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The Essentials of Forgiveness:  
A Virtue-Focused Philosophical Analysis

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2016

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors in Philosophy

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### **Acknowledgements**

This project would not have been possible without the guidance of my project advisor, or without feedback from the professors who kindly agreed to read drafts and participate in this project's defense. I would like to thank Professors Patrick Shade, Rebecca Tuvel, Joseph Jansen, and Mark Newman.

**Table of Contents**

<u>Project Abstract</u>	<u>v</u>
<u>I. Introduction -- The Definition of Forgiveness</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>II. Forgiveness and Virtue</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>III. The Self and Others</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>IV. When do we Need Forgiveness?</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>V. The Stages of Forgiveness</u>	<u>28</u>
<u>VI. Humility</u>	<u>33</u>
<u>VII. Faith</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>VIII. Care</u>	<u>45</u>
<u>IX. Conclusion -- Faith and the Unforgiveable</u>	<u>56</u>
<u>Works Cited</u>	<u>64</u>

## Abstract

The Essentials of Forgiveness: A Virtue-Focused Philosophical Analysis

By

John Leverett

In this project I offer a philosophical exploration of human forgiveness based in virtue theory that pays special attention to the development of the self in relation to others. I argue that humans are fundamentally social beings, and that maintaining healthy relationships with others is therefore essential to our realization as flourishing individuals. Thus, so long as we harm one another in ways that threaten our relationships, we will have need of a faculty that reverses the damage we inflict: forgiveness. Characteristic of this faculty, I argue, is its ability to revive dead or dying relationships by transforming the dispositions of forgiver and forgiven. In the best cases, offender and offended become friends, though it is only strictly necessary that they both commit to virtuous self-improvement and develop a general sense of goodwill for one another. How does forgiveness work? I argue that the concept is best analyzed in terms of three component virtues: *humility*, *faith*, and *care*, each of which requires repeated, real-world practice to develop. Without these components, I argue, forgiveness is incomplete, and therefore cannot heal our relationships or bring us closer to flourishing. My discussions of virtue and the self draw on the philosophies of Aristotle, William James, Julia Annas, and others. I illustrate my theory with examples drawn from fiction, such as *Les Misérables*, historical non-fiction, such as Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*, and current events, such as the forgiveness exhibited in the wake of the Charleston shooting.

# I. Introduction -- The Definition of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is familiar to all of us. Chances are everyone has, at one point or another, forgiven or been forgiven. We tend to believe that it is worthwhile to forgive each other, but what, exactly, is so special about forgiveness? What is its ultimate goal? What are the conditions that all cases of forgiveness meet? Are we always obligated to forgive? How do we become better forgivers? Such questions naturally arise when we try to dig deeper under the surface of forgiveness, and yet it seems to me that many of us lack the language and concepts necessary to answer questions like these. Analysis of forgiveness has traditionally been tied to religious doctrine, but with this project, I will engage in a secular, philosophical analysis of forgiveness. While religious accounts have much to say about forgiveness as it relates to our relationship with a higher power, I believe that more remains to be said about the ways forgiveness affects our relationships in the human sphere. My account will provide explanations of what forgiveness requires from us, as well as reasons why we would want to practice it, that do not rely on religious concepts, but are at the same time not incompatible with religion should a reader wish to supplement my theory. Ultimately, I aim to provide a theory of forgiveness that anyone can use, whether he or she subscribes to religious views or not. Before I begin my analysis, I turn to a couple of recent examples of forgiveness in the real world.

On June 17, 2015 Dylann Roof shot and killed nine citizens of Charleston, South Carolina in a church basement. The shooting was racially motivated, and the tragedy kicked off a manhunt for Roof as well as numerous protests against the white supremacist

ideals he outlined in a personal manifesto.<sup>1</sup> Today, Roof has yet to have his day in court, but he faces thirty-three federal charges and is eligible for the death penalty.<sup>2</sup> Most would agree that Roof's actions deserve a harsh penalty, so imagine the country's surprise when several of the victims' families stepped forward, not two days after the shooting, to proclaim their forgiveness of him. Not all the families participated, some thinking it too soon to talk about forgiveness. Among the families who reached out to Roof, some even went as far as to invite him to their church, telling him that he would be welcome so long as he came to repent.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not we believe the survivors of Roof's attack offered forgiveness too soon, few of us would deny that there was something admirable about the way they extended a conciliatory hand to the man who caused them so much grief. For instance, contrast the forgiveness of the Charleston survivors to the forgiveness Allstate Insurance claims to offer its customers in its many commercials. Allstate offers a discount called "accident forgiveness" as part of its car insurance plans, which means that it will overlook one of a customer's car accidents when normally it would raise the rate he or she pays. Although Allstate engages in something it calls "forgiveness," we would hardly call the practice praiseworthy in the same way as the Charleston forgiveness. In fact, if we look closely and critically, we will find that equating Allstate's forgiveness to the Charleston forgiveness would be to make a mockery of the concept. Considering why the two

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<sup>1</sup> David Drehle, "What It Takes to Forgive a Killer." *Time*. Web. 04 Apr. 2016. <<http://time.com/time-magazine-charleston-shooting-cover-story/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Morrison, "Dylann Roof Death Penalty Case: Speedy Trial Right Waived By Lawyers for Accused South Carolina Church Shooter." *International Business Times*. 01 Oct. 2015. Web. 04 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.ibtimes.com/dylann-roof-death-penalty-case-speedy-trial-right-waived-lawyers-accused-south-2122978>>.

<sup>3</sup> Inae Oh, "Families of Charleston Mass Shooting Victims: 'We Forgive You.'" *Mother Jones*. 19 June 2015. Web. 03 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2015/06/families-charleston-shooting-victims-we-forgive-you>>.

conceptions of forgiveness are not on par with each other will help us see more fully what is distinctive of the phenomenon of forgiveness.

Our intuitions about forgiveness tell us that harm must be done before forgiveness can take place. Dylann Roof certainly hurt the people of Charleston, but I cannot be said to have harmed Allstate in any significant way if I get into a car accident, unless we count the fact that I cause the company to pay out some money. On these grounds, I would say Allstate has no reason to forgive me. If the causing of harm is the only criteria that must be satisfied to qualify for forgiveness, then we must consider hurricanes and tornadoes potential objects of forgiveness. We do not do so, however, which suggests that only harms *of a certain kind* are eligible for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a concept relating to morality, so we must disqualify natural disasters from forgiveness because they cannot participate in moral behavior. Importantly, most of us would argue, Roof is a *moral agent*, by which I mean he has the capacity to choose good or evil, and he chose to inflict harm on others. For the purposes of this paper, I will treat "person" and "moral agent" interchangeably, and I will consider only humans to be people. I will call the requirement that forgiveness responds only to harm that results from the choices of moral agents the *trespass* component of forgiveness.

The Charleston forgivers welcomed Roof into their church, which to them is a sacred place where they all regularly come together as friends. They did not welcome him so that they may punish or humiliate him, but so that he may repent just as they all repent for bad things they have done. The forgivers seemed to believe that Roof is, in a sense, just like them. They may have thought he made some horrible choices in the past, but their invitation indicates that they did not think this permanently disqualifies him

from their community. In contrast, Allstate believes it is doing me a favor by graciously granting me a discount. My intuitions about forgiveness tell me that those who forgive neither look down upon those they forgive, nor think they are doing the other a favor, but instead recognize the commonalities between themselves and the other. I call this requirement the *humility* component of forgiveness.

Allstate's aim in keeping my rate the same is to get my business. The company is not primarily concerned, for instance, with whether I ever become a better driver, but with ensuring that I do not find an insurance provider that offers more appealing customer benefits. Further, Allstate keeps track of the number of accidents in which I am involved, and then uses that information against me when its forgiveness expires after my second accident. In contrast, the Charleston forgivers were willing to allow Roof to atone for his evil deeds so that he may join them and eventually become a better person. They believed that radical improvement was a real possibility for Roof, a cold-blooded murderer, and that their forgiveness could help bring it about. In genuine cases of forgiveness, I argue, the forgiver believes that the past does not disqualify the one forgiven from becoming better. I call this the *faith* component of forgiveness.

Finally, it seems that the forgiveness in Charleston involved a commitment both to help Roof get better and to banish their hostile feelings for him. If he repented, the forgivers suggested, they would treat Roof as genuine part of their church -- a friend. For them to be truly friends, it is likely that Roof would have to undergo a transformation, which the church would help him achieve. For instance, Roof would have to change such that he no longer hated the people of the church. Additionally, the forgivers would have to transform such that they no longer felt anger towards Roof and his horrible deeds. In

contrast, Allstate is a cold corporate entity that never spends time with me, except to provide me with insurance coverage (sometimes I talk to a representative on the phone, for instance). Allstate cannot forgive me because it is not invested in my improvement, and vice versa. I call the requirement that forgiver and forgiven invest themselves in each others' moral transformations the *care* component of forgiveness.

If we combine the components I just roughly described, we come to a tentative definition of forgiveness: *Forgiveness is a human activity in which we engage to respond to our trespasses against one another, and it aims at moral transformation through the practice of humility, faith, and care such that forgiver and forgiven can move forward in a friendly way.*

To expand upon this definition, I will, first, situate forgiveness within the context of virtue ethics so that I may provide an account of the way it transforms us over time, tie forgiveness into the living of the good life, and argue that forgiveness is essential for the continuation of human social life. To accomplish these tasks, I will draw on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Julia Annas' *Intelligent Virtue*, both works that uncover the workings of virtue and its relation to humans as social creatures.

Next, I will analyze the process of forgiveness from start to finish in order to develop my theory regarding the necessary components of forgiveness. I will start by analyzing trespasses, the pains we cause one another that warrant forgiveness, with the help of Lewis Smedes' *Forgive and Forget*. Then I will discuss what I believe to be the two stages of forgiveness, which in turn consist of the practice of three virtues: humility, faith, and care. To discuss humility, I draw on Charles Griswold's account of moral monsters from *Forgiveness: a Philosophical Exploration*, and I illustrate my points with

examples from David Lynch's *The Straight Story*. I take inspiration from William James' account in *The Will to Believe* to develop my own view of faith, and I use Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* for illustration. Lastly, my description of care draws on Nel Noddings' discussion of the engrossment she believes takes place in all caring relationships, and I work with examples from a fable by Lewis Smedes. I conclude with a brief discussion of the possibility of unforgiveable trespasses, and then outline some of the benefits of my theory by applying it to a scenario from *The Sunflower*, by Simon Wiesenthal.

## II. Virtue and Forgiveness

In short, my theory of forgiveness is a secular one, and one which identifies the power to change our dispositions for the better as forgiveness' characteristic feature. Naturally, I need to base my theory on an ethical system which accounts for our human capacity to change ourselves. My theory of forgiveness owes a lot to *virtue ethics*, a general form of ethical theory which give due attention to the way people develop morally over time. Many virtue-oriented ethical accounts suggest that there is a single end to human life -- *eudaimonia*, *flourishing*, or *the good life* -- towards which all people who are morally inclined should strive for the duration of their lives. Placing forgiveness in a virtue ethics context allows me to talk about the way practicing forgiveness over time turns us from mere *people who forgive* into *forgiving people*, for whom forgiveness is an inseparable part of their identity. Doing so also helps explain why becoming an authentically forgiving person is something we should pursue in a moral sense: because being forgiving contributes to the living of a good life. This section will set up the basics of virtue ethics and explain how forgiveness fits into a virtue-oriented framework. I will save discussion of the way virtue is learned and developed for section III.

