Hegel's Concept of Forgiveness

I Introduction

Despite the prominent position given to it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel's theory of forgiveness has a marginal position in the contemporary philosophical literature. This is perhaps because his approach appears excessively optimistic. In forgiveness, Hegel claims, "the wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind" (PhS §669).[1] Contemporary approaches are less naïve. Aurel Kolnai, for example, says of forgiveness that "[a] serious wound when healed leaves a scar behind; it cannot vanish to the point of *restitutio in integrum*. On the other hand, in some sense the 'scar' may prove to be tougher, more solid and resistant, than the intact tissue was" (Kolnai 1973, 106).

This paper offers an interpretation and defense of Hegel's approach to forgiveness. Hegel understands ethical principles to be principles constitutive of a relationship between rational agents. Because such agents are self-conscious, this relation properly exists just in case the participating agents think it to exist. Forgiveness will consist in two normative powers related to such ethical relations. The victim exercises a normative power in rescinding their moral judgment, and the perpetrator exercises a normative power in changing their moral character. Together, these powers allow agents to disregard a past transgression, and restore the ethical relation. If agents disregard the transgression then the transgression is of no significance for the ethical relation: no scars are left behind because the ethical relation is just as they think it to be.

Forgiveness has a privileged status as a moral psychological concept for Hegel because it is the experience of agents' coming to know the truth about ethical relationships. What appeared as independently given ethical principles comes to be known as immanent to the social relations between agents. And this knowledge is not a merely theoretical knowledge about the nature of these relationships. It is a kind of practical or maker's knowledge.[2] Thus coming to know the nature of ethical relations is not distinct from coming to have a power over our ethical relations.

My plan is as follows. Section I offers an overview of Hegel's metaethical position and outlook on forgiveness. I then descend into the *Phenomenology.* Hegel justifies his account of forgiveness by uncovering the insufficiencies of two alternative attitudes in responding to a transgression, which misconstrue the kind of agency present in moral judgment and forgiveness.[3] A central aim of the paper is to argue for the tenability of the Hegelian position in contemporary moral psychology. To this end, sections II and III cast two contemporary theories of forgiveness in these respective shapes of consciousness so as to situate Hegel's position in the contemporary literature. Section II deals with accounts that emphasize humility as the ground of forgiveness. I will suggest this undervalues the authority agents have in forgiving. Much of the secondary literature understands Hegel's position to be a version of the Humility Account, so I will distinguish my interpretation from the prevailing interpretation there. Section III looks at Monique Wonderly's advocacy for a capacity to 'unforgive'. This, I suggest, overestimates the kind of agency available in forgiving. Section IV develops Hegel's account of the two normative powers involved in forgiveness and how these normative powers overcome the insufficiencies of the prior models.

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[11] See my abbreviation key before the bibliography.

[2] That this is Hegel's paradigm conception of knowledge is foundational for the interpretation of Hegel offered in Wolf (2026).

[3] Hegel is juggling many themes at this point in the *Phenomenology*. I bracket many significant philosophical claims that Hegel is developing with regard to, for example, cultural criticism (see Pinkard 1994, 193–221), metaphilosophical theory (see Brandom 2019, 583–635), and philosophy of religion.

Ethical relationism

Getting to Hegel's position on forgiveness requires the context of a key part of Hegel's metaethical position, which can be understood as a kind of relationism about ethical obligations, or what I will call ethical principles. Relationists about obligations understand the latter to obtain by virtue of the kind of relationship that agents stand in to each other.[4]

Hegel's version of this position can be put in summary form as follows:

Ethical relationism: an ethical principle is (i) the constitutive concept for a kind of objective relation that (ii) truly exists between agents by virtue of them thinking it to exist according to that principle.

The first part points to the objectivity of ethical relationships, the second part their ideality. Let me unpack each in turn.

By objective, I mean that Hegel is a realist about such relationships, and they have a kind of ontological priority over their relata. Wolves exist in packs; bees exist in hives. This is part of their nature: wolves and bees cannot properly exist on their own. If we concede the existence of particular wolves, and those wolves in turn rely on a pack for their existence, then we can say that the relation, the pack, is objective. Humans exist in various nested relationships with each other that are necessary for a proper or complete existence. Romantic love, for example, is a part of a complete and flourishing modern human life on Hegel's account. In love, we feel (and are) "deficient and incomplete" without the other person (PR §158). So in this sense, our relations to others have a proper ontological status, one which has ontological priority over our status as agents in two ways: (1) agents are the kind of agent they are by virtue of standing in these relations; and (2) agents are deficient instances of the kind of agent they are if that relationship is broken off, or deficiently realized in some way. I will return shortly to the issue of deficiency before introducing forgiveness, which concerns repairing some deficiency. First we need a better grip on (1).

Hegel will use the term "ethical substance [*sittliche Substanz*]" (PR §146) for these relations with objective status. Substance is that which exists independently, not reliant on something outside of itself.[5] Hegel explains that "substance is essentially the relation of accidents to itself" (PR §163, cf. Enz I §151A): a substance is a unity of accidents through being their unifying ground. In the case of ethical substance, such accidents are understood to be individuals (PR §145A). Such individuals are the kinds of agents they are with reference to this relation. So different domains of human life will be informed by ethical principles of different kinds in accordance with the relevant aspect of right under consideration. Hence Hegel states "In [Abstract] Right, the object is the *person*; at the level of morality it is the subject, in the family the family-member, and in civil society in general, the citizen" (PR §190R).[6]

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[4] This means that Hegel understands ethical relations to be primitive, in contrast to contractualists, who understand individuals as bearers of rights to be primitive. See Zylberman (2021) for helpful discussion of relationism about moral obligations.

[5] Enz I §151.

[6] For discussion see Neuhouser (2000, chap. 4). The first two elements cannot be said to properly and self-consciously involve ethical substance because in these forms of awareness ethical substance is not an object for the individuals participating in Abstract Right and morality. Nevertheless, both morality and Abstract Right can obtain their proper function only within ethical life. They are therefore classified by Hegel as mere "moments" (PR §141R) of ethical substance. An enormous amount could be said about the various ways each of these different specifications of agency deliver different kinds of ethical structures, and relate to one another. Families, for example, can take on a form of personhood described in Abstract Right, when considered from the perspective of another (such that others treat the property of a married couple as held in common, and the state allows families to file taxes together).

