



# Crossroads of forgiveness: a transcendent understanding of forgiveness in Kierkegaard's religious writings and immanent account of forgiveness in contemporary secular and Christian ethics

Andrzej Słowikowski<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to clash the problem of forgiveness as formulated in contemporary secular and Christian ethics with Kierkegaard's considerations concerning this issue. Kierkegaard's thought is increasingly used in the modern debate on forgiveness. It is therefore worth investigating whether Kierkegaard's considerations are really able to overcome in any way contemporary disputes concerning this problem or enrich our thinking in this area. The main thesis of this paper states that there is a fundamental, ontological difference between Kierkegaard's understanding of forgiveness and that of modern thinkers. While the Danish philosopher refers to the transcendent reality of spirit, where the act of forgiveness is always performed by God, in contemporary ethical and Christian thought, forgiveness is first and foremost formulated from an immanent point of view that appeals to the world of human values. This difference is demonstrated by analyzing the four main themes corresponding to the most important issues taken up in the contemporary debate on forgiveness. These are: the victim-offender relation, the conditionality and unconditionality of forgiveness, the issue of condonation, and the problem of the unforgivable. As a result of the analyses presented herein, the impossibility of directly applying Kierkegaard's transcendent theses to ethical thought of the immanent variety will be shown.

**Keywords** Forgiveness · Kierkegaard · Contemporary secular ethics · Contemporary Christian ethics · Transcendence · Immanence

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✉ Andrzej Słowikowski  
aslowikowski@ifispan.waw.pl

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, ul. Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warsaw, Poland

## Introduction

The issue of forgiveness has been hotly debated in the last few decades in the context of secular and Christian thought. As forgiveness is commonly understood to concern the harm or evil, whether physical or psychological, administered by one person to another—something which every average person has been the perpetrator or victim of at some point in life—the ethical importance of this issue is not a matter of discussion. Authors of a whole mass of books and articles dispute the essence and meaning of forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> Where a fundamental dividing line between agreement and disagreement appears is in trying to establish whether it is possible to determine the conditions necessary for forgiveness to actually occur and to be a creative act in both an individual's private and social life.

One can attempt to view this entire contemporary debate on forgiveness from a completely different perspective, one which was laid out by Kierkegaard in his religious writings.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, recent years have seen a growing interest in the Danish philosopher's thought, and his commentary is more and more often invoked by authors investigating the ethical value of forgiveness.<sup>3</sup> Yet since there exists a basic discrepancy between the ethical understanding of forgiveness and Kierkegaard's account thereof, the question arises as to whether such approaches are valid. This discrepancy arises from the remarkable seriousness and radicalness with which Kierkegaard treated the truth of Christianity. It is not simply a difference in views, but a difference of ontology—one that concerns how to understand man's being, his essence, and the point and meaning of human existence.

All ethical accounts and most Christian accounts appeal to an immanent world of human values in which the moral concepts of good and evil define the axiological horizon of human activity. A different state of affairs holds in Kierkegaard's thought, where the category of overriding importance is the transcendent category of spirit, which always primarily concerns the particular existence of the individual realizing

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<sup>1</sup> The literature is enormous in this area. Most works, however, refer to or address the most classic accounts of the subject formulated by authors such as Aurel Kolnai, Jeffrie G. Murphy, Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, and Charles L. Griswold in secular ethics; Marilyn McCord Adams and Richard Swinburne in Christian ethics; and Hannah Arendt, Vladimir Jankelevitch, and Jacques Derrida with regard to the unforgivable. The texts of these authors, when supplemented with some of the most recent accounts of forgiveness, will constitute the foundation of the thought presented in this article, where the aim will be to summarize the most important positions in the contemporary debate on the problem of forgiveness.

<sup>2</sup> This primarily concerns Kierkegaard's considerations as presented in *Works of Love*, especially with regard to two texts from this book: *Love Hides a Multitude of Sins* (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 280–299) and *The Victory of the Conciliatory Spirit in Love, Which Wins the One Overcome* (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 331–344). He supplements them with three other texts titled *Love Will Hide a Multitude of Sins* (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 55–68, 69–78, 1997b, pp. 179–188) as well with texts focusing on the titular character from *The Woman Who Was a Sinner* (Kierkegaard 1997b, pp. 135–144, 145–160, 167–177).

<sup>3</sup> See Abramson and Senyshyn (2010), Gauvin (2017), Howell (2010), Lippitt (2013a, pp. 156–180, 2013b, 2017), Lotz (2006), Nowachek (2013), Podmore (2011, pp. 181–192), Podmore (2012), Pyper (2011, 145–160), Senyshyn (1998), Warren Berry (1992). It is worth mentioning two dissertations that undertake detailed analysis of the relations between Kierkegaard's vision of forgiveness and accounts of this topic in contemporary ethics: Hoffman (2000) and Howell (2009).

Christian truth in his life.<sup>4</sup> What this means is that discussions about good and evil refer not to the human-universal concepts of good and evil but to absolute good and evil, which primarily have a spiritual dimension and for which the only reference point is man's relation to God, mediated in Jesus Christ, taking on the dimension of the basic dichotomy in human existence: salvation-damnation.

This ontological difference translates into two different realities. Secular ethicists and immanent-Christian ethicists refer to the external reality of the individual's life that is accessible to sensory experience and cognized intellectually, a reality in which the temporal purpose of existence takes shape. Kierkegaard, however, always has in mind the inner, spiritual reality of the individual's life in which what is decided is not his psycho-sensory or intellectual-moral well-being, but the ultimate purpose of his existence. This purpose exceeds man's faculty of intellectual comprehension and demands that he sacrifice his temporal life for the realization of Christian truth concerning man's salvation in God.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this difference, it is undoubtedly worthwhile to clash the uncompromising, Christian account of Kierkegaard's with those arising within contemporary secular and Christian ethics. To that end, four related, characteristic themes will be put forth around which the majority of today's ethical thought on forgiveness revolves: the victim-offender relation, the conditionality and unconditionality of forgiveness, the issue of condonation, and the problem of the unforgivable. The aim of this article is in reference to the four aforementioned topics, to show the most important differences between Kierkegaard's account of forgiveness as found in his religious writings and those arising from contemporary secular ethics and Christian ethics. In effect, in relation to the aforementioned four themes, a certain theoretical superiority of the transcendent solution will be presented, one that can be reconstructed on the basis of Kierkegaard's religious writings in relation to immanent ethical accounts and, at the same time, reasons will be provided as to why the direct application of the transcendent solution to immanent reality becomes impossible. In the context of the impossibility of adopting Kierkegaard's account in the sphere of contemporary ethics, criticism of such attempts in the works of contemporary authors will be provided at the end of every theme addressed herein.

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<sup>4</sup> Among the accounts that emphasize the transcendent understanding of Christian forgiveness, Marylin McCord Adams's (1991) article "Forgiveness: A Christian Model" (McCord Adams 1991) is worthy of note. The author of this text makes a clear distinction between the transcendent account of Christian forgiveness and immanent ethical accounts and, in some of her theses, produces claims similar to those of Kierkegaard despite not being directly inspired by them. Kierkegaard would undoubtedly agree with Adams that, contrary to the progressive secularization of how the concept of forgiveness is understood 'forgiveness is a value that is particularly "at home" within a Christian framework' (p. 278).

<sup>5</sup> It seems that the failure to discern an ontological difference here is a fundamental flaw of most texts devoted to Kierkegaard's understanding of forgiveness. This article, however, is not intended to reconstruct Kierkegaard's spiritual account of forgiveness, as this project has been taken up in a different article.

## The transcendent and immanent understanding of forgiveness

### The victim-offender relation

The basic reference point for ethical theories of forgiveness is the victim-offender relation. It assumes that forgiveness in the human world (immanence) makes sense only when one person in any way harms or administers physical or moral pain to another.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the relation is two-dimensional and it becomes difficult to accept that one can forgive in the name of someone else.<sup>7</sup> This is, ethically, completely justified, as the ethical relation requires two persons who are aware of themselves and responsible for their actions—just as one cannot bear responsibility for another's actions, one cannot annul the effects thereof on behalf of another.

