Adopting roles: Generosity and Presumptuousness

Section 1 – What is good about generosity?

An understanding of generosity must be central to an understanding of our moral nature, yet there is no good philosophical account of generosity. This is exemplified in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, where interesting accounts of liberality (using your wealth well) and magnificence (spending large amounts of money well) are provided in Book IV, but none of generosity. Hutcheson and Hume were interested in benevolence, but benevolence is not the same thing as generosity either. For Hume, benevolence is ‘desire of the happiness of the person belov’d, and an aversion to his misery.’ (*Treatise*, 2.2.9.3) So, acting benevolently, for Hume, is acting from this sentiment for the sake of someone else’s wellbeing. Picking up litter that somebody else has dropped is not benevolent on this account, but I think it may count as generous behaviour. And conversely, I will argue later that benevolent actions that are presumptuous and intrusive are not generous.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I take it that acting generously is acting well. By asking what it is that makes generous actions good and also what it is that stops actions from being good in that way - not generous – we can make some progress in understanding what generosity itself is. But asking what is good about generosity is not asking what is *praiseworthy* about generosity. For one thing, it is not always clear that generosity is praiseworthy. Suppose that a philanthropist takes a fancy ot me and decides to give me some money. They have been generous to me, but perhaps their behaviour is too arbitrary to count as praiseworthy. They are certainly owed gratitude, but not praise. Likewise some excessively risky behaviour may count as foolhardy and not praiseworthy, but still be generous. I should respond to someone taking a large risk for me by thanking them, and at the same time I may criticise them for doing something they shouldn’t have done. The value of generosity might then best be expressed as *gratitude-worthiness* rather than praiseworthiness.

These examples are not clear-cut. But what is clear is that praise and gratitude are different reactive attitudes, playing quite different roles in galvanising our normative social relationships. Praise is an attitude of assessment. It acknowledges successful behaviour in an impersonal mode as if by an impartial judge. It offers a reward – the reward of good standing. Gratitude, on the other hand, acknowledges a different quality in someone’s behaviour, one that cannot be acknowledged completely impartially, but depends on one’s being, or being vicariously, a beneficiary. When someone does something praiseworthy you say, ‘Well done!’ and offer them a rosette (figuratively). That would be inappropriate and possibly offensive as a response to a piece of generosity. The participants in generosity and gratitude are offering something more personal, something more like a relationship.[[2]](#footnote-2)

If the goodness of generous actions corresponds to gratitude-worthiness rather than praiseworthiness, there still remains the question I began with concerning what it is about generous actions that accounts for this goodness. And one of the first things that strikes one about generous actions is that they are supererogatory – beyond the call of duty. This seems to have at least something to do with what makes them worthy of gratitude.

David Heyd (2012) asks about the source of the particular moral value associated with *supererogatory* acts. His answer is that the ‘source of this particular value is double: the good intended consequences on the one hand, and the optional nature of the act on the other.’ And he develops the second of these as follows:

Doing one's duty does not win the agent any credit. She only did what she had to do. But going beyond the call of duty is meritorious exactly in the sense that the agent did something ‘extra,’ breaking the balance of justice. (Heyd 2012)

As Heyd acknowledges, there is nothing in itself good about acting in a way that one is not obliged to do. His thought seems to be that the optionality of supererogatory behaviour gives the goodness of that behaviour its special flavour. It is what transforms merely good behaviour into something worthy of *merit*. So the picture that emerges from this sort of approach when it is applied to the case of generosity is that there is one thing that makes generous actions good – perhaps something about their intended consequences or about their motive – and there is something else that makes them worthy of gratitude (or merit) – namely the fact that the agent was under no obligation to do them. This special element is that the goodness of the action is ‘extra’.