Now the idealist component of ethical relationism. Hegel's claim that the kind of objective practical relations we stand in are properly realized only when we think them to exist stems from a Kantian inheritance concerning the nature of rationality. Kant tells us that "everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws" (G 4:412). The laws under which a rational agent acts are efficacious in being represented as such by the agent. Hegel agrees with this basic account: "The sun and the planets also have their laws, but they are unaware of them[…] When right is posited and known [by spirit… it] attains its true determinacy" (PR §211A; cf. Enz III §529R). Both understand ethical relations between rational beings to be an essential application of this conception of rationality. Hegel differs, though, in looking to *extant* groups of rational beings standing in some direct relation to each other for this structure, rather than Kant's absolutely universal Kingdom of Ends, which includes in it all rational beings. So an ethical substance is actual through being thought in its concept by its accidents.[7] Hegel calls this kind of thought universal self-consciousness, which he claims is "the form of consciousness of the substance of every essential spirituality—of the family, the fatherland, the state" (Enz III §436R).

We can now come back to the issue of deficient cases of ethical relations. Readers will have noticed the set of adjectival modifiers like 'proper' employed in describing both the idealist and realist components. This concerns one of Hegel's central uses of the concept of truth: while we might come across a lone wolf, this is a contingent, derivative case that does not fit with the concept of a wolf. According to the latter, wolves live in packs, and the proper realization of its form of life relies on its existence in a pack. It is in this sense not a true wolf (see Enz I §24A).[8] This will be important because forgiveness is a response to something having gone wrong. I will call a transgression a case in which a relationship cannot go on as it did because of a violation of some ethical principle. In this sense the relationship is broken off. In Hegel's system negations are *determinate* negations. Breaking off an ethical relationship with someone does not mean you return to a previous dynamic with each other. Rather, the broken-off relation itself exists, taking the form of judgments of condemnation and blame, and accompanying attitudes of resentment or bitterness. An ex, for example, does not become a stranger again after a contentious breakup. I may instead continue to resent him, and, furthermore, our ruined relationship may fairly be described as a kind of 'wound' which defines my character.

Forgiveness overview

With this overview in place, we can ask what Hegel's attitude towards forgiveness is. There are two modes of exposition at work in the *Phenomenology*. Ethical relationism explains the structure of forgiveness, and, conversely, forgiveness is the self-conscious experience of ethical relationism. Let me take these in turn.

Monique Wonderly usefully distinguishes two approaches to forgiveness for two agents V and O with reference to some wrong w:

(F1) V had a shift in affective attitude such that her resentment (and/or other negative emotions) toward O for w has been eliminated or substantially reduced.

[7] For this reason, that the substance is through the accidents thinking it, Hegel sometimes states that 'accidents' is not quite the right term for such individuals, as the dependence relationship is more sophisticated than usually occurs in substance-accident relations. See Enz III §514.

[8] See Kreines (2015, 250–51).

(F2) V altered O's relationship status or normative position – e.g., by reaccepting O into a moral relationship or by releasing O from (certain) obligations to V on account of w (Wonderly 2021, 3).[9] Since ethical relationism is going to explain how forgiveness is possible, we can see that Hegel can be placed in the second camp.[10] Forgiveness is understood by Hegel to involve two powers possessed by the agents, close to what contemporary theorists describe as a normative power. A normative power is a capacity to change what or how some set of concepts applies in some situation, for example, a judge's power to sentence.[11]

Forgiveness involves, first, ceasing to hold an agent culpable for some transgression. Hegel is clear that the transgressions remain transgressions: forgiveness is neither excusing nor justifying (PR §282A).[12] But consider the contrast between the judgments 'you are a bad boyfriend' and 'you were a bad boyfriend'. The second no longer identifies the presently existing agent with the transgressions. What is of interest to Hegel is that he thinks the same set of past transgressions (say, some infidelities) licenses *either* judgment: the state of affairs judged about underdetermines which is appropriate. So the grounds for the moral judgment cannot lie exclusively in the object of judgment, but must lie partially in the agent judging. And the first normative power involved in forgiveness is precisely the capacity for a choice about which moral judgment to deploy. This first power is reflected in a second normative power, which is a capacity to change one's moral character. This may sound like something other than a normative power. But, for Hegel, to be of good character is to understand oneself to fall under objective ethical principles. And so it too can be considered a normative power, even though it is partially self-directed.

Together these powers allow for the restoration of an ethical relationship. In the *Phenomenology,* then, forgiveness produces a "recognitional existence [*anerkennende Dasein*]" (PhS §666), a "reciprocal recognition [*gegenseitiges Anerkennen*]" (PhS §670), a "*self-conscious* and *existing* conciliation [selbstbewußte *und* daseiende *Ausgleichung*]" (PhS §669), or most dramatically a "reconciling *yes*, in which both I's let go of their opposed *existence*, [and which is] the existence of the *I* extended into two-ness [*das Dasein des zur Zweiheit ausgedehnten Ichs*]" (PhS §671).[13] I take these descriptions to be highlighting what I have called the objectivity of ethical relations between agents, and their ideality, where such agents must have a self-conscious, recognitional, or I-involving awareness of that relationship.

While ethical relationism explains what forgiveness is, forgiveness constitutes a kind of practical awareness of ethical relationism. This is why forgiveness features in the *Phenomenology* as an

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[9] Compare Scanlon (2009, chap. 4), for a similar contrast between accounts that stem from Strawson's work on reactive attitudes and accounts which center the nature of moral relationships. Scanlon (2009, 159–60) also emphasizes the moral relationships in accounting for blame and forgiveness, although he does not understand these relations as the primitive basis for ethical principles; see Zylberman (2021). He thus lacks the idealist component that characterizes Hegel's view.

[10] There are, for Hegel, affective components necessary to certain forms of forgiveness. If the relevant ethical relationship requires that the subjective elements of the objective relationship are necessarily reflected in the form of feeling (e.g. in friendship or romantic relationships), then forgiveness will involve feeling as well. I take Hegel to be demonstrating with this that no aspect of immediate human existence is external to the concept, such that even feeling can be included within it. But the aim of this paper is to supply a more general account of forgiveness, such that it may account for Hegel's other examples, such as a sovereign pardon.

[11] See Bennett (2018, 216) and Warmke (2016), who argues that acts of forgiveness paradigmatically involve a declarative force. Declaratives are acts (usually speech acts) that transform reality in some way. Forgiveness, Warmke argues, is thereby best understood as a normative power which involves the changing of norms of interaction between wrongdoer and victim.

[12] I will not examine these contrasts here. As Russell (2023, chap. 2) argues, they are a matter of near universal consensus in the contemporary literature on forgiveness.

[13] See Enz I §91R for a discussion of the concepts of existence [*Dasein*] and reality [*Realität*] at stake here.

experience. Some further context, both about the views Hegel is engaging with, and about the part of the *Phenomenology* in which forgiveness appears is required to understand this element.

Hegel follows Kant (and Fichte) in understanding moral or ethical principles as explications of the internal principles of the will. As he puts it in an early work, "[that] the essence of right and duty, and the essence of the thinking and willing subject, are one and the same—is[…] the great element in the philosophy of Kant and Fichte" (NL 83). That moral or ethical consciousness is essential to the will's self-legislative, or autonomous, or self-grounding status as a free being remains in Hegel's mature work. For example, he states that "duty itself in the moral self-consciousness is the essence… of that consciousness, the way in which it is inwardly related to itself alone" (PR §135).

