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Self-forgiveness and the moral perspective of humility: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

John Lippitt

University of Hertfordshire

ABSTRACT:

What does it take to forgive oneself? I argue that reflection on Briony Tallis in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* can help us understand two key aspects of self-forgiveness. First, she illustrates an unorthodox conception of humility that, I argue, aids the process of responsible self-forgiveness. Second, she fleshes out a self-forgiveness that includes continued self-reproach. While Briony illustrates elements of the self-absorption about which critics of continued self-reproach (such as Margaret Holmgren) are rightly concerned, she also shows a way of getting beyond this, such that the delicate balance between self-forgiveness and self-condemnation is upheld. *Atonement* also shows the significance for the task of self-forgiveness of a particular kind of narrative continuity.

1. Introduction

Is it possible to forgive oneself? If so, should the person who has done so, for a serious wrongdoing, be fully at peace with herself? Some philosophers, perhaps most famously Hannah Arendt, have denied the coherence of the very idea of self-forgiveness.[1] Others, such as Charles Griswold, have recognised it as both coherent and important: a distinct phenomenon from accepting the forgiveness of others, and vital in circumstances where seeking such forgiveness is morally problematic. Yet Griswold still holds self-forgiveness to

fall short of what he calls “paradigmatic” forgiveness.[2] One of the key ideas behind this article is that part of the problem with understanding self-forgiveness is a mistaken tendency to think of it in “all or nothing” terms. Robin S. Dillon articulates the problem as follows:

> One troubling dimension of much of what is written about self-forgiveness is the assumption that there are only two stances one can take towards the self: negative or positive, loathing or being at ease with oneself. But in truth there is a vast middle ground in which one could retain a complex view of oneself that is shot through with ambivalence … But, and here’s the important thing, to go on like this can be to have forgiven oneself. Self-forgiveness does not require extinguishing all self-reproach, for it is not really about the presence or absence of negative feelings and judgements; it’s about their power. Forgiving oneself means not that one no longer experiences self-reproach but that one is no longer in bondage to it, no longer controlled or crippled by a negative conception of oneself and the debilitating pain of it, no longer alienated from oneself, so that one can now live well enough. This is possible even if one retains a measure of clear-sighted self-reproach, overcoming it without eliminating it.[3]

This recognition of a self-forgiveness that retains room for continuing self-reproach is important. It allows for a self-forgiveness that strikes the appropriate mean between the excessively easy variety - peddled by many a self-help book – and the refusal to forgive oneself that may actually be a form of morally problematic pride. But Dillon’s view has met with criticism, several writers denying that it is a variety of self-forgiveness at all. Here, I consider the most detailed such critique, that of Margaret Holmgren, and argue that it rests upon a false either/or between self-forgiveness and self-condemnation which ultimately

begs the question against Dillon. I believe that Dillon is broadly right in the account that she sketches. But to see why, we need more detail than Dillon offers. This is best achieved through exploring a complex literary case, such as that of Briony Tallis, the central character in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*. I shall argue that Briony demonstrates - firstly - aspects of the kind of self-absorption about which critics of continued self-reproach such as Holmgren are rightly concerned. But also – secondly - a way of getting beyond this, such that the delicate balance between self-forgiveness and self-condemnation is plausibly upheld. Seeing this involves considering what I shall call (borrowing a phrase from Joseph Kupfer) the moral perspective of humility. Central to such humility, we shall see, is not self-abasement or ranking oneself low, but a sense of radical dependence and other-focus of a certain sort. In a comment on Arendt's "elusive" reasons for dismissing the coherence of self-forgiveness, Griswold points out: "Her view does not consider the possibility of our viewing ourselves 'from the outside,' in the mirror of a notional 'other'."[4] Through her narrative - in which she presents herself largely from the outside - Briony does precisely this. Holmgren, I argue, underplays the importance of narrative continuity in self-forgiveness and self-reconciliation - as Briony can help us to see.[5]

2. Forgiveness and self-forgiveness in *Atonement*

McEwan's *Atonement* is a many-layered, complex story at the heart of which is the question of whether the central character, Briony Tallis, is able to forgive herself for a terrible error – described as a "crime" – she made in 1935 as a young teenager. The themes of forgiveness and self-forgiveness permeate the novel. In the early pages, the precocious thirteen-year-old Briony, a keen writer, has been preparing her latest play, *The Trials of Arabella*, for a family performance. But Briony's young twin cousins, visiting in the wake of