The most frequent problem that stands in the way of forgiveness is overcoming the negative reactive attitudes or emotions that the victim harbors towards the offender in relation to the latter's act. Such states include anger, resentment, contempt, hatred, etc.<sup>8</sup> Ethical theories mostly focus on the way in which the victim can overcome these negative reactive attitudes or emotions brought on by another's attack. Without this, forgiveness becomes impossible, and both agents remain in hostile relations toward one another. Some authors hold, however, that the subjugation of these negative reactive attitudes or emotions is not sufficient for forgiveness to occur, for it is also necessary that the victim display a certain positive turn towards the offender—an attitude of good will, a certain basic concern for the welfare of the wrongdoer. The victim must open up before the offender to such an extent that the former becomes capable of conveying to the latter his forgiveness while not hindering the offender in his potential attempts for atonement (Garrard and McNaughton 2003, p. 44).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Essentially all contemporary texts devoted to forgiveness—both those which refer to secular ethics and those whose reference point is Christian ethics—assume that, for it to be possible to speak about forgiveness, it must be the case that some interaction has taken place at an earlier time between two parties, where as a result, the actions of one causes the suffering of another [see e.g.: Griswold (2007, p. xv), McCord Adams (1991, pp. 292–294)]. The same can be said in reference to forgiveness in socio-political life, where the offenders and victims are not only concrete people, but can also take the form of entire social groups [see e.g.: Griswold (2007, pp. 136–137, 139) and Moody-Adams (2015, pp. 178–180)].

<sup>7</sup> This is a matter of so-called 'third-party forgiveness' (Griswold 2007, pp. 117–120)—while it seems the possibility of forgiveness on behalf of another person can be ruled out on a secular account, such a situation is possible to consider within a Christian understanding (McCord Adams 1991, pp. 293–294). This problem also extends to the issue of forgiveness in the social sense, where it takes on the character of a question: can one forgive on behalf of a victim of a crime (“[The problem of the unforgivable](#)”). There are, of course, many more ethical controversies related to forgiveness. One can wonder if, for example, it is possible to forgive the dead or oneself (Griswold 2007, pp. 120–130).

<sup>8</sup> See Giannini (2017, pp. 64–65), see also: Murphy (1982, pp. 504–508), Griswold (2007, pp. 38–47), Moody-Adams (2015, p. 166, 1991, p. 297). This way of thinking about forgiveness comes from the 18th century English bishop Joseph Butler. A detailed account of Butler is provided by Griswold in his book (2007, pp. 19–37).

<sup>9</sup> Here, Christian accounts speak directly of the loving attitude of the victim towards the offender (McCord Adams 1991, pp. 292, 297–298, 300, Giannini 2017, pp. 67, 71, 79).

In this sense, it appears that forgiveness—seriously, ethically considered— does not release the offender from the moral responsibility of his act, but communicates to him that the victim no longer harbors towards him any negative reactive attitudes or emotions and that he does not seek revenge, being instead, perhaps, ready for reconciliation, which in this case is a type of return to the state that preceded the offender's act, an attempt to nullify the negative reactive attitudes or emotions thereof in reality.<sup>10</sup> Forgiveness can, in certain situations, prove to be even indispensable in order to strip the victim of the trauma of violence experienced and help him return to normal life.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the offender, forgiveness can help him understand his act and bring forth a desire for moral atonement or for a transformation of his life so that such a situation could not repeat in the future.<sup>12</sup>

Things stand differently on Kierkegaard's account—here the relation of forgiveness always requires the mediation of God, and thus is three-dimensional (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 106–107). This reference to God, who alone can actually forgive, is the key to everything Kierkegaard says about forgiveness, which means that his considerations do not adhere to any purely secular accounts. Under such accounts, a person is never directly guilty in relation to another, but to God.<sup>13</sup> What follows is that moral and physical evil, all harm done by one person to others, results not primarily from the former's hostility to others, but from a missing relation to God (Kierkegaard 1997a, pp. 136, 143). His guilt thus stems, in an important sense, not from some temporary moral indisposition or from a more firmly established one which leads him to a particular act, but always, first and foremost, from the fact that he does not truly exist as spirit, remaining a person only in the psycho-sensory dimension.<sup>14</sup> All man's evil, then, is sourced in the spiritual dimension and is impossible to fix other than by discovering the spiritual reality of one's existence.

In consequence, Christian forgiveness—insofar as Kierkegaard's thought is concerned—refers not to some particular guilt of a person in relation to some concrete act, but to his sin of life, the sin of life without God.<sup>15</sup> It is this sin that is deeply responsible for any and all moral indisposition, though this moral indisposition is

<sup>10</sup> See Griswold (2007, pp. 53–59), Moody-Adams (2015, pp. 163, 167, 171, 175–177), Garrard and McNaughton (2003, pp. 45–46), and McCord Adams (1991, pp. 297, 299).

<sup>11</sup> See Moody-Adams (2015, pp. 167, 168), Garrard and McNaughton (2003, p. 45).

<sup>12</sup> See Griswold (2007, pp. 47–53), Moody-Adams (2015, pp. 167, 168), and McCord Adams (1991, pp. 295, 297–298).

<sup>13</sup> Which is why Kierkegaard states, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, that 'every sin is before God' (1980b, p. 80). See also the discourse: *The Joy of It That in Relation to God a Person Always Suffers as Guilty* (Kierkegaard 1993b, pp. 264–288).

<sup>14</sup> Strictly speaking, the guilt of a person here stems from the fact that he exists in untruth (Kierkegaard 1985, pp. 13–22), by which is meant a disintegration of the synthesis of the self, or, in other words—despair (Kierkegaard 1980b, pp. 14–17). As a result, a person identifies only with the sensate in his life, thereby losing any reference to eternity (Kierkegaard 1997a, pp. 134–143). Kierkegaard calls such a state 'spiritlessness' (1997a, pp. 66–67, see also: 1980a, pp. 93–96, 1980b, pp. 44–45, 101–102).

<sup>15</sup> See Kierkegaard (1993a, pp. 32–36, 1993b, pp. 285–287, 1997a, pp. 102–103, 180–181).

here merely a manifestation of life in sin and not an essential trait of being in sin in relation to God.<sup>16</sup>

In this sense, the Christian forgiveness Kierkegaard speaks of concerns not the offender-victim relation, but of the loving one-sinner relation.<sup>17</sup> This means that forgiveness is not here an expression of the victim's personal grace towards the offender, but that forgiveness constitutes the response of God's love, manifesting itself through the one who loves in the face of the sin of life of another person (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 339–343). Here it surely bears distinguishing between the situation where one forgives another who has inflicted some physical or psychological harm in the human world and the situation where the one who loves stands before the sinner with a message of love transcendent to both of them (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 336, 343).<sup>18</sup> This loving one brings the sinner forgiveness independently of the physical or psychological harm he has experienced in immanence. This gift of forgiveness is equally important even in the situation in which, in a human sense, the sinner has not, in any way, taken on fault in relation to the one who loves, since the goal here is to free the other person, not so much from the evil he has done, but, more deeply, from the evil in which he lives. From the Christian point of view, the one who loves is to bring forgiveness not only to the one who personally harms him, but, absolutely, to each person that lives in the world without any experience of Divine love in need of reconciliation with God. The loving one's neighbor requires as much (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 60, 67–68, 70–73, 83–84, 140–142) the pattern for which was provided by Jesus, be it when forgiving the woman who was a sinner or the robber on the cross.<sup>19</sup> In both cases, He turns not to the individuals who have done Him harm, ethically speaking, but to the individuals in need of forgiveness for their life of evil.

On the radical Christian account that can be put forth based on a reading of Kierkegaard's works, the relation of the loving one-sinner exists above the victim-offender relation, as the former relates to the spiritual reality that itself encompasses the reality of morality which constitutes the latter relation. This means that the relation of man to the spiritual (transcendent) reality of good and evil marks the way man relates to the moral (immanent) reality of good and evil. On this account, transcendent and immanent reality are closely linked, such that each moral act of a

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<sup>16</sup> On Kierkegaard's account, it is possible to imagine a person who is a model of moral virtues in the universal-human sense, and yet, in the spiritual dimension, lives in sin. Such a person needs forgiveness just as much as the worst offender, for the evil of his life consists in living in the world without God.

<sup>17</sup> In a certain sense, Marilyn McCord Adams is the closest to Kierkegaard's account, as she, like him, considers the Christian relation of forgiveness to be three-dimensional: 'My model makes forgiveness a process within the context of a triangular relationship, among the victim, the offender, and God.' (McCord Adams 1991, p. 299). Yet even in this case, the main actors in this relation are the victim and the offender (which perhaps results from the fact that McCord Adams constructs her model with reference to contemporary ethical accounts that make use of this one fundamental distinction), while Kierkegaard's account clearly extends this perspective to the loving one-sinner relation due to the constitutive meaning of the spiritual, rather than psycho-physical, relation.

<sup>18</sup> See also Kierkegaard (1990, pp. 149–151, 156–158, 1995, pp. 281–282).