It is this capacity which Hegel describes as an "inward turn" (PhS §775) that defines an individual as individual. Rather than immediately and unreflectively relating to a set of ethical principles that defines your moral community, modern individuality requires a distance from ethical principles such that you decide your relationship to them. Hegel calls the agent aware of their role of translating these principles into action 'conscience'. Conscience makes moral laws actual in selecting and acting on them. In this sense it "absolves itself from every determinate duty which is supposed to be a law, and […] it has the majesty of absolute autarky, to bind and to undo" (PhS §646). Such an authority meets Hegel's definition of evil, for such an agent is not bound by any ethical principle in relating to another unless they choose to be: "whoever… says that he acts with regard to others according to *his own* law and *his own* conscience is saying in fact that he is mistreating them" (PhS §662).

The drama of the concluding paragraphs of the Spirit chapter is "the opposition of singular individuality vis-à-vis other individuals and vis-à-vis the universal" (PhS §659). The universal mentioned here describes universal moral principles. Hegel examines how evil agents, who disregard this universal in their particular actions, relate to those that judge them to be evil, and how both relate to moral principles themselves. As I reconstruct in the following sections, forgiveness will involve agents becoming aware that moral principles are neither other-worldly unachievable demands, nor personal commitments. They constitute the objective principles that relate individuals to one another.

II Confession

The first model of forgiveness examined by Hegel involves the original request for forgiveness made by a confessing consciousness. Evil consciousness finds itself judged as having transgressed by another consciousness, but rejects the legitimacy of this judgment, given that it acts autonomously, from its own law. In this experience, evil consciousness discovers an equality with the judging consciousness which leads to a confession. The tendency of the judging consciousness always to discover, in the transformation of an ethical principle into an actionable intention, some fault, some element of particularity that does not issue from duty itself, is understood by evil consciousness to be "base". This is because judging consciousness holds onto the "action's inequality with itself" (PhS §666), or fixes on the aspect of an action that is not essential to it but speaks to some particularity of the actor. Judging consciousness finds a desire for fame behind noble actions, or a distant relationship to one's mother behind valuing a loving, monogamous relationship. Furthermore, this judgment is "hypocrisy" because the judging consciousness "pretends that such judgment is not only *another manner* of being evil but is rather itself the *rightful consciousness* of action" (PhS §666). How is this judging hypocritical? Evil consciousness had understood the morally universal as that which is 'for others', and acts according to a principle it determines for itself. But, in seeing that the judging consciousness similarly claims unique legitimacy in its judging of others, evil recognizes its own

attitude in the other. Rather than taking the identification of the judging consciousness with ethical principles seriously, it understands this judging consciousness as its equal. It rejects its form of life and unethical actions in favor of the universal. Evil consciousness
finds that the judging consciousness, according to his own constitution, is equal to himself. Intuiting this equality and *giving voice* to it, he *confesses* this to the other, and he equally expects that the other, just as he has in fact placed himself on an equal plane to him will reciprocate[…] it is solely on account of the intuition of *his equality* with the other that he gives voice to himself, that in his confessions he gives voice on his own part to *their equality*. (PhS §666)
In confessing, evil consciousness expects the consciousness which judged it to have done evil to forgive it. It expects this forgiveness because its confession stemmed from a recognition that judging consciousness is equally a particular consciousness, and thus equally fallible and equally guilty before universal and implacable ethical principles. Hegel's use of the term equality here deserves comment. Its meaning is more easily seen through its opposite, inequality. I understand Hegel to mean by the latter some kind of disparity between a concept and its object. So, for example, a fumbled pick-up line at a bar describes an inequality between the agent's intention and its realization in speech. The inequality of action that the judging consciousness originally picks up on is more general than this: any action just in its existing will involve a particularity not present in the 'universal' conception of it that the actor had. In ethical relationships, inequality describes the way in which an agent may assert privileged authority over the conception of the relationship. This constitutes a kind of inequality between concept and object because ethical relations, by definition, require the two agents to mutually think the relationship. Hence evil agents, in treating an agent according to their *own* principle, express such inequality between their conception of an ethical principle and what an ethical principle must be. And judging consciousness similarly expresses such an inequality, in demanding exclusive authority over the ethical principle that relates them to the other agent.

Humility Accounts of Hegel's forgiveness

It is popular in Hegel scholarship to understand this to be the standpoint of forgiveness which Hegel himself endorses.[14] From this standpoint, consciousness must recognize that it is not a self-sufficient ethical entity, but a finite entity before the moral law. Thus the judging consciousness sins just as much as evil consciousness in understanding itself, in its purity, to be above the moral law. Rather, the standard story claims, Hegel is suggesting a Lutheran thought in which we are equal in our finitude. I will call approaches to forgiveness that ground acts of forgiveness in some recognition on the part of the forgiver of their finitude or fallibility Humility Accounts of forgiveness. Robert Stern sets out such an approach clearly. He distinguishes two models of forgiveness:
a. I forgive you because I realize I am not in a position to judge you, as I realize I could have acted as badly as you have done, given my own limitations.
b. I forgive you, because I have the authority to waive my judgement over you, so I no longer hold you to account (Stern 2021, 611)
According to Stern, Hegel is in fact interested in type-a forgiveness, and the conclusion of Hegel's dialectic occurs when the party of whom forgiveness is asked in fact "admits that he has no such authority, as the 'judge' is just as bad as himself, the so-called sinner" (Stern 2021, 611). There are differences amongst commentators about how exactly to adjudicate the role of the forgiver in this process, with different degrees of authority assigned to the forgiver and to the ethical principles or ethical community of which the two actors are a part. Molly Farneth states, for example, that

[14] One exception is Bernstein (1996, 45), who agrees that the rebuff is justified.

forgiveness reveals of the participants "their selfsameness as acting and judging subjects who can be held accountable for their actions and judgments by others" (Farneth 2017, 61). Dina Emundts, similarly, claims that "we receive this authority to judge and to forgive the other person on the condition that we relativize our own attitude, judgement and standard accordingly" (Emundts 2025, 11). By 'relativize' here, Emundts means that while forgiveness is between two persons, it requires the forgiver to submit their own judgment to the standards of an ethical "community" (Emundts 2025, 11).[15] The power to forgive still falls to an individual, but the lesson learned from the universality of the sin is that the individual must displace themselves from a position of unique authority.