their parents' marital breakdown, are reluctant to participate in performing it, on the grounds that plays are "just showing off."[6] This, we are told, is precisely why Briony loves them: "everyone would adore her." (The *lack* of humility here is hard to miss.) Briony's forgiveness of her cousins, which is said to have "softened her tone," essentially involves looking down upon them, as "she knew they could never understand her ambition" (p. 11). Here "forgiveness" is something those who see themselves as superior may dispense on their perceived inferiors. This idea continues into one of the most important scenes of the novel, in which Briony observes from a window a scene by a fountain involving her sister Cecilia and Robbie, the son of a domestic servant whom Briony's father has taken under his wing and helped out financially with his education. When Cecilia, bafflingly to the observing Briony, strips to her underwear and dives into the water (actually to retrieve a piece of a Meissen vase, accidentally broken by Robbie in a clumsy attempt to help Cecilia fill it (pp. 29-30)), Briony assumes she must be doing so in response to an order from Robbie. Briony later witnesses her sister and Robbie getting sexually intimate in the library. This is the first sexual encounter between the two, and results from an anatomically frank letter in which Robbie reveals his feelings for Cecilia; a version which is not the one Robbie intended to send, and which Briony read in delivering his missive to Cecilia. Though Cecilia is an entirely willing participant, the idea of Robbie as a sexual predator with a strange authority over her poor sister becomes fixed in Briony's mind. Thus a little later, it is said that she "would never forgive Robbie his disgusting mind" (p. 115) – forgiveness again being presented as something Briony offers or withholds from the moral high ground she takes herself to occupy.

The sense of herself as a writer is an important element in what leads the young Briony into her terrible "crime." When her two young cousins go missing one evening and

everyone searches for them, their fifteen-year-old sister Lola is raped in the dark by an unknown assailant (actually a wealthy house-guest, Paul Marshall). Convinced of the truth of her version of events – that the rapist was Robbie – Briony is determined that she can describe the assailant, as “there was nothing she could not describe” (p. 165). She manages to convince the understandably confused and uncertain Lola that Robbie was the rapist, “with Briony’s certainty rising whenever her cousin appears to doubt herself” (p. 167). In an echo of the idea that forgiveness is a gift that the morally superior may dispense to (or withhold from) their inferiors, when Robbie - who is really the hero of the piece - returns with the lost twins, who are safe and sound, Briony tells herself this is “surely a cynical attempt to win forgiveness for what could never be forgiven” (p. 183). Immediately after Robbie’s arrest, when he and Cecilia are allowed a brief conversation just before the handcuffed Robbie is driven away, she also wrongly assumes that forgiveness is what Cecilia is magnanimously dispensing to Robbie (p. 185). In fact her sister – correctly, it turns out – never believed there to be anything for which to forgive him. Cecilia later leaves her family, unforgiven for their premature judgement of Robbie, to train as a nurse (p. 209).

Thus Briony’s crime: to allow her *moral* certainty about Robbie’s character to colour the reports she gives about what she *saw*. The novel’s description of this - crucial to my analysis - requires quoting at length:

> As early as the week that followed, the glazed surface of conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks. Whenever she was conscious of them, which was not often, she was driven back, with a little swooping sensation in her stomach, to the understanding that what she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that. … Her eyes

confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth *instructed* her eyes. So when she said, over and again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. What she meant was rather more complex than what everyone else so eagerly understood, and her moments of unease came when she felt that she could not express these nuances. She did not even seriously try. … Within a couple of days, no, within a matter of hours, a process was moving fast and well beyond her control. … She was asked again and again, and as she repeated herself, the burden of consistency was pressed upon her. What she had said she must say again. Minor deviations earned her little frowns on wise brows, or a degree of frostiness and withdrawal of sympathy. She became anxious to please, and learned quickly that the minor qualifications she might have added would disrupt the process that she herself had set in train.

She was like a bride-to-be who begins to feel her sickening qualms as the day approaches, and dares not speak her mind because so many preparations have been made on her behalf. The happiness and convenience of so many good people would be put at risk. These are fleeting moments of private disquiet, only dispelled by abandoning herself to the joy and excitement of those around her. So many decent people could not be wrong, and doubts like hers, she's been told, are to be expected. Briony did not wish to cancel the whole arrangement. She did not think she had the courage, after all her initial certainty and two or three days of patient, kindly interviewing, to withdraw her evidence. However, she would have preferred to qualify, or complicate, her use of the word "*saw.*" Less like seeing, more like knowing. Then she could have left it to her interrogators to decide whether they would proceed

together in the name of this kind of vision. They were impassive whenever she wavered, and firmly recalled her to her earlier statements. Was she a silly girl, they implied, who had wasted everybody's time? And they took *an austere view of the visual*. There was enough light, it was established, from stars, and from the cloud base reflecting street lights from the nearest town. Either she saw, or she did not see. There lay nothing in between; they did not say as much, but their brusqueness implied it. It was in those moments, when she felt their coolness, that she reached back to revive her first ardour and said it again. I *saw* him. I know it was him. Then it was comforting to feel she was confirming what they already knew.

