to suppose that the “look of love” necessarily leads us *away* from the truth: it might sometimes bring us closer to it, as when we consider extenuating circumstances to which friendly or parental love has the best access. The vision leading to the slack I cut my friend might be a more accurate judgement of the reasons behind the actions of the enemy I am tempted to condemn. We can conclude that it is not clear that “love’s vision” is “on the whole less likely to reveal the truth than is the detached, dispassionate view we tend to take of those we do not know or like”.⁴³ In other words, in many circumstances “love’s vision” may be appropriate in the sense that while it is not epistemically mandated, neither is it epistemically forbidden.⁴⁴ But

we can go further: sometimes it is *only* a loving kind of attention that provides a form of awareness that reveals deeper insights than any that are attainable from the perspective of detachment. (For example, a child who performs in a mediocre way on all the standard tests might have a specific latent talent—say for art—that has been missed by all his teachers noted and nurtured by a loving aunt who really cares about her nephew.⁴⁵ Not all paintings on the world’s fridge doors are atrocious, and some latent talents are only noticed by the “look of love”.)

But how does all this apply to forgiveness? Note that the literature on forgiveness typically places an obstacle in the path of love’s vision by the very talk of “the wrongdoer” or “the perpetrator”. This is a convenient shorthand, and it is hard to avoid. But its convenience comes at a price: those who have wronged us are *presented to us under that description*. Getting beyond thinking of them as only that—wrongdoers—is thus part of the battle. But suppose we apply specifically to forgiveness—contrary to the assumptions of the proponents of the view that forgiveness must be “earned”—the following thought. That “[w]hatever good may exist in a person ... becomes apparent to us only if we adopt a charitable vantage point. To demand objective ‘loveworthiness’ in advance, prior to loving, is to assume a detached stance that prevents us from finding what we are ostensibly searching for.”⁴⁶ In illustration of this, Kierkegaard has a memorable story of two artists, one of whom travels the world in search of a face worth painting, but comes back despairing of finding any without defects. The second stays at home, but reports not finding “one single face to be so insignificant that I still could not discern a more beautiful side and discover something transfigured in it” (WL 158/SKS 9 159). The hard task that love’s forgiveness demands is to try to bring the attitude of the *second* artist to bear in our view of those who have wronged us (or others).

Yet sometimes this highly demanding task is achieved. There is an exemplary kind of forgiveness that is able to see the value in even egregious wrongdoers, in a way that goes beyond just the recognition of the common humanity they share with the rest of us (which—to draw an analogy with our discussion of Gaita’s nun—would take us beyond the orderlies but no further than the psychiatrists). If we ask what the value of the wrongdoer consists in, certainly part of it is the “common watermark” of our humanity: that which he shares with all human beings. But Kierkegaard’s insistence on loving “the people we see” suggests a need to go beyond just this, since this value is manifested uniquely in each case. Such vision is demonstrated by another nun, Sister Helen Prejean, “spiritual

advisor” to Death Row inmates and author of *Dead Man Walking*. In line with Kierkegaard’s focus on loving “the people we see”—as specific individuals rather than fungible recipients of a generic benevolence—she describes how she came to view the convicted murderer Elmo Patrick Sonnier as an individual who, despite his egregious crimes, was worthy of her care and understanding. It is not that Sonnier’s good qualities immediately impressed her, so while her attitude to him goes beyond mere *recognition* respect (that which is owed to any person *qua* person), it is not *evaluative* respect in this sense. Rather, I submit that what Prejean manifested was love’s generosity of vision: an *openness to seeing the good* in Sonnier that preceded any recognition of specific positive qualities in him. As Rick Furtak glosses Kierkegaard’s version of this idea, the thought is that “the unique and irreplaceable worth of *this* person will not be revealed to us unless we love them first, before we have entirely discovered why they are worthy”.⁴⁷