In order to live a good life, the virtue ethicist argues, we must first develop the contents of our character because flourishing necessarily involves activity and our actions stem from the means and motivations within us. Virtue ethics distinguishes itself from other ethical systems by prioritizing *virtues*, the dispositions within our characters which enable and motivate us to live well. For example, unlike the consequentialist, who calls those actions good which lead to favorable effects, the virtue ethicist calls actions good when they are virtuous: those of the kind that ultimately improve our characters, making us more likely to live well. Virtue ethics argues that people are creatures of habit, and it therefore leans heavily on the concept of *habituation* to explain the ways our character can become more (or less) virtuous over time. By repeatedly engaging in virtuous activity (by practicing it regularly in the real world), we gradually make virtue second nature. With enough practice, we master virtues (or their opposites, vices), incorporating them into our personality such that we automatically approach the world with them. For instance, whereas an occasional forgiver must usually deliberate about whether he or she can forgive others, a truly forgiving person, who has devoted much time and energy to the practice of forgiveness, will already be disposed to forgive those who cause him or her harm. The forgiving person asks not "Can I forgive this person?" but "How can I forgive?" On the flip side, if we repeatedly refuse to forgive, we may habituate a character that is stingy with forgiveness. Over time, we may become someone for whom the question of forgiveness never arises at all.

Keep in mind that "automatically" practicing virtue does not mean practicing it "absentmindedly" or "as part of a routine." Rather, as Julia Annas points out, each instance of virtue necessitates reasoning about how to best exercise the virtue given one's

unique situation.<sup>4</sup> Absentminded forgiveness is therefore not effective forgiveness; each time I forgive I must consider, for instance, how a particular trespass hurt me, how best to approach the other person, what qualities about myself and the other I should try to change, etc. Practicing virtue is hard work, even for the most experienced of us. In addition, habituation of virtue can take place over the course of many years, and thus true mastery of forgiveness can take a lifetime to complete

Courage, temperance, generosity, and justice are all virtues, but what exactly makes them virtues? Aristotle writes that development through habituation is not enough to distinguish virtues from "arts" like grammar and musicianship.<sup>5</sup> For instance, we become more musical by playing music, but we would not say musicianship is a virtue. What distinguishes an instance of virtue from an instance of non-virtue, Aristotle says, is that the performer is "in a certain condition" during the act; "in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character."<sup>6</sup> Non-virtuous arts seem to require knowledge, since people familiar with a language, or with music theory, make better grammarians and musicians. But these types of knowledge may sometimes result from rote memorization: for instance we can memorize punctuation rules or chord shapes. In contrast, virtue is never practiced mindlessly, so it cannot be learned by rote. Virtues are also special in that they must be practiced as a result of our intentional choosing, never by accident. For instance, I do not call the 50 dollar bill I dropped into a collection plate a "generous" donation if I gave it thinking it

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<sup>4</sup> Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011) 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. David Ross. Ed. Lesley Brown. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) Book II chapter 4, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, Book II chapter 4, 27-28.

was \$5. Further, to qualify as virtuous, my choice must result from a reliable disposition in my character to make that choice; my choice cannot be made on a whim, or on the spur of the moment. For example, we are courageous if we manage our fear well every time (or almost every time) we are tested. If I choose to squish a spider once, but then scream in terror and run away every other time I see one, no one would say I am courageous with respect to spiders. In the future, however, if I repeatedly expose myself to spiders and each time choose intentionally to face them rather than flee, I may eventually make courage with respect to spiders a reliable facet of my character.

Aristotle's last condition for virtue is that the choice behind a virtuous act is made *because we believe it is virtuous*. For example, if I want to be temperate, it is not just because I want to avoid embarrassing drunkenness in social situations; I really want it because I think temperance is its own reward. In other words I do not want it for the sake of something else, but believe it is *good in itself*. Virtue ethicists value virtues as *internal means* to a good life, in the sense that their mastery both brings about and constitutes a good life. Internal means contrast with *external means*, like health and wealth, which may contribute to a good life, but are not strictly necessary for it. For the virtue ethicist, the ultimate reward for our hard work habituating virtue is that we get to be the type of people who embody virtue in all we do. Thus, we can imagine a good life in which we are poor or ill, for instance, but not one in which we are cowardly, stingy, or overindulgent.

To live an overall good life is to incorporate all virtuous dispositions into our character, or at least as many as we can in our relatively brief lives. Those committed to virtue embark on a lifelong quest that involves constant activity, never idleness. The

intention to physically harm someone out of anger is immoral even if it never drives one to action, since entertaining the intention habituates an angry or violent outlook towards others. This fact should not, however, lead one to believe that mastering virtue is merely a matter of having the right intentions. The intention to remain peaceful, for instance, is only virtuous insofar as it leads one to resist the urge to be violent, or perhaps even to forgive an aggressor. Importantly, well-developed virtues are effective in bringing us to action; good intentions are not enough. I can intend to forgive others all I want, but if I never go out and forgive anyone, forgiveness will never become a lasting, internalized part of my character, and I will never enjoy the reward of being a forgiving person.

Everyone struggles at first to complete the chain from good intention to good action. The more we nurture our virtuous dispositions, the more they become stable facets of our personality, and the more likely we are to follow through. There are two reasons for this: one is that, as with any acquired skill, experience teaches us more effective methods of performance. For example, practicing basketball makes one more acquainted with the rules of the game, and playing an instrument can teach one about music theory. The more I try to forgive, the more I learn *how* to forgive -- how to approach others, how to approach myself, etc. The other reason is that practicing virtue tends to enable us to enjoy practicing it. Though on the surface virtue looks like hard, painstaking work (and it is), we find that those we consider most virtuous actually enjoy doing what they do -- in fact, they cannot help but be virtuous since they have made virtue a stable part of their personality. For example, those who give often to charity tend to feel good when they do it, whereas those who give rarely do so reluctantly. Similarly, the more I forgive, the more I reorient myself such that I want to continue forgiving.

No one is born with a well-developed character, and thus we all must intentionally develop both our skill and motivation to continue building virtue. One reason we may find internalizing virtue difficult is that virtues lie in a mean, and so being virtuous therefore requires a delicate balance.<sup>7</sup> Each virtue lies between the extreme of deficiency and the extreme of excess. For example, if I am deficiently temperate I will gorge myself on food and drink with no concern for my health. And if I am excessively temperate, I will deny myself a healthy portion, which may be just as unhealthy. As we habituate virtues, we want to make sure we practice them in just the right amount. Since our lives are all different, the "right amount" is going to be an amount individualized to each of us. Aristotle writes about a muscular wrestler named Milo: surely, what is an excessive amount of food for a smaller man would not be enough to sustain Milo. And thus, to be temperate with his eating (to neither eat too much nor too little), Milo must eat more than the average person.<sup>8</sup> Coming to know ourselves and what constitutes our virtuous mean comes with the regular and repeated practice of virtue, which teaches us the most effective methods of performance relative to ourselves.

Another reason habituating virtues can be complicated is that many virtues are interwoven. Often, developing one virtue means developing many others as well.<sup>9</sup> For example, a virtue like generosity probably also requires compassion, empathy, and kindness for its practice. Aristotle would go on to argue that all virtues are unified, meaning that one cannot truly have one without having them all.<sup>10</sup> My project is not to examine virtue in general, so I will not argue whether all the virtues are really one virtue.

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, Book II chapter 6, 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, Book II chapter 6, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Annas, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, Book VI chapter 13, 117.

I do believe, however, that the practice of forgiveness is like the practice of any virtue, and that the development of forgiveness requires the development of multiple virtues at once: humility, to open the door to forgiveness, faith, to take a step towards the other, and care, to finish the stride into a healthy, restored relationship.

In summary, I argue that virtue ethics provides a natural context in which to understand the *development* of forgiveness as a character trait. As with any virtue, we must develop the capacity to forgive over time, and through repeated practice, if we want it to become a lasting part of our character. Those we consider most forgiving are those in whom repeated practice has made forgiveness an authentic part of their personality -- it is no longer a concept external to them, but an activity in which they engage automatically and reliably. Further, as with any virtue, forgiveness seems to lie in a mean.<sup>11</sup> If we are too stingy with forgiveness, we become hard-hearted. Unlikely to repair broken relationships, we tend to end up alone. On the other hand, if we give forgiveness too freely or too quickly, we make ourselves into pushovers. Never willing to stand up for ourselves, we allow others to harm us repeatedly, and our relationships become one-sided. Thus, we must ensure that our forgiving disposition remains expressive of a virtuous mean. Finally, like a virtue, forgiveness contributes to our ultimate flourishing as an internal means. I will argue in the next section that forgiveness is indispensable for maintaining healthy social lives, which are integral to human flourishing. For these reasons, I conclude that forgiveness is best analyzed through the lens of virtue ethics because it is best understood *as a virtue*.

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<sup>11</sup> Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*. (New York: Cambridge UP, 2007) xiv.

Just as I do not become more courageous staying in comfortable situations, I do not become more forgiving by refusing to forgive, or by only forgiving when it is easy. As with the development of virtue, the development of forgiveness requires us to rise to the challenge. To get the means and motivations to forgive frequently, successfully, willingly, and rightly, most of us must undergo a great transformation, spanning many years. Though by the end we will undoubtedly still feel the pain of others' trespasses, and will still need to exert great effort to remain forgiving at times, we will find our transformed selves able to clear hurdles we once thought impassible. Our strong humility, faith, and care we will enable us to forgive the most heinous of trespasses, should we choose to, and we and our relationships will remain strong.

### III. The Self and Others

Virtue ethics maintains that developing virtue is integral to living well. We have already seen that virtue ethics aims at eudaimonia, the ultimate end of human life, and that the development of virtue is necessary for living in a way that strives for flourishing. We can say that living virtuously is an objectively good activity for any person, even if we note that the particulars of the activity for each individual may vary since everyone has a different starting place. Some may find certain virtues easier to develop than others -- for instance, some may find it easier to forgive than others -- but there is no one born with all virtues mastered, and so all those committed to virtue ethics are united by their common striving for improvement.

Until now, I have not discussed the social dimension implicit in our quest for virtue. This section will explore the way the self and the other must interact to facilitate the successful development of virtue, as well as the eventual achievement of flourishing. Specifically, it

will discuss the way virtue is learned and developed socially, and will conclude that no good life is therefore complete without other people with whom to share it.

No one would deny that people seek the society of other like-minded people, and that, once together, they prefer to stay together than be apart. But Aristotle goes as far as to say that, metaphysically, relationships with others are a key part of the human experience.<sup>12</sup> Thus virtue ethics assumes a definition of humanness such that life without other people would be an incomplete one -- it argues that people are fundamentally social creatures. Virtue development is motivated partly by the self and partly through the help of others. On one hand, when we lack virtuous dispositions, we need to intentionally direct ourselves toward virtue as it will not yet be something attractive to us in itself. The intentional development of virtue requires frequent self-assessment, and implies a certain amount of self-consciousness, which one may not acquire until one is a mature adult. On the other hand, we could never have learned the virtues in the first place, before we were mature adults, had we not originally used others as models on which to base our behavior.

We can imagine an individual practicing some virtues in private. For example, competing desires sometimes put us in conflict with ourselves, like when a dieter feels tempted by sweets. A virtue ethicist can break the stalemate between competing desires by choosing actions that will make him or her more virtuous in the long run. Though the dieter faces strong temptation, he can choose to habituate the virtue of self-discipline, thus doing what will be good for him in the long run (in the sense that it may improve his character permanently), rather than what will feel good now and only now. But just because we can imagine particular virtues exercised in private, we should not wrongly assume that virtue, in general, is a private activity. In reality other people serve vital roles

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<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, Book VIII chapter 1, 142.

in the development of our virtues. One role they play is to be the object of our virtue: for instance, practicing virtues like generosity, humility, faith, and care all require others for us to be virtuous *towards*. They are, in essence, social virtues that facilitate quality interactions between people.

The other crucial role the other plays in our virtuous development is that of a role model, to which we conform our behavior. It seems that all virtues, whether private or social, must first be acquired from outside ourselves before we can perfect them within ourselves. As children, beginners in virtue, we naturally try to imitate those we respect, whether they are famous people, heroes of ours, or just everyday people. Annas writes, for instance, that we "recognize generosity in billion-dollar funding and in a neighbor helping out with babysitting" and "courage in warriors and also in terminal patients."<sup>13</sup> Importantly, we can extract virtues from the original contexts in which we encounter them and apply them to new situations.<sup>14</sup> For instance, after modeling my courage after a soldier I can utilize it in contexts other than battle.