We have then a range of models which attempt to specify to what degree authority is ceded in an act of forgiveness. These positions all capture in some sense what Hegel is interested in, what I described in the section above as the Fichtean-Kantian inheritance: the specification of how an individual agent relates to moral laws that are purported to be its 'essence' qua agent. I will argue these interpretations misstate Hegel's own position on this issue, instead supplying versions of more or less communitarian Kantianism. The disagreement turns on what equality means. These readings understand equality to involve both agents recognizing their shared finitude before the authority of the moral law or a moral community. I will argue that Hegel is not advocating for such a position. The details of the text are subtle here, but from a broad outlook the insufficiency of these approaches is obvious: Hegel's analysis does not end with this confession from evil consciousness. Confessing consciousness, and its fixation on human finitude, finds itself rebuffed by judging consciousness.[16] It is rebuffed because this scene of equality is one of an abject world, in which, as Stern puts it, "we are all equally sinners" (Stern 2021, 612). Even if confessing consciousness is right to think the judging consciousness equally guilty, the judging consciousness rightly recognizes that it should not cede its power of moral judgment. I will now look at what form forgiveness would have to take in such a world, and suggest that such a model of forgiveness is insufficient.

Kant and Humility Accounts of Forgiveness

I will suggest that the basis of the dramatized rejection of confessing consciousness, and the corresponding rejection of a Humility Account of forgiveness which confessing consciousness exemplifies, stems from a rejection of the Kantian elements internal to any Humility Account. This can be seen by turning to Kant and contemporary Kantian approaches to forgiveness.

I begin with Kant himself. Forgiveness does not loom large in Kant's practical philosophy, but he does tell us that "a human being has enough guilt of his own to be greatly in need of pardon… It is therefore a duty of human beings to be *forgiving (placabilitas)*" (MM 6:461). For Kant, this means forswearing a "*desire for revenge*" (MM 6:460), a kind of malice or enjoyment of the suffering of others, here specifically directed at others that have morally wronged me. Kant scholars have understood this to be an affective view of forgiveness, in which "the core of forgiveness consists in overcoming resentment toward the wrongdoer" (Blöser 2018, 12). And, based on Kant's emphasis on the wronged party's own guilt, contemporary Kantians have understood Kantian ethics to be committed to a Humility Account to ground this affective view of forgiveness. Jeffrie Murphy, for example, deploys Kant's universalization test for the identification of duties to argue that we must be able to

[15] See also Mathew (2026) for a contemporary defense of this kind of model of forgiveness.

[16] There is still to come the breaking of the hard heart that at first rejects the confession. Hegel does state that "[t]he breaking of the hard heart and its elevation to universality is the same movement which was expressed in the consciousness that confessed" (PhS §669; underline mine). But in that same paragraph he then differentiates the movements, claiming that while one consciousness "exhibits the power of spirit over its actuality, the [other] exhibits the power of spirit over its determinate concept" (PhS §669). So we should not overidentify the two moments. They are of the same movement only in the sense that a single act, forgiveness, is articulated through two elements (which I will examine in detail below).

forgive. Our own finitude means that we have to hope for forgiveness, a desire that can only be made consistent with duty if it is universalized: "only a person so arrogant as to believe that he will never wrong others or need to be forgiven by them could (in Kantian language) consistently will membership in a world without forgiveness" (Murphy 1982, 513). Eve Garrard and David McNaughton emphasize our "common moral frailty" (Garrard and McNaughton 2003, 57) as the grounds for our obligation to forgive. Claudia Blöser similarly suggests "Awareness of moral fallibility… creates awareness of similarity with the wrongdoer" (Blöser 2018, 18).

One further Kantian account of forgiveness is worth examining in more detail because it provides a useful foil for Hegel's understanding of the way judgments about another's character and forgiveness relate. In contrast to other versions of the Humility Account, Lucy Allais emphasizes the epistemic humility characteristic of Kant's position as a condition on forgiveness. Allais understands forgiveness to involve "giving up warranted blaming-reactive attitudes" (Allais 2019, 261), the latter being an "affective-evaluative way of seeing a person in the light of her action" (Allais 2019, 268). The threat is that this can appear irrational, for if one still judges the wrongdoer to be culpable, changing one's affective-evaluative perception of them would be to see them incorrectly. Epistemic humility solves this problem. According to Kant another's phenomenal actions are mere signs of their underlying noumenal character, about which we can never judge with certainty (see CPR A551/B579n). Allais suggests we can bracket some of Kant's more contentious metaphysical claims here, and understand it as treating other agents as, from a temporal perspective, "only partially unified works in progress" (Allais 2021, 276). This allows Allais to drive a wedge between a culpable action and a morally evaluable character. Forgiveness is directed towards someone's character, even while still understanding the morally wrong action as a morally wrong action: "the point here is not that our lack of certain knowledge should lead to epistemic humility about the wrongdoer's *culpability*… [rather] you choose not to let your view of her be affected by it" (Allais 2008, 61). An elegant upshot of this theory is that because of our epistemic humility, what makes forgiveness not *irrational* is also the basis for the *elective* aspect of forgiveness. Unlike the above accounts, Allais can treat forgiveness as a voluntary act rather than a duty.[17] Forgiveness can be a practical attitude similar to a kind of Kantian hope, in which we choose to take up an optimistic outlook about having a successful ethical relation to others (Allais 2021, 283).[18]

These Kantian versions of the Humility Account of forgiveness, I think, accurately describe the position of confessing consciousness, and the limitations characteristic of this position for Hegel. While Hegel has his eye primarily on Humility Accounts that center moral fallibility, confessing consciousness first intuits its equality with the judging consciousness on the basis that the latter's judgments fixate on the particular aspects of an evil act that allow for condemnation. Hence, like Allais's account, confessing consciousness has recognized that moral judgment should not condemn another's character on the basis of a base, faultfinding attitude:

The judging consciousness is itself thereby *base* because it divides up the action, and it both brings out and holds onto the action's inequality with itself[…] In his non-actuality and in the vanity he has in being such a faultfinder, he places himself far above the deeds he excoriates (PhS §666)

[17] Some will understand this as a cost, rather than a benefit. The elective component of forgiveness is controversial because the focus on reasons for action in contemporary philosophy of action seems to disallow it. The worry is that elective acts of forgiveness are incoherent because one has reasons to forgive or not, and these reasons should determine whether one forgives or not. For critical discussion of the notion of elective forgiveness, see Milam (2018).

[18] Compare Sussman's (2005) related approach, and Kant's comments about divine forgiveness at CF 7:48.