So, for Heyd, there is some sort of goodness that generous actions have that can be understood independently of their optionality. On the face of it one might identify three possible sources of this goodness: (i) the cost or sacrifice to the agent; (ii) the gain to the recipients; (iii) the good sentiment (kindness, sympathy or benevolence) motivating the action. I want to construct a single example to show that the source of goodness (i.e. gratitude-worthiness) in generous actions is none of these. The example is that of presumptuousness. If an action is presumptuous, it does not matter how much it costs the agent, how much the recipient gains from it, or how sympathetic and kind the motivating sentiment, it lacks the goodness of generosity; it is not worthy of gratitude. And this is not to treat presumptuousness merely as a defeating condition of generosity, as if there is something present – derived from one or more of these three sources - that would make the actions good if it were not for the presence of the presumptuousness. Presumptuousness *destroys* what would have been gratitude-worthy about the behaviour despite the fact that these three sources remain present. There is no longer anything gratitude-worthy (even potentially) about the behaviour if it is presumptuous.

Section 2 Presumptuousness

Suppose that one of my neighbours thinks that if she were the parent of my nine-year-old daughter she would not let her walk home from school by herself. She thinks there is something forlorn about my daughter walking down these big streets by herself, so very young. She knows we are busy working parents who cannot, without some difficulty, take time out to drive or walk our children home from school. Also she knows that we claim that we do not think it is necessary; we say it does her no harm to walk home by herself. The neighbour takes it upon herself, without telling us, to drive over to the school, at some cost of time and effort, collect our daughter and drive her home.

When I find out, I am not happy. I am not worried that my daughter is in any way damaged or threatened by this act. She knows my neighbour to be safe; it will not set a bad precedent and expose her to increased stranger danger. From my point of view it is a harmless treat to be collected from school; I do not take it to be spoiling my daughter or undermining her independence. I just resent my neighbour for acting as if she were my daughter’s parent, when my daughter already has perfectly good parents.[[3]](#footnote-3)

My neighbour on the other side of the house happens to be driving past my daughter on another afternoon as she sets off for home in a rainstorm. She picks her up and drives her home. It is no real trouble for this neighbour, but I am grateful to her for picking up my daughter. I take it to be an act of generosity. My daughter would have been soaked. If I had been at home that afternoon I would have seen the rain coming and driven to the school myself to collect her. But I wasn’t and I’m grateful to my neighbour for taking on the task. My gratitude is appropriate in this case. But in the case of the first neighbour no gratitude is appropriate. Her behaviour is presumptuous, not generous. Indeed its presumptuousness is what makes it not generous.

So in some circumstances it is generous of someone else to act as if she is a parent to my daughter. This will generally be when my daughter needs a parent, but for some reason no parent is available. In other circumstances it is presumptuous and not generous, however kindly meant. My presumptuous neighbour gave some of her own time. She might have given something more concrete, like a proper hot meal or some money. But that would not have made the act more generous. And the action involved some sacrifice for her. It might have cost her much in terms of expense and effort. We need not suppose that the benefit to her of the satisfaction of thinking she had done a good deed outweighed the pain, inconvenience and irritation involved in collecting my daughter. However much the pain and irritation was in excess of the satisfaction, the behaviour was not a whit more generous. She may have acted out of kindness and concern for my daughter. She still acted presumptuously.

I might have given any number of other examples of presumptuousness being opposed to generosity. For illustration of the thesis consider another two examples:

1. I read a friend’s novel and give him some helpful but unasked for tips as to how to do better next time. If my friend had asked me for my help it would have been generous of me to read the book with that sort of critical attitude and offer my advice; but as it is, it is not generous, however genuinely useful the advice might be.
2. Someone abuses my wife. I am naturally angry with them for that but despite the pain my wife still feels and the fact that she cannot forgive them, I forgive them. Arguably it is not my place to forgive them; it is presumptuous of me to take on the role of forgiver in this situation, and my behaviour cannot count as generous. My wife would be entitled to resent the act of forgiveness for its presumptuousness. If my wife had died following the abuse, then my forgiveness might have been generous, since in that case there would have been no one else able to take on the role of forgiver. One might argue that it is still not my place to forgive, but then it couldn’t ever be your place to forgive someone who killed your wife/husband, and I think it is clear that sometimes such forgiveness is genuinely generous.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In all these cases presumptuousness is at odds with generosity. And I suggest that this is generally the case. But the point is not just that generosity and presumptuousness are incompatible. Their relationship is closer than that. In behaving presumptuously you get wrong the very thing that you get right in behaving generously. Presumptuousness is a corruption of generosity.