In Sonnier’s case, it seems that Prejean’s attitude indeed “loves forth love”: as her friendship with him develops, Sonnier seems to grow as a human being. In the final days and hours before his execution, he expresses real gratitude to her for being the first person to show him what love really means (“It’s a shame a man has to come to prison to find love”). His gratitude is also extended to the lawyer who tries, ultimately unsuccessfully, to get his sentence commuted to life imprisonment (“Mr. Millard, thank you for what you and the others done for me ... no, no, no, Mr. Millard, you didn’t fail...”), and to the chef who prepares him his final meal. Having earlier been tempted to use his final words to show hatred and defiance, in the event he asks forgiveness from the father of one of his victims.⁴⁸

And this returns us to the importance of hope. When describing the task of love as being to find the object of our attention *lovable*,⁴⁹ Kierkegaard immediately adds that by this he is not recommending “a childish infatuation with the beloved’s accidental characteristics, still less a misplaced sentimental indulgence” (WL 166/SKS 9 167). What he calls the “earnestness” of love is said to consist in this: that *the relationship itself* will “fight against the imperfection” and “overcome the defect” (WL 166/SKS 9 167). In other words, rather than condoning or excusing serious defects, he expresses a faith and hope in *the power of love to transform them*. A key illustration of this is his discussion of Christ’s reaction to Peter’s betrayal of him:

Christ’s love for Peter was boundless in this way: in loving Peter he accomplished loving the person one sees. He did not say, ‘Peter must

first change and become another person before I can love him again'. No, he said exactly the opposite, 'Peter is Peter, and I love him. My love, if anything, will help him to become another person'. Therefore he did not break off the friendship in order perhaps to renew it if Peter would have become another person; no, he preserved the friendship unchanged and in that way helped Peter to become another person. (WL 172/SKS 9 172)

Though the discussion is not explicitly about forgiveness, what is hinted at here is how the healing power of loving forgiveness—the vision of love’s “friendly eye”, held out in hope—illustrates the phenomenon here described. This is not to condone or to excuse. It is not to be “blind” to the offender’s faults in any problematic way. (Kierkegaard is explicit about this: “Christ still knew his [Peter’s] defects” (WL 168/SKS 9 168).) Rather, it is not letting their faults become the whole picture. It is to avoid seeing Peter exclusively through the lens of “wrongdoer”, “betrayor” or “coward”.

In summary, we have trivial deeds or flaws, which the “look of love” can legitimately ignore.⁵⁰ More significant ones, which need nevertheless not be “incorporated into the overall image”. And—overlapping with this—truly egregious deeds or flaws, where not letting them be “incorporated into the overall image” might require the sort of exemplary attitude manifested by Christ to Peter or by Prejean to Sonnier.⁵¹ Let’s see how Kierkegaard develops this beyond this specific example of Christ’s attitude to Peter.

III. KIERKEGAARD ON LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

First, let us recap. I have sketched parallels between Jollimore’s account of “love’s friendly eye” (discussed in the context of preferential love) and Kierkegaard’s view of love as a “lenient interpreter” (applied to neighbour-love). In this section, I shall expand upon features of love that, for Kierkegaard, are important to understanding forgiveness as a work of love. First, how in forgiveness love “hides a multitude of sins” by acknowledging a wrong but refusing to focus all one’s attention upon it. And second, how “love’s abidingness is a form of love’s hopefulness”,⁵² discussed chiefly in terms of love’s continued openness, typically, to possible reconciliation with the estranged other.

The three *Works of Love* deliberations, “Love hides a multitude of sins”, “Love abides” and “The victory of the conciliatory spirit in love” all address forgiveness

and reconciliation. The first explicitly discusses forgiveness as one of the major ways in which love “hides” sins or wrongdoing, while the third—building on the second—focuses on the practice of reconciliation and restoring broken bonds. Love’s *vision* is integral to all these discussions.