She would never be able to console herself that she was pressured or bullied. She never was. She trapped herself, she marched into the labyrinth of her own construction, and was too young, too awestruck, too keen to please, to insist on making her own way back. She was not endowed with, or old enough to possess, such independence of spirit. An imposing congregation had massed itself around her first certainties, and now it was waiting and she could not disappoint it at the altar. (pp. 168-70, my emphases).

In a subsidiary crime, Briony takes Robbie's letter from Cecilia's room, without her sister's permission, the obscenity it contains being in her mind "clinching evidence" (p. 176) of Robbie's character and therefore - in her mind - his guilt.

Briony's sense of herself as a creature apart, something special because a writer, sometimes extends as far as self-obsession. Imagining her mother's death, Briony makes this all about herself: "There would be a funeral in the village at which Briony's dignified reticence would hint at the vastness of her sorrow. As her friends came up to murmur their

condolences they would feel awed by the scale of her tragedy" (p. 161). And after the rape, Lola's being taken upstairs "left Briony centre stage" (p. 173): poetic justice in Briony's eyes, given that Lola had earlier claimed for herself the central role in the play that Briony had wanted for herself.

When we next meet Briony, five years later, her view of herself now is as unforgivable. (Robbie has joined the army as a condition of early prison-release and is fighting in grim conditions in the war; Cecilia, still estranged from her family, is working as a nurse.) Having given up her opportunity to study at Cambridge, instead training as a wartime nurse like her sister, Briony judges herself thus: "Whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it, whatever illumination in tutorial she had relinquished, or lifetime moment on a college lawn, she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable" (p. 285). Her self-obsession, pride and a sense of herself as occupying the moral high ground are important elements of what is corrected by the moral perspective of humility that is growing in Briony. However – and this is vital - it also comes to correct her austerely unforgiving view of herself.

3. Briony Tallis and the moral perspective of humility

In debate about humility (or modesty), philosophers have disagreed about whether it involves a disposition to underestimate, or be ignorant of, accomplishments or self-worth in some respect (and if so to what degree)[7] or whether it involves, on the contrary, *accurate* self-assessment which nonetheless takes care not to *exaggerate* one's importance.[8] I see this sort of discussion of humility as one in which *comparison with other people* plays too central a role.[9] There is no need to think of humility thus. Rather, I shall develop the thought that what characterises the humble person is not that they think *less* of themselves

(comparing themselves with others and ranking themselves relatively low), but that they think *about* themselves less. In other words, they resist the temptation to have an orientation towards the world in which the self, its needs and concerns are what matters most (the kind of self-absorption we see in the young Briony).

In an under-valued article, Joseph Kupfer has argued for four dimensions of the moral perspective of humility.[10] First is acknowledgment of our "radical dependence," glossed by Kupfer in terms of the need to acknowledge how much of whatever we might have achieved depends upon people other than ourselves and circumstances beyond our control. Second, Kupfer notes that a reference to the morally exemplary helps to keep our "technical" (e.g. sporting, academic or professional) achievements in perspective. An exceptionally successful athlete or scholar may thereby come to realise that someone whose achievements in the relevant fields are more modest than his own is nevertheless his moral superior, such as in terms of the time, energy and resources they give to others, a realisation that enables even "high achievers" to remain humble.[11] Third, setting high moral ideals enables even the *morally* exemplary to keep their moral achievements in perspective, as the infinite nature of the ethical demand means that there is always more to be done. When they succeed, they are aware of how much more is to be done, so rather than bask in their success they get on with doing more of what is needed. I would put it like this: they focus on the pursuit of the good, rather than *their own achievements* in pursuing the good. And fourth, relatedly, the moral perspective of humility incorporates an orientation towards other people and objectively valuable elements of the world such that the humble person appreciates and promotes the value of these goods *apart from their instrumental value to herself*.

The upshot of this is that the humble person's attention is turned outwards, "away from themselves and toward things that have value in the world apart from themselves" – for instance, other people or serving a valuable cause – with the result that "humble individuals are disposed *not to dwell on themselves*."[12] Robert C. Roberts presents a similar picture – sometimes labelled the "low concern for status" view - of humility as "a trait marked by the absence of a certain kind of concern or concerned attention,"[13] such that the humble person is focused on value-not-necessarily-related-to-the-self rather than herself. (In Kupfer's view, the first two of his features tend to diminish in importance the more humility is informed by the third and fourth features, such that the most deeply humble people tend to pay less, rather than more, attention to themselves.[14])[15]

