

Review of John Lippitt, *Love's Forgiveness: Kierkegaard, Resentment, Humility, and Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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If appearances count for anything, then one may defensibly argue that contemporary Western cultures appear to largely nurture (and perhaps have always nurtured) hard-hearted unforgiveness, valuing and promoting instead upmanship, self-aggrandisement, and other-depreciation or -pejoration over restorative reconciliation in interpersonal relationships. If this is so, contemporary Western cultures may be characterised as generally unloving since consummate and exclusive concern for self at the expense of the other(s) does not foster love but rather flies directly in the face of, for example, the Book of Proverbs, chapter 17, verse 9: 'Love prospers when a fault is forgiven, but dwelling on it separates close friends.'<sup>1</sup> However, keeping with one of the focal themes of hope explicated throughout the present issue, it is worth attending to other facets of Western culture writ large so as to not prematurely and heavy-handedly (or, more suitably, heavy-mindedly) conclude such a bleak and desolate landscape and that all is very truly lost and hopeless. Indeed, in his recent book, *Love's Forgiveness: Kierkegaard, Resentment, Humility, and Hope*, John Lippitt undertakes a determined investigation within one small facet of Western culture, an under-explored area of Kierkegaard studies—the Danish philosopher-cum-theologian's account of forgiveness—to argue the case for understanding forgiveness as a 'work of love,' which, just as such, necessarily entails the task of hope. This review, therefore, examines Lippitt's undertaking to explore the ever-timely and ever-important topic of the interrelations between hopeful/lessness, un/forgiveness, and un/lovingness.

Drawing upon a range of contemporary literature as well as theological and philosophical analysis in addition to Kierkegaard's own writings, Lippitt presents the case for grasping forgiveness as a 'work of love' across nine chapters. Chapter 1 traces several definitional questions to outline an

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<sup>1</sup> Prov. 17:9.



ontology of 'forgiveness' in which the latter concept involves a supersession of resentment or feelings of deep indignation and bitterness arising from an injustice toward a state of restitution. In Chapter 2, Lippitt further refines his conception of forgiveness by engaging questions of what places one in the position to forgive and, alternately, to be forgiven, as well as exploring matters of conditional versus unconditional forgiveness. In Chapter 3, Lippitt provides an overview of Kierkegaard's commentary on forgiveness as well as broaches biblical treatments of this expansive issue. Lippitt pays special attention here to Kierkegaard's contemplations of the connection between the divine forgiveness of sins (as contained in scripture) and interpersonal forgiveness as well as detailing a Kierkegaardian philosophy of love in which humility, hope, and justice figure prominently. Thereupon, Lippitt offers interpersonal forgiveness as a 'work of love' in the distinctive sense in which Kierkegaard recruits that phrase.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 4 builds from this initial argument to galvanise Lippitt's understanding of interpersonal forgiveness as a work of love against criticisms that his view fails to accommodate biblical, agapeic love, on the one hand, and a proper concern for justice, on the other. Chapters 5 and 6 continue this defence by relating forgiveness as a work of love to accounts of forgiveness expressly found in the Old and New Testaments as well as contemporary philosophical work on forgiveness, respectively. In turn, Chapters 7 and 8 individually elaborate the ways in which humility and hope subserve one's 'forgivingness' as it is directed toward others. Conversely, the concluding Chapter 9 turns from interpersonal forgiveness to the context of self-forgiveness to offer what Lippitt regards as a morally admirable (i.e., as opposed to morally culpable) form of one being able to forgive oneself.

Overall, Lippitt's book offers a well-researched argument comprising a sensible integration of Kierkegaard's thought with contemporary philosophical and theological scholarship. One notable commendation is Lippitt's compelling exposition of forgiveness, in the mode of expressing hope for another (e.g., an offending party in a given case of wrong-doing), as a genuine Kierkegaardian work of love, as clearly articulated in Kierkegaard's claim that 'love, which is greater than faith and hope [i.e., in themselves], also takes upon itself the work of hope, or takes upon itself hope, hoping for others, as a work.'<sup>3</sup>

Despite Lippitt's otherwise exacting analysis, however, the effort to exposit the relationship between hope, forgiveness, and love (largely carried out in Chapter 8) would have benefitted from greater consideration of despair as the converse of hope. To be sure, giving credit where credit is due, Lippitt does stipulate that '[t]his is not the place for a lengthy discussion of Kierkegaardian despair—investigated many times before, far more commonly than Kierkegaardian hope—but in general I...[share the view]...that despair is at root the unwillingness to hope' (191). Lippitt is not wrong, and the Kierkegaard studies literature is indeed replete with analyses of despair. Be that as

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<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 248. Cf. 1 Cor. 13:13.

it may, despair is not merely tangential to Lippitt's attempt to bridge the concepts of hope, forgiveness, and love. In fact, Lippitt may be seen to tacitly acknowledge the pertinence of despair for this aspect of his overall project. That is, Lippitt expends some effort to rebut prospective criticisms that his use of non-theistic philosophy to illustrate Kierkegaardian hope may fail insofar as it does not satisfactorily account for Kierkegaard's recurrent distinctions between 'secular,' 'mundane,' 'earthly,' or 'temporal' hope on the one hand, and 'religious,' 'eschatological,' or 'eternal' hope on the other. The rebuttal culminates in Lippitt stressing that the hope which he positively commends is not merely what Kierkegaard decries as the hope for 'something particular,' 'a hope that is not hope at all,' a fickle wish, 'a longing expectation now of one thing, now of another,' but rather an open-ended hoping for all things.<sup>4</sup> Having earlier invoked Kierkegaard to the effect that to hope all things is to, in Kierkegaard's words, 'give up on no human being, since to give up on him is to give up on your love for him', Lippitt writes, '[t]o lovingly hope for others is to remain open to the possibility of the good in their lives;' and here significantly disclosing recognition of the centrality of despair to his treatment of hope, forgiveness, and love, 'never to despair over them' (203–4).<sup>5</sup> To this it may be additionally noted that Lippitt's early discussion of conditional and unconditional forgiveness in Chapter 2 does not contain a more extensive consideration of despair. Nor, be it further noted, is despair more extensively discussed in the concluding chapter in which Lippitt contemplates *self-forgiveness*, despite despair being fundamental to Kierkegaardian selfhood. Taken together, then, these salient absences substantiate the point that Lippitt's work would have been strengthened by a more concerted effort to articulate how the converse of hope—Kierkegaardian despair—impacts on the interrelationship of hope, forgiveness, and love.

This principal omission notwithstanding, however, with *Love's Forgiveness*, Lippitt offers an informative, honest, insightful, and well-argued work. Lippitt eloquently provides readers with a valuable point of entry or elaboration for those wishing to explore the diverse and multi-layered theological, psychological, and philosophical debates which the topic of forgiveness ushers forth.

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<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 250.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 255. It is worth highlighting that the closest Lippitt gets to penetrating further into the ways in which despair impacts upon hope, forgiveness, and love is to observe in two footnotes that 'Kierkegaard claims that hope for others and hope for oneself are inextricably linked' (e.g., Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 259–60; 197n34). Further, recalling Kierkegaard's petition to never give up on another, Lippitt specifies that '[t]his 'giving up on' is presented [by Kierkegaard] as a manifestation of despair: presumably akin to what *The Sickness Unto Death* presents as the despair that 'lacks possibility' [Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 37–42.]...[g]iving up hope for another person is...said to be a 'dishonor,' which—unlike hope—puts a person 'to shame' [Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 262]' (198n41).