It is with respect to the first two of these deliberations that Kierkegaard commentators have considered a worry akin to that we discussed in section II above: that Kierkegaard’s ethic might involve “an unhealthy kind of blindness or wishful thinking or an intellectual dishonesty”.⁵³ The most interesting *prima facie* case for the “unhealthy blindness” charge concerns those instances in which love “cannot avoid seeing or hearing” (WL 289/SKS 9 286) wrongdoing. Kierkegaard claims that it hides such wrongdoing in three ways: by silence (such as avoiding careless gossip, rumour-spreading and slander); by looking for a “mitigating explanation” (WL 291-4/SKS 9 289-291); and—where this is not possible—by forgiveness (WL 294/SKS 9 291). In the second of these cases—the mitigating explanation—Kierkegaard’s concern seems to be to remind us, in our rush to form unfavourable judgement of others, of the extraordinary variety of possible interpretations of most forms of human action, and to commend choosing “the most lenient interpretation” (WL 292/SKS 9 289) consistent with the facts. (This might involve condoning or excusing, where one can legitimately do so.) This continues the line of argument of earlier deliberations: that trust and mistrust, hope and despair, have access to the same evidence, and when forced to choose on the basis of ambiguous evidence, our choices reveal something significant about us. But the very inclusion of a third category, the need for forgiveness, shows that there are limits to how plausible “mitigating explanations” (condonation or excuse?) can be. So does the “unhealthy blindness” worry emerge in the specific discussion of forgiveness?

Although at times Kierkegaard appears to conflate forgiving with forgetting and with blotting out sin (drawing on biblical imagery of God as hiding sin behind his back⁵⁴ (WL 296/SKS 9 293)), this focus on “hiding” is not a claim about wrongdoing having been wiped out as if it had never existed, but rather, again, a refusal *to focus on it* or *to allow it to determine one’s global view of the wrongdoer*. However, it might be objected, to say this is still not to answer directly the following question: *why* look with love’s friendly eye in cases of wrongdoing? I think Kierkegaard’s answer, complementing that sketched above, is threefold. Firstly, a religious claim: such a way of seeing acknowledges that all humans—even the worst sinners—are equally loved by God.⁵⁵ But second, a claim that requires no religious commitment to

accept: that such a way of seeing best facilitates personal relations between flawed human beings; the kind of creatures where “every one so often needs forgiveness himself”.⁵⁶ Third—anticipating Jollimore’s response to Keller—it reminds us of something which while obvious when stated, is often overlooked in practice: that just as trust can be deceived, so can mistrust; just as love’s “wilful blindness” will strike some as unjustified, so too can the look of suspicion (or malice, or envy) be. A reminder, in other words, of the defeasibility of our judgements—uncharitable as well as charitable.⁵⁷ These points are, I suggest, recommendations of a kind of *humility*, inextricably bound up with *hope*. And it is the presence of *hope for the wrongdoer* that distinguishes “hiding the sin” as a *refusal to focus all one’s attention on wrongdoing* from a mere “looking the other way”, as Griswold puts it.⁵⁸

The next *Works of Love* deliberation extends these themes: the *fidelity* of love discussed in “Love abides” is explored in terms of love’s continued, hopeful openness to the possibility of reconciliation with the estranged other. Here, Kierkegaard also makes that move which is controversial even within the Christian tradition: a bold valorisation of *pre-emptive* forgiveness, offered in love, which he treats as the touchstone of exemplary forgiveness. Love, he claims, takes the initiative; loving forgiveness is offered *before* the wrongdoer repents or seeks forgiveness.⁵⁹

Kierkegaard is well aware of a sometimes noted danger in the context of interpersonal forgiveness, that of forgiveness being wielded over the wrongdoer as a weapon. To counter this, he stresses the importance of sensitivity to the wrongdoer’s self-respect. Nevertheless the latter must become aware of their wrongdoing (what Kierkegaard calls love’s “merciful blow” (WL 339/SKS 9 334))—and this is why we need to keep it distinct from condoning or excusing. He describes the balance that needs to be struck in terms of a combination of “rigor” and gentleness, commenting: “[w]hat a difficult task ... to be as rigorous as truth requires and yet as gentle as love desires” (WL 339/SKS 9 334). Love’s forgiveness must thus be practised *artfully*.