<sup>19</sup> Luke 7,47 and Luke 23,43. Both of these stories are among Kierkegaard's favorite topics, see Kierkegaard (1993b, pp. 264–288, 1997b, pp. 135–144, 145–160).

person towards others has its source in his relation to God. If, as in the attitude of the one who loves, the individual mediates his relation to another person and to the world in God, every moral act in the world (in relation to another person and to the world) is then motivated by spiritual action (the relation to God) and in God has its ultimate purpose.

The Christian relation of the loving one-sinner creates certain dependencies when applied to the immanent relation of the victim-offender. Firstly, the one who loves cannot be a perpetrator of moral evil with respect to other people because no one who takes part in evil—to any extent—can spread Divine good in the world. Secondly, the one who loves can be a victim. As a victim of moral evil, the one who loves does not stop at the moral harm he experiences at the hands of the offender, but tries to reach the spiritual source of the evil in the offender (the sinner) and transform him at his core such that he opens up to Divine good. Thirdly, the sinner can be both victim and offender. In an immanent relation viewed from the transcendent perspective, it is most often the case that both the victim and the offender are sinners, that is, they are people who do not recognize the transcendent source of good and evil in themselves. In such a situation, despite the fact that the offender is, in precisely this situation, the cause of evil in an immanent sense, it is from the transcendent point of view that both he and the victim are people who need to be liberated from spiritual evil that destroys them from the inside. The lack of forgiveness in the victim-offender relation results precisely from the spiritual downfall of both these subjects. Worth noting here is that, even if the victim forgives the offender in this relation, or, even if the offender asks for the victim's forgiveness, this does not mean that any spiritual good has arisen between them, but only that there is a break in the moral evil that has occurred between them. Such immanent forgiveness can, but does not have to, become a starting point for the search for spiritual forgiveness. Finally, fourthly, the offender is always a sinner. Only one who participates in spiritual evil can be a perpetrator of moral evil in the world.

There exists a fundamental difference in the strength of forgiveness formulated from the perspective of immanent ethics and transcendent ethics. Christian forgiveness, as Kierkegaard understands it, never stops at an individual's temporal harm or guilt, but, in relation to them and through them, strives to get to their spiritual source. The removal of the spiritual source of evil in man automatically entails the removal of the possibility of man's immoral conduct towards himself and others. The moment the sinner accepts forgiveness from the one who loves and himself becomes one who loves—this is when he ceases to be a potential perpetrator of future moral evil in immanent reality. The purpose of such forgiveness, however, is considerably deeper than the removal of a given person's immoral behavior, for this is about the salvation of the individual in God as well as the recognition of his responsibility for the truth of his life (Kierkegaard 1993b, pp. 129–143, 148–152).

In contrast, forgiveness considered from the perspective of immanent ethics focuses on blocking the evil which has occurred between people to prevent it from spreading. What becomes the overriding goal here is the possibility of the offender



and victim returning to normal social life, rebuilding their interpersonal relations.<sup>20</sup> In the human world based on an immanent relation to good and evil, however, there is no possibility of entirely ruling out the offender's immoral behavior. Even if he receives forgiveness and changes his behavior, he may become a perpetrator of some other evil in some other life situation. The same goes for the victim, who may simultaneously experience evil caused by one person and himself be the perpetrator of some evil in relation to another person. What this means is that such forgiveness has a limited range. Of course, it may constitute a model for people to forgive each other in similar situations, but it cannot guarantee the elimination of moral evil from even future relations between the victim and offender.

It is for this reason that forgiveness in ethical accounts is not what guarantees the occurrence of good in the victim-offender relation or in other interpersonal relations in which they will participate. Furthermore, as long as forgiveness is here a condition for reconciliation, it is possible to consider a situation in which the victim forgives the offender but has reasons not to ultimately reconcile with him does not seem morally suspect (Griswold 2007, pp. 110–111; Moody-Adams 2015, pp. 162–163, 167; Giannini 2017, pp. 60–65). The matter looks different on Kierkegaard's transcendent account in which forgiveness is the process that leads to reconciliation, where the sinner's accepting forgiveness means he is reconciled with the one who loves in God (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 336). Such reconciliation has the quality of finality; it unequivocally brings the sinner into the reality of Divine good, such that he becomes a servant of this good, one who ceases to participate in evil, and thus he is spiritually and morally rejuvenated in all future interpersonal relations. Additionally, he here becomes one who, in his attitude, spreads this good in the world in spite of all the temporal evil he may encounter.

In spite of transcendent forgiveness's evident supremacy over immanent forgiveness, the former's occurrence in the world is remarkably rare. Christian forgiveness as described by Kierkegaard is a miraculous event in which God's originative power in relation to man manifests itself (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 295–296). Undoubtedly, the majority of people on Earth have never experienced such forgiveness, nor will they ever—and though on Kierkegaard's account this is the result of their being rooted in evil as well as their lack of desire for inner transformation, such an argument has very little effect on people who limit their lives to the temporal and forego searching for spiritual depth. The consequence is such that, from the ethical point of view, such forgiveness is unreal, or it is rejected on ideological grounds as an ethically irrational worldview. In this sense, transcendent forgiveness and its concomitant relation of the loving one-sinner have no chance of penetrating immanent forgiveness based on the victim-offender relation.

What's more, this separation in Kierkegaard's account must exist, for the ethical (universal) remains in dialectical tension in relation to the religious (individual-oriented)—these two realities cannot be reconciled in a person's life as one of them always predominates in the individual's worldview (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 54–56,

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<sup>20</sup> The matter surrounding the purpose of forgiveness and potential ethical reconciliation may of course be presented in various ways (see Griswold 2007, pp. xxiv–xxvi, 110–111, 211–212).



68–69, 82–83). What this means is that these two types of forgiveness must exist aside one another in the world and cannot affect each another directly. Transcendent forgiveness does not thus constitute any kind of alternative to immanent forgiveness and will never be accepted by an individual with a standard ethical, immanent worldview. Its acceptance happens only through its being appropriated, that is, through the miraculous inner transformation of the individual with the help of the one who loves—in God.

From the above it clearly follows that Kierkegaard's thoughts on transcendent forgiveness should not constitute a direct inspiration for ethical theories. It is therefore epistemically dangerous in this situation to transfer Kierkegaard's thoughts on the loving one-sinner relation to the ethical victim-offender relation.<sup>21</sup>

One example of such a risky interpretation is John Lippitt's, who, in his book *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*, explores the question of whether a person who has harmed another can forgive himself for the deed done if, despite his requests, repentance, and reparations, he does not receive the victim's forgiveness. On the basis of Kierkegaard's Christian thought, Lippitt asserts that: 'from the Kierkegaardian point of view, the ultimate point would be that if God forgives me, the refusal of my victims to do so—while it should certainly be taken seriously and may continue to occasion profound and genuine sorrow and regret on my part—should not *ipso facto* prevent me from accepting divine forgiveness and extending to myself the self-forgiveness that this acceptance makes possible' (p. 178). Admittedly, Lippitt here makes note of the superior status of divine (transcendent) forgiveness in relation to human (immanent) forgiveness, however, since he directly superimposes Kierkegaard's thought onto the victim-offender relation, he loses the true context of Kierkegaard's considerations—the relation of the loving one-sinner. As a result, he fails to appreciate that the offender, as sinner, who was granted transcendent forgiveness (meaning he has met the one who loves along his way) is not only spiritually cleared of guilt (which does not mean that the moral effects of his actions have been lifted in the world), but is able, in the transcendent order, to become the forgiver (the one who loves) for the person who was his victim (and who remains a sinner) in the immanent order.

Such a reversal is brought about precisely by Christian forgiveness, which, despite transforming the inner being of the sinner (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 295–296) and turning him into the one who loves, does not do away with the real effects of the moral wrongdoing one has committed, or one's responsibility thereof in the human world. The forgiveness granted by Jesus to the robber does not give him life in the temporal sense, but opens up for him, in the last moment of his life, the prospect of eternal salvation. In this sense, transcendent forgiveness does not replace immanent forgiveness, though undoubtedly, if it is accepted by the victim or offender, it constitutes fertile ground for its growth.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Howell (2010), Lippitt (2017), or Nowachek (2013).

## Conditional and unconditional forgiveness

The second most general issue taken up in contemporary ethical thought on forgiveness is its conditionality. One can basically distinguish two approaches here: the first, according to which forgiveness is conditional upon an admission of guilt and the wrongdoer's sense of repentance;<sup>22</sup> and the second—one significantly closer to Christian ethics broadly construed—according to which forgiveness is unconditional and therefore up to the victim's discretion (thus being independent of the wrongdoer's recognition of guilt and expression of repentance),<sup>23</sup> and, on some Christian thinkers' accounts, even a certain moral obligation (McCord Adams 1991, p. 300).