Section 3 Adopting a Role

Such examples suggest an alternative approach to understanding generosity – understanding it as what presumptuousness is a corruption of. At a rough approximation, presumptuousness involves adopting a role that you do not have and are not entitled to adopt. My presumptuous neighbour improperly adopts the role of parent to my children. In presumptuously giving my novelist friend advice I am improperly adopting the role of critic. In forgiving my wife’s abuser I am taking on the role of forgiver where she has the prior claim over that role.

If it is right to think of presumptuousness as a corruption of generosity then we might think of generosity as the *proper* adopting of a role associated with certain commitments, which you do not actually have. While my presumptuous neighbour improperly adopts the role of parent to my child. My other neighbour, the generous one who happens to be passing my child in a thunderstorm and offers her a lift, may also be adopting the role of a parent, but in this case not improperly. I am rightly grateful to my neighbour in that case for standing in for me. On that occasion the role was vacant.

To pursue this suggestion we need to develop some account of what it is to adopt a role. First of all, let me introduce the idea of a *normative status*.[[5]](#footnote-5) I take a *normative status* to be a position or relationship that carries with it entitlements and/or commitments and may indeed be constituted by them. So being a certain sort of parent or friend or teacher or having made a promise is having a status. This status obliges you to behave in certain ways and entitles you to be treated in certain ways.

For the purposes of this discussion of generosity and presumptuousness I am only interested in the *obligations* that go with having a particular status. The stranger who comes up and gives you an unwanted kiss is being presumptuous in the sense of improperly acting as if they have the *entitlement* corresponding to a certain status they do not have. That sort of presumptuousness is not a corruption of generosity, but a corruption of a sort of free expressiveness – a kind of attractive cheekiness.

Adopting a *role* is acting as if you have the corresponding status. More precisely, it is *being motivated by the considerations that should motivate someone who actually has that status*. Someone merely adopting a role who does not have the corresponding status does not thereby actually have the commitments that go with that status. They are doing what the status represented by that role would oblige them to do without in fact being so obliged. They act a certain way because that is what the status demands; but at the same time they are not obliged to act that way, because it is only a role and not an actual status that they are taking on. My neighbours who adopt the role of parent to my child are not thereby parents to my child and nor are they adopted parents. They have no status that commits them to any sort of care of my child.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We can also describe someone who has actually taken on a status and acts accordingly as having taken on the *role* of that status too. If someone adopted my daughter they would take on the *status* of parent, as recognised by law and custom, with its associated commitments and simultaneously the *role* of parent (assuming they fulfilled their commitments). They would simultaneously be adopting the status and the role of parent. So adopting a role corresponding to some status is being motivated by the considerations that should motivate someone who actually has that status. And this applies to someone who actually adopts that status and acts accordingly, as well as to someone who is merely acting as if they have done so.

The metaphor of *going out of your* way captures the idea of adopting a role corresponding to some status that you do not at that time actually have. If we think of *your way* as being the way of behaving required by the status you actually have, then going out of your way to do something involves adopting the role of a status you do not actually have. My daughter is about to get soaked in a thunderstorm and my generous neighbour can rescue her from that by stopping and giving her a lift. That is a consideration that ought to motivate her parents in the same circumstances. Her parents would be under an obligation. But my generous neighbour is under no such obligation. It is not the case that she *should* stop and pick up my daughter; I would not feel let down to hear that she had driven past. But she has taken on that role and is therefore motivated by the same consideration; she goes out of her way to pick up my daughter.

We can see that her motivation is rooted in the adoption of this role by the fact that she is not motivated by any concern for the other children on the street about to become soaked. It only occurs to her to rescue *anyone* from the rain when she sees that it is *our* daughter there. This also shows that it is not merely kindness that motivates her. If being a good parent meant you had to let your child walk home and get wet as a lesson to them to remember to take their coat to school, then the generous neighbour who knew that would not give the child a lift. Her behaviour is sensitive to the requirements corresponding to the role, even though she is not subject to these requirements. The presumptuous neighbour who knew what was required by the role she was illegitimately adopting would also leave the child to walk home in the rain, perhaps reporting afterwards that they did it to teach the child a lesson. But the merely kind neighbour might still give the child a lift. They would be moved by nothing more than a concern to save a child from getting soaking wet.