But self-respect more commonly enters this debate in a different place: the concern about pre-emptive forgiveness is often that this is premature, signalling weakness, servility and a lack of self-respect on the part of the forgiver.⁶⁰ However, notable instances of immediately proclaimed forgiveness—consider, for example, that of Gordon Wilson for the IRA bombers who took the life of his daughter at Enniskillen in 1987 or that extended to the racist murderer Dylann Roof from

several victims of the 2015 Charleston, South Carolina church shooting—do not strike me as involving these qualities at all. While such forgiveness is unconditional in the sense that it is offered pre-emptively, it is not unconditional in the sense to which Griswold objects (as discussed earlier). This is because forgiveness *offered in love* can be a *loving gift offered in hope*. As noted earlier, this hope has at least two targets: for the reform of the offender, and for the forgiver’s own ability *fully* to forgive. (In this sense, “I forgive you” can be a statement of hope or intent rather than a description of a state already achieved.)

The question underpinning such worries is again whether forgiveness offered in love threatens justice. So it’s important to note that nobody in the Enniskillen or Charleston cases thought that offering forgiveness was in any way inconsistent with letting the legal system bring the perpetrators to justice.⁶¹ But all this requires us to consider, in a little more detail, the relation of love’s forgiveness to other virtues—especially hope and humility.

IV. ALLIED VIRTUES: HOPE AND HUMILITY

Hope is a more important dimension of Kierkegaard’s thought than is typically recognised.⁶² Nor is this all about hope for one’s eternal destiny. On hope in forgiveness, Kierkegaard’s position seems broadly Lutheran. Commenting on Paul’s discussion of faith, hope and love in 1 Corinthians—in particular the “love hopes all things” verse that so interested Kierkegaard—Luther insists that the hope to which Paul refers is *hope for the good of others*:

Love despairs of no man, however wicked he may be. It hopes for the best. ... Love is a virtue particularly representing devotion to a neighbour; his welfare is its goal in thought and deed. Like its faith, the hope entertained by love is frequently misplaced, but it never gives up. Love rejects no man; it despairs of no cause. But the proud speedily despair of men generally, rejecting them of no account.⁶³

Such hope is no naïve, sunny optimism. The sheer difficulty of manifesting it in the contexts of some wrongs means that it will sometimes need to be “radical” in something like Jonathan Lear’s sense of that term: the hope may be such that its precise content cannot be specified in advance. As Lear describes such “radical hope”, the best we can say is that “something good will emerge even if it outstrips my present limited capacity for understanding what that good is”.⁶⁴

Such hope is connected to the patient openness to the future that one Kierkegaard commentator has called the virtue of “active receptivity”.⁶⁵ And one manifestation of such receptivity is that openness to seeing the good in someone we earlier attributed to Helen Prejean.

We are now better placed to see the significance for forgiveness of Kierkegaard’s focus on striking the right balance between the “rigor” of what “truth requires” and the “gentleness” of what “love desires”. While “love’s forgiveness” does not stand by with a checklist, ensuring that the wrongdoer has first accepted responsibility, repudiated his action, and done enough to make amends, etc., before forgiveness may be dispensed, neither does it hope for *nothing* from the wrongdoer, fearful (like Derrida) that to do so would be to reduce forgiveness to an “economic” transaction. Thus it avoids Griswold’s worry, as outlined near the start of our discussion. Love’s forgiveness hopes for the offender to mend his ways in the kind of ways Griswold specifies—but it does not require proof of this in advance before forgiveness can be offered (and is in this sense unconditional). Love’s forgiveness *is* a gift, but not in the sense that Griswold rejects (where talk of gift “is taken to mean ‘elective’ in a sense that is not responsible to any moral reasons”.⁶⁶) Love’s forgiveness responds to the kinds of moral reason I have drawn on Kierkegaard to sketch above: reasons such as a recognition of all as unique creatures of God or bearers of a common humanity, expressed uniquely in each individual; a recognition of one’s own flaws and vices (he needs forgiveness from me, as I do from others); a hopeful concern for the wrongdoer’s moral improvement and return to the moral community; and—sometimes—a restored relationship.