How, and to what extent, does Briony manifest this four-fold perspective? As she trains as a nurse near the start of the Second World War, there are moving scenes of treating the casualties from the evacuation of Dunkirk in which all the above four features are displayed to varying degrees. Briony's recognition of her "radical dependence" emerges in her sense of herself as part of a team doing good and valuable work – a useful cog in an important machine, where what she does has value as part of what that wider collective achieves for its fellow humans. If Briony thought about her own worth at all, it would be primarily as part of this collective. But as her confidence in her competence develops, there is a hint of what Roberts describes as the ideal of humility, an "implicit and inarticulate sense of [her] own worth" which, if "articulated in a definite life view", would be the "radical self-confidence" associated with a kind of humility: "a self-confidence so deep, a personal integration so strong that all comparison with other people, both advantageous and disadvantageous, slides right off [her]".[16] The humble person neither basks in her success nor feels a debilitating anxiety about her failures. Roberts suggests that such

humility is “an emotion-disposition - primarily a negative one, a disposition *not* to feel the emotions associated with caring a lot about one’s status.”[17]

Kupfer’s second feature, the focus on exemplars, is a more subtly drawn theme explicitly, but can be observed both in the status Florence Nightingale is given in the training of the nurses and, more importantly, in the submission of Briony’s will to her superior Sister Drummond: terrifying but clearly excellent at her vocation. This connects to the third feature, namely setting high ideals and the recognition of the infinite nature of the ethical demand (such that any ethical achievements are kept in perspective). Briony’s growing competence as a nurse, and successes in treating casualties, are quietly and indirectly recognised by Sister Drummond. In one significant incident, she comforts Luc, a dying French soldier who, in his state of confusion, thinks Briony is a girl he loves. When Briony here transgresses the cardinal rule not to use her first name with patients, Sister Drummond does not – unlike on a previous occasion – reprove her for this. Rather, she overlooks it, tells Briony to wash her face, and minutes later, Briony returns to her duties on the ward (p. 310). One never gets *praise* from Sister Drummond, but Briony’s progress is nevertheless silently acknowledged – yet there is always, immediately, more to be done.

However, it is the fourth feature - Briony’s focus on others – that is perhaps the most important. The formerly self-obsessed little girl who lives in her imagination has become a young woman who has clearly acquired an orientation towards people other than herself and other entities of value in the world. The intensity of treating the seriously wounded and dying take her out of herself. This is the most obvious aspect of Briony’s moral growth in the years immediately after her “crime.” She starts to recognise nursing, originally taken on as a penance, as a possible manifestation of *agapic* love of the neighbour: “Sometimes, when a

soldier that Briony was looking after was in great pain, she was touched by an impersonal tenderness that detached her from the suffering, so that she was able to do her work efficiently and without horror. That was when she saw what nursing might be, and she longed to qualify, to have that badge. She could imagine how she might abandon her ambitions of writing and dedicate her life in return for these moments of elated, generalised love" (pp. 304-5). This "generalised" love is sometimes directed at a particular individual. When Luc asks "Do you love me?" she replies in the affirmative: "No other reply was possible. Besides, for that moment, she did. He was a lovely boy who was a long way from his family and he was about to die" (p. 309).

The key point here, I take it, is that while part of Briony's becoming reconciled with herself is indeed through her penance, she achieves this not through introspectively beating herself up. By focusing on others – the war injured and dying – and absorbing herself in the ethical demands of this essentially other-focussed role, she achieves something beyond what introspection alone could achieve. Perhaps the self-reconciliation at which self-forgiveness aims is, as Mill famously claimed of happiness, something that can only be approached obliquely, "only to be attained by not making it the direct end."[18]

That said, a key part of Briony's process of atonement involves fully facing up to what she has done. In "Two Figures by a Fountain," the piece of fiction she submits to a magazine, the key aspects of her crime are absent. There is the observing young girl, but the rest of the novella dissipates into Woolfian stream of consciousness. In his relatively encouraging rejection letter, the critic Cyril Connolly asks of this young girl: "Might she come between them [the characters based on Robbie and Cecilia] in some disastrous fashion?" (p.

313). As a result of which, Briony realises that “the evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life” (p. 320).

When the eighteen-year-old Briony meets with her elder sister (at least as the much older Briony narrates it in her fictional account of this imagined scene), she offers publically to admit her error and renounce her earlier evidence, acknowledging the enormity of her “crime,” and insisting she does not expect forgiveness. Cecilia assures her she will indeed never forgive her (p. 337): echoes of the earlier view of forgiveness as dispensed from the moral high ground, but this time with Briony on the other side of this power-relation. There is also a description of a confrontation with an equally unforgiving Robbie (pp. 339ff.), but this too is fictional: we later learn that both Robbie and Cecilia were killed in 1940, Robbie from septicaemia in active service and Cecilia as part of the Blitz. Briony had in fact chickened out of facing her recently bereaved sister, limping home from Marshall and Lola’s wedding (Lola indeed married her rapist). We later learn that Briony never again saw her sister before the latter’s death. The elderly Briony’s willingness to recount the details of her crime, despite knowing that she will never be able to publish in her lifetime - Marshall and Lola being rich and highly litigious - is part of the atonement she attempts. Her crime must be on the record, to be published after Lola’s death, even if Briony herself will not live to see its publication.