We can use the concept of modeling to explain the powerful influence our environment has on our development, especially in our early lives. The force that drives us toward virtue, even when we are too inexperienced to find virtues appealing in themselves, is what Julia Annas calls our innate *drive to aspire*, which motivates us toward the continual improvement of our faculties in the ways we think best. Julia Annas explains that the drive to aspire is present in all people, but that its ability to lead us to a good life can be helped or hampered by the social contexts in which we find ourselves

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<sup>13</sup> Annas, 83.

<sup>14</sup> Annas, 84.

embedded.<sup>15</sup> For example, a parent who treats a young child poorly becomes a model to the child: an anti-virtuous one. We can all think of examples of people who grew up in households with few virtuous role models. We know that some never rise above the example set by their parents, and those who do rise above must generally work harder to attain virtue than those who do not need to (for instance, they may have to put distance between themselves and their families).

Full-grown adults are probably more discerning in their choice of models than young children; if they encounter an abusive parent they are unlikely to model themselves after him or her because years of experience has taught them that such behavior is anti-virtuous. This is not to say that adults never need models. Supposing that an adult is a recovering alcoholic, he is more likely to cure himself if his environment contains a network of friends to help. The alcoholic can choose to model himself after those with more impulse-control than he, which demonstrates that our ability to use others as models remains vital to our quest for virtue in all stages of our lives. I have mentioned that the drive to aspire directs us toward what we think is best, and one may then ask how we come to know what is best for us. If one is a beginner in virtue, one does not yet understand which dispositions are virtuous and which are not. Do we not need to be able to visualize ourselves at our best before we can strive to become our best? No virtue ethicist will deny that we lack a clear idea of what virtue entails when we first start to pursue it. But they will argue that the path to virtue grows clearer as we move along it - our character is a continual work in progress, and as we improve our character we also

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<sup>15</sup> Annas, 5.

come to better understand what we must do to continue improving.<sup>16</sup> Thus we do not need to have a perfect picture of ourselves, or a complete idea of what virtue mastery entails, to begin developing ourselves. Rather, visualization of our best self is informed by our social experiences, and continually revised in light of new experiences.

Whenever I recognize an instance of courage I learn something about courage in general. Over time I construct a comprehensive understanding of the virtue, and in turn my end goal of flourishing, from my past experiences. Our recognition of virtuous models is not limited to instances within other, living people. We can also learn about virtue from reading history, philosophy, fiction books, and watching movies.<sup>17</sup> But it is still probably preferable to learn virtues from immediate experience (real life models in our own lives), since in these cases we get a chance to feel the effects of virtue firsthand. For example, when we hurt a friend but he or she forgives us, we get to feel what it is like to be forgiven -- we get to experience the healing of a relationship firsthand, as opposed to reading about it in a book. Having experienced the power of forgiveness, and having enjoyed its benefits, we are likely to model ourselves after the person who forgave us.

I cannot truly conform my behavior to a model (or at least not in a way that truly leads to me acquiring virtue) without incorporating that model into my own personal identity. When I imitate someone else's virtue, I not only try to imitate their physical movements, but also to habituate the inner motivations and dispositions behind their

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<sup>16</sup> Annas writes that the ultimate goal of living is vague for everyone, but that this is not threatening to a virtue-oriented approach because the aspiration towards happiness (a good life) forms the starting point of ethical theory in general (125). Because we want to be happy, we try to find out what happiness is and how we can achieve it. Our conception of happiness becomes more determinate the more we cultivate the virtues. If we knew from the start what happiness is and how to get it, we would be virtuous from birth.

<sup>17</sup> Annas writes that the practice of virtue unites us with the community of all people who have practiced that virtue, past, present, and future. This allows us to learn virtue from those outside our cultures -- she give the example of ancient Rome -- and to distance ourselves from our original context, should it be anti-virtuous (for example, if one grows up in an abusive household, one can escape and find more virtuous role models elsewhere) (58).

action. My goal as a virtue practitioner is to turn virtues from ideals external to me into permanent, internal parts of my personality. Thus, when I recognize virtues I have not yet perfected in the behavior of other people, I aim to change myself into someone more like them. To learn from others, especially those with much more developed virtues than we have, it does not suffice for us to merely watch others from afar. Rather, we must act as others do so that we become intimately acquainted with their character. In summary, to improve ourselves we must form close relationships with others such that we can make parts of their virtuous character ours. As we interact with close friends and family -- with whom we stay attached for years and with whom we are continually both teachers and students of virtue -- we will undoubtedly find that our closest relationships form an important part of who we are.

As we move towards flourishing, we will inevitably make friends and want to keep them. Aristotle writes not only that friendship "is a virtue or implies virtue" and is therefore a necessity for the virtue practitioner, but also that "without friends no one would choose to live," highlighting that our social natures are unsatisfied without a sense of companionship.<sup>18</sup> When we engage in *friendship*, we invest our naturally aspirational spirit into the lives of others. In short, we aim to help our friends flourish, and vice versa. Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of friendship: the kind built on utility, built on pleasure, and built on character. He concludes that friendships of the third kind encompass all that is desirable about the other two kinds: if friends love each other for their virtuous character, they will inevitably find each other both useful and pleasant to be around. Additionally, friends of this sort will find that their relationship is long lasting

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<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, Book VIII chapter 1, 142.

because good character "is an enduring thing," while what is useful or pleasurable to us may change relatively quickly.<sup>19</sup>

I will refer to friendships of Aristotle's third kind as "true" friendship because I believe it is the most sought-after by those who strive to flourish. True friendship is the most complete and virtuous relationship we can maintain with other people. In it, a mutually virtue-oriented spirit drives the parties to incorporate the other's goodness into their own identity, thus making both better. And conversely, true friends invest themselves in each other's flourishing, wishing each other well and helping whenever possible, perhaps for the duration of their lives. If we acknowledge that flourishing people need both virtues and social companionship, then it seems Aristotle's true friendship is the relationship we try to approximate with all of our relationships, as it is lacking in neither virtue nor companionship. I will argue in section V that the ultimate end of forgiveness is to secure friendship between forgiver and forgiven, true friendship being the perfect expression of human relationships.

## IV. When Do We Need Forgiveness?

Forgiveness contributes to our flourishing in two ways. First, forgiving and being forgiven help to habituate the virtues of humility, faith, and care, which have applications outside of forgiveness, and which contribute to an overall virtuous character. Second, forgiveness heals our relationships, which inevitably break from time to time, and ensures the continuation of friendship, another integral component of human flourishing. We practice forgiveness in the face of broken or nearly-broken relationships, so we must first

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<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, Book VIII chapter 3, 145.

explain the contexts in which our relationships break down before we can understand the complex dynamics of forgiveness itself.

Not every bump in the road of human relations warrants thought about forgiveness. For instance, some transgressions between people are so minor that they pose no threat to our relationships; we easily shrug them off. Others cannot be traced back to any transgressor at all -- in these cases toward whom can we direct our forgiveness? Typically, a transgression of any sort between two human parties must satisfy certain criteria before we will consider it a *trespass*, *i.e.*, a candidate for forgiveness. To explain what I think constitutes a trespass, I turn to Lewis Smedes' analysis of crisis-causing pain. He distinguishes two types of pain: one that does not threaten relationships and one that does.

Most everyday transgressions between people result in *superficial* pains. To relieve ourselves of these pains we need only briefly direct our thoughts elsewhere, or wait a relatively short time for them to subside.<sup>20</sup> For example, when a driver cuts us off on the freeway we do not harbor ill will towards the stranger for long. Often we forget the transgression entirely by the time we reach our destination. We never feel the need to confront the stranger who cut us off, nor do we tend to introspect deeply about what happened to us. If the driver is a friend of ours, we may chalk up his transgression to him being late for an appointment, or we assume it was an accident. In other words, superficial pains do not lead us to rethink our relationships with others, nor do they negatively impact our future interactions with the transgressor.

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<sup>20</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1996) 5.

But we know from experience that some pains transcend superficiality. Such pains stick with us indefinitely. We try to forget the memory, but we always end up reliving our suffering.<sup>21</sup> If other people inflict what Smedes calls *transcendent* pain on us, it certainly impacts our future interactions negatively -- in some cases we may cut ties with them completely. For example, a spouse's adultery can hurt for years, and even cast shadows of pessimism and distrust on relationships with future partners. The usual tactic of directing our thoughts elsewhere breaks down as we lie awake in bed, painfully dissecting the betrayal, which just will not leave our subconscious, over and over in our mind. Occasionally transcendent transgressions may cause one party (or both) to develop a lasting grudge wherein he or she continually wishes the other harm. Not all transcendent transgressions lead to obsession, separation, or long-lived grudges, but they do always serve to push the parties of a relationship apart such that the relationship cannot continue the way it did before. This is because transcendent transgressions, unlike superficial ones, cause significant damage to relationships we most consider parts of ourselves, thereby threatening to disrupt our flourishing. Transcendent transgressions are characterized by the creation of lasting bitter feelings towards the transgressor, as well as a lack of trust in him or her, all stemming from the perception that oneself has been damaged. I will refer to this overall unfriendly disposition as *resentment*.

We have already discussed how our relationships with others become a part of ourselves. In our quest for flourishing, we invest our time and energy into the lives of others. When we invest a large amount of ourselves in others (for instance, with our closest friends and family), the relationship between us becomes a part of our personal identity, and the other becomes, to a certain degree, an extension of ourselves. Thus,

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<sup>21</sup> Smedes, 5.

when relationships break down and ties between parties are severed, a part of ourselves is also severed. When trespassers cause our relationships to break down in such a way, we feel that they *owe us something*: the restoration of the part of ourselves that was destroyed. Our inner virtue of justice demands that the damage we incurred be repaired (in some situations, this may never happen), and until then we feel bitter resentment towards the trespasser. In the adultery example, the faithful spouse is no longer able to associate with the unfaithful spouse -- the trespass has changed him or her for the worse; something he or she once had is now missing. As demonstrated by the pessimistic view the faithful spouse takes into the future, the worst transcendent trespasses hurt our ability to relate to others in the future. After suffering so much damage to ourselves, we are less likely to stick our neck out again -- to try and make social connections, which we know are integral to our flourishing.

When a party's resentment causes a relationship to suffer, the usual methods of relieving the pain of a transgression break down and forgiveness becomes a possibility. Since we often feel bitterness when we encounter the transcendent transgressor, who robbed us of part of ourselves, we cannot simply forget their misdeed and treat them normally. Close friends become distant friends if they remain friends at all, couples split, and family members stop speaking to one another. At this point, Smedes would say, we enter a "crisis of forgiveness."<sup>22</sup> In such a crisis we must choose between continuing to resent, which leaves us with the pain of our memories and the damage to the self we have sustained, and taking on the risky process of forgiveness, which may ultimately transform our resentment, revive our relationship, and restore the missing parts of ourselves. There are legitimate reasons to choose either option (as I will argue in section VIII), but it will

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<sup>22</sup> Smedes, 2.

suffice here to say that it is not always an easy choice, which is why we call it a "crisis." Having explained that certain transgressions engender resentment and that resentment puts us in the position to forgive, it now remains to clarify what it is about certain transgressions that classify them as resentment-sparking trespasses. Following Smedes, I will argue that these trespasses have three concurrent dimensions: they are *personal*, *unfair*, and *deep*.<sup>23</sup>

For a trespass against us to be *personal*, it must be inflicted upon us by other people. People (by which I mean humans) are the only possible recipients of forgiveness because only they can be held accountable for their actions.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, we cannot hold nature accountable for earthquakes, blame wild animals for attacking us in the woods, nor punish computers for running less efficiently than we would like. In addition, the closer a trespasser is to us, the more his or her trespass tends to hurt us. For example, it may be difficult to brush off the pain of an unfaithful spouse because one begins to ask questions about oneself like, "How could I have gotten so close to someone like that? What does that say about me?" Generally speaking, it does not make much difference to our lives when we sever ties with a stranger, or mere acquaintance, but when we lose a good friend it throws our lives off balance. Being social creatures, our relationships with others, some intensely so, make up parts of who we are. Because we are more likely to consider our relationships with those close to us to be integral to our identity, we tend to need time to rebuild when faced with the most personal trespasses.