The difference between these two approaches consists primarily in a different understanding of what forgiveness is and what purpose this phenomenon serves in the life of a person. Proponents of the conditional account of forgiveness formulate it primarily in the social context, it being for them a condition for restoring broken social ties and mutual trust, respect, and recognition (Griswold 2007, pp. 48–49). From this perspective, what is crucial in this whole process of forgiveness is for the wrongdoer to play the active role, as his understanding of his guilt and his willingness to change his behavior becomes a guarantee that his harmful behavior towards others will successfully come to a stop and that, to some degree, the very evil behind these actions will be brought into check. The victim, on this account, becomes his own kind of notary of forgiveness, for whom the basis of drafting the notarial deed, as it were, is the wrongdoer's admission of guilt, his repentance and his willingness to atone for it.

In the unconditional account of forgiveness, on the other hand, the entire burden rests on the victim: his gesture here is independent of the wrongdoer's reflection upon his own case and constitutes its own kind of selfless gift for him, a gift meant to lead him onto the path of inner transformation (Moody-Adams 2015, p. 178). This way of formulating forgiveness requires a different vision of humanity in which man's being is captured in a perspective that is more metaphysical than social. In such a case, the victim, in forgiving, refers to the core of man's essence in which he and the wrongdoer are interconnected. In this perspective, the victim discovers a certain community of human beings both he and the offender share which allows the former to more deeply understand and sympathize with the latter and gives the former a chance to more fully grasp himself (Moody-Adams 2015, pp. 166, 169–170,

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<sup>22</sup> This trend includes the most classic ethical accounts of forgiveness such as those proposed by Kolnai in his article "Forgiveness" (Kolnai 1974), by Murphy in "Forgiveness and Resentment" (Murphy 1982), or by Griswold in his recent, widely discussed book *Forgiveness* (Griswold 2007). It is worth noting that conditional accounts of forgiveness also appear in Christian ethical thought, as in the case of Richard Swinburne, who presented such an account in the chapter "Guilt, Atonement and Forgiveness" in his book *Responsibility and Atonement* (Swinburne 1989, pp. 73–92).

<sup>23</sup> This type of Christian account of forgiveness is presented by McCord Adams in her article "Forgiveness: A Christian Model" (McCord Adams 1991) and by Giannini in his work "Hope as Grounds for Forgiveness" (Giannini 2017). Unconditional accounts, however, are not only the domain of Christian ethics, as they are also developed in secular ethics, examples being Moody Adams' article "The Enigma of Forgiveness" (Moody-Adams 2015) and Garrard and McNaughton's article titled "In the Defense of Unconditional Forgiveness" (Garrard and McNaughton 2003).

173, 176–178, Garrard and McNaughton 2003, pp. 46, 54–59). For this reason, this way of understanding forgiveness appears most often in Christian ethical thought, in which the reference point for this aforementioned community of being is God. The Christian, as a victim, should be able to open up to the working of Divine generosity and strive for the good of the offender, in whom, as a consequence of the act forgiveness, an inner transformation occurs. This is difficult process requiring inner commitment and self-sacrifice through which the victim can help the offender be closer to God and through which the victim himself is given a chance to develop his own relation with the Creator (McCord Adams 1991, pp. 294–300).<sup>24</sup>

On Kierkegaard's account, the act of forgiveness, as a thing embedded into the deeper spiritual context of the loving one-sinner, takes on a much more radical, Christian dimension, for the one who loves is supposed to not only forgive when he becomes the victim of someone's attack, but, above all, to spread love, through forgiveness, to each person who remains in the sin of ignoring God's love, to each who does not express, through himself, love of one's neighbor. In this sense, the call to spread forgiveness really is unconditional. The Christian, in accordance with the principle of equal love for one's neighbor, cannot pick and choose people, but is supposed to help each person that fate (God) places on his path to love (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 70–73). Nevertheless, forgiveness is a process that must be properly carried out; it is not simply a spontaneous act, but rather an event that consists of hard spiritual work on the part of the one who loves (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 334–344). He must prepare the sinner for the acceptance of forgiveness, to bring it about that he himself has perceived and acknowledged his sin, and that he then desires to liberate himself from it (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 72–74, 77). In this sense, Kierkegaard's account transforms from an unconditional duty to spread forgiveness to all people as a starting point, into, ultimately, a clear condition allowing for the occurrence of forgiveness (and in consequence reconciliation as well) only in those people who acknowledge their sin and desire to be liberated from it. Between these two extreme points, the entire undertaking (process) that is forgiveness unfolds, where the Christian works for his own good as well as for that of the other, doing all that he can 'to win the one overcome' (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 334–344).

In order to better understand this, a distinction should here be introduced between the possibility and actuality of forgiveness. Forgiveness as a possibility, as an attitude of the one who loves, as what he, the one who loves, should spread among others in his life—this is unconditional; forgiveness as a factual state, however, as that which actually occurs and signifies an inner transformation of the sinner, is conditional upon his own desire for a response to the love revealed to him in the one who loves (Kierkegaard 1997b, pp. 140–143).

<sup>24</sup> An interesting attempt to reconcile the discussion on the conditional and unconditional nature of forgiveness is offered by Christopher Bennet in his article "Personal and Redemptive Forgiveness" (Bennet 2003). He has suggested that unconditional forgiveness may be characteristic of forgiveness granted to an offender personally by a victim and involves overcoming morally inappropriate reactions such as resentment. Conditional forgiveness, however, takes on the form of *redemptive forgiveness*, which is meant to restore the offender's membership to the moral community and, from this perspective, requires the offender's repentance and atonement (p. 142).

In a certain sense, a division into a conditional element and an unconditional one runs parallel to the division in immanent ethics: one side of the relation corresponds to the unconditional gift of forgiveness (the one who loves) and the other—to the fulfillment of the condition for forgiveness (the sinner). In reality, however, one cannot equate transcendent ethics with immanent ethics. This is so, because, firstly, as shown earlier, there is no simple transfer of the attitude of the one who loves onto the victim, nor is there a simple way to transfer the attitude of the sinner onto the offender. On one hand, the one who loves does not have to take the form of the victim in relation to the sinner, and likewise, the sinner does not have to be the perpetrator of immanent evil in relation to the one who loves. On the other hand, though the offender is always a sinner, the victim may be a sinner to the same degree as the offender. Secondly, though it seems that the transcendent account plays out ideally in immanent ethics, when the readiness of the victim (the one who loves) to forgive merges with the simultaneous remorse of the offender (the sinner), there exists a fundamental difference. What on Kierkegaard's account one can recognize as two stages of one process, where the continuity of the entire act of forgiveness is clearly visible, contemporary theories within secular and Christian ethics present as two opposing accounts of forgiveness which are basically impossible to reconcile and cancel each other out.

In transcendent ethics, the loving one's readiness to forgive results from the attitude of love for one's neighbor, which mandates him to spread forgiveness to each person regardless of whether there exists any kind of temporal relation between the two (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 137–147). This readiness is absolute. It constitutes a spiritual imperative with regard to which the one who loves can make no exceptions. In turn, the remorse of the sinner and his consequent consciousness of sin are, on Kierkegaard's account, a response to the actions of the loving one, who fights for the sinner and attempts to awaken the good that exists in him even before he begins to understand his guilt (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 335–336). The sinner, however, must reach the source of his evil alone and reject it, thanks to the help of the one who loves (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 338–339). The forgiveness that arises is therefore the result of a spiritual relation in which both subjects are active and their ultimate aim of reconciliation in God proves to be a common one. Forgiveness so understood is an expression of a certain fullness of humanity, in which an equalization of the sinner and the one who loves before God occurs, since both are, in this act, equally important and equally necessary for each other (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 341–342).

Immanent ethics in relation to transcendent forgiveness so understood proves to have many places lacking clarity. On one hand, the conditional account, which makes forgiveness contingent upon the wrongdoer's repentance, provides neither the possibility to unequivocally explain how repentance could appear in the wrongdoer, nor the unequivocal assurance that such repentance is possible or true at all (Moody-Adams 2015, pp. 172–173, 176). What things most depend on is the conscience of the wrongdoer himself, which is why forgiveness in this case concerns him more than the victim. Without his repentance, even if the victim wanted to forgive him or, more strongly, decides to forgive him, there can be no certainty that this act makes any sense. In turn, the unconditional understanding of forgiveness defers the wrongdoer's transformation into the near, undefined future, turning the very act

of forgiveness into an event which more concerns the victim than the wrongdoer, thereby being suspended, as it were, in a vacuum, not completed. Furthermore, the unconditionality that results from the gesture of mercy the victim shows the offender cannot here be imposed on the victim in any way. It may be a moral indication, one which refers to the nobility of the victim's attitude, to his good nature, and to his concern to improve the offender's conduct. This indication, however, must respect the victim's right to refuse to forgive, especially in the case of the most severe harm inflicted by the offender (Moody-Adams 2015, pp. 173, 177).