Regardless of which flavor of the Humility Account one prefers, these accounts share, in Hegel's eyes, a kind of alienation from morality. Morality is at once the essence of humanity, constituting the "pure knowing of [our] essence" (PhS §594). But at the same time, our existing empirical self can never meet, or can never know itself to meet, that standard. Forgiveness serves only as a kind of stopgap between human existence and pure, unachievable morality: at least from a humanist perspective moral concepts are concepts *for human agents* (whatever that means), so the introduction of a set of stopgaps to link up humanity with these concepts must mean that something has gone wrong. Look at the strangeness of the process by which, from the fallibility of humans with regard to some set of moral laws (e.g. we must never lie), the universalization procedure can derive some *further*, secondary moral principles (e.g. we must forgive those that do lie). This suggests the threat of a regress of moral principles, insofar as each set is demonstrated to be too distant or too demanding for its application to an individual human (Should we be forgiving of those who, due to their own frailty and moral short-sightedness, fail to forgive those that lie?).

The Kantian can block this complaint by foot-stamping: humans are, on their account, imperfect creatures. But those whose allegiance is to a robust conception of forgiveness rather than a forgiveness derived from Kantian premises should find Hegel's complaint here compelling. Notice that neither of the two Kantian approaches surveyed can provide a strong notion of forgiveness. Kant's own remarks in the *Metaphysics of Morals* license a particularly weak kind: only the degree of emotive response and appropriate retributive actions by individuals to those that have wronged them shift in forgiveness. The account has nothing to do with repairing a relationship with another, reevaluating their character in more positive terms, or ceasing to understand the other as having committed some kind of moral transgression. Accounts like Allais's can supply a more substantive notion of forgiveness which does allow for the repairing of a relationship and a reevaluating of a wrongdoer's character. But this is possible only by limiting our capacity to morally judge in the first place: forgiveness exists only due to epistemic limits on judgment. If we had perfect knowledge of another's moral character (or future moral character), forgiveness would be impossible, our moral judgment final.

This detour through Kantian positions gives us a grip, I think, on why current interpretations of Hegel's own position on forgiveness are deficient, and why confession on its own is similarly deficient. Hegel understands Humility Accounts of forgiveness to alienate us from ethical concepts, and thus from our own essence. Conscience had rendered all moral principles contingent on our endorsement of them, and thus became a kind of evil. Confessing consciousness swings too far in the other direction, recognizing moral principles as binding but in a manner that alienates us from them. We lack proper warrant in morally evaluating others, and thus have only a watered-down capacity to morally judge another. This makes space for only a similarly watered-down capacity to forgive another. Confessing consciousness has not yet achieved the kind of maker's knowledge of ethical relationships that Hegel understands forgiveness to involve. Rather, it understands itself to have *discovered* this equality by virtue of a shared fallibility in which we all are sinners before a moral law. It is for this reason that the "judging consciousness repels this community from itself" (PhS §667). The latter will take the form of the hard heart's refusal to alienate itself from ethical principles. The dialectic of the hard heart will be that it must learn of its equality with the other without ceding the power of moral judgment.

III The Hard Heart

In contrast to the confessing consciousness, the hard heart retains the power of moral judgment and thereby remains unalienated from its ethical essence. In doing so it rejects the equality of sin offered up by confessing consciousness: "The judging consciousness repels this community from itself and is the hard heart which is for itself and which rejects any continuity with the other" (PhS §667). In rejecting this continuity with the other, the hard heart "cannot arrive at the intuited unity of itself in

an other, and [thus] it cannot arrive at existence" (PhS §668). It finds itself in a "contradiction between its pure self and its necessity to empty itself into being and to turn itself around into actuality". This breaks the hard heart, which is "shattered into madness" (PhS §668).

While Hegel's complaint against Humility Accounts is relatively easy to pick out, getting his argument in view in the case of the hard heart is a challenge. Hegel's basic claim will be that the hard heart violates the constitutive norm of objective ethical judgments, while still attempting to make an ethical judgment. And its judgment thus lacks objectivity, or is merely subjective.

To see Hegel's claim, we need to look again at the idealist component of ethical relationism. Transgression means that two agents no longer understand the relationship in the same way. For the transgressor cannot both represent the relationship according to its ethical principle and act in a manner that violates that principle: it is in judging how someone deserves to be treated that I then treat them in that manner (leaving aside cases of akrasia here). Judgments of condemnation are a route to reconciliation because they can reintroduce a shared understanding of the relationship. Blame communicates what transgression occurred.[19] And to understand what transgression occurred is to understand the ethical principle that determines what counts as a transgression. So, and here is the idealist claim, moral judgments of condemnation are a way of bringing an ethical relationship back into existence. The claim here is not that victims are obligated to reconcile with those who wronged them. The claim is that moral judgment involves an implicit commitment to such a possibility. For those with whom you have no interest in reaching a shared understanding of the transgression, there is no point in blaming them. Now the hard heart makes a moral judgment, which it expects the other to recognize. But it has no interest in a shared understanding leading to the reestablishment of the ethical relationship. It is thus caught in a performative contradiction.[20]

Unforgiveness?

How tenable is Hegel's argument here? Its force can be seen if we look at the kind of accounts of forgiveness it rules out. Despite the interest today in 'paradoxes' associated with forgiveness, I am not aware of anyone defending the claim that forgiveness is in principle impossible. However, a similar position to the one that Hegel rejects can be found in Monique Wonderly's argument in favor of the possibility of unforgiving. The positions have an analogous structure because, as I will explain, both attribute an excessive normative power to the wronged party. I will argue that allowing for unforgiveness renders the normative powers of forgiveness and blame merely subjective powers of the wronged party in a manner that excludes extant ethical relationships. I thus propose to read the hard heart's position as a denial of the objectivity of ethical relations in favor of a wholly subjective understanding of relationships and moral principles.

Wonderly suggests that unforgiving is an important moral psychological concept that has gone underdeveloped in contemporary work on forgiveness. Wonderly's arguments tend to hinge on

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[19] Hegel endorses this at PhS §666. It has many contemporary proponents. The *locus classicus* is Watson (1987).

[20] That our acts of judgment are, by their nature, to be recognized is not because we have a need to validate our own thoughts by having others affirm them, or that our thoughts can be valid just by others affirming them. Hegel criticizes this kind of idealism in his discussion of beautiful souls (cf. PhS §658). Rather, it is in the very nature of judgments that they are objective: that any other must be able to think the same, and therefore understand my judgment as valid. If they lack this objectivity, they are failed judgments. And if they do not constitutively (though perhaps implicitly) aim at this objectivity, such mental actions are not judgments at all. So for judgments such as condemnation, confession or forgiveness, it must be so that the condemned, the wronged, and the forgiven can think the same thoughts as well (though from the other perspective, as it were). For such an account of shared thoughts see Thompson (2012) and for the application of such a model to German Idealism specifically see Rödl (2021). Forgiveness is a subclass of judgment which requires not only that the other party *could* think the same, but that they *actually* also think it (just as a marriage ceremony requires both parties to think that they are marrying).

cases in which one retracts one's forgiveness in light of new evidence. She provides the following example:

Jane and Mabel are sisters. Upon his death, their father bequeathed to Mabel a treasured family heirloom, an antique locket, and Jane destroyed it in a fit of jealousy. Mabel, who loved the locket, initially resented Jane for her infraction, but in response to Jane's apology and expressions of remorse, finally told her sister, "I forgive you." Months later, Mabel overhears Jane gleefully telling a friend that she no longer regrets smashing the locket and plans to destroy more of Mabel's "undeserved" possessions. Upon hearing this, Mabel's resentment over Jane's destruction of the locket returned. She tells Jane, "I know that I said that I forgave you for smashing my locket, but I take it back! You need to set things right!" (Wonderly 2021, 7)

Wonderly notes that there are conditions on unforgiving such that there are cases in which it may be either impossible or at least unjustifiable. The conditions that make unforgiveness warranted, Wonderly indicates, are likely to be symmetrical to the conditions that make forgiveness justified, in cases in which those conditions are not in fact met (e.g., that remorse exhibited was in fact feigned).[21]

I will argue that, from a Hegelian point of view, allowing for the possibility of unforgiving in fact excludes the possibility of an ethical relation. To see the problem, consider the distance Wonderly needs to create from another ordinary language usage of the term forgiveness: financial debt cancellation.[22] One cannot retract an act of debt forgiveness. If this were not the case, then the debt could not be cancelled at all. One would always be potentially beholden to a creditor. Similarly, interpersonal unforgiveness undermines the possibility of forgiveness. What about the kinds of cases, usually involving a lack of sincerity by the wronging party, that Wonderly uses to motivate her account? Hegel, on my interpretation, understands forgiveness as a success-term which picks out the objective restitution of a relationship, not a subjective term concerning whether I believe that the wronging party has apologized or made some other restitution. So cases of pretended remorse will mean the conditions for forgiveness were in fact never met.

Wonderly anticipates this kind of objection, and responds that "oftentimes, even where we acknowledge that we forgave mistakenly or wrongly, we still understand ourselves as having genuinely forgiven…. [if] I come to realize that I truly forgave someone under false pretenses. My response in this case wouldn't be 'I never really forgave you,' but rather, 'I no longer forgive you'" (Wonderly 2021, 9–10; compare Wonderly 2022, 482). But recall that Wonderly suggests that forgiveness can be understood in two ways: as a shift in affective attitude towards another or as a change in the relationship status or normative position of another. Wonderly attempts to introduce unforgiveness as neutral between these two formulations. But Wonderly's response to this objection functions *only* under the affective interpretation of forgiveness. If we understand forgiveness as the reacceptance of an agent into a moral relationship, then, at least on a Hegelian account, it cannot be right to say that one can 'genuinely forgive' under false pretenses. For the false pretenses exclude the possibility of both agents accurately representing the moral relationship they stand in. Hegel's idealist constraint on ethical relationships, that the relationship exists just in case the participants represent it according to its principle, excludes the possibility that the ethical relationship exists while a participant misrepresents it (compare: 'my boyfriend and I have gotten back together, he just doesn't know it yet'). I can at most *believe* that I have reaccepted another into an ethical relationship. This is what is required to make sense of ethical relationships as something objective, not as

[21] Wonderly (2021, 10–11), compare Wonderly (2022, 486–87).
[22] Wonderly (2021, 8–9).

something that two agents merely believe they stand in to each other insofar as they have not discovered various betrayals, but as the actual, self-conscious state of affairs.

That Wonderly is tacitly committed to F1 becomes clear, I think, when she remarks that trust and love are forgiveness's "sister attitudes": "ideally, trust, love, and of course, forgiveness, would persist; yet things are not always ideal" (Wonderly 2021, 9; compare Wonderly 2022, 485). An attitude, as I understand it to be used here, is a kind of disposition to relate or feel a certain way towards another agent. And this is only a legitimate interpretation of forgiveness assuming (some versions of) F1. Forgiveness, on an F2 interpretation, is not an attitude, or any kind of disposition, but is a kind of *act*. As Wonderly describes, attitudes can persist, and pass away, and return. But acts have a distinct temporal profile.[23] For example, I may fall in and out of love with someone, but I remain married until the act of signing the divorce papers. If I get remarried to the same person, it is a second marriage, not the return of the previous marriage. Similarly, as an act, each instance of forgiveness is a unique token. Thus to accept unforgiveness requires understanding relationships between individuals as a set of affective dispositional orientations towards each other. And this, for Hegel, would amount to a denial of ethical relationism.

So if we accept Hegel's claim that forgiveness is not merely an affective shift but concerns the normative status of a relationship between agents, as well as his idealist claim concerning the necessary shared recognition of that relationship, we have to reject the kind of authority of moral judgment that unforgiveness makes room for. We can now return to Hegel's description of the hard heart. The hard heart's expectation that its moral judgment be recognized, but its inability to recognize the other's act of confession as genuine, is mirrored in the case of unforgiving. Both the hard heart and someone who insists on their right to unforgive fail to understand existing ethical relations as having priority over the power of moral evaluation. The person who reserves the right to unforgive, like the hard heart, cannot enter into ethical reality.

The hard heart identifies itself exclusively with its capacity for moral condemnation. But it is the possible recognitive ethical relationship with another that confers objective status on a judgment of moral condemnation. Moral condemnation can be distinguished from a subjective, affective orientation towards another only if the moral judgment has internal to it the possibility that the other could come to share our understanding of the transgression. Despite the hard heart's attempt to make an objective moral judgment concerning the other, its contravening of the constitutive principle of moral judgment renders its judgment merely subjective, just as unforgiveness rendered forgiveness merely a subjective, affective orientation to the other. Hegel understands madness as regarding a "merely subjective representation[…] as something objective" (Enz III §408A). The hard heart shatters into madness because it cannot distinguish its subjective orientation towards the other from its objective judgment.