The balance that Kierkegaard stresses also reemphasises the importance of the need not to wield forgiveness domineeringly as a weapon of power (cf. WL 295/SKS 9 292-3). Recall Helen Prejean. What makes such an *agapic* attitude as hers possible in the context of forgiveness is *inter alia* the *humility* expressed in the recognition of the equal value of all before God (WL 342/SKS 9 336-7) and the need we all have for forgiveness, which, taken seriously, muddies the waters of any simple division of the world into “wrongdoers” and “wronged parties”; “perpetrators” and “victims”.

My final suggestion, then, is that what looks from some perspectives like “blindness” to justice is actually a manifestation of an admirable kind of humility. Space constraints preclude a full account⁶⁷ of the kind of humility I have in mind, but we can outline some of its central features. One such is *other-focus*: an

orientation towards people and other things of value in the world such that we appreciate and promote their value *apart from their instrumental value to ourselves*. This orientation stems, in part, from a sense of *dependence*: a recognition that whatever we have achieved inevitably depends upon other people, institutions and circumstances beyond our control.⁶⁸ Exemplars of such humility are those who focus less on themselves and more on what they find worthwhile in the world other than themselves, such that the “spirit of comparison” with others that Kierkegaard finds such a damaging element of human psychology is quietened.⁶⁹ Such humility is, I suggest, in large part what enables us to get beyond the hurt pride that often stands in the way of forgiveness. And such humility is certainly not to be conflated with servility. Indeed, we might even think of it as a kind of moral strength. Robert C. Roberts, for instance—for whom humility is “a disposition *not* to feel the emotions associated with caring a lot about one’s status”⁷⁰—describes it as “a transcendent form of self-confidence”.⁷¹ Such a person has an “implicit and inarticulate sense of his own worth”⁷² that does not depend on his comparative value to others. And because such a person’s sense of self-worth does not depend upon a sort of ranking derived from the “spirit of comparison”, this will make easier a willingness to forego the sense of moral superiority towards those who have wronged us to which we might otherwise feel entitled. But this does not amount to the lack of self-respect that philosophers of forgiveness have worried about. Indeed, such willingness is also a kind of *courage*, insofar as it involves what Christopher Bennett describes as “having sufficient confidence in your own status ... that you are prepared to make yourself vulnerable to further insult in order to reach out to the wrongdoer in some way—for instance in the hope of encouraging his return to the moral community”.⁷³ It is such an attitude, I submit—an attitude of hope and what Kierkegaard elsewhere calls “humble courage”—that makes possible love’s forgiveness.