As a result, Kierkegaard's account fits neither the unconditional model nor the conditional one as presented by contemporary secular ethical thought and its Christian counterpart.<sup>25</sup> It therefore cannot solve the fundamental aporia existing between them, the result being that there is not one coherent concept of forgiveness, but two opposing theories, each so loaded with a worldview that their unification seems impossible. Neither can Kierkegaard's account be a model for immanent ethics, as the power of forgiveness remains hidden to the immanent world. Just as Simon and the Pharisee took offence to the forgiveness Jesus granted the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7,47), so too the immanent world fails to accept the sensibility of forgiveness which goes beyond a moral assessment of the victim and offender's situation.

This is why commentators who attempt to apply Kierkegaard's thought to the victim-offender relation face a considerable problem, for the Danish philosopher's account eludes the immanent division of forgiveness into conditional and unconditional forms. The majority of commentators are under the illusion that, in connection with the command to love one's neighbor—a command to which Kierkegaard relates his reflections—the forgiveness Kierkegaard speaks of must be to some degree unconditional (Howell 2010, pp. 39, 45, Gauvin 2017, pp. 85, 100–101, Lippitt 2017, pp. 33, 34, Nowachek 2013, pp. 40–41). Yet for that to be the case, it would be necessary to first show an equality between the attitudes of the victim and the one who loves. It is clear that among commentators, there is an incentive for the victim to behave like Kierkegaard's one who loves. The problem is that the average person who becomes the victim of another person's evil act, be it minor or major, cannot behave in such a way since he cannot, within his temporal understanding of the world—one which focuses on good fortune in life, or on the common good—suddenly implement a principle which completely redefines his relation to himself and to others. Being the subject of serious harm that is physical or moral in nature can bring the victim closer to spiritual exploration, the same being true for the offender who is terrified by his actions. Yet, to complete the spiritual transformation of another person, it is necessary to first undergo it oneself. The forgiveness that the victim bestows upon the offender in immanent reality does not at all signify spiritual mercifulness (and thus spiritual transformation) towards the offender even

<sup>25</sup> Mitchell J. Gauvin goes with a strong intuition in this direction when he claims in his article "Can Isaac Forgive Abraham?" (Gauvin 2017) that: 'The form of forgiveness that Isaac could demonstrate in his love for his father is antithetical to our modern, secular understandings of forgiveness, in which forgiveness is either a moral transaction between an offender and victim or an optional, unconditional expression of empathy for a shared human predicament (namely, of moral frailty)' (p. 102).

if the former is motivated by his Christian worldview. Rather, at the most, it is a moral gesture of support for the offender, an attempt to create a chance for him to understand the evil of his act and to desire to improve his conduct. Christianity that functions because of the immanent goal of the individual or social group does not have the spiritual power to transform another person, and it is (precisely) this power which the transcendent forgiveness of Kierkegaard's account concerns. The victim does not automatically become one who loves through the very gesture of granting forgiveness in immanent reality.

### The issue of condonation

One issue that is closely linked to the problem of the conditionality of forgiveness is the puzzle of condonation, which is also the most discussed matter in the ethical debate on forgiveness. This issue arose as a consequence of attempts to transfer the problem of forgiveness from religion, its source element, to secular ground, and has become the main argument against the unconditional conception of forgiveness.<sup>26</sup> Authors who have raised this problem point to the ethical ambiguity tied to the fact that forgiveness can be a peculiar allowance of evil if it turns out to merely be an exemption of the offender's moral guilt. Such forgiveness could, as a result, imply an absence of self-respect on the part of the victim, who, in forgiving the wrongdoer, in a certain sense morally assents to his bad act.<sup>27</sup> The question therefore arises whether one can sensibly forgive another while at the same time condemning the evil of the act and maintaining a morally proper attitude towards oneself.

From the logical point of view, this situation is, in accord with the paradox of forgiveness formulated by Aurel Kolnai, very difficult to defend (Kolnai 1974, pp. 95–99). For, if the offender expresses repentance for his act, what sense does it make to forgive him? And if he feels no repentance, forgiveness proves to be a leniency towards him and thus seems to be immoral. Of course, one can grant that, despite his repentance, the offender expects a confirmation that the victim feels no resentment towards him, yet on the other hand, continued obduracy on the victim's part, in the face of the offender's inner transformation, would again be immoral. Thus one could conclude that, in this case, forgiveness is, to some degree, morally dangerous or simply unnecessary.

The ethical line of defense of forgiveness formulated as unconditional focuses on bolstering a feeling of self-respect in the victim. This respect should flow from the act of forgiving the offender—not be threatened by it. To this end, Moody-Adams states: 'Some of the hardest and yet most important work of forgiveness is the effort to detach one's sense of worth as person from the wrong that one has endured' (Moody-Adams 2015, p. 168). In carrying out this task, in no way can the victim be helped by the offender's repentance, since no declaration of his is able to build a sense of the victim's self-worth. The victim can reaffirm his self-respect, but only

<sup>26</sup> See McCord Adams (1991, p. 278), Giannini (2017, p. 67), and Moody-Adams (2015, p. 173), Garrard and McNaughton (2003, p. 41).

<sup>27</sup> See Griswold (2007, pp. 64–65) and Murphy (1982, pp. 505–510).

by means of reaffirming his own humanity (Moody-Adams 2015, p. 169). Hence, the victim must, to carry out the act of forgiveness, overcome the moral distance that divides him from the offender and find a certain basic common humanity they share. In this way, the victim performs a revision of his judgement of the situation that has arisen, taking a wider, generally more human perspective,<sup>28</sup> thanks to which he becomes capable of recognizing that the offender was not always a perpetrator of evil, that every person is capable of being a perpetrator of similar evil, and that the offender is, as is human, capable of transforming his behavior and life (Moody-Adams 2015, p. 169). On such an understanding, an absence of forgiveness may prove to be the greatest threat to self-respect, while forgiving the offender builds up a new and strengthened sense of self-worth (Moody-Adams 2015, p. 175).

Authors who consider the problem of forgiveness from the point of view of Christian ethics point here to the role of the attitude of hope and love as a weapon, as it were, in the hand of the forgiver (McCord Adams 1991, pp. 292–300; Giannini 2017, pp. 74–79). Forgiveness, in this case, is not meant to be an ethical calculation in which one considers whether one can forgive another in spite of the absence of repentance in the wrongdoer. Here it is about the awareness, which puts faith in God, that man is not the master of his own life and is not able to fully judge the actions of another person justly (McCord Adams 1991, p. 295, Giannini 2017, p. 78). A believer can therefore say, in spite of the absence of remorse in the wrongdoer, that he forgives him, because he entrusts God with the offender's fate and hopes that he will become good under His care (Giannini 2017, pp. 75–76, 79, 80). In this way, forgiveness here becomes an expression of hope for the good of the offender, that his salvation is possible, and that, consequently, God's purification of his guilt is also possible. From the perspective of Christian ethics, the question 'Can I forgive?' appears to take on the form 'How could I not forgive?'—for an absence of forgiveness here would equal desiring damnation for the offender, thus negating the very essence of Christian teachings. As a result, the problem of immoral condonation disappears, since forgiveness becomes the Christian's duty (McCord Adams 1991, p. 300; Lauritzen 1987, pp. 152–153). In forgiving the offender, the Christian does not negate ethical reality, acquiescing to the evil of the act, but appeals to a higher order of Divine love, as if hoping that in this love the evil act finds its proper judgement. In this way, the evil of the act is not nullified, but one suspends human judgement of it, with full awareness that he is called to collaborate with God to fight, within human possibility, against evil (McCord Adams 1991, pp. 298–299).<sup>29</sup> Hope and love do not here justify the evil of the act, but they do justify forgiveness as an expression of faith in the possibility that the offender can change in the face of the ultimate and under the influence of divine providence (McCord Adams 1991, pp. 297–298, 299; Giannini 2017, pp. 77, 80).

<sup>28</sup> An example of taking such a broad perspective on the victim-offender relation is found in Garrard and McNaughton's account in the form of the concept of "human solidarity" (Garrard and McNaughton 2003, pp. 53–59).

<sup>29</sup> McCord Adams is here claiming that the Christian—as a victim in the act of forgiveness—must, through prayer, enter God's point of view in relation to the situation that has arisen, thereby learning Divine love and freeing himself of retributive emotions and attitudes (McCord Adams 1991, pp. 294, 296–297).