Although freak accidents fall under the scope of nature and therefore cannot be forgiven, painful unintentional accidents due to negligence can often be traced back to

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<sup>23</sup> Smedes, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Smedes, 6.

people. For example, a pedestrian may forgive a distracted driver who unintentionally runs her over at a crosswalk. Additionally, a trespasser need not always be a single human individual; it is possible for groups to forgive each other. We should note, however, that the transgressions of very large groups are likely to be impersonal. For example, governments and economies are systems run by numerous people. Governments hurt people when they wage war, and some economic systems leave people impoverished. And yet it does not usually make sense for victims to offer forgiveness to these systems because there are no specific individuals within the systems at whom to point our fingers.

We need to exercise caution as we move into the territory of indirect harm. Especially in cases of pain caused by large groups it becomes difficult to trace the hurt we feel back to anyone in particular. Transgressions can be diluted across many members of a group, for instance, the orders of an evil dictator descend through the ranks of an army and ultimately get carried out by thousands of officers and soldiers. Surely we can point fingers at the dictator for the harm his orders caused, but is not the army to blame as well? Just how much responsibility should we assign to any one member of the army? How responsible is the dictator, considering he never got his hands dirty? These questions cloud our judgment, making it difficult to assign blame, and to forgive. In cases where we can blame specific individuals within large groups, like horrible dictators or crooked bankers, we must ensure that these individuals have personally and directly hurt *us*.<sup>25</sup> We must be certain we do not feel hurt on someone else's behalf, and that we can trace a direct path from our pain to his or her actions.

*Unfair* pains are those that would be considered undeserved by a reasonable observer. For a trespass to be unfair it must be inflicted upon us without first being

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<sup>25</sup> Smedes, 6.

warranted by something we have done. It may come from someone we trust, or at least from someone we reasonably expect not to do us harm.<sup>26</sup> For example, we cannot forgive a casino card-dealer for taking our money after we have gambled and lost, but we may forgive a mugger who robs us on the street. In the first case, there is nothing unfair about the way we lost our money; we agreed to the terms of the game beforehand. In the second case, one day while minding our own business another person suddenly violated our general expectations of common human decency. One may be tempted to bring up natural disasters, unexpected deaths, and congenital disease in a discussion of unfair pains. Few would deny that all these things are undeserved by those who suffer from them. Unfairness alone, however, is not enough to turn a pain into a trespass. Remember that trespasses are also personal; unfavorable circumstances of nature do not count.

A trespass need not be intended to be unfair to be so. The negligent driver still causes undeserved suffering even if he never intended to do any harm. Sometimes we even suffer unfairly at the hands of those with good intentions. For example, a parent may beat a child (the parent insists) in order to teach a valuable moral lesson.<sup>27</sup> What these cases of unfair trespasses all have in common is that they would be considered undeserved by the best objective judgment of a disinterested observer. What I mean by "best objective judgment" here is somewhat vague, and this project's purpose is not to lay out the conditions for a just punishment. But to give an idea of my meaning, surely not everything judged to be unfair will actually be unfair. For instance, a murderer may disagree that life in prison is a fair sentence for him, but we may argue that his assessment is not objective in the sense that he is too close to the issue to judge fairly.

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<sup>26</sup> Smedes, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Smedes, 11.

Lastly, *deep* pains are those of a high magnitude which do not disappear quickly or easily. For example, we feel a shallow pain when we barely miss happy hour at our favorite restaurant. A father feels a deep pain when he misses his daughter's birth because he got caught in traffic. Smedes admits that a pain's "depth" is not a precise measure since how much something hurts can depend on the person feeling the hurt.<sup>28</sup> The same action may impact multiple people, each person feeling either no pain, or a pain of varying depth. For instance, I might make what I think is a lighthearted joke to a group of friends only to be confronted days later by one member of the group who found it hurtful. In these cases, it is clear that what I find innocuous does not hold for everyone. Additionally, we, the ones in pain, are not always reliable reporters or interpreters of our inner feelings. After a heated argument with a friend, I may find days later that an offhand, sarcastic remark stings me much more than I originally thought, or that I still do not know how I feel about the whole encounter. Still reeling, my thoughts about the matter are scattered and unintelligible. But even if we cannot lay out a precise list of pains arranged in order from deepest to shallowest, it makes sense to say that some pains hurt us more than others, and that (most of the time) we can tell if we are hurt a lot or a little.

The closer a trespasser is to the offended -- the more the offended trusts the trespasser, or considers the trespasser a part of himself or herself -- the more personal the trespass becomes. The more it resembles a betrayal, and the more damage it inflicts to our personal identity. The more we can trace a trespass back to another person's actions (and not our own), the more unfair it is and the more we can blame the other, which makes it easier to draw lines of severance between us and them. The harder we get hit by

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<sup>28</sup> Smedes, 13.

a trespass, the deeper it is, and the more we are compelled to avoid such pain in the future. The three dimensions of a trespass combine to break our relationships and cause us great, lasting pain. Our bitter feelings, which arise in response to personal, unfair, and deep trespasses, and which create distance between our trespassers and us, are understandable. We are victims, they are in the wrong, and we do not want to be hurt again.

I will discuss resentment's moral implications in more detail in the next section, but for now I will conclude this section with two points about the topic. First, as people striving to be virtuous, we must be careful not to resent others when unjustified, *i.e.* when resentment does not result from trespasses that are truly personal, unfair, and deep. For example, insofar as my resentment stems from an irrational tendency towards rage, I should seek to improve myself rather than think bitterly about the other. Second, we must be aware that resentment is only temporarily justifiable as a response to a trespass, since resentment disrupts our flourishing. A good life is not one in which we bitterly live in isolation, continually reliving past pain. Rather, virtuous people are able to move on in one way or another, to let resentment go, and to resume their quest for flourishing among other people. Forgiveness is one way to move on. It enables us to let go of painful memories and to reconnect with those who cause us harm. There are other ways to move on, for example, virtuous people move on after natural disasters destroy their homes, or when they cannot reconcile with a trespasser (for example, in section VIII I discuss cases in which pursuing forgiveness would be detrimental to flourishing), but they do not do so with forgiveness.

## V. The Stages of Forgiveness

When faced with trespasses that are personal, unfair, and deep, resentment builds inside us. In the worst cases resentment dissolves relationships and perhaps even drives us to harm the offender back. At the very least resentment leaves us slow to offer or accept forgiveness. It does not matter which party feels resentment in a relationship; if resentment is present then it drives a wedge between them and makes the relationship strained and unhealthy. Resentment erects walls that keep us safe from further trespasses, but at the same time block us from extending ourselves to the trespasser, thus straining the relationship. In cases where resentment is justified, *i.e.*, when it arises solely as a response to another person's personal, unfair, and deep trespass, I would call the walls "*moral walls*" because we have a good moral reason for keeping our distance: the trespasser hurt us in a way that damaged our relationship, our personal identity, and our flourishing. When asked why we no longer speak to a trespasser we are justified in resenting, we may answer that we have a moral hang-up about doing so, or that we do not associate with people *like that*.

We must be careful, however, in our rush to keep ourselves safe from pain, that we do not box ourselves in with no way to heal. Resentment is only temporarily justified, since no trespass gives us license to wallow perpetually in bitterness. Resentment festers over time, only getting worse the longer we entertain it. Sometimes resentment leads us into a feedback loop in which our hatred of someone makes us remember how they hurt us, and this makes us hate them more, and so on. Over time our unchecked resentment can bleed into our other, healthier relationships (remember that a spouse's infidelity can lead to a general distrust of everyone else), ultimately damaging them as well. Our

harbored bitterness causes us continual pain, and our habitual wall-building slowly shrinks the self such that, eventually, we become unwilling to engage socially with anyone. Being social creatures, we cannot flourish alone, and so we must learn to relieve our pain by reaching out to others when appropriate, rather than walling them all off and retreating inward.<sup>29</sup>

Enter *forgiveness*: the faculty that allows us to let down moral walls, work through our bitterness, and come together again. The feature most characteristic of forgiveness is that it allows us to move past relationship-damaging trespasses by *changing our dispositions toward one another in accordance with virtue*. It is important that forgiveness changes us in accordance with virtue because otherwise any change that preserved a relationship, whether or not it brought us closer to flourishing, could be counted as forgiveness. For instance, if "moving past a relationship-damaging trespass" just meant forgetting that it happened, or making ourselves no longer feel its pain, then, as Charles Griswold writes, "hypnosis or amnesia or taking a pill" could qualify as forgiveness.<sup>30</sup> It is sensible to say that successful forgiveness arises from a "praiseworthy character" -- it is an intentional act performed by people and one whose practice we should aim to perfect over time.<sup>31</sup> Also, forgiveness seems to require some form of reconciliation between the parties involved. It seems that the offender and offended must

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<sup>29</sup> In cases where we cannot reconcile with trespassers, for instance, in cases where being friends would require the loosening of our deepest moral principles, we may maintain our moral walls and sever our ties. In these cases, we may forever hold onto one component of our resentment, in the sense that we refuse to associate with a particular trespasser. But we must still rid ourselves of our destructive bitterness concerning the trespasser's actions, or else it will continue to threaten our relationships with others, and our ultimate flourishing. This healing will be achieved through an activity other than forgiveness, probably similar to the one that helps us move on after a natural disaster.

<sup>30</sup> Griswold, xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Griswold, xiv.

work with one another such that they at least improve, if not repair, their damaged relationship.

To focus this discussion, when I talk about forgiveness I will be talking about what I consider the *paradigmatic case*: forgiveness between two living parties in immediate contact with one another wherein one party is the only forgiver and the other is the only forgiven. It is possible that forgiveness could be granted while at the same time being received, it may also be achieved long-distance, between more than two parties, or perhaps even between a living person and a deceased person.<sup>32</sup> Though most cases of real-world forgiveness are bound to encounter some complications (humans are fallible, after all), my theory will come across more clearly if we ignore them for now. For a paradigmatic case of forgiveness to succeed, the offender and offended must each complete the *two stages of forgiveness*. The first stage involves the choice to forgive, and it requires that both parties approach each other as equals, both committed to the enactment and completion of forgiveness. The second stage consists of the offender and offended doing character-transformative work to change their dispositions towards each other. In the best cases, completion of the second stage results in genuine friendship between the parties, but in all cases the parties are at least left with an attitude of friendliness toward each other.

In section II I talked briefly about the component virtues of forgiveness: *humility*, *faith*, and *care*. In the first stage we must exercise humility and faith, since they combine to orient us towards others, and to make our first moves towards a relationship with them. Humility tells us that all people are moral agents capable of good or evil, and therefore

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<sup>32</sup> My theory could be applied to such *non-paradigmatic* cases, but unfortunately I lack the space to discuss these cases further.

just as capable of redemption as trespass. Importantly, a humble outlook keeps the forgiver from thinking himself or herself superior to the forgiven, and ensures that the forgiven recognizes his or her trespass and regrets it. Faith drives us to commit to the project of forgiveness such that we begin to invest ourselves in it with confidence. Faithful forgivers believe there is the potential for restored goodness within the trespasser, and that the forgiven will demonstrate it if given the opportunity. Faithful forgivers believe that the forgiver's offer of forgiveness is genuine, and that self-improvement is a real possibility. Humility and faith reassure the parties that beginning the often long and involved process of forgiveness will be ultimately rewarding, poising them to begin making changes so that their relationship will work. Stage one turns forgiveness from a mere idea into one of our personal projects, to which we commit our time and energy. Sometimes we fail to forgive because we never pass the first stage: the offender, offended, or both refuse, for whatever reason, to let down their guard and approach the other humbly and faithfully.