I submit that Briony meets the following criteria for legitimate forgiveness: an offence against another for which she judges herself responsible; reactive negative emotions (such as guilt and shame) thereto; a narrative account of what she did, and why, which makes her actions intelligible (the story we are reading); and contrition for the wrong. We also have commitment for change and taking serious steps to live up to this

commitment.[19] By the end of the novel, it is clear that Briony has spent much of her life trying to atone for her crime and to demonstrate herself as being more than the person she was at thirteen: she describes it as a "fifty-nine year assignment," with eight different drafts of the novel between 1940 and 1999 (p. 369). An underlying humility is implicit throughout this task of atonement.

But Cecilia and Robbie are dead, and so unable to forgive. Self-forgiveness seems Briony's only option. Yet I submit that Briony also meets - most of - the criteria Griswold outlines for self-forgiveness:

> One must reframe one's view of oneself and see oneself in a new light; make a commitment to change one's ways; confront honestly and fully the injury one has done …; have compassion for oneself, and refrain from objectifying oneself as though one was a "moral monster"; develop a narrative that explains how one came to do wrong and what emendatory steps one will take, and that expresses how one "re-frames" one's view of oneself … Crucially, one must take responsibility for oneself. The target of forgiveness remains the agent, not the deed. … A moral case of self-forgiveness, finally, does not assume that self-reproach is always unjustified – on the contrary, it assumes that it may be justified and then, for good reasons, cease to be.[20]

Returning to where we started, my interest now is in the last claim. Need self-reproach be entirely expunged in order to be able to say that someone has forgiven themselves? Most writers on self-forgiveness tend to assume so. However, like Dillon, I think that they are wrong - and that we can draw on Briony to see why.

4. Self-forgiveness and self-reproach: Holmgren on Dillon

Margaret Holmgren is extremely sceptical about this view. In a careful critique of Dillon, Holmgren worries that we might "objectify" ourselves by conflating ourselves with our own past values and attitudes, which is inconsistent with respecting our own moral agency: "Although our past wrongful actions and attitudes warrant our condemnation, and in severe cases, our contempt, we as persons do not."[21] In the background here is the concern that this might lead to a total moral breakdown, in which we are unable to "go on" after our past wrongs. Holmgren's position trades on a version of hating the sin but loving the sinner (and compare here Griswold's condemning the deed, not the agent). This leads her to argue for what she calls "genuine self-forgiveness" as opposed to "self-condemnation" (which she seems to conflate with Dillon's "self-reproach"). In doing so, Holmgren claims that focusing on one's own past record of moral performance is "devoid of any real value." Asserting that there is "no reason to focus our attention on our past moral track record," she instead commends "ways in which we can enhance our moral growth in the future, make genuine contributions to others, and engage in constructive activities."[22] Self-forgiveness involves respecting one's moral agency and using it responsibly, transcending the focus on oneself and one's past wrongs, and turning one's attention to what is truly of value.

I certainly think there is *something* to this worry. We would not want a person so weighed down by guilt about their past actions that they were unable to do any subsequent good. But Holmgren is throwing out the baby with the bathwater in moving from legitimate worries about such cases to claiming that continued reflection on our past moral errors has *no* value.[23] Briony, I submit, is a revealing counter-example to Holmgren's claim. For what of

cases where my wrongful deed proceeds from having a character flaw? In considering such cases, Glen Pettigrove suggests that sometimes we need to forgive a wrongdoer not only for what she has done, but also for "who she is (or was)."[24] When – as in the Briony case – the wrongdoer is me, what I can do is try to make myself less of the person from whom the wrongful act arose. But in order to do so, I need to understand the ways in which the character flaw that led to it may still be present within me.