In the radical Christian account of forgiveness Kierkegaard presents, it is clear that there can be no discussion of the controversy relating to condonation. This is the case because, firstly, this problem can arise only within secular ethics, for which the moral correctness of interpersonal relations in respect to the common good defines the whole axiological horizon of the act of forgiveness. Secondly, the loving one-sinner relation to which Kierkegaard refers is not based on a one-sided gesture of forgiveness, as in the case of unconditional accounts, but instead is grounded in a spiritual relation in which the sinner and the one who loves are equal subjects. Each is assigned a particular task to carry out, and until it is fulfilled, forgiveness will not take place. The task of the one who loves is not to perform a personal, grace-extending gesture before the sinner, as such forgiveness would be ineffective and, as Kierkegaard notes, would make the sinner dependent, in an earthly sense, on the one who loves (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 338–339). In order for true, Christian forgiveness to occur, the loving one must spiritually prepare the sinner for it.

Hence Kierkegaard's words on not seeing sins as a strategy inverse to normal human behavior towards a guilty person (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 60–61; Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 282–288). Usually people have a tendency to find the sins of others without seeing those of their own, yet the Christian, on Kierkegaard's account, is supposed to act such that he hides the sins of others, to not see them in order awaken the love residing within the sinner—the deepest good of his being, established in him by God (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 215–217, 1990, p. 77). For, it is only this good (love) that can allow a person to discover, on his own, the sin within himself. Only this good can make him see the emptiness of his life and desire forgiveness. It is not possible to liberate a person from the workings of evil just by showing them to him—this can only be done by awakening the good within him, thanks to which he himself will discover the evil and desire to rid himself of it (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 338). The loving one's external not seeing of the other's sin opens up the latter's eyes to the evil of his own life.

On such an understanding, then, forgiveness is not a response to an evil act, but constitutes a fight for the good of the other's interiority—the one who loves, standing before the evil of the other person, must fight for this other's good, not desiring to see this evil (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 285–287, 335–336). It is precisely in this that the essence of Christian forgiveness lies, as Kierkegaard perceives it. To forgive means here to awaken in the other a desire for forgiveness, to uncover the good residing in him, and to give him spiritual strength to act, to combat evil. For the Christian to be able to do this, as Kierkegaard understands it, he must become equal to the other in God, needing forgiveness to the same degree as the sinner—only then can their spiritual reconciliation occur (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 336, 343). The result of this equality between both subjects is that, on Kierkegaard's account, the sinner is never a passive person, but is—like the sinful woman who comes to the feast of the Pharisees—one who seeks forgiveness, one in whom love has been awakened (Kierkegaard 1997b, pp. 150–155). This is why the forgiveness granted by Jesus ends with the statement “Your faith has saved (healed) you,” which serves to highlight the active contribution of the sinner, without which forgiveness remains only an unrealized possibility, an empty gesture in the world of human sin.

In immanent ethics there is a clear, unsurpassable difference in people's attitudes towards the situation in which some evil occurs in an interpersonal relation. On the conditional account, the entire focus is on the evil which has occurred not being disregarded, hence the fear of hastily granting forgiveness without waiting for the offender's remorse, offered as an encouragement in order to change the latter's behavior. In this context, condonation seems to be the most important problem, the point in the end is for the offender to not feel unpunished, or most crucially, to not feel that others have acquiesced to his act or affirmed it reasonably. In turn, proponents of unconditional forgiveness focus on the potential good which may arise thanks to the gesture of forgiveness. Despite the victim's awareness of the harm that has been inflicted, the point here is that he be liberated from this trauma, that he show his moral superiority while at the same time, by means of his attitude, working on the consciousness of the offender, such that the latter realizes that the good of the victim stands above the evil of the offender. The risk of the offender being indifferent to the victim's gesture here becomes of secondary importance; what is paramount is that the victim dismiss the evil that has been inflicted, that he show that this evil is something with no power over the victim or his system of values.

Kierkegaard formulates things completely differently, where forgiveness is not for him a matter of personal guilt, but of granting another person a new life in God. The reference point for the act of forgiveness here is therefore neither concrete evil (the conditional account) nor abstract good (the unconditional account), but concrete good which, in the work of love, can pass over evil (not see it) in order to get to what is originally good in another human being. This entire process plays out in the relation between the parties in which forgiveness occurs. The problem of immanent ethics is clearly the lack of this relation, where the entire act of forgiveness is dependent on only one party. Everything here depends either on the remorse of the offender or on the victim's forgiveness, two factors in relation to which, in a certain sense, it only remains for the second party to passively complete the act. Of course, forgiving does not become something easy by mere virtue of the fact that the offender feels remorse (the conditional account), just as feeling remorse itself is not something easy in the face of being forgiven in advance (the unconditional account). Yet, on one hand, the hard-heartedness of the victim in relation to the remorse of the offender is, on the conditional account, something immoral, as it constitutes a kind of disbelief in the latter's desire to change or even counts as a refusal to give him the opportunity to change—under the assumption that forgiveness is something that would activate such a change. In Kolnai's paradox, one can go so far as to say that the offender's remorse makes forgiveness something obvious. Yet on the other hand, on the unconditional account, forgiveness has already been granted regardless of the offender's attitude. And though granting forgiveness is for the offender a clear signal that the victim no longer considers him his enemy and that he expects a positive response from him, the act of forgiveness itself decides nothing and does not change anything in an ultimate sense. Forgiveness so understood is, in both the first case and the second, the result of a one-sided effort—not a relation between subjects of the event.

It is crucial to note that what makes transcendent forgiveness a relational event cannot be transposed into immanent forgiveness. Not seeing sins as an origina-

spiritual strategy in relation to another person must be based on the act of loving one's neighbor, an act in which the one who loves surpasses the dissimilarity of the temporal world in order to get to the love hidden at the core of the sinner's being. Such an act is immanently impossible because not seeing guilt in the victim-offender relation would become a caricature of the spiritual original. Instead of leading to an inner transformation, it would give rise to a feeling of impunity within the offender, thereby ridiculing the dignity of the victim. Furthermore, the equality between the subjects of the loving one-sinner relation cannot be recreated in the victim-offender relation. This equality consists in the subordination of both subjects to God, who then performs the actual act of forgiveness (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 341–342). In the purely human world, such equality does not appear—there is nothing on which it can be based, and thus forgiveness is not a reconciliation, but instead an event always highly one-sided. This transcendent reality of forgiveness, as Kierkegaard explicitly stresses, can only be recognized in faith—in the faith of love (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 294–295).

An attempt to defend the unconditional account of forgiveness in the immanent world based on Kierkegaard's thought was made by John Lippitt in his article "Forgiveness. A Work of Love?" (Lippitt 2017). His reasoning in this matter, however, seems inconsistent with Kierkegaard's transcendent account on which he bases this reasoning. This only confirms the thesis regarding the non-transferability of Kierkegaard's Christian thought to immanent ethics. For example, Lippitt acknowledges that, though the forgiveness Kierkegaard talks about is unconditional (since it is offered before the offender asks for it), it is not unconditional in the sense in which Griswold criticizes this type of understanding forgiveness, he maintaining that it frees the offender of moral responsibility for his act. Lippitt's interpretation is such that the offender must become aware of the wrong he has done, and thus cannot obtain forgiveness without understanding his act (p. 32). The forgiveness he is offered in this arrangement proves to be 'a loving gift offered in hope' and 'has at least two targets: for the reform of the offender, and for the forger'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.)' (p. 33). Such an understanding of forgiveness fits perfectly into the logical reasoning of unconditional, immanent accounts (both secular and Christian), which take advantage of hope as a power thanks to which space is created for the offender so that he be able to confess his guilt and right the wrong he has committed. Meanwhile, the essence of Kierkegaard's transcendent vision of love is that this love works for the benefit of the other and fights unceasingly for him, attempting to spiritually liberate him from the evil that has taken hold of him (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 335–338). The Christian does not here passively wait for God's grace and mercy for the other but becomes that through which this grace and mercy comes to the other (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 380–381, 383–384). Christian hope, in this case, is not just a pious passing of the matter into God's hands, but creates a spiritual environment in which sin can actually be erased and the sinner recreated by God for a new life in love

(Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 295–296).<sup>30</sup> Forgiveness in this meaning is obviously 'a loving gift offered in hope,' but its purpose is simply not 'the reform of the offender' and 'the forgiver's own ability to forgive' (as Lippitt believes), for these are immanent ethical goals. Kierkegaard, in contrast, clearly indicates the transcendent, spiritual purpose of forgiveness which is to create another human being in love and to reaffirm oneself in it (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 336, 339–340, 343). For this reason, the hope that Kierkegaard has in mind does not have its object in temporality—it is not hope 'for the wrongdoer's moral improvement and return to the moral community; and—sometimes—a restored relationship' (Lippitt 2017, p. 34). It is the hope that God's love and the good will manifest themselves in the sinner and be expressed in the world through him, just as God's love and the good manifest themselves in, and are expressed in the world through, the one who loves. This manifestation of Divine love in the sinner is precisely the condition for the occurrence of forgiveness, the possibility of which manifests itself to the sinner in the world in the form of the unconditional gift of love with which the one who loves comes out to the sinner.