You might or might not be conscious of adopting a role when you act in this way. As far as my generous neighbour is concerned, she may just be aware of the need of her neighbour’s child to avoid being soaked, and act to avoid it. She need not be consciously adopting the role of parent to this child in this respect. No more need the child’s actual parents be aware of doing what they do because they are so obliged by being that child’s parents. The parents may think: ‘She needs to get picked up or she will be soaked; I can do it; so I’ll pick her up.’ The generous neighbour may think: ‘She needs to get picked up or she will be soaked; her parents would do it if they were here; but they aren’t and I am; so I’ll do it.’ The ‘so’ here does not mark an inference that could be universalised across different subjects. Instead it marks a *decision* to take the preceding considerations as reasons for that conclusion.

Consider another example. I’m at a tea party, and someone says: ‘Who’ll be Mother?’ in a throwback to a more genteel age. I say: ‘I’ll be Mother. What do I do?’ I’m told that I pour the tea, pass round the biscuits and when anyone’s cup is empty I ask them if they want a refill. In this case, by saying ‘I’ll be Mother,’ I am making a performative utterance - a promise of sorts. I am not just adopting the role of ‘Mother’, I am adopting the corresponding normative status. This is not the status of an actual mother of course, but of a tea party ‘Mother’.

The action of taking on this status has generated actual commitments. This is to be contrasted with merely adopting the role without making any such performative utterance. Suppose nobody has asked: ‘Who’ll be mother?’ But I just pick up the teapot and play the role without ceremony. Then I would not be under an obligation to act in this way. I would not be pouring the tea because that is what I *should* be doing. But I would be motivated by the considerations that should motivate someone who genuinely has that status and its associated commitments. These are considerations like the fact that Mabel’s cup is empty and she looks as if she could do with a refill. I need not think to myself that I am standing in for ‘Mother’ and that that’s what you should do when you are ‘Mother’, although of course I might do.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Section 4 The Proper adopting of a role

My suggestion now is that a generous action comes from the proper adopting of a role, and that a presumptuous action results from the improper adopting of a role. This suggestion fits into Aristotle’s virtue theory. Aristotle’s idea in the *Nicomachaen Ethics* is that a virtuous action is the proper exercise of a natural (though habituated by custom) disposition to choose, whereas a vicious action is the improper exercise of such a disposition.[[8]](#footnote-8) The disposition in question when considering generosity and presumptuousness is the disposition to adopt a role that you do not currently have. It is the disposition to become motivated by considerations that *should* motivate someone who actually has the corresponding status, while not in fact being such a person, or at least not yet. Given this, generosity should be thought of as a mean between meanness on the one hand and presumptuousness (understood as the improper exercise of a disposition to adopt a role) on the other hand. Presumptuousness and meanness are vices corresponding to the virtue of generosity. Presumptuousness is one way of exercising the disposition when you shouldn’t and meanness is not exercising it when you should.

It may seem that the disposition I am talking about is the disposition to engage in the imaginative exercise of role-play. For what else could it be to adopt a role corresponding to a status that you don’t in fact have? And it would be a very strange idea to equate this with generosity. But even though playing with a role may be how you learn how to adopt a role, they are not the same thing. It is true that in both cases you are sensitive to the requirements that that role would impose if you actually had it. But in the case of role-play this sensitivity is a means to the end of simulating the person with that role, and in the case of adopting a role it is a response to the value of having someone around who actually has that status. These will manifest in different behaviour.

The disposition at work in adopting a role corresponding to a status that you do not have is a disposition to respond to a need that is out there for someone to fill a role. Suppose that a child lacks a mother and needs a mother. The generous disposition is the disposition to step in. This does not mean that one becomes the mother or adopted mother and takes on the commitments that go with that role, although one may do this. What it requires is that one stands in for someone with that role for that moment. The child who needs a mother might not as a result get a mother, but at least she gets someone doing the things a mother would be required to do. And this is not at all the same thing as getting someone who is *impersonating* her mother, though it may be mistaken for it.