The novel touches upon this in the crucial last section. A seventy-seven-year-old Briony - now a successful novelist but who has recently received a medical diagnosis of approaching vascular dementia - returns to the former family home in which her crime was committed (now an elegant hotel) for a birthday party in her honour. One of the twins, now also a septuagenarian, has arranged a surprise: the première of the thirteen-year-old Briony's long abandoned play (all ten minutes of it). As the prologue begins, Briony describes her reaction: "Suddenly, she was right there before me, that busy, priggish, conceited little girl, *and she was not dead either*, for when people tittered appreciatively at 'evanesce' my feeble heart – ridiculous vanity! – made a little leap" (p. 367, my emphasis). In other words, Briony acknowledges that for all that she has grown, *her now* still contains an element of *her then*. This changes what self-forgiveness is available to Briony. She acknowledges not only what she did at age thirteen, and the way in which her gross error then had disastrous, if unforeseen, consequences. She also recognises that a little of the "priggish, conceited little girl" is still with her. I suspect this reveals a truth about ourselves that many of us would, if we are honest, uncomfortably have to acknowledge about our past moral failings. Jeffrie Murphy describes this neatly as "the fear that the seeds of such a person might still remain within me."[25]

For this reason, Briony also shows that Dillon is right to trying to strike a balance between self-forgiveness as Holmgren seems to understand it – Holmgren's "genuine self-forgiveness", in which self-reproach has no role to play *at all* - and blanket, entirely past-focussed self-condemnation. What neither Holmgren nor other critics of Dillon seem fully to register is Dillon's explicit image of self-forgiveness as a kind of *overcoming*, on something like the model of overcoming a disability. The Paralympic athlete (a wheelchair basketball player, say) has not *eradicated* their disability – they are still wheelchair-bound – but rather they have managed to triumph over it such that it is no longer debilitating. As Dillon puts it, "to overcome something is not necessarily to eradicate it. We also overcome things by not letting them … control us, by lessening or constraining their power over us."[26] Self-forgiveness, then, need not be seen as an all-or-nothing phenomenon, but rather something to which threshold conditions apply.[27] Holmgren distinguishes what she calls "improvement-oriented" self-assessment from "judgement-oriented" self-assessment.[28] The former assesses how I am doing in terms of my normative self-conception and what amendments I need to make. She takes this to be of obviously fundamental moral importance. The latter sits in judgement on my past moral performance, and it is only this, Holmgren claims, which gives rise to shame, self-reproach and the inability to forgive oneself. It leads one to judge oneself as selfish, unworthy, a moral failure. What Holmgren seems primarily to object to is this totalising move.

However, the neat distinction Holmgren here aims to draw seems false to moral reality, and again Briony can help us to see why. It is not clear that Briony ever quite conflates herself in totality with the person who committed her crime (in the sense that there was no more to her than that). So she never manifests judgement-oriented self-assessment in such an extreme form. Holmgren suggests that we can abandon judgement-

orientation "and the shame and self-reproach to which it leads, without loss."[29] Against Dillon's argument that self-reproach (especially its emotional dimensions) reminds us of what we care about,[30] Holmgren responds that improvement-orientation does this better than judgement-orientation, as the former is less self-focused. Part of Holmgren's objection is that a Dillonesque self-forgiveness that retains room for self-reproach involves excessive focus on oneself.[31] But Briony is a revealing counter-example to this claim too: despite the time she has spent facing up to her wrong, her life has *not* been excessively dominated by self-focus. We have seen how her experience as a nurse takes her out of herself into acts of *agapic* love: hers has not been a life of narrow self-obsession. And to her time as a nurse we might also add, in her later life, the value her novels have presumably given to her readers. In more general terms, this possibility is missing from Holmgren's analysis: *that a person's judgement-oriented self-reflection might be done in such a way as to provide something valuable to others*.

(It is true that self-focus is central to Dillon's analysis; the other-focused humility that I see in Briony is consistent with, but certainly not emphasised by, Dillon. Note that when Dillon mentions humility, her Kantian version of it is about ranking oneself low.[32] So while my position supports Dillon's general line on self-forgiveness as retaining room for self-reproach, it is distinct from it.)

Moreover, in urging us to ditch judgement-oriented self-assessment in favour of improvement-oriented self-assessment, it is ultimately unclear precisely what Holmgren is recommending. If the objection to judgement-orientation is merely to conflation (a Briony who thinks of herself as *nothing but* the person who committed her crime), then I would have no quarrel. But Holmgren seems to mean more than this, and overlooks the possibility

that judgement-orientation (in a sense distinct from such conflation) *is a vital element of improvement-orientation*. The elderly Briony's judgement that the little girl is still with her is testament to this possibility. (And note that when she recognises the priggish little girl as still part of herself, the elderly Briony does not simply *conflate* the two.) Judgement-orientation cannot be dismissed as a mere distraction if the future self is related in any deep way to the past self. So finally, I shall suggest that part of what makes self-forgiveness intelligible is that the future self *is* so related to the past self. In the final section, I turn to Griswold and Peter Goldie's focus on the narrative dimension of self-forgiveness, in order to suggest what an improvement-oriented self-assessment that includes judgement-oriented self-assessment could look like.