### The problem of the unforgivable

The last matter that has been widely discussed in the philosophical literature is the problem of the unforgivable. This issue was taken up by philosophers after World War II (Hannah Arendt and Vladimir Jankelevitch, among others)<sup>31</sup> and refers to the possibility of forgiving crimes against humanity, the most glaring example of which was the Shoah.<sup>32</sup> Their position in this matter was clear: one cannot forgive a person who does not seek forgiveness (Jankelevitch),<sup>33</sup> nor can one forgive that which cannot be punished (Arendt).<sup>34</sup> Forgiveness in these cases, as if on behalf of war crime victims, would be a disregard for their suffering and could lead to an allowance of similar crimes in the future (Pyper 2011, pp. 146, 151). Forgiveness in relation to a crime of such magnitude exceeds human ability; no person can be authorized to

<sup>30</sup> See also Kierkegaard (1995, pp. 253–256). A likely example of this attitude is analyzed by Lippitt himself in the same article, where, on the basis of Kierkegaard's thought, he presents the relation between Helen Prejean the nun and Elmo Patrick Sonnier—a murderer sentenced to death. It is quite clear that, despite the lack of a victim-offender relation, Prejean—as the one who loves—turns to the sinner, Sonnier, with a message of love, seeing the good within him independently of his crime, attempting to awaken within him the love that would help him desire forgiveness and accept it (p. 29).

<sup>31</sup> See Pyper (2011, p. 146) and Brennan and Lo (2012, p. 79). This is mainly about Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958) and Jankélévitch's essay "Should We Pardon Them?" [Jankélévitch 1996]—first published as *Pardonner?* in Jankélévitch's *L'Imprescriptible*, (1971)].

<sup>32</sup> More broadly, this problem concerns forgiveness granted in the social sphere in connection with political injustices and persecution that is racial, ideological, or religious in nature, with war crimes being the most striking example thereof.

<sup>33</sup> See Pyper (2011, pp. 146, 149), La Caze (2006, pp. 280–281).

<sup>34</sup> See Pyper (2011, p. 146), Brennan and Brennan and Lo (2012, p. 80), La Caze (2006, pp. 276–278). This is about the concept of radical evil Arendt derives from Kant, and which, in her opinion, can be neither punished nor forgiven, since it goes beyond purely human motives for action (La Caze 2006, pp. 276–278).

undertake this act—the possibility of which should be left to that which exceeds the human realm (Brennan and Lo 2012, pp. 86–87; La Caze 2006, pp. 279, 280–281).

Among contemporary thinkers, this problem was taken up by Jacques Derrida, who espoused that true forgiveness can only concern the unforgivable, since to forgive that which is forgivable requires no special effort, it being a sort of tautology. In this way, he claims that it is only the unforgivable that becomes an authentic challenge and condition for true forgiveness to occur (Derrida 2001, pp. 32–33, 48).<sup>35</sup> Derrida thereby reaches the limits of speech in this matter, for, on his account, it is not something that can be comprehended. It constitutes a completely unconditional event beyond anyone's motivation or intention—and thereby is pure in its idea (Derrida 2001, pp. 32, 44–45, 49). So understood, forgiveness could only be something for which one needs to wait, to which one must listen intently, something which, despite this, appears unexpectedly and surprises, interrupting the ordinary course of historical temporality (Derrida 2001, pp. 32, 39).<sup>36</sup> Derrida's account thus runs counter to the positions of Arendt and Jankelevitch: it shows that the impossibility of forgiveness actually occurring is not something that rules it out, but shows, conversely, that this impossibility gives forgiveness its meaning and allows one to hope for it as an event that is absolutely extraordinary, one that can change the world.

It is worth pointing out here that the authors who raise the issue of the unforgivable in relation to crimes against humanity are speaking about the unforgivable in immanence, allowing for the possibility of forgiveness beyond human power, in transcendence. There is no contradiction here, simply a suspension of judgement—a lack of a solution. Derrida, however, reverses the problem, establishing the unforgivable as that which conditions forgiveness. Forgiveness is thus possible only because the unforgivable exists. (Derrida 2001, pp. 32–33, 37) In this way, the unforgivable is for him a transcendent category, while forgiveness is that for which one should wait in immanence.

The problem of the unforgivable in the context of Kierkegaard's thought on forgiveness shows two basic incompatibilities in relation to the accounts of contemporary philosophers. First, for Kierkegaard, the problem of forgiveness has the character of a meeting between two people and concerns the inner good of the individuals, not of any group of people, which, in his opinion, cannot be mediums of existential truth.<sup>37</sup> Socio-political issues, from their very nature, are therefore not subject to forgiveness in the Christian dimension, since they are not mediums of spiritual truth which plays out in the interiority of the individual.<sup>38</sup> The Christian, therefore, is not able to hide the crime of the Shoah as a socio-political phenomenon, just as it is not able to hide the sinfulness of the world, which happens in spite of Christianity. Forgiveness could occur here only in the meeting between a Christian (the one who

<sup>35</sup> See also Pyper (2011, p. 146).

<sup>36</sup> See also Lotz (2006, p. 268).

<sup>37</sup> See Kierkegaard (2011, pp. 126–128, 2015, pp. 28–29, 424–425, 2017, p. 320, 2018, pp. 26–27, 35–36).

<sup>38</sup> In this sense, Kierkegaard states that Christianity is not meant to change anything in the external world—its task is to transform the inner life of the individual (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 135–137, 143–147).

loves) and a criminal (the sinner) where neither the former nor his family, in accordance with what has been said about the loving one-sinner relation, need be a direct victim of the latter. In this situation, the Christian should be able to find the strength within himself, not wanting to focus on the sin of the criminal, to reach the good residing in him, such that the criminal is driven off from the beaten, sinful path and made open to confronting the sin that cannot be forgiven by any means other than a personal desire for forgiveness.

It is at this point that a very important conclusion presents itself, one that flows from Kierkegaard's thought: Christianity does not concern itself directly with the evil that is done—its focus is the good that is not done. The one who loves knows that only awakening the good in the sinner can help him remove his sin. The aim of Christianity, inversely to that of ethical accounts, is not to identify and fully recognize evil such that one be able to avoid it in the future—for no evil can be permanently removed from the sinfulness of the world after it has come into existence. Evil can be permanently removed only in the individual and only in him can forgiveness occur. The magnitude of the evil tied to the Holocaust—its unusually spectacular sinfulness—overwhelms any possibility of seeing good in man. This is precisely what is unforgivable from the immanent point of view—and this is what can be made clear only by breaking through the mass of victims and crimes in search of the good always residing in man, independently of this evil. It is only this good that is worthy of the act of forgiveness and it is only the search thereof and the actualization thereof which the Christian should devote his life to.

In this sense, secondly, though making it evidently clear that there exists a stark difference between what is unforgivable for man and what is forgivable for God (for no one can forgive either themselves or another their sin of life—only God<sup>39</sup>), Kierkegaard never leaves the problem of the unforgivable unsolved. It is clear that what is unforgivable for man becomes a sign of his path to God in his search for inner purification—a condition for his salvation. The absolutely negative impossibility of forgiveness here manifesting itself to man is answered immediately, and absolutely positively, by the pattern of Jesus Christ (Kierkegaard 1997b, pp. 179–188). Christianity introduces an understanding of eternity and God for which everything is possible. It is essential to note here that this possibility is not abstract. It is not, as in the case of Derrida, an imagined, intellectual phantom—this possibility has its own concrete referent: it is the love of God for man residing in the core of every individual, the love which the loving one invokes when forgiving (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 9–10, 216–217). It is this which overcomes, in God, that which is impossible for man; it is this which, in the act of forgiveness in God, breaks through what is unforgivable for man. This love, though, relates to the spiritual in man, and without the

<sup>39</sup> This results from the absolute qualitative difference between God and man [Kierkegaard (1985, pp. 44–47, 1980b, pp. 99, 121, 126, 127); see also Podmore (2012, pp. 14–17)]. This qualitative difference between God and man also makes it impossible to translate the category of divine (transcendent) forgiveness directly into human (immanent) forgiveness. Wherever Kierkegaard speaks of Christian love, he speaks of divine forgiveness in which the one who loves is precisely an intermediary—one who makes the conveyance of the transcendent message possible in immanence.

participation of the transcendent in the individual's existence, it cannot ever manifest in the world.