In fact, actually adopting the child, assuming that this is appropriate and that it involves taking on the commitments that go with the status, may also be generous. So the disposition under consideration here is not the disposition merely to adopt a role corresponding to a status that you do not have, but the disposition to adopt either a role without the corresponding status or both role and status, given in both cases that you do not already have that status.[[9]](#footnote-9) As I said earlier you can adopt a role either by acting as if you have the corresponding status – being sensitive to the considerations that someone with that status is obliged to be sensitive to – or by taking up the status itself and thereby becoming obliged to be sensitive to these considerations.

At the tea party I was considering earlier there are two ways to be generous. One is to adopt the role of ‘Mother’ if there is nobody else taking it on, noticing that Mabel needs a refill and pouring her a cup. I am under no obligation to give her a refill in this case; it is a generous act. The other way of being generous is by making the performative utterance at the start that I will be ‘Mother’. I am under no obligation to make that utterance. It is generous of me to volunteer. But after that I am obliged to look after Mabel’s cup, at least until I renounce the status. That second act – looking after Mabel’s cup after I have adopted the *status* of mother - is not generous. Mabel will still thank me of course, but that is for form’s sake. In that case, what they all – not just Mabel – have to be grateful to me for is the original act of volunteering to be ‘Mother’.

The need that is being responded to in generous – or role-adopting - behaviour is not just the need for kindness as such. My generous neighbour’s kindness will not necessarily do my daughter any good in the rainstorm. The merely kind neighbour would be just as likely to help somebody else. What my daughter needs is kindness *towards herself*. This is a need to be treated as if my neighbour had a special relationship with her – one demanding highly partial behaviour towards her. Michael Langford describes supererogation as treating someone who isn’t a friend as a friend.[[10]](#footnote-10) And this is what I am arguing for too, though not limiting the adopted role to that of being a friend. You are lost and lonely and in need of a friend, but you don’t have one. A stranger steps in and adopts the role. They do freely what a friend would be obliged to do. That is generosity. They have not adopted the *status* of friend, otherwise they would then have an open-ended commitment into the future. Adopting the role without the status is something they do for the duration of the action and then they can move on, without any obligation to stay in touch.

The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke, 10: 25-37) is often taken to exemplify supererogation.[[11]](#footnote-11) Certainly the Samaritan’s behaviour seems generous and not merely kind. It would not count as generous if the Samaritan were doing nothing more than his duty. The background assumption, acknowledged by the lawyer who gets Jesus to tell the parable, is that you do have a duty to love your neighbour. So if the Samaritan already has the status of neighbour to the wounded man (in this sense which should not be confused with the sense in which the woman collecting my daughter from school is a neighbour) then his behaviour is not generous according to my account. But it is clear that the Samaritan does not automatically have that status or else so would the priest and the Levite walking past on the other side of the road. Jesus is not saying that the priest and the Levite passing by on the other side of the road fail to do their duties as neighbours of the wounded man.

The situation was crying out for a neighbour or friend or family member to be there. There was nobody there who actually had the responsibility to look after him. The Samaritan responds to the need for someone with that responsibility and steps in. He takes on the status of neighbour, a status that he does not automatically have. This act of adopting the status of neighbour is a generous act assuming he is not compelled by duty or law to do it. But once done, the rest of his behaviour is simply required.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The disposition exemplified by the generous person – the disposition to adopt the role of a status you don’t have - is a natural one, and a valuable one. We can imagine our primitive forbears responding to an orphaned child in the cave by standing in as parents, taking the orphan under their wing. The community or members of a community may have an unmet need – a need for someone with a certain status or relationship that means they should meet this need. And if there is no such person for one reason or another, other members of the community are needed either to take on that missing status or at least to adopt the role of that status and do what the person who would have had that status would have been obliged to do. This is better for the community than everyone just doing what they are supposed to do given their actual statuses.

Also, you need generosity in order to establish actual statuses in a community. You need people to be disposed to take on jobs that they are not obliged to take on. In addition, it is important that people adopt roles without the corresponding statuses. For example, acting as a friend when you are not a friend is a way of establishing such a relationship. Relationships like friendships cannot be established in a moment by mutual agreement or an isolated avowal, but depend on people acting as if they are friends for a while before they actually become friends. Given the value of such relationships it is clear that the disposition to respond to the considerations that would make demands on one if one actually had the relationship is a useful disposition. This does not just apply to friendship in the strong sense explored by Aristotle for example, but to any relationship built on trust. Such trust is developed by generosity on both sides. When trust has been established the same behaviour is no longer generous but required by that relationship; people are doing what they should do.[[13]](#footnote-13) In advance of the relationship being established people must go beyond what they should do if they are to establish such relationships.