5. The narrative angle

Clearly, what is involved in self-forgiveness on some level is *me now* judging *me then*. As noted, there is an important role for narrative in Griswold's account of this.[33] In Griswold's view, narratives of forgiveness will be both "projective" and "recollective".[34] Holmgren emphasises the former at the expense of the latter. But surely both are important. Griswold talks of *growth* – that with which Holmgren is also concerned – in terms of realising an ideal. But crucially, he adds that the significant change involved here "is not just a rupture with the past, let alone its obliteration, but *its reinterpretation and integration into a larger narrative*".[35] Holmgren's account, I suggest, de-emphasises the latter features in such a way that it comes uncomfortably close to recommending a mere "rupture with the past." It's as if I am to say: "Sure, I got drunk while showing off my handgun collection, and accidentally shot two of the neighbours. I feel awful about that, but there's no point in crying over spilt milk: I must do better next time."[36] But this does not take seriously enough

the damage I did *this* time. Griswold, like Holmgren, notes the importance, in both requesting forgiveness and forgiving, of “the decision not to be determined by the past alone.”[37] But Holmgren, it seems to me, is ultimately not willing, beyond a certain unspecified stage in the self-forgiveness process, to be influenced by the past *at all*, and this is problematic.[38] There can still be room for *me now* to continue to see *me then* as blameworthy, *and to continue to experience the appropriate emotions about this*. And the fact that *me now* and *me then* are *the same person* – not only in a formal sense but in the way that Briony registers in seeing the “prissy little girl” in her current self - makes this something other than third-person observation. Holmgren seems to downplay this important difference.[39]

We can see both the recollective and projective elements at work in the case of Briony. Her multiply redrafted novel clearly shows her engaged in narrative thinking about her past. But this also has a *projective* dimension, since it involves engaging in narrative thinking of herself in the future. As Goldie argues in a discussion of self-forgiveness which builds on Griswold’s work,

> Engaging in narrative thinking of myself in the future, imagining myself acting on the self-governing policies that I have now adopted because of my regrets for what I did in the past, I can now conceive of myself in future episodes, acting as I now know I should. And I now feel, external to the narrative, emotions that express my satisfaction, through strong reflective endorsement, with my self-governing policies. In the long run, my aim is that these policies will become embedded in my character and personality traits, so that the policies no longer need to be conscious, explicit parts of my self-governance. By then my commitment for change will have been fully met.[40]

My suggestion is that this is what an improvement-oriented self-assessment that *includes* judgement-oriented self-assessment would look like. *Me now*'s continuing to blame *me then* is an important dimension of *responsible* self-forgiveness.[41] It is being well along in – indeed, towards the end of – this process that allows the elderly Briony, at the end of the novel, to sleep. But if we view self-forgiveness as a threshold, rather than an "all or nothing" condition, then we can see her as having forgiven herself not in the sense that she has extinguished all self-reproach, but in the sense that she is no longer controlled by it, allowing her to "live well enough." Or, in Briony's case, to die a good death.

Notes

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[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 237, 243.

[2] Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: a Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 122-130. On morally problematic cases of requesting forgiveness, see Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 104-105.

[3] Robin S. Dillon, "Self-forgiveness and Self-respect," *Ethics*, 112 (2001): 53-83 (83).

[4] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 122n6. Garry L. Hagberg extends this point by noting that in doing so, we become "able to feel warranted resentment" against the perpetrator of the injury - ourselves – and "in so transcending ourselves, we arrive at the doubled state in which we are able to look back on who we are and what we have done as if we were seeing another," a process parallel to the experience of "vicariously" entering another's life-narrative that takes place in our engagement with literature (Garry L. Hagberg, "The Self

Rewritten: the Case of Self-Forgiveness," in *The Ethics of Forgiveness*, ed. Christel Fricke (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 69-80 (p. 73).)

[5] To my knowledge, the only other philosophical article to discuss self-forgiveness in *Atonement* is Byron Williston, "The Importance of Self-Forgiveness," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 49 (2012): 67-80. But Williston's concerns are different from my own, most obviously in that his focus is on shame, whereas mine is on humility.

[6] Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: QPD, 2001), p. 11. All in-text citations hereafter are to this edition of the novel.

[7] Julia Driver has been the most prominent proponent of the underestimation view: see especially "The Virtues of Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): 373–84 and *Uneasy Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). I do not accept the distinction made in some of this literature between humility and modesty, instead taking the terms to be interchangeable. But I shall not argue that case here.

[8] See Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 420-28 and Norvin Richards, *Humility* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 8.

[9] The same is ultimately true of more recent discussions such as Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr and Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94 (2017): 509-539. Talk of owning one's limitations still tacitly requires a greater degree of comparison of oneself with others than is prevalent in the view I shall develop here.

[10] Joseph Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2003): 249–69.