Kierkegaard's vision does not solve the aporia of ethical accounts within immanence, to which these accounts refer, but, in invoking the spiritual understanding of man, provides an opportunity to look upon the problems analyzed from a different, transcendent perspective. On one hand it is impossible, when using Kierkegaard's line of thought, to assert that one can forgive crimes against humanity, since forgiveness as he understands it possesses, not a socio-political dimension, but an existential one, concerning only individuals. Such forgiveness removes not moral evil from the human world, but only the possibility of the individual's doing evil, and this is not effective in the universal-human account. One can redeem the criminal, but it is not possible to erase his crime from the world, nor for that matter his mass crime, where the wrongdoers and victims are essentially uncountable. According to Kierkegaard's account, one does not forgive a crime as a fact that obtained in the world, one forgives the criminal his sin of life, from which the crime resulted. One does not deny the fact of the crime, one negates the criminal in the person, recreating him for a new life in the good.<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, human sin, as the unforgivable (sin of the individual), does not indicate here, to any degree, a horizon of forgiveness (God as Redeemer). Sin, understood Christianly, cannot define the possibility of forgiveness, since evil cannot be a cause of good, as then evil would possess a meaning-creating capacity within man's realm of being. Sin is an overt negation of forgiveness. It is what makes man's reconciliation with God impossible. The possibility of forgiveness exists only thanks to love and the good, which constitute the basis of human being created by God. As long as the unforgivable exists, there is no chance that forgiveness will appear. Yet each time forgiveness is brought into existence, the result is that the unforgivable disappears. Therefore, the possibility of forgiveness exists outside of the unforgivable and independently of it; between the two, moreover, the possibility of forgiveness is primal, as it results from the very essence of human being, whereas evil, in relation to such being, is contingent. This leads to the upbuilding conclusion that forgiveness is possible for man even before he is defined by evil, meaning that forgiveness is prior to evil—forgiveness, therefore, is not a response to evil (good is never a response to evil, but always prior to it), but a return to good, to that which always exists prior to evil and above evil.

The vision of forgiveness that can be reconstructed from Kierkegaard's writings seems to resist any direct application to the problem of the unforgivable as formulated and discussed in contemporary ethical thought, which places this problem in the socio-political context. As Hugh Poyer suggests in his essay "Forgiving the Unforgivable: Kierkegaard, Derrida and the Scandal of Forgiveness," (Poyer 2011). Derrida's account of the problem of the unforgivable seems in some way to share certain features with Kierkegaard's, as when the former speaks of 'the madness of the impossible' which is rooted in the claim that forgiveness forgives only the

<sup>40</sup> As Poyer rightly observes: 'Kierkegaard would be misrepresented if he were put forward as an advocate of the idea that forgiveness obliterates the past and undoes evil' (Poyer 2011, p. 152).



unforgivable (Derrida 2001, pp. 32, 39, 45, 49, 55). These concepts seem related to Kierkegaard's use of the terms 'paradox' and 'the absurd,' which appear when eternity intervenes in existence, making the impossible possible (Pyper 2011, pp. 147, 150, 155, 156). This a conceptional illusion, however. This illusion consists in the fact that, in referring to the concept of forgiveness, both Derrida and Kierkegaard make use of the dialectic of paradox. The fundamental difference in their thinking on forgiveness, however, consists in the fact that, for Derrida, the unforgiveable conditions forgiveness, while for Kierkegaard, the unforgiveable rules out forgiveness. For Derrida, forgiveness becomes sensical only when the unforgiveable appears in the human world, whereas—according to Kierkegaard—forgiveness cannot occur as long as the unforgiveable exists. Thus on Derrida's account there exists an ontological balance between the unforgiveable and forgiveness—while according to Kierkegaard these two states cannot co-exist, for one replaces the other.

It seems that Pyper failed to grasp this qualitative difference in his paper, which is why, despite the penetrating analysis of the problem of forgiveness in Kierkegaard's thought, one may suspect that the author is trying to use Kierkegaard's reasoning as an explanation for Derrida's enigmatic theses. Yet considering the fact that these two philosophers concern themselves with different types of realities, this attempt is a very risky one. What this comes down to is the depth of an approach to forgiveness as a religious category, forgiveness which, for Kierkegaard, does not exist outside the individual-oriented spirituality of Christianity, and which, for Derrida, is merely inspired by the Judeo-Christian tradition as it relates to socio-political matters.

## Conclusion

In his religious writings, Kierkegaard repeatedly makes use of the dialectic of rigorosity and leniency to describe man's relation to God as given by Christianity. He claims that only if man relates to himself with rigorosity, that is, only if he makes an effort to make himself aware of his sin to then go on to look for redemption from it—only then can he count on the Christian leniency that attaining forgiveness of one's sins provides (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 72–73, 340, 1997b, pp. 128–134). This rigorosity towards oneself goes hand in hand with leniency towards others. The Christian, as the one who loves, bestowed with the grace that is the capacity to love one's neighbor, possesses the ability both to not see the sins of others and to awaken in them the Divine good that is at the core of their being. However, the person that is rigorous towards others, occupying himself with the search for their sins as well as the assignment of blame in the world, tends to be lenient towards himself, unaware of his own sin and guilt (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 281–288). A person like this, in the opinion of Kierkegaard, must reckon with the fact Christianity will be rigorous for him, as God applies the same criteria to man that man himself applies in relation to his neighbors (the Christian like for like). God forgives when the individual himself spreads forgiveness, and He is a rigorous judge when the individual himself is rigorous in relation to others (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 376–386).

Proponents of conditional forgiveness in immanent ethics would too easily like to read Kierkegaard's thought as a confirmation of their theories. In reality, the

dialectic employed by Kierkegaard is not as simple as it seems. The problem is that the Christian like for like is mediated in transcendence, and when in isolation from this mediation, it does not create a model which could make sense in immanence. One simply cannot say that the conditional approach is rigorous in the sense in which Kierkegaard criticizes such a human attitude, and that the unconditional one is lenient in the sense in which Kierkegaard deems this way of relating to another person as ideal. This is the case because neither the conditional account nor the unconditional account is mediated in transcendence, and God therefore does not appear in them as a middle term. In immanence, leniency towards the harm inflicted by another person can be the result of one's own docility and moral imperfection, just as the rigorousness of the conditional account may be the result of deep reflection over one's moral behavior. For this reason, one should not apply Kierkegaard's transcendent account either as a model for immanent accounts or as an argument in contemporary ethical debate (including the problem of the unforgivable). The radicalness of Kierkegaard's vision gives rise to a justified fear that an attempt to directly adapt his thought for secular or Christian ethics—which are anchored in human immanence—will result in cognitive aberrations if one ignores the understanding of Christian truth Kierkegaard ascribed to.

This conclusion need not be unequivocally negative, however. The mere fact that there is no possibility to make use of Kierkegaard's thoughts on transcendent forgiveness does not mean that they are useless for the contemporary, immanent understanding of this problem. They may constitute an independent reference point, as awareness of the existence of a strong solution to a given problem in transcendence by no means should block attempts to adequately formulate the problem in immanence. That this is the case is especially clear if one notes that Kierkegaard's account favors the individual in his search for the fulfillment of the Christian ideal in his life. Immanent ethics, on the other hand, always has the good of the human community in mind. Being a part of this community while simultaneously being conscious of the existence of a higher ideal by no means weakens the value of moral practices developed within this community but instead makes it possible to put them in their proper place in the world. It makes sense to invoke here Paul the Apostle's dictum, around which Kierkegaard organizes his thoughts on Christian love: "Love is the fulfilling of the law" (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 91–134). If love is to be deemed a synonym of transcendent ethics and its concomitant understanding of forgiveness, and the law—the domain of imminent ethics along with its division into various visions of forgiveness in the human world, then one can see that Kierkegaard's account does not negate immanent accounts, but instead gives them a higher-order reference point in which they find their ultimate definition. Of course, acknowledging such a reference requires, at the least, intellectual acceptance of the accuracy and value of Kierkegaard's transcendent vision. Admittedly, this vision does not dissolve the aporia of contemporary ethical accounts in immanence, but it does certainly confirm the validity of their search for an adequate view of forgiveness—for surely no one can become the one who loves in a transcendent sense unless he has first defined his existential relation to the problem of forgiveness in immanence.

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