Section 5 – Wolf’s Nameless Virtue

Generosity, as I am treating it, has close affinities with what Susan Wolf has described as the ‘nameless virtue’; indeed she describes her nameless virtue as ‘a species of, or at least akin to, the well-established virtue of generosity’. [[14]](#footnote-14) This is what is lacking in a truck driver whose failure to service his truck’s brakes results, through very bad luck, in a child being killed, but who then does not feel responsible for her death. His position is described by Wolf as fully rational, as he need feel no more responsible than the thousands of other equally careless truck drivers who get away with it.[[15]](#footnote-15) But ‘what is troubling about the fully rationalist truck driver is not that he refuses to accept what responsibility he objectively has for the child’s death - it is that he fails to take responsibility for it, in a way that goes beyond that.’ (2013, 13)

There is a virtue that I suspect we all dimly recognize and commend that may be expressed as the virtue of taking responsibility for one’s actions and their consequences. It is, regrettably, a virtue with no name, and I am at a loss to suggest a name that would be helpful. It involves living with an expectation and a willingness to be held accountable for what one does, understanding the scope of ‘what one does,’ particularly when costs are involved, in an expansive rather than a narrow way. It is the virtue that would lead one to offer to pay for the vase that one broke even if one’s fault in the incident was uncertain; the virtue that would lead one to apologize, rather than get defensive, if one unwittingly offended someone or hurt him. (Wolf, 2013, 13)

Now this virtue of taking responsibility for what one has done even when one is not obliged to is not the same as the virtue I have been describing of taking on responsibilities, or merely adopting the corresponding roles, when one is not obliged to. But I think Wolf’s nameless virtue is a special case of the virtue of generosity that I am describing. For it is the proper exercise of the disposition to adopt the role of *guilty/responsible person*, when you do not at that time have that status. As we have seen this can take the form of adopting the *status* of guilty person, and thereby becoming obliged to act in certain ways - apologize, make amends, seek forgiveness, etc. Or it can take the form of merely adopting the corresponding role.

In the latter case you still apologize and make amends, but you are not obliged to do so, since you are merely acting as if you have the status of guilty person. If the offended person does not accept your apology then that is their problem; you can drop the role and walk away from the situation. In the first case, however, where you take on the status and not merely the role of guilty person, you thereby have real commitments you cannot walk away from. If the person you now take yourself to have wronged does not accept your apology or plea for forgiveness that is your problem. You are stuck with the suffering that goes with unforgiven guilt.

The non-rationalist truck driver, as Wolf describes him – the one who has the nameless virtue - adopts the status of guilty person. This is not merely a temporary adoption of a role. If the child’s parents do not forgive him, then he has to suffer unappeased guilt. And even if they do, he will still have the suffering that goes with being responsible for the child’s death. Assuming that Wolf is right to say that he does not already have the status of guilty person just in virtue of killing a child as a result of his carelessness, then his taking on of that status is generous.[[16]](#footnote-16)

There are more common cases, where one generously, but temporarily, adopts the role of guilty person without the status. If someone misunderstands what you say and takes offence, you are neither guilty nor should you adopt the status of guilty person. But there is an opportunity for you to adopt the *role* of guilty person, just to resolve the hurt feelings of the other person. You apologize for causing offence: ‘I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to cause offence; I only meant …’ It is generous of you to do this. If the offended person maintains their grievance, then you are under no obligation to deal with it; it’s their problem. The same goes for the broken vase. If it was as a result of your agency that the vase broke, even though it was not your fault, you can generously offer to pay for it. In so doing you are adopting the role of guilty person even though you know you do not have that status.