[11] Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," p. 253.

[12] Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," p. 251, my emphasis.

[13] Robert C. Roberts, "The Vice of Pride," *Faith and Philosophy,* 26 (2009): 119-33 (129).

[14] Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," p. 265. Elsewhere, I have connected these four aspects of the moral perspective of humility with Kierkegaard's category of "jest" (see John Lippitt, "Jest as Humility: Kierkegaard and the Limits of Earnestness," in *All Too Human: Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Lydia L. Moland (Springer, forthcoming).) The above two paragraphs overlap with that discussion.

[15] In their discussion of intellectual humility, Whitcomb et al offer two objections to the "low concern for status" view, both of which I find unconvincing. Their claim is that a low concern for status is neither necessary nor sufficient for (intellectual) humility. In support of the latter claim, we are to imagine a philosophy professor who is highly talented and knows it: but his motivation is for epistemic goods, rather than status or entitlement (so – Whitcomb et al insist – he has a low concern for status). However, we are told, his default response when confronted with his intellectual errors and imperfections is to cover them up or explain them away: he is extremely bad at admitting his mistakes or to weaknesses in his arguments. This picture is psychologically unconvincing: if he has little or no concern for his status, we are left completely lacking an explanation of *why* he responds to criticism in this way. In support of the other claim (about necessity), we are to imagine a female professional who does not have a low concern for her status because that profession is male-dominated and tends to marginalise those without status. So a lack of concern with her status would result in negative consequences for her and her family. Such a person, Whitcomb et al claim, can still possess intellectual humility. Again, this claim seems dubious: I submit that the humble person would typically find the obligation to "represent" their gender or some other group in this way unwelcome. Even if they overcame this unease in the interest of a perceived higher good, it seems plausible that the genuinely humble person

would feel some cognitive dissonance at being pressured to care more about their status than they would ordinarily wish.

[16] Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: a Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 90.

[17] Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, p. 88.

[18] John Stuart Mill, *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009), p. 142.

[19] This list is derived from the account given in Griswold, *Forgiveness*, but has much in common with other accounts.

[20] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, pp. 127-28.

[21] Margaret R. Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 124.

[22] Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, p. 125.

[23] Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, p. 130.

[24] Glen Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 43.

[25] Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Jean Hampton on Immorality, Self-Hatred, and Self-Forgiveness," *Philosophical Studies* 89 (1998): 215-36 (226). There is perhaps no single term that perfectly captures Briony's character flaw. It is a conceited, self-centred and judgemental attitude, one manifestation of which is to tend to presume that one occupies the moral high ground. If we settle for "conceited" as our term, then we could say that her "crime" was committed "with the motives and aims that are characteristic of the [conceited] person" (cf. Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, p. 42). In this sense, the "crime" was not just an isolated action, but expressed and revealed something of her underlying character – and it is this character flaw, not just the action, that needs to be forgiven.

[26] Dillon, "Self-forgiveness and Self-respect," p. 75.

[27] I believe that the same is true of forgiveness in general, but I do not have space to make that case here.

[28] Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, pp. 128-29.

[29] Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, p. 129.

[30] Dillon, "Self-forgiveness and Self-respect," p. 78.

[31] Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, pp. 119, 131.

[32] Dillon, "Self-forgiveness and Self-respect," p. 83.

[33] I have no room to do this full justice here, but shall focus on just one key feature.

[34] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 108.

[35] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 109, my emphasis.

[36] Compare Holmgren: "there seems to be no reason to focus our attention on our past moral track record. It is much more responsible from a moral point of view to focus on ways in which we can enhance our moral growth in the future, make genuine contributions to others, and engage in constructive activities" (*Forgiveness and Retribution*, p. 125).

[37] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 109.

[38] This runs into Dillon's objection that if self-forgiveness is to be self-respecting, one cannot forget the past or overturn judgments about its significance for one's character. What one can do is recognise that the past need not *determine* the future, so self-forgiveness can alter the *power* the past has over us (see "Self-forgiveness and Self-respect," 79-80).

[39] In a point that he mentions but does not develop, Griswold suggests that narrative can help to explain "the sense in which self-now can both identify with self-past and benefit from the perspective of distance in a way that makes self-forgiveness possible" (*Forgiveness*, pp. 126-27). Holmgren's account risks severing this important continuity.

[40] Goldie, *The Mess Inside*, p. 108.

[41] Goldie's way of putting this risks making it sound as if my continued negative emotions when I recall my misdeed are a regrettable remnant of reflection on the past that I haven't – yet – quite been able to shake off (*The Mess Inside*, p. 147). But in fact, I am arguing, such a reaction – of self-forgiveness that contains self-reproach - is a crucial part of what distinguishes *responsible* from *irresponsible* self-forgiveness.