Breaking of the hard heart

It is at this point that Hegel can begin articulating what the normative power of forgiveness in fact involves. Hegel warns us again and again that moral judgment is itself an act, just as actual, and thus is in a sense just as culpable, as the actions of evil consciousness (e.g., PhS §665). But it is not until the denouement of the hard heart and its breaking that we see what this act consists in: barring the reinstitution of the moral community. Appreciating this requires contrasting moral judgment and theoretical judgment. A theoretical judgment is world-dependent. For example, I should judge 'my

[23] I am here indebted to the analysis of this distinction in Rödl (2012, 163).

eyes are red and puffy from crying' only if that state of affairs actually obtains: my eyes are in fact red and puffy from crying. Not so in the case of moral judgment. Moral judgment does not merely represent a relationship whose status is fixed independently of this judgment. Certainly, there is a fact of the matter about whether or not a transgression occurred. But part of whether I stand in rightful relation to another is whether I judge that rightful relationship to obtain. In the case under consideration here, it involves whether a relation to another should be reinstituted or not. Hence: "[i]t is therefore just the hard heart itself which is putting obstacles in the way of the other's return from the deed… and into the equality of spirit… it engenders the inequality which is still present" (PhS §667; underlines mine). Just as confessing consciousness needs to realize it is enacting an equality, the hard heart must realize that it is engendering the remaining inequality. When you hold someone to be blameworthy, you cannot abdicate the responsibility for such an act and pretend to be merely determining what moral concepts appropriately apply where. It is in this sense that the hard heart is a hypocrite: its hypocrisy is not that the hard heart must have committed its own transgressions in the past that it is conveniently ignoring. It is that it wishes to hold onto a power for condemnation which stems from an identification with moral principles, while at the same time rejecting the kind of responsibility that this involves. When it finally recognizes this, the hard heart "lets go of this difference between determinate thought and its determining judgment existing-for-itself" (PhS §670). The determinate thought is the concept of good or evil under which a person's character and actions can fall.[24] The determining judgment is the subsumption of this case under the determinate thought. To let go of this difference is to recognize that the judgment about whether the concept applies is (paradoxically) part of whether it in fact applies.[25] In letting go of this difference it becomes the case that the broken heart may *decide* whether to blame or to forgive.[26]

IV Two powers of Spirit

I have surveyed the two models of forgiveness that Hegel argues against. Here I outline Hegel's positive conception of forgiveness in detail. In an ethical relationship, the participants understand the relationship the same. But if it is broken off, how do they get to the point at which they might share this thought again? Beginning with some moral transgression, Hegel developed the stances of moral judgment and confession. And these stances on their own were both found wanting because they refused the legitimacy of the other's stance.[27] The unity of these two insufficient models will reveal how forgiveness is possible (PhS §669).

When confession and moral judgment are thought together the two shapes of consciousness show that they can think the transgression as what it is, as a violation of some ethical principle constitutive of their relation to each other. In both thinking the transgression *as transgression*, both parties show that they can think the relationship the same, in its broken form. And in this shared thought each

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[24] See PhS §777 and §779.

[25] Hence Hegel (Enz I §162R) claims the concept must move beyond mere determinate concepts, concepts that are merely 'for us' but not immanent in that to which they apply. In forgiveness the concept becomes immanent in this sense, for ethical concepts immanently constitute the relationship to which they apply.

[26] In contemporary terms, this means that forgiveness has declarative force. For critical discussion, see Pettigrove (2004), who claims that understanding forgiveness as a power with declarative force does not sit well with relational qualities of forgiveness. See Warmke (2016) for further discussion and a defense of declarative force.

[27] Though, as Hegel is keen to point out, each tacitly relies on the stance of the other for its own form of self-consciousness. The hard heart, judging the other to have transgressed, takes the unrealized ethical principle as its essence. But the latter is *unrealized* because it has been transgressed. Thus the hard heart's essence is something that "it equates with this other consciousness which was actual action" (PhS §670). And the evil and then confessing consciousness can be evil only if it sees moral principles as "non-actual" by being only "for another" (PhS §671).

consciousness re-inherits, in its proper form, the normative power that it thought it had. Confessing consciousness thinks that we all equally exist as sinners, and alienates itself from the power of moral judgment. The hard heart retains the power of moral judgment and refuses to enter existence. The two powers thought together are the power to change one's character, or spirit's power over its actuality, and the power to cancel one's moral judgment, or spirit's power over its determinate concept.

Spirit's power over its actuality

Confession is the breaking of the "unrecognized existence of particular being-for-itself" and thereby the "power of spirit over its actuality" (PhS §669). In confession, in recognizing the wrongs I have done to another, I reject that I may determine myself particularly, or as I see fit. Recognizing these wrongs as wrongs is already to understand oneself to be bound by the determining concepts of an ethical relationship. But our ethical existence constitutively involves our recognizing such ethical principles. Hence confession discloses that our ethical character is not immutable, but reflects how we understand our relationship to ethical principles. And this act of recognition is already to transform one's actuality, or to transform one's character by understanding oneself to be bound by some ethical principle.[28] Such an act of confession does not recognize the other as the sole authority on moral norms and is thus not a "humiliation" (PhS §666), but neither is it the claim that both transgressor and victim are equally sinners before the law. Rather, confession involves a recognition of a transgression and hence a recognition of a shared understanding of the nature of the transgression and ethical principle transgressed. In confession "speech will pronounce [the hard heart's and the confessor's] equality so that recognitional existence will make its appearance" (PhS §666). So rather than bringing the judging consciousness down into particularity as another sinner, confession allows the transgressor to ascend to universality. Its significance lies not in the acknowledgment of universal sin, but in the reinstitution of the existing moral relation, and a return from out of sin.

This places a kind of confession-condition on Hegel's conception of forgiveness. Ethical relationships require the agents to represent the relationship the same, and thus reconciliation requires that the agents concur about what counted as a transgression and what did not, in a roughly similar way to how Miranda Fricker understands communicative blame and then forgiveness to involve the establishment of shared moral understanding between agents.[29] This makes clearer the sense in which forgiveness cannot exist if someone has only pretended to show remorse: lacking shared understanding, they cannot be forgiven and have duped the other into the appearance of a reinstated relationship. And it is for symmetrical reasons that, if we truly believe we did nothing wrong, an offer of 'forgiveness' from the party who perceived themselves to have been wronged can

[28] This may raise the question of whether there is some set of conditions on validly forgiving: that forgiveness is only warranted in cases in which someone has atoned. While I think Hegel does seem to be indicating that there is something like a confession-condition, which minimally involves a recognition of the transgression as a transgression, I do not think that the language of warrant is appropriate here, as it suggests that there could be an act of forgiveness that genuinely exists but is unwarranted. I think, rather, the confession-condition should be seen as part of what is constitutive of forgiveness as such. Just as marrying my boyfriend when he refuses to say 'I do' is not so much unwarranted as impossible.

[29] See Fricker (2016) and Fricker (2019). There are of course major differences between Fricker's approach and Hegel's, which I cannot examine here. For example, Hegel does not understand forgiveness as a contingent social practice. Rather he understands it as an achievement of modernity, in which we are able to recognize the true status of our ethical concepts. Nor does he understand its role as primarily shifting certain reactive attitudes.

be infuriating. Their 'forgiveness' is a kind of imposition of their own moral understanding of the relationship which we reject.[30]

Spirit's power over its determinate concept

The return from out of sin of the transgressor requires a reciprocal moment in which the victim retracts their moral evaluation of the other. The breaking of the hard heart discloses the normative power of spirit "over its determinate concept" (PhS §669). Judgment about the blameworthiness of an agent and thus determining the actual blameworthiness of an agent is a power that belongs to spirit. Thus the idealist component of Hegel's view is not only that the ethical relation exists when the two agents think it to exist. The agents are conscious (perhaps inchoately and only in the modern era) of this latter fact as well. And in being conscious of this fact, agents are capable of determining when an ethical relation exists. In this way spirit has not lost its identification with moral principles, and also no longer refuses to enter into ethical community with others.