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NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the University of Pardubice and at the ASCP conference at Deakin University. I am grateful for these invitations to speak and to audience members at both conferences, as well as to Anthony Bash and two anonymous referees for this journal, for useful discussion and suggestions. The paper also develops some claims sketched in part of my "Kierkegaard on love", in Christopher Grau and Aaron Smuts (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love*, New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.
2. Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: a Philosophical Exploration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Griswold's account has been taken by many to be one of the richest recent discussions of the topic, several later writers on forgiveness—including Peter Goldie, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Martha Nussbaum—taking it as a touchstone for further discussion.
3. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, xxiii, 42, 47, 49-51.
4. See for instance Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 103 (2003, 39-60).
5. Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. London: Routledge, 2002, 40.
6. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 39. He poses this as a question, but it is clearly rhetorical.
7. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 63.
8. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 63-4, my emphasis.
9. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 64, my emphasis.
10. Ibid.
11. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 53-9.
12. For key discussions, see Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and Other Writings on Ethics*. Ed. David McNaughton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 68-83 and Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
13. Interestingly, the connection between "gift" and "to forgive" is to be found in languages such as French (*pardonner*), German (*vergeben*) and Danish (*tilgive*), as well as in English.
14. Exceptions to the typical case would be cases such as where Alethea needs to forgive her colleague Jim for a wrong done to her friend Carla (but not—at least directly—to Alethea) if her relationship with Jim is to be restored.
15. For a secularised version of this general approach, see Lucy Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean: the Heart of Forgiveness". *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 36-1 (2008, 33-68).
16. This and all parenthetical references are to Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*. Trans. H. V. and E. H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, hereafter WL. All references to Kierkegaard's works will also include a reference to the volume and page numbers of the standard Danish edition, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997-2014, hereafter SKS.
17. Note that this is still unconditional, just as a university admissions officer who makes an unconditional offer to a predicted straight-A student may, with perfect consistency, still hope that she achieves high grades.
18. Garrard and McNaughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness", 44.
19. Troy Jollimore, *Love's Vision*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 46-73.
20. Jollimore goes on to discuss Kierkegaard in a later essay ("The Importance of Whom We

Care About”, in Anthony Rudd and John Davenport (eds), *Love, Reason and Will: Kierkegaard After Frankfurt*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, 47-72), but has confirmed to me that at the time of writing *Love’s Vision*, he had not read Kierkegaard on love.

21. See M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving: a Commentary on Works of Love*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 99-116 (note that Ferreira’s chapter has the same title as Jollimore’s later book) and Patrick Stokes, *Kierkegaard’s Mirrors: Interest, Self, and Moral Vision*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010, especially 134-144.

22. The reference is to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “a friendly eye is slow to see small faults” (Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 46).

23. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, xiii.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 176n2.

26. Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, 106, my emphasis.

27. It is on the basis of this fourth deliberation in the first series of *Works of Love* that Ferreira explicitly suggests that “Kierkegaard’s Christian ethic is one of *vision*” (Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, 105).

28. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. H. V. and E. H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 59, my emphasis; SKS 5 69.

29. For more on this, see my *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 136-155.

30. John Armstrong, *Conditions of Love*. New York: Norton, 2002, 114; cited in Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 49.

31. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 51.

32. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 51-2.

33. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 53.

34. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 66.

35. The idea that our defects humanise us is, I take it, the thought behind Disraeli’s objection that Gladstone had “not one single redeeming defect”.

36. Simon Keller, “Friendship and Belief”, *Philosophical Papers* 33:3 (2004, 239-352 at 329).

37. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 57.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 58. To say this is not to rule out the possibility that Rebecca’s poetry may be so terrible that a good friend should try to find a way to let her know that her efforts would be better extended in another direction (what Kierkegaard calls love’s “rigor”, as we shall see). But the point is that no such verdict should be reached in advance of giving that poetry a generous hearing.

40. Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity*. London: Routledge, 2002, 18-19.

41. It seems that, notwithstanding his professed scepticism about *agape*, Jollimore shares this view. Discussing a similar case, he suggests that the solution is not “to attempt to expunge love’s way of seeing from whatever realm we are speaking of, but rather to transform the realm in question so that *everyone* can be seen in this way” (Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 60).

42. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 62. In fact, it seems to me that Keller does recognise this: see Keller, “Friendship and Belief”, 344-6. What Keller’s account does seem to overlook is the possibility that we might sometimes be *more* critical of our friend than we would be of a stranger, simply in virtue of knowing him better (and thus being aware of whatever his particular Achilles heel may be).