In the second stage of forgiveness we exercise care, which allows us to invest ourselves in the character of others such that we try to help them improve. Care fosters a mutual concern for the other's flourishing, which, once habituated, helps us see each other in a different light, and drives us to improve ourselves and the other where necessary. When stage two is complete, both forgiver and forgiven have done the work necessary to banish resentment and orient themselves toward virtue. At this point, we would say the mutual concern between the parties has grown into a healthy, friendly relationship, and that the damage of the trespass has been repaired. I say "friendly" here because, if forgiveness requires care, and care requires concern for the other's flourishing,

then it would be strange for parties who forgive each other to wind up indifferent to one another after the fact. I accept that the formation of a true, long-lasting friendship (in the Aristotelian sense) is likely too strong a condition for every case of forgiveness. At the very least, if they truly have cared for one another, it seems forger and forgiven must exhibit friendly attitudes toward one another, and that could mean something as small as wishing each other well after they part ways.

We should note that caring for someone does not equate to turning a blind eye to the harm they have caused. In fact, we (the forger and forgiven) need to keep the trespasser's trespass in mind when we forgive, as this enables us to make sure it does not happen again. Forgers and forgivens who care for one another try to get at the heart of what caused the trespass, and then seek to correct the problem. Further, forgiving someone does not preclude punishing them when deserved. For example, a burglar may be forgiven by the family he robbed, but he still may be required to serve his time in prison. As a forgiven, sometimes accepting one's punishment or paying reparations can help move forgiveness along. Doing so may help demonstrate that the forgiven is truly sorry, and this will bolster the forger's faith. I would not say, however, that such gestures are strictly necessary for forgiveness to take place. Sometimes we forgive people who never get their just deserts.

I have numbered the stages of forgiveness and believe that they generally proceed in this order, at least at first. I also recognize that forgiveness can, and often should, unfold in a cyclical fashion. It is not always necessary or ideal for the parties to finish stage one and then move onto stage two without ever looking back. Transforming our character can be difficult enough to shake our resolve to forgive. In such cases, we

must re-motivate ourselves to forgive by thinking back to our reasons for beginning the process in the first place. In other words, the choice to forgive must sometimes be made, and then be continually renewed. The two stages of forgiveness can feed off of each other. For instance, spending time caring for someone can make it easier for us to believe faithfully in them, or to be humble towards them. Conversely, making oneself humble or faithful with respect to the other can make it easier to care for him or her.

## VI. Humility

Humility is the virtuous mean between too much pride and too little self-respect. Generally speaking, those with humility are aware of their weaknesses and strengths and strive not to blow either out of proportion. Humble people, for instance, derive an appropriate amount of self-esteem from their achievements, neither arrogantly thinking themselves superior to those to whom they are in fact inferior, nor beating themselves up in a self-effacing manner. Also, at all times they consider themselves neither too perfect to make mistakes nor incapable of improvement. Thus, they are not content to perform virtuous act only once: because they know they are fallible, they remain vigilant, continually trying to improve their character. When they fall short of virtue they do not despair perpetually, but pick themselves up and try again. For this project, I will apply humility to the struggle between trespasser and the one offended, and demonstrate that it is a necessary component for successful forgiveness of the paradigmatic kind.

Although he never committed to a virtue-focused approach, I believe Charles Griswold would agree with me that forgiveness necessitates what I call "agent humility:" the recognition of moral agency not unlike one's own within the other's character. When we feel resentment towards another person, Griswold says, our tendency is to think of the

other as a *moral monster*, a twisted irredeemable creature who is nothing more than the hurtful actions he or she committed.<sup>33</sup> This attitude encourages us to keep distance between ourselves and those we resent, making relationships with them difficult (if not impossible) but protecting us from future damage to ourselves at their hands. Griswold argues, however, that true forgivers look past harmful actions to the person behind them and recognize that he or she is a moral agent with the potential to become better.<sup>34</sup> If we are sufficiently humble forgivers, we will approach trespassers with the attitude that they could have done right or wrong, but made the wrong choice. Thus, they are not barred from redemption and flourishing so long as they now take measures to improve themselves such that they would make the right choice in the future. Humble forgivers recognize that everyone is fallible, themselves included, so they do not consider themselves on a fundamentally higher level than those who harm them, even if the trespasser really is much less virtuous than they.

When we as forgivers recognize a trespasser's moral agency, we try to put ourselves in the trespasser's shoes. Upon doing so we may find that there is more to the trespass than we originally thought. For instance, sometimes the motives behind a trespass are partially noble, and this can strengthen our resolve to forgive. For instance, we may sympathize with the character Jean ValJean from *Les Misérables*, who steals food to feed his starving family.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, not all trespasses have good intentions behind them, and even those that do cannot be all good or else they would not be trespasses; even if the court felt sympathy for ValJean, it still put him in prison for his crime. The

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<sup>33</sup> Griswold, 72.

<sup>34</sup> Griswold, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*. Trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee. (New York: Penguin Group, 2013) "Fantine" section, Book II chapter 6, 84.

exercise of putting oneself into the trespasser's shoes, in any case, still helps the forgiver relate to the trespasser so as to understand his or her motives. When we (the forgiver and the trespasser) understand the reasons for the trespasser's action, we can discern what went wrong and what needs to be changed to bring the trespasser's character in line with virtue. Understanding a trespasser's motivation does not necessarily mean that we believe we would have done the same. In fact, if we are too quick to identify with the trespasser's motives we may end up mistakenly justifying the harm done to us, thus letting the trespasser's anti-virtuous character go unevaluated and unchanged. Letting wrongdoings slide too much demonstrates a lack of self-respect, and an excess of humility. As Griswold points out, we turn ourselves into doormats when we spinelessly refuse to call trespasses what they are, or to feel resentment towards a trespasser when justified.<sup>36</sup>

Forgivers must to some degree understand the motives of the trespasser, or else forgiveness cannot proceed. For instance, if an insane person breaks into my house, hell-bent for no apparent reason on killing me and destroying my property, then I will be unable to put myself in his shoes. I will not discern any noble means or ends; indeed I may discern no motives at all. Even if I cannot be sure that the insane burglar is incapable of moral thinking or self-improvement, I cannot see (or am prevented by his condition from seeing) what needs to change in his character to bring him in line with virtue. Cases of complete insanity may be rare, but we can more easily imagine a situation in which distance prevents trespasser and one offended from communicating. For instance, I cannot come to understand a drunk driver who runs me over and then speeds off never to be seen again. I may still need to heal from the trauma of the accident, but there is no other person present for me to try to understand better, and no relationship here to repair.

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<sup>36</sup> Griswold, 29.

The less we can discern a trespasser's motives, whether because he or she is absent or because we cannot relate as moral, rational agents, the more the trespasser resembles an indifferent natural disaster, which causes serious harm but is not a candidate for forgiveness.

If we are humble forgivers, we are neither too proud to apologize, nor too self-punishing to accept forgiveness. We will think of ourselves as fundamentally equal to the forgiver, since we recognize the potential to improve within ourselves, but we may feel temporarily in his or her debt. We will see that our trespass has suppressed flourishing, both ours and theirs, and motivated to maximize flourishing we will regret what we have done and begin the path to self-improvement. Humble forgivers need not say the words "I apologize," but they need to feel empathy and remorse such that they recognize the harm they caused, take responsibility for it, and somehow make their remorse known to the one harmed. Their apology, tacit or explicit, may also include an honest explanation of their motives to make it easier for the forgiver to understand them. Humility leads the trespasser to want to begin making it up to the offended, which he or she ultimately accomplishes by moving towards virtue in stage two of forgiveness. Note that the forgiven need not discern the motives of the forgiver for engaging in forgiveness (at least not in the paradigmatic case). This is because forgiveness makes the character of the forgiven, not the forgiver, into a project on which both parties work. Humility places forgiver and forgiven on an equal level with respect to their fallible natures, but engages them in an asymmetrical arrangement in which the forgiver takes on more responsibilities than the forgiven.

Humility is the first step of the first stage of forgiveness. It starts forger and forgiven on the path towards a healed relationship by putting them both on equal (though asymmetrical) footing. Without equal footing, an arrangement like true friendship cannot appear as a (distant, but) genuine possibility to either party. In true friendship, both friends contribute to each other's flourishing such that they consider themselves both teacher and student of virtue. So long as one party pridefully thinks him or herself superior, the party will not be prepared to learn from the other. And so long as a party self-effacingly thinks him or herself inferior, the party will believe he or she has nothing to contribute. Most relationships will not live up to the standard of true friendship, but I believe we deny perfectly worthwhile relationships to both ourselves and others when we cannot exercise humility, and this negatively impacts flourishing both for us and them. To illustrate my point, I turn to the character Alvin Straight, from the film *The Straight Story*.<sup>37</sup>

After ten years of silence between him and his brother Lyle, Alvin, a retired farmer in his 70s, hears that Lyle has suffered a stroke. Deeply regretting his estrangement but having too poor vision to drive a car, Alvin sets off on his riding mower on a 240 mile journey to make up with his brother before it is too late. Over the course of the film, we get the impression that Alvin and Lyle's long silence was more the result of pride than of the argument they had ten years prior (we never get the details about the argument). From Alvin's behavior on the journey we can infer the presence of stubborn pride within him. For instance, he refuses hospitality from friendly people who offer him food and shelter. He prefers to sleep on their lawn, and when he borrows their cordless

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<sup>37</sup> *The Straight Story*. Dir. David Lynch. Perf. Richard Farnsworth and Sissy Spacek. (Walt Disney Pictures, 1999).

phone he refuses to come inside where it is warm. He even leaves a few dollars under the phone when he returns it. Alvin's stubborn refusal to accept favors showcases the same pride that likely kept him from reconciling with his brother. Both accepting favors and apologizing (assuming Alvin was to blame for the separation) requires us to make ourselves indebted to another person. When we indebted ourselves, we must come to terms with the fact that we are not sufficient on our own, that we need help.

Alvin's behavior on the road also suggests the beginning of a transformation. For example, he longingly reminisces about lying under the stars with his brother as children, back when they were each the other's closest friend. It seems that Alvin knows he is missing something in his solitude, and it took the news of his brother's poor health for him to realize it. A trip to the doctor early in the film reveals that Alvin is in poor health as well, which may suggest that Alvin feels remorse as a result of the commonality he finds between himself and his brother. Faced with the reality that no one is invincible, not even ourselves, we may let go of our prideful independence. We find that putting ourselves in another's debt does not make us inferior but rather human because all humans are fallible, imperfect, and dependent on each other.

## VII. Faith

Having humbly recognized the agency and perhaps a bit of oneself in the other, all that remains in stage one of forgiveness is to commit to working together. The virtue of faith handles the commitment aspect of stage one -- it enables us to let down moral walls and begin investing ourselves in the project of restoring the relationship. But we should recognize that, in cases of real-world forgiveness, the line between faith and humility can blur. The two virtues are really two sides of the same coin. For instance, if

we are the forgiver our commitment to work with the forgiven can grow stronger the more we understand his or her motives. Additionally, our commitment to work together may drive us to learn more about the forgiven. Humility informs faith and vice versa, so one need not happen before the other. What is important is that both elements -- the recognition of agency and the commitment to work together -- are present.

Faith is the virtuous mean between foolhardiness and being overly cautious or skeptical. Faithful people neither make blind, arbitrary leaps to certain beliefs, nor scrutinize candidate beliefs until they are unwilling to adopt any at all. By adopting a belief, I do not mean that we store an inert piece of information in our minds. When we truly adopt a belief, it usually means we also take a corresponding course of action. What makes faith special is that it allows us, as beings who generally demand evidence before adopting beliefs, to make the jump from skepticism to belief in cases where there is not quite enough evidence to wholeheartedly convince us, or sometimes when there is very little evidence at all. It is important to recognize that faith has limits: we should not adopt beliefs frivolously, as this would be arbitrary and reckless. Believing without strong evidence is not the same as believing for no reason, and when we practice faith in the context of forgiveness we always do so with good reason. We may talk about faith with respect to ideas, concepts, or points of view. For example, one can have faith in the liberal arts that it will provide one with a well-rounded education. For this project I will be concerned with faith with respect to people. When we say we have faith in others (or ourselves), we believe that they are being sincere, or we have an optimistic outlook about their capabilities. In other words, having faith in people is like giving them the benefit of

the doubt *now*, even when their past actions suggest the possibility that we may be disappointed *later*.