Here Wolf introduces one of the rare examples of presumptuousness in the literature, by considering a mere bystander witnessing someone else breaking the vase but offering to replace it herself. ‘While we might appreciate and even admire the bystander’s offer, we might also be slightly puzzled by it, or even in certain cases, resent it.’ (Wolf, 2013, 14) I do not even see why we should appreciate or admire this behaviour at all. Unless there is some special reason why it would be disasterous for the real culprit to take the responsibility, it seems thoroughly presumptuous and not at all generous to offer to pay for the vase. It is an improper exercise of the nameless disposition. There is someone else with the status of guilty person in this case; the role is not vacant; it is not the bystander’s place to fill it.

Note how different this is from the bystander generously stepping in and replacing the vase if the owner is terribly upset about its loss and cannot replace it themselves. In this case the role she is adopting is not that of guilty person, but of what we might call fairy godmother, where a fairy godmother has the job of meeting a particular person’s needs and desires. The adopted role is not that of guilty party even when the only way the owner will accept the gift is if the bystander pretends she is the guilty party. As I said before, playing a role (play acting) is not the same thing as adopting a role. In this complex case, she may be *playing* the role of guilty party in order to *adopt* the role of fairy godmother.

Section 6 Giving

It is worth observing that this notion of generosity I am developing does not require a complete lack of self-interest or self-concern. I may act generously to you, perhaps by giving you a present, in the hope that this will lead to a good friendship. I may even be hoping that you reciprocate and give me a present back. The difficulties Jacques Derrida (1992) identifies with the idea of a gift as somehow pure and as placing no associated burden on the recipient do not apply here. Derrida argues that if you give someone something with awareness that that is what you are doing, it is not really a gift, since it knowingly places a burden on the recipient to acknowledge the gift or to thank you. Only a sort of unconscious act of giving can really count as an act of giving. ‘If there is a gift, the *given* of the gift … must not come back to the giving.’ (Derrida, 1992, 7)

Generosity, as I am treating it, does not need to be pure in this sense. Of course, the giving of presents can be presumptuous. There might be something inappropriate about adopting the role of fairy godmother or friend to someone when he has enough friends already and does not need a fairy godmother. Then the present-giving is not generous. But what stops it from being generous is not the mere fact that the donor has a background desire to gain something from adopting this role, but the fact that they are not entitled to adopt this role. Just as the presumptuous neighbour is adopting the role of parent where no such role is required, as my daughter has perfectly good parents already, so the unwelcome present-giver is adopting the role of friend where no such role is required, as the recipient has quite enough friends already. If he didn’t have enough friends he should perhaps be grateful for the present.

Giving money to a beggar or a charity may be generous. It is adopting the role in which the beggar or the charity has a demand on you – perhaps the role of fairy godmother. The beggar is expressing the need for someone to fill that role and the generous person can step in even though it is not their responsibility to do so. Perhaps the beggar should not be given money. Perhaps the fact that there is always someone to adopt this role is stopping the beggar from breaking out of this passive or infantile state. If these familiar considerations have weight then giving money to the beggar is not generous after all. We might call it presumptuous, even though in this case the inappropriate adopting of the role of fairy godmother is welcome – i.e. it is not taken to be presumptuous by the recipient. A structurally similar argument applies to the question of institutions giving aid to the governments of third world countries for example.

It might be objected to this whole approach that there is no neat correspondence between statuses or relationships and specific obligations. A friend is not obliged to give their friend presents or smile at them. A parent is not obliged to protect their child from a rainstorm. There are many different ways to be a friend or a parent, and you take on different ways of behaving that go with that status as you see fit. This challenges my approach in two ways. First, it challenges the idea that someone who is not a friend can be generous in virtue of adopting the commitments that correspond to the status of friend, since, according to this objection, there are no such determinate commitments. Second, it reveals the possibility that you can be a generous friend. This suggests that your generosity might be a feature of the way you treat the status you actually have, whereas on my view it is a function of your transcending that status.

But there is a simple way to respond to this objection. I have been talking for ease of presentation as if the term ‘friend’ or ‘parent’ designated a specific normative status with fixed obligations. But of course there are any number of ways of being a friend or a parent, each with its own set of commitments. We do not have different names for these different normative statuses, but we can pick them out and distinguish between them despite this. We might say: ‘There is this sort of friendship and that sort of friendship. And with this sort of friendship you should behave in this sort of way,’ demonstrating the ‘thises’ and ‘thats’ by pointing out paradigms.