43. Jollimore, *Love’s Vision*, 63.

44. On this point, see Allais, “Wiping the Slate Clean”, 60-2.
45. I owe this example to Rick Anthony Furtak (“Love as a relation to truth: envisaging the person in *Works of Love*”, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2013, 236)).
46. Furtak, “Love as a relation to truth”, 237-8.
47. Furtak, “Love as a relation to truth”, 222.
48. Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*. London: Fount, 1996, 105, 113, 111, 119-20.
49. “To be able to love a person despite his weaknesses and defects and imperfections is still not perfect love, but rather this, to be able to find him lovable despite and with his weaknesses and defects and imperfections” (WL 157-8/SKS 9 158).
50. In what follows, the talks of deeds and flaws is meant to capture the thought that, while what one needs to forgive a person for will typically be an action or set of actions, in some cases what one needs to forgive a person for may be a character flaw.
51. Glen Pettigrove discusses Jean Hampton’s claim that bestowing forgiveness on a person involves granting “her approval of him as a person despite what he has done to her” (Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 85). Pettigrove suggests that on a strong reading of “approving him as a person”, this is false (we need not approve of such a person “in an all-things considered moral sense”, judging that “on balance he has done something worthwhile with his life” (Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 97n58)). But on a weaker reading, it is true, since such approval need only amount to Kantian recognition respect. I am suggesting that love’s hopeful forgiveness, as illustrated by Prejean’s attitude to Sonnier, shows a third option, more than just recognition respect but still stopping short of judging Sonnier’s life as a whole to have been lived in a worthwhile manner.
52. “Love abides” (1 Corinthians 13: 13); Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, 186.
53. Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, 170.
54. Isaiah 38: 17.
55. Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*. Trans. H. V. and E. H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 165; SKS 12 281. On this point, see also Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, p. 81.
56. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Uplifting Discourses*, 58; SKS 5 68.
57. On the value of “looking again” in light of such a thought, compare the much discussed example of the mother and daughter-in-law in Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. London and New York: Routledge, 17-18.
58. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 46.
59. Interestingly, Kierkegaard takes God as the model for this: God’s forgiveness of sins is taken to be freely and gratuitously offered, as opposed to the view that forgiveness needs to be preceded by repentance (WL 336/SKS 9 332).
60. See for instance Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 16-19.
61. For a discussion of how punishment consistent with forgiveness can block condonation and preserve self-respect, see Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 117.
62. See my “Learning to hope: the role of hope in *Fear and Trembling*”, in Daniel Conway (ed.), *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: a Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 122-141 and Mark Bernier, *The Task of Hope in Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
63. Martin Luther, “Sermon for the Sunday before Lent: 1 Corinthians 13”, available at: <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|version=Luther|reference=1Cor.13&options=VNHUG>
64. Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 94. For more on the relevance of this to Kierkegaardian faith, see Lippitt, “Learning to Hope”.

65. Gregory R. Beabout, "The Silent Lily and Bird as Exemplars of the Virtue of Active Receptivity", in Robert L. Perkins (ed.), *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Without Authority*. Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2007, 145-6.
66. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 68.
67. For relevant discussions, see Joseph Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 84:3 (2003, 249-269); Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: a Psychology of Christian Virtues*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, 78-93 and "The Vice of Pride", *Faith and Philosophy* 26:2 (2009, 119-133); and Nicolas Bommarito, "Modesty as a Virtue of Attention", *Philosophical Review* 122:1 (2013, 93-117).
68. It is this that ties humility to gratitude, and which contrasts it with "hyper-autonomy", that "vice of pride" which underestimates our dependence upon others (see Robert C. Roberts, "Humility and Gratitude", in David Carr (ed.), *Perspectives on Gratitude: an Interdisciplinary Approach*. London: Routledge, 2016, 57-69).
69. This is a major theme of Kierkegaard's various discourses on "the lilies in the field and the birds of the air".
70. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 88.
71. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 81.
72. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 90.
73. Christopher Bennett, "Personal and Redemptive Forgiveness", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 11:2 (2003, 139).