William James, aiming to disprove the idea that it is always morally wrong to believe without sufficient evidence, argues that believing on faith is acceptable when faced with decisions that are *living*, *forced*, and *momentous*. A living choice is one that appeals to us such that we could see ourselves making it.<sup>38</sup> For example, it is a living possibility for most Americans to adopt Christianity, but it likely does not even register as a possibility to most of them to adopt the religion of a far-away country, with which they have no familiarity.<sup>39</sup> Factors external and internal, like the kind of people with whom we happened to grow up around and continue to have relationships, the part of the world in which we find ourselves, and the current network of beliefs we already hold affect how lively a hypothesis appears to us. A forced choice is one in which we are presented two options without the possibility of choosing neither. For instance, I could avoid the choice of going out with or without an umbrella by not going out at all.<sup>40</sup> But if the choice is between being a drug addict and checking into rehab, then we can really only choose between those two options. If we try to defer our decision in this case, it amounts to choosing to continue doing drugs. A momentous choice is one that is probably unique, meaning that, in all likelihood, it may only present itself once. Unlike my choice of what color socks to wear, momentous choices cannot be easily overturned. James offers the example of choosing to join a North Pole expedition: if I go, I may not make any discoveries and may not become famous, but if I do not go, I will *definitely* not

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<sup>38</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe*. (Lexington: CreateSpace Independent Platform, 2012) 1.

<sup>39</sup> James, 2.

<sup>40</sup> James, 1-2.

become famous.<sup>41</sup> James' point is that momentous choices have high stakes: our choice decides whether we gain or lose something valuable to us.<sup>42</sup>

James argues that moral questions often put us in situations where we must make living, forced, and momentous decisions.<sup>43</sup> I argue that the question of offering forgiveness is such a moral question. Trespasses leave the parties of a relationship in a situation where only the virtue of faith, *i.e.*, only choosing to give the other the benefit of the doubt, will allow forgiveness, and the healing of their relationship to proceed. Provided we have already exercised humility, we have enough information to consider forgiveness a living possibility. As forgivers, so long as we believe the trespasser is a monster we will believe that extending forgiveness is futile. But if we believe humbly that the trespasser is a moral and rational agent, we can choose whether to *expect* him or her to self-improve. Humility tells forgivers that the trespasser can improve, and faith tells them that the trespasser *is likely to* improve, should they trust him or her. The confidence afforded by faith animates forgivers to make themselves part of the trespasser's improvement -- the trespasser, to them, becomes someone worth caring for.

As forgivers, we believe that forgiveness is a living possibility when we have faith that the forgiver's gestures are genuine -- that the forgiver is not going through the motions of forgiveness to appear virtuous or superior. Humility tells us that the forgiver is an agent capable of forgiveness, and faith leads us to believe that he or she is trying to forgive. Further, forgivers must also have faith in themselves. Here humility tells them

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<sup>41</sup> James, 2.

<sup>42</sup> For my purposes, I use a weaker version of James' momentousness condition. Very rarely, I believe, do we encounter truly unique choices, of the same magnitude as the joining of a North Pole expedition, and yet I want to apply a fairly Jamesian account of faith to forgiveness, which I believe we encounter in our everyday lives. I argue that forgiveness, though perhaps not always a unique choice, usually has high stakes, and that its outcome tends to matter very much to us.

<sup>43</sup> James 9.

they are agents capable of improvement, and faith tells them they will improve, and are thus worthy of forgiveness.

The choice to forgive is forced because the only two options that present themselves are to continue one's resentment or to try and heal the relationship. As long as forgivers or forgivens drag their feet, neither wanting to commit to forgiveness nor refusing to commit, they effectively allow their relationship to remain damaged. It is only by stepping forward faithfully that they begin to engage the other in forgiveness. Even if we can conceivably overturn our decision not to forgive at any time, I would still consider the choice to forgive a momentous one because our character, and with it our flourishing, is at stake, especially when the relationship is vital to our sense of self. When we choose not to forgive in cases where we could have, we miss out on opportunities to habituate the virtues of humility, faith, and care, which are integral parts of an overall virtuous character. Additionally, a general unwillingness to forgive tends to leave us friendless, and no human flourishes in a vacuum.

As faithful forgivers, our original resentful attitude towards our trespassers must change in a radical way: we must intentionally make a leap from feeling justified resentment towards their anti-virtuous character to trusting that they will turn their character around. I stress that the change in the faithful forgiver's attitude is a *leap* because it does not seem to follow naturally given the empirical evidence with which most forgivers are faced. In fact, the past actions of most trespassers serve as evidence *counter* to the hypothesis that they are people we should embrace, which makes the choice to forgive, and thereby involve oneself in the flourishing of the trespasser, even more unexpected. I argue that the *leap of faith* taken by faithful forgivers necessarily

makes them vulnerable, and since forgivers must faithfully lower their moral walls to engage the trespasser, forgiveness is unsafe by definition. Much like when we choose to believe in God, forgiveness requires us to confidently stick our necks out despite the absence of strong empirical evidence which assures us we have chosen correctly.

On the surface, making a leap of faith to forgive may sound reckless, but there is at least one good reason to make ourselves vulnerable in such a way: faithful gestures can demonstrate a confidence in the other which constitutes the beginning of a new relationship with him or her. Having faith in our relationships with others, in the absence of empirical evidence to suggest our relationships' health, can actually bring about their health. For instance, James writes, if I "am willing to assume that you must like me" such that "I meet you half-way" and "show you trust and expectation," then you are more likely to come to like me. But in contrast, if "I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence" that you like me, "ten to one your liking never comes."<sup>44</sup> In other words, once one party takes the initiative to extend a first, faithful overture of friendliness, the other party is much more likely to be friendly back, and a relationship between the two is much more likely to blossom. Crucially, the faithful party is not sure that the other will return his or her friendliness, but takes the initiative anyway, and his or her apparent confidence in the fledgling relationship inspires the other to feel confident in it as well.

I argue that faith in forgiveness behaves the same as faith in James' example. If we fold our arms and wait for a trespasser to show signs of improvement before we will let down our guard around him or her, it is likely that we will be waiting forever. Refusing to budge until one has convincing evidence of improvement inspires little

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<sup>44</sup> James, 10.

confidence in the trespasser's mind that the offended would entertain reconciliation under any circumstances. In addition, it leaves the relationship damaged indefinitely, since forgiveness is a forced choice: either we forgive or we do not forgive. In contrast, an offender's willingness to make the first move towards forgiveness despite a lack of evidence shows the offender that he or she believes in the relationship, wants it to work, and can let the past go. A forgiver's confident and faithful attitude may inspire the trespasser to have faith in him or herself as well as the relationship, which may lead to self-improvement and the eventual healing of the relationship. A trespass destroys the confidence the parties of a relationship have in one another, for instance the one offended may think the trespasser a monster incapable of improvement, which drives a wedge between them. Faith has the capacity to restore confidence: when forgivers make a first, faithful overture of friendliness toward the trespasser, they may bring about the beginning of a new relationship with him or her.

To illustrate the way a forgiver's faith can motivate a trespasser's self-improvement, as well as prevent the destruction of a relationship, I turn to the exchange between Jean ValJean and Bishop Myriel from *Les Misérables*. The Bishop is the only person who offers ValJean, a recently released prisoner with a long rap sheet, food and a bed. That night ValJean steals the Bishop's silverware and runs off, only to be caught in the morning by police. When the police bring ValJean back to the Bishop's house, he does not press charges but instead lies, saying that the silverware was a gift.<sup>45</sup> The Bishop says to a dumbfounded ValJean, "you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man... my brother, you no longer belong to evil but to good."<sup>46</sup> With this, the

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<sup>45</sup> Hugo, "Fantine" section, Book II chapters III, V, X, XI, XII.

<sup>46</sup> Hugo, "Fantine" section, Book II chapter XII, 106.

Bishop forgives ValJean's trespass because he has faith that he will improve his thieving character one day. Even though he barely knows the man, and the little that he knows suggests that ValJean cares nothing for honor or virtue, the Bishop faithfully chooses to extend kindness, rather than resentment. Shortly after ValJean leaves, the memory of the Bishop's kindness fills his soul with a "magnificent radiance" and he breaks down and cries. As he weeps, he examines his soul and sees that it is "frightful," but then he perceives a "gentler light," beginning to shine within him as he kneels in prayer.<sup>47</sup> The Bishop's faith inspires ValJean to believe he could become a good man despite all he had done before. The spreading of the gentle light, as well as ValJean's kneeling to pray symbolize his newfound faith in himself, as well as the beginning of his transformation from thief to honest businessman -- ValJean goes on to use his silver to industrialize the town of Montreuil-sur-mer, making himself and its inhabitants rich.<sup>48</sup>

## VIII. Care

Once both parties advance to stage two of forgiveness, they must engage in care in order to heal their relationship and reorient their characters toward virtue. At the beginning of stage two, the relationship between forgiver and forgiven begins to resemble friendship, as the two parties approach each other willing and motivated to at least try investing their time and energy into each other. By the end of stage two, we hope that the relationship is healed, or at least improved such that the parties can move forward with a degree of friendliness. But care does not always succeed; we will see that it is a

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<sup>47</sup> Hugo, "Fantine" section, Book II chapter XIII, 113.

<sup>48</sup> Hugo, "Fantine" section, Book V chapter I.

demanding process, capable of shaking the newfound humility and faith of forgiver and forgiven.

Care is the virtuous mean between callousness and hypersensitivity. It entails wanting what is best for oneself or another person such that one considers what would be best, and then actively tries to bring it about. Callous people ignore their drive to aspire's call to become the best version of themselves they can be. Instead, they sit idly and complacently, neither improving their own character nor helping others to improve. Hypersensitive people are impulsive: if they do not spread themselves so thin worrying about others that they have no energy left for themselves, they expend all their energy agonizing over their own path to flourishing, changing their minds constantly about what is best. It is important to recognize that caring for oneself and caring for another does not mean ensuring that oneself or the other person can do what they want -- that is, what they happen to find attractive at the present moment. Virtuous care always has our or their best interests in mind. For instance, an alcoholic can be aware of the harm his habit causes his loved ones, as well as the harm it brings to his own body, but still want to drink. Imagine that part of him wants to stop: a tiny voice cries out in his head, telling him that he is far from the path to flourishing. If he is callous, he will ignore the voice and continue to do what feels good in the moment. But if he truly cares for himself, he will listen and then reflect on the steps necessary to bring himself in line with virtue. These steps may include seeking help from others, attending regular meetings, and trying each day to drink less and less.

We can think of caring for ourselves as a dialogue between our current self and the picture we have of ourselves at our best (which I outlined in section III). When we

reflect on our character and find that we are not the best we can be (or at least the best we think we can be, given that the picture is subject to change according to our experiences and role models), exercising self-care drives us to make the necessary changes, and this usually means habituation of the virtues we believe we lack. For example, the alcoholic has to work his way out of his addiction, each day resisting strong urges to drink and practicing new, healthy habits regularly until they genuinely become *his* habits. Matters get a little more complicated when we care for others. Imagine that we have an alcoholic friend and we want to care for him. We do not have direct access to the picture he has of himself at his best, so if we want to help him achieve that picture, we have to rely on the information we can gather about him or from him to inform our care. We may ask why we do not just substitute our own picture of ourselves at our best. The answer is that this practice would be callous.

If we have our friend do as we would do (and only as we would do), we would deny him the opportunity to develop his virtues organically, and to achieve the flourishing that fits him. Recall from Aristotle's example of Milo the Wrestler (in section II) that the development of virtues is individualized to each of us; what works for one does not work for all. Though the general goal of flourishing and its general means "develop virtue" are shared by all, the particulars of development vary across people.<sup>49</sup> Of course, in the process of caring for the other we cannot be expected to ignore our picture of what is best for us (it is hard-wired into us), nor should we act as if what is good for us could not in any way be good for others. For instance, though the degree to which each of us must develop courage can vary, it is probably the case that courage is a good trait for

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<sup>49</sup> Within reason, of course. For instance, just as no human should probably consume ten pounds of meat per day, no matter their weight, no one's development of virtue will involve skipping certain virtues, or developing a vice.

anyone to have, cowardice is a bad trait, and that those who have courage can spot cowardice when they see it. When caring for others we should not discard our principles concerning what we think a good life is like -- chances are we have wisdom we can pass to others which holds for them *and* for us, but successful caring requires us to account for the needs of those for whom we care.