Here we can return to Allais's claims about judgments of character. On her picture, epistemic humility licenses forgiveness because of the uncertainty it introduces. The latter gives sufficient warrant to withhold judgment about someone's character and then judge them to be morally better than their actions strictly recommend. Now Hegel agrees with Allais that forgiveness involves being able to change electively our judgment about another's character. But he does not ground this capacity in an uncertainty stemming from a distinction between the external actions affecting another and an unknowable inner disposition. In fact, he denies that such a distinction can be treated as fundamental (PR §124; cf. Enz I §140A). Rather, the purportedly unknowable inner ethical disposition (my good or evil character) turns out to *just be* the outer ethical relations that an agent stands in.[31]

Hegel's point here is idealist: the evaluative judgments of others are part of one's character. And this is because, per ethical relationism, he understands an agent's ethical character to be defined by the self-conscious relationships they stand in with others. Of course, cases of misjudgment occur.[32] But in the basic case the evaluation of an agent's character by another standing in an ethical relationship to them is part of what their character is: my boyfriend is not an essentially good or bad boyfriend over and above the actually existing relationship he stands in to me. And this means that my free choice about whether to forgive him or not is not funded by my uncertainty about whether he has the character of being a bad boyfriend. Rather, my forgiving him is a part of the process where he becomes a good boyfriend again by restoring that ethical relation. Forgiveness is not judging someone to be better than they in fact are, but is the very process of making them better: "the deed is repossessed by spirit into itself" (PhS §669). This is more obvious in cases in which forgiveness is explicitly understood as taking the form of a reparative process, but is essential to any instance of forgiveness.

Conclusion

Our ethical concepts are not a set of normative standards that we stand under, and forgiveness is not some stopgap for our inability to meet such standards. Rather, forgiveness demonstrates an awareness that our ethical concepts just are the principles by virtue of which we relate to others, and these principles are not external to the exercise of our agency, but are rather included in it.

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[30] So Hegel does not take a strong 'gift' view of forgiveness, in which there are effectively no conditions on forgiveness. See Fricker (2019), Allais (2019) and Russell (2023, chaps. 2 and 3) for discussion.

[31] For discussion of this distinction see Alznauer (2015, chap. 4).

[32] See Enz I §142.

Forgiveness is therefore a constitutive power of human freedom. The power of spirit over its determinate concept is a reappropriation of evil consciousness's distorted application of this power, in which it understood itself as able to determine freely whatever laws should apply to it. This power "to bind and to undo" (PhS §646) which duties apply, has its proper application in forgiveness as an "undoing of what has been done" (LPR 260). Hegel makes this explicit in his discussion of the sovereign's right to pardon: "the act of pardoning is the responsibility of the one with whom right and wrong cease to exist (as they cease to exist with conscience)" (LNR §139). Duties exist within relationships (here that of citizenship). Thus the pardon, in reinstituting the relationship, undoes its being broken off by pardoning the criminal act. Since forgiveness is an ungrounded decision, there cannot be any obligation to forgive, for it is the act of forgiveness that first (re)produces an ethical relation within which obligations (or some subset of ethical obligations) apply. And furthermore, the participating agents may adjudicate the standing of their ethical relationship completely independently of any further criterion. My friend's criminal behavior has no effect on the status of our relationship as friends unless I decide that it does.

Pardoning and forgiveness thus constitute an "ungrounded decision" (PR §282), unable to be determined or obligated by causes or reasons, something every bit as radical as Kant's transcendental freedom, in which an unconditional causality begins a state from itself (CPR A533/B561). An instructive contrast arises here with Hegel's key interlocutor in practical philosophy. Kant's account of freedom requires that the will stand outside of spatiotemporal determination. And Kant understands conscience to be an agent's self-consciousness of this fact: "The judicial sentences of that wonderful capacity in us which we call conscience [means that a…] human being may use what art he will to paint some unlawful conduct he remembers as an unintentional fault[…] he nevertheless finds that the advocate who speaks in his favor can by no means reduce to silence the prosecutor within him, if only he is aware that at the time he did this wrong he was in his senses, that is, had the use of his freedom" (CPrR 5:98). In identifying with our past transgressions we understand these actions to issue from one, atemporally chosen disposition, and thus understand ourselves in abstraction from our temporal existence. Rather than indicating an *independence* from temporal existence, Hegel's forgiveness discloses spirit's *power over* its temporal existence, its being with itself in another. In undoing the past transgression, spirit reinterprets the past events, stripping them of their prior ethical significance.[33] The transgression is not obliterated, but its significance for spirit's self-understanding is disregarded by placing the transgression in a past it no longer identifies with: "the remembrance of the [transgressive] deed is no longer that conscience's intuition of itself" (ET 239).[34] As Hegel puts it in a different context, "spirit is only what it does, and its deed is to make itself – in this case as spirit– the object of its own consciousness, and to comprehend itself in its interpretation of itself to itself" (PR §343). For these reasons, "the wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind" (PhS §669). The self-interpretive work of relationships, and thereby the relationships themselves, are wholly ideal, and are therefore capable of being completely scarless, only as we think them to be.

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[33] This is close to but distinct from Ware (2014), who suggests that forgiveness no longer involves associating the transgressions with a person. As Hieronymi (2001, 550–51) notes, emphasizing this kind of dissociation can distort the kind of acknowledgment of the wrong that forgiveness also involves. Hegel also sees a danger here and insists several times that the transgression is not literally undone in forgiveness (e.g., PR §282).

[34] The principle by virtue of which this is so, the moral law, sets out a normative standard for our agency which is therefore beyond our own sovereign control. For this reason Kant claims that the judgments of conscience can be identified with God's verdict (MM 6:439). Hegel will understand forgiveness as a way in which we can reappropriate these supposedly divine powers as human powers. This is why "god appears" (PhS §669) when spirit experiences forgiveness (see, by contrast, Kant's claim at CF 7:48). But this approach to Hegel's philosophy of religion is beyond the scope of this paper.

Abbreviation key

Hegel's works:
Enz I *Encyclopedia Logic*
Enz III *Philosophy of Mind*
ET *Early Theological Writings*
LNR *Lectures on Natural Right*
LPR *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion Volume III: The Consummate Religion*
NL *Natural Law*
PhS *Phenomenology of Spirit*
PR *Philosophy of Right*

Kant's works:
CF *The Conflict of the Faculties*
CPR *Critique of Pure Reason*
CPrR *Critique of Practical Reason*
G *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*
MM *The Metaphysics of Morals*

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