Nel Noddings situates care in the center of an entire system of ethics: care ethics. I am not arguing for her view, since she does not consider care a virtue, but I believe some of her observations about care apply well to my theory. For instance, Noddings writes that caring always involves *engrossment*, by which she means "apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible."<sup>50</sup> To apprehend the other's reality is to see the world, as best as one can, through the other's eyes. This contrasts with the putting of oneself in the other's shoes that can take place in stage one of forgiveness. Importantly, when we put ourselves into the other's shoes, we do so with our personal goals and histories intact. When we *engross* ourselves in another person, we try to put ourselves into the person in their shoes, meaning we think deeply about the particulars of being that person. A math teacher, Noddings gives an example of trying to teach a student who hates math. If she is to care for this student, and to teach him effectively, she cannot start with the assumption that he loves math as much as she does. Rather, she must engross herself in the student and think what it must be like to be him. "How would it feel if I hated mathematics? What reasons could I find for learning it?" she asks herself, and then begins the lesson plan from that point of view.<sup>51</sup> Only when she starts to think like this can Noddings engage the student in a way that brings him closer to his individualized

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<sup>50</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*. (Berkeley: U California, 2003) 16.

<sup>51</sup> Noddings, 15.

goals (the reason learning math will be good for him). When she fails to engross, her teaching amounts more to telling students what *she* would do to reach the goals *she* wants to reach.

Notice that, even though Noddings knows the student hates math, she still teaches him math. When Noddings engrosses she does not completely set aside her own personal goals and motives (for instance, to successfully teach her subject). Also, she probably still believes that learning math is something that will be good for the student, no matter what he thinks of it (for instance, because it habituates self-discipline, or because she thinks it will prove immensely useful in any student's future): Noddings keeps her general principles in mind of what a good life is like. The student may also know, deep down, that it would be in his ultimate best interest to learn math, or really to do a great number of things that sound tedious in the now, and this may become clear to Noddings when she engrosses. As with self-care, we do not aim to just allow others to do what they currently would prefer to do. Even if it is through their eyes, we still look towards their ultimate improvement and their best interests -- what will most make them flourish.

There is a significant sense in which caring for others means spending time with them and doing things for them. Noddings points out that a man who claims to care for his elderly mother but then never visits her at her nursing home probably cares a deficient amount.<sup>52</sup> It seems that true care requires us to take action. Just as the self-caring alcoholic must actively take steps to improve, we must take steps to help our alcoholic friend. For instance, we can spend time with him in places that do not serve alcohol, go to meetings with him, or at least give him advice based on our own experiences. We decide what the right thing to do for another person is by engaging him or her in dialogue,

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<sup>52</sup> Noddings, 10.

similar to the way we engage ourselves in dialogue when we care for ourselves. This can mean conversation about what they want most, or just spending time together -- whatever helps us engross ourselves in them. Once we engross ourselves in others, we internalize their picture of themselves into ourselves (though we may not adopt it for ourselves) and work with the other to help them reach it, or at least begin moving towards it.

During stage two of forgiveness, a caring forgiver exercises self-care *and* care for the other. Forgivers aim to improve both their own character and the forgiven's (and they learn how to do so through engrossment). In contrast, the caring forgiven primarily exercises self-caring, meaning that the caring component of forgiveness results in an asymmetrical set of responsibilities for forgiven and forgiver. At least in the paradigmatic case, the forgiven's character becomes a project for both parties, but the forgiver's character, at least initially, is the forgiver's project only. This does not suggest, however, that the forgiven cannot help the forgiver fulfill his or her responsibilities, or that the parties' relationship cannot eventually become more reciprocal.<sup>53</sup> In fact, if the forgiven truly self-cares, he or she will want to give the forgiver information that aids engrossment (through dialogue), since the improvement of the forgiven's character depends in part on the forgiver's ability to successfully engross. Additionally, as the forgiver forgives, his or her own character becomes apparent. For instance, the forgiven becomes aware of the forgiver's weaknesses and strengths when the forgiver fails or succeeds in resisting the urge to resent. If the forgiver wants to be forgiven, it will matter to him or her whether the forgiver has the virtue to follow through. In this way both parties engaged in forgiveness come to know and concern themselves (to some degree) with each other's

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<sup>53</sup> As the parties come closer and closer to healing their relationship, they will likely start to act more as friends do -- they will become mutually interested in each other's character.

characters. And it is the concern for each other's character that starts strangers on the path to true friendship.

Developing a concern for the other's character and engrossing oneself in the other (if one is the forgiver) may sound difficult -- and it is -- but the hardest part of caring in the context of forgiveness is changing oneself so that the relationship can resume. Naturally, we expect at least one of the parties (though usually both) to come out of forgiveness changed. Bad character is usually the source of the trespasses that prompt us to put up moral walls in the first place, and also what allows unjustified resentment to continually drive us apart. If both forgiver and forgiven could come away from forgiveness unchanged such that further trespasses of a similar kind could continue and resentment could continue to degrade their relationship, we would probably not think forgiveness valuable at all. The second stage of forgiveness consists of the transformation of one or both parties' character in accordance with virtue. We have already discussed the way the virtue of care drives us toward actions that serve our best interests. We also know that our ultimate best interest is flourishing, and that the path to flourishing involves the continual habituation of good virtues. It does not suffice for the truly virtue-oriented person to do what is best for oneself, or to engross in another person and then do what is best for them, only once. Rather, those who truly care aim to become the type of people who do what is best all the time: they habituate care to make it a reliable facet of their character. To illustrate the way caring parties cleanse themselves of the attitudes that keep them separated, while simultaneously habituating good attitudes towards each other, I turn to a fable by Lewis Smedes.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Smedes, xvii - xix.

Smedes tells the parable of Fouke the upright baker and his lonely wife Hilda. One day Fouke returns home to find his wife in bed with another man, and the betrayal begets bitter resentment in his heart. Each time he lays eyes on Hilda, his painful memory returns and the pain makes him hate her more. Reciprocally, this increased hatred makes him feel even more pain. Unbeknownst to Fouke, every time he feels hate for his wife, an angel drops a tiny stone into his heart. Over time, his heart becomes so heavy with resentment he can not imagine ever loving life, let alone his wife, ever again. One night the angel speaks to Fouke, telling him of the *miracle of the magic eyes*. With these eyes, the angel says, the sight of Hilda will lighten Fouke's heart rather than weigh it down. Before leaving, the angel tells Fouke he need only ask with sincerity for the miracle to be bestowed upon him. At the end of his rope, Fouke pleads wholeheartedly to receive the miracle, and sure enough Hilda changes before his eyes. He no longer sees her as a heartless betrayer, but as a needy, lonely woman who repents for her misdeed and longs for his touch. And though the past cannot be changed, nor Hilda's trespass justified, with each day Fouke's heart grows lighter and lighter. The stones are tiny and numerous, so it takes time for the angel to lift them out of Fouke's heart. But when the transformation is complete, Fouke and Hilda are finally able to come together again as husband and wife.

Smedes' fable highlights the destructive, as well as the restorative, power of habituation. Fouke finds himself trapped in a feedback loop of hatred, which makes his heart heavy and miserable. The more he hates his wife, the more Fouke becomes someone whose heart is continually filled with hatred -- Smedes writes that Fouke even "[grows] to love his hatred."<sup>55</sup> Further, the more his heart becomes angry and hard, the more Fouke's hatred manifests in his life outside his marriage -- Smedes writes that the

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<sup>55</sup> Smedes, xviii.

weight of Fouke's heart causes him to hunch over and strain his neck, and that he becomes so weary of carrying the weight that he wishes he was dead.<sup>56</sup> We can imagine the ways a spouse's adultery can drive us to distrust everyone, not just our husband or wife, as well as foster a generally pessimistic outlook on life. Hilda's trespass and Fouke's subsequent habituation of resentful feelings combine into a storm cloud that follows Fouke everywhere, making it difficult for him to flourish.

Upon progressing into stage one of forgiveness, symbolized by his sincere request for the magic eyes, Fouke begins a cycle of good, virtuous habituation. When Fouke sincerely asks to see the woman he loves again -- when he humbly looks past her trespass and takes a leap of faith that the Hilda he once knew is still there -- he does see her. The removal of the stones symbolizes Fouke's gradual and intentional transformation from resentful to loving. First, Fouke engrosses to find that Hilda did what she did because she was lonely, that she gave in during a moment of weakness, and that she still loves him very much. Thus, Fouke does not abandon Hilda but instead, day by day, alters his behavior towards her (perhaps he approaches her with a positive outlook, reminding himself faithfully at each encounter that she *is* the woman he loves) until that behavior becomes a genuine part of his character. Gradually, Fouke lets go of his resentment, and his heart becomes light again. By the time Fouke nears the end of stage two of forgiveness, the magic eyes are no longer an external miracle bestowed upon him, but his own true eyes. His transformation complete, he and Hilda can move on with their healed relationship into a "second season of humble joy."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Smedes, xviii.

<sup>57</sup> Smedes, xix.

The fable does not say explicitly whether Hilda underwent a similar transformation, but I assume that she did. She must have, at some point apologized to Fouke, promising truly and honestly to be faithful, and then day by day worked on her character too. Healthy relationships require *give and take between parties*, and I argue that forgiveness aims to unite forgiver and forgiven in a healthy relationship once more, so it too requires parties to meet each other in the middle. In the paradigmatic case, forgiven and forgiver must each fulfill certain responsibilities. For instance, the forgiver must engross to grasp the forgiven's ultimate goals and the forgiven must work in tandem with the forgiver to try and make the goals reality. If Hilda had refused to do her part, for instance, if she refused to change any part of her character, she would have repaid Fouke's humility, faith, and care by pushing the entire burden of forgiveness onto his shoulders. At this point Fouke could continue to care for Hilda in faith, believing that he can and will help her change for the better, but after repeated rejections Fouke would naturally start to feel like giving up. To live with such a stubborn Hilda, Fouke would have to change his character so radically that he would think her character is virtuous as it is. Since Hilda's character is anti-virtuous, such a change would require Fouke to compromise his commitment to virtue. I conclude that a party is free to retract the commitment to forgive in cases where the other simply will not pull his or her weight. For example, if we have good reason to believe certain trespassers have no interest in bringing themselves in line with virtue (suppose they reject our care again and again), then we need not compromise our integrity or our flourishing to maintain a relationship with them. At a certain threshold, humility becomes spinelessness, faith becomes foolishness, and care is wasted effort.

I have already argued that forgiveness tends to engender a concern for each other's character in both forgiver and forgiven. At first, trespasser and one offended must work hard, both pushing themselves to exercise humility and faith, and to care for each others' flourishing. But little by little these attitudes become natural parts of us, and trying one's best to exhibit these friendly attitudes gradually becomes just being a friend. If forgiveness succeeds perfectly, then the forgiver's resentment of the original trespass is banished, the damage done to his or her personal identity is repaired, the forgiven's character is improved such that a trespass of the same kind is unlikely to happen again, and both parties have some experience caring for each other. At this point, I believe friendship modeled after true friendship, in which both parties care for each other's flourishing in a more or less equal way, is a reasonable next step.

Of course, friendship can admit of degrees, so maybe not everyone we forgive will become true friends in the Aristotelian sense, or even someone we talk to regularly. I believe it would be very strange, assuming forgiveness involves the habituation of care, that forgiver and forgiven would end up feeling indifferent or worse towards each other. I believe that successful forgiveness leaves us able to continue our lives free from the resentment that once put walls between us, and with at the very least a sense of mutual goodwill and well-wishing: the bare minimum of friendliness. For example, Bishop Myriel never saw Jean ValJean again after he gave away the silver, but I would argue that forgiveness still took place. The Bishop did not personally reform ValJean's character, but he played an important role in orienting ValJean towards virtuous action. First, the Bishop trusted that ValJean could turn his life around despite the fact that he was a well-known thief, thus demonstrating humility and faith. Then, through engrossment, the

Bishop made ValJean aware that his current lifestyle was not in his best interest -- that it would not lead to his flourishing. Though the Bishop and ValJean ultimately did not spend much time together, the two parted ways with no resentment between them, with the Bishop firmly believing that ValJean would become an honest man, and ValJean with a new lease on life that he may not have adopted without the Bishop's help.

## IX. Conclusion -- Faith and the Unforgiveable

Now that I have discussed a case in which forgiveness may not be recommended - - when one party refuses to fulfill his or her responsibilities as forgiver or forgiven -- the question arises if there are cases in which forgiveness is *impossible* to achieve, even with fully-committed parties. Assuming the parties are committed, living, in immediate contact with one another, and that there is only one forgiver and one forgiven, could there be an unforgiveable trespass? The first step to answering this question is to distinguish between trespasser and trespass. When we forgive, we do not really forgive the trespass itself because we never change with respect to it (we always believe it was wrong). Rather, we forgive the *person* behind the trespass -- I argue that this is obvious in the way a stage one forgiver humbly refuses to reduce the trespasser to his or her trespass, recognizing him or her instead as a moral agent. Therefore, if there is anything truly unforgiveable in the world, it must be a person, not an action he or she took. Trudy Govier agrees, arguing that calling a trespass unforgiveable actually amounts to calling the trespasser *irredeemable*, *i.e.*, "to believe in effect that it would be wrong for anyone, ever, under whatever circumstances to forgive him -- to come to see him again as a

human being capable of good and deserving of re-admission into the human community."<sup>58</sup>

Govier goes on to say that an attitude which denies the possibility of a trespasser's moral redemption is "fundamentally wrong" in the sense that it conflicts with a system of ethics which respects "persons and their capacity for reflection and transformation."<sup>59</sup> As someone who subscribes to a virtue-oriented account of forgiveness, I am inclined to take seriously the concepts of habituation and the moral agency of all people.<sup>60</sup> I agree with Govier because I believe that all people in general can (in theory) choose what is good and make it their habit over time. And because I believe that all people are capable, deep down, of moral transformation, I am willing to make the leap of faith necessary to care for particular people, namely those who have hurt me, those whom I hate, and those whose trespasses suggest an anti-virtuous character. Govier recognizes, however, that even if we believe no one is an irredeemable monster, our ability to forgive others is still not absolute, but contingent on their remorse and moral transformation.<sup>61</sup> Although I am inclined to believe that redemption is always, strictly speaking, possible, I do not also believe that forgiveness is always practical. For instance, insofar as trespassers refuse to repent or make virtuous changes to their characters, it will be impossible to maintain a virtuous relationship with them. Since forgiveness aims at virtuous, restored relationships, we would probably be better off leaving our moral walls up around the truly unrepentant than compromising our characters to live with them.

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<sup>58</sup> Trudy Govier. *Forgiveness and Revenge*. (London: Routledge, 2002) 118.

<sup>59</sup> Govier, 118.

<sup>60</sup> A theory of personhood could lay out the conditions that must be met for the status of "person" (by which I mean "moral agent") to be granted. It could also explain why we do not ascribe moral agency to most other animals, as well as why some humans do not seem to qualify for moral agency -- for example, children or the criminally insane. Unfortunately, such a theory lies outside the scope of my project.

<sup>61</sup> Govier, 118.

A strength of the theory here developed is that it provides us with the language and concepts we need to analyze potential instances of forgiveness that we may otherwise not know how to approach. For instance, when forgiveness breaks down we can talk in terms of the component virtues of humility, faith, and care to figure out what went wrong. In cases where it is ambiguous whether we should, or can, forgive, we can use my theory to help muster the motivation to make a choice. To demonstrate, I turn now to Simon Wiesenthal's struggle to forgive, as told in *The Sunflower*, an autobiography that has divided readers on the question of what they would have done in Simon's situation.<sup>62</sup>

The events of *the Sunflower* take place mostly during World War II. Simon is taken from his home and held prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, where one day, out of the blue, a nurse calls him out of his work crew and takes him to the infirmary. There Simon meets a dying SS man named Karl, who had asked the nurse to bring him "a Jewish prisoner" with whom he can speak.<sup>63</sup> Karl's face is almost completely bandaged, and his sickly voice is a faint whisper; Karl knows he will soon be dead. He begs Simon to stay with him and hear his story. He then proceeds to tell all about how he was raised Catholic by his mother and father, but then became part of the Hitler Youth and eventually the SS after the war broke out.<sup>64</sup> Near the end of his story Karl describes a particularly heinous act he committed as part of the SS, in which he helped herd dozens of Jewish people into a building that he then set on fire.<sup>65</sup> Karl implores Simon to forgive him for all he has done, saying "I cannot die...without coming clean. This must be my

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<sup>62</sup> My copy even includes a Symposium section, which gathers more than fifty varied responses to the question "what would you have done?" from contributors such as the Dalai Lama, Dennis Prager, and Desmond Tutu.

<sup>63</sup> Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. (New York: Schocken, 1997) 28.

<sup>64</sup> Wiesenthal, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Wiesenthal, 40-43.

confession... I want to die in peace."<sup>66</sup> Simon ultimately leaves Karl without saying a word, and his choice to remain silent continues to trouble him for years, even long after he is freed and the war ends.

Karl's confession is deeply unsettling, and Simon's silence unsatisfying. I will argue that this is the case because the deathbed forgiveness scenario presented in *The Sunflower* does not satisfy most of the criteria I have previously argued are necessary for forgiveness. Several ambiguities and unanswered questions linger in the wake of Simon's autobiography, which contributed to his complex inner conflict, and I will analyze them using my virtue-focused theory of forgiveness. First, both parties know Karl is about to die, and this casts doubt on whether his plea for forgiveness is sincere. For instance, if Karl were given the chance to live, would he try to change himself for the better (possibly with Simon's help), or would he go back to the SS? Does he truly understand and regret the harm he caused others, as well as the way he squandered his capacity to live virtuously, or does his deathbed repentance really just demonstrate that he is afraid of what awaits him in the afterlife? I understand these questions to be asking whether Karl's confession was motivated by *care* for himself and others, or rather by selfishness. Unfortunately, we cannot know for sure, since there is no potential for a living relationship to form between Simon and Karl, in which Karl could prove his sincerity through virtuous action.

Second, Karl's request for any "Jewish prisoner" the nurse could find, as well as the fact that he never so much as asks Simon's name, suggest that Karl only sees Jewish people as abstractions, not as people. If Karl thinks of Simon as a Jew and nothing more, then he fails to exhibit *humility*. When we seek forgiveness we should see the other as a

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<sup>66</sup> Wiesenthal, 53-54.

moral agent who aims at flourishing just as we do, and whose flourishing we have hampered with our trespass. In the absence, however, of any indication that Karl acknowledges his lack of humility or that his regret goes beyond mere words, there is more evidence than not to suggest that Karl does not deserve Simon's forgiveness.<sup>67</sup> I suspect that Karl knew he would never have to answer for his crimes, and that his confession served no purpose but to lighten his own conscience -- for instance, he knew confessing to a single stranger would do nothing to aid the flourishing of those he killed or injured.

Third, it is doubtful whether Simon has the right to forgive Karl, since to do so may require him to forgive on behalf of those Karl killed. If *trespasses must be personal*, then it seems Simon's tangential relationship to Karl's horrible actions (which does not seem any more substantial than the fact that he and the victims are Jews persecuted by the Nazis) is not sufficient to authorize Simon to forgive Karl's behavior; under my account, we cannot forgive on behalf of others. I am inclined to say that Karl is asking the wrong person for forgiveness. Karl's actions were horrific, but they did not affect Simon, so there is no broken relationship between the two in need of repair. Granted, many of the people Karl harmed are deceased, so he could not confess to them. If he were in better health, however, perhaps Karl could have achieved a more personal connection by tracking down and confessing to the families of his victims, who were much closer than Simon to the consequences of his actions. As it stands, it appears that Karl intends for Simon to act as an ambassador for all Jewish people, and surely this asks too much of

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<sup>67</sup> The only evidence we have of goodness within Karl is that his memories of his time in the SS seem to bring him pain.

Simon, since Simon does not know whether all Jewish people (including those Karl killed) would be in favor of offering forgiveness.

Finally, despite the awful nature of Karl's actions, his story makes Simon and the reader take pity on him, and this makes us uncomfortable with Simon's silence. By beginning his story with himself as a child, Karl makes it clear that he was "not born a murderer."<sup>68</sup> If we have humility, we believe that, if Karl was capable of being good at any time in his life, then he must be capable of being good even on his deathbed. Though it likely would have taken years to happen, if Karl had somehow become a good man in the time between his crimes and his being bedridden, then he would not deserve to be left alone in his last moments. Though we condemn Karl's deeds, we still sympathize with his apparent pain: we imagine ourselves on our own deathbeds, hoping against hope that just one faithful person will give us the benefit of the doubt that we have changed. No matter how heinous his crimes, we resist the prospect of forever disqualifying Karl from human society, as Govier would say. Though Simon was perhaps the wrong person to grant Karl forgiveness, he may still have regretted his silence because he could not bring himself to have *faith* in Karl, which would have allowed him, at least, to provide the dying man with comfort and companionship in his last moments. I believe that Simon views his exchange with Karl as a failure on his part to embody the virtues associated with forgiveness, as a truly forgiving person always does. Even if Simon ultimately found that he could not grant Karl forgiveness (for instance, because he did not think Karl harmed him), he could have at least extended faith and humility to the sorrowful man, stayed with him, and perhaps held his hand while talking with him. Instead, Simon gave up before entering stage one -- he chose to run silently from Karl, and to callously ignore his *drive to aspire*.

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<sup>68</sup> Wiesenthal, 31.

I argue that *The Sunflower* offers a powerful example of a case in which the practice of forgiveness is not justified. Ultimately, the autobiography confirms the strength of my theory by demonstrating that unsuccessful cases of forgiveness lack the features I say are necessary for forgiveness. I conclude that Karl was unforgiveable, not because he was by nature irredeemable, but because he sought forgiveness from Simon, for whom the lack of a personal connection to Karl's trespasses disqualified him from granting forgiveness. Additionally, it appears that real-life cases of forgiveness are messy, sometimes to the point that we agonize over them for years, as Simon did. In some cases, our forgiving experiences are plagued with ambiguities. Cases in which we have limited relations with those who seek our forgiveness, especially those without sufficient prospects for future caring interactions, tend to generate uncertainties that make proceeding with forgiveness difficult at best. For instance, Simon found it difficult to approach Karl, a near-stranger and a man on his deathbed, because he could not be sure whether Karl's humility or care were genuine, and because insufficient time remained for Karl to prove his commitment to virtue through action. The presence of ambiguity is unsurprising, however, because we know that forgiveness always involves a leap of faith, which Simon never took, and which may override a lack of evidence suggestive of a trespasser's goodness.

Whether we are forgiver or forgiven, we cannot be certain of all the variables involved in forgiveness. At a certain point, to bring our relationships back to life we must stop looking for certainty and instead choose to leap faithfully into the unknown. Habituating a generally forgiving disposition is part of a good life, since it keeps us devoted to making our relationships and our characters healthy. Even so, I cannot derive

an obligation from my theory as presented to forgive every trespasser we encounter. In the end, leaps of faith of any sort are always up to our individual discretion. If we are forgiving people, we will usually try at least once to extend faith to those who hurt us. Indeed, we should always try our best to forgive when it seems that the other is willing to work with us. But even in cases where the other is not cooperative, he or she may yet surprise us if we continue to have faith.

As with virtue ethics in general, there is no one-size-fits-all rule of forgiveness for every individual to follow. As we live our lives, we trust that the way we should live will become clearer and clearer. To start ourselves on the path to become the best forgivers we can be, we must forgive as best we know how in each given situation. Slowly but surely, our experiences of forgiveness will build on each other, and our forgiving dispositions will become more powerful. Our knowledge of the components of forgiveness will naturally expand with our social interactions, and we will come more and more to love being the forgiving people we become.

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