This opens up the possibility that you might be one sort of friend, who is thereby required to behave in certain ways, but act as if you have the commitments of another, more demanding, sort of relationship. That is what it is to be a generous friend. If, as a result of this sort of behaviour, your status changes to that of the better friend, then the very same behaviour would no longer be generous, but just be what you have to do as such a friend.

This whole approach might now be thought to have become explanatorily empty. I am arguing that generosity is acting as if you have the commitments of a status you do not already have. But someone might complain that for any behaviour we can gerrymander a status according to which that is a commitment. For example, suppose you throw a ball to someone in play. This should not usually be taken to be generous behaviour. But, presumably there is some status that you do not actually have that would make that behaviour obligatory – for example the status of being a player in a game with rigid rules that require such a throw.

But it should be stressed that adopting a role is not to be thought of as acting in a way that happens on this occasion to coincide with what someone with the corresponding status would be obliged to do. It is being motivated by the considerations that should motivate such a person. If your ball throwing is just playful then it is not motivated this way. It involves no sensitivity to the demands of a game you are not in fact playing. But suppose it does. Then it is probably presumptuous if nobody wants or needs you to be playing that game. And, of course, if there is such a need then the behaviour is generous after all.

Consider another example. Suppose that at the end of a meal I pay the bill with a 50% tip. There is no possible relationship with the waiter that makes this sort of tip an obligation. The case would be different if I saw that this person was short of money and the huge tip was just a way to meet that need – a need that would make giving that money an obligation for a fairy godmother of the waiter. In the case I have in mind, I just hand over a massive tip without there being any such possible role for a customer of the restaurant to have that demands that behaviour. The waiter is happy to have the extra money; they can use it to buy a new mobile phone. But they do not need it.

Is my behaviour generous? I’m inclined to say not. It’s not even presumptuous. It is not an exercise of the disposition to adopt a role corresponding to a status that one does not have, since there is no such status in this case. It is instead the exercise of a disposition to spend one’s money. The proper exercise of this disposition is what Aristotle discussed in the Nicomachean Ethics (Book 4, chapter 1) under the term *eleutheriotēs*. Not exercising this disposition when it is appropriate is stinginess, and exercising it when it is not appropriate to do so is prodigality or wastefulness. Irwin translates ‘eleutheriotes’ as ‘generosity’, but it is much better translated, as Ross does, as ‘liberality’. My excessive tip is an instance of wastefulness, the improper exercise of a disposition that would in its proper exercise constitute liberality.

Section 7 Forgiveness and Love

The last example of generosity I want to consider is forgiveness. This would be a problem case for me if forgiveness, as many people argue, is never obligatory, but always elective. They argue that no amount of repentance on the part of the wrongdoer can make it obligatory for the wronged person to forgive them.[[17]](#footnote-17) The wrongdoer can only *ask* for forgiveness but not *demand* forgiveness. If they think they are owed forgiveness that rather undermines the nature of their recognition of guilt. And it is just that sort of recognition of guilt that would justify the wronged person’s forgiving.

I want to allow that forgiving may be an act of generosity. But on my account, what would make forgiveness generous is not only that it is not obligatory but also that it involves adopting a role corresponding to a status in which it *would be* obligatory. My claim is the strange-sounding one that forgiveness is only generous if there is some status in which it is not generous. And that flies in the face of treating forgiveness as always optional.

But we can accept that there is nothing the wrongdoer can then do to make forgiveness obligatory, while insisting that there is something the *wronged* person can do. They can give themselves the status that makes forgiveness obligatory. We might call that status the status of *loving* the wrongdoer, bearing in mind that the words ‘love’ and ‘loving’ can be used in many other ways. When you love someone in this sense you must forgive them. Such love carries with it commitments. For example, a loving parent in this sense must forgive the wrongs their child does them, even when that child is not an irresponsible minor. According to the account I am developing this sort of forgiveness would not count as generous.

This is not to say that you have to love someone in order to forgive them. You can act *as if* you have the commitments that such love imposes, adopting the role of loving, and then forgive despite having no love at all for the wrongdoer. Such forgiveness is generous. If someone robs you, you do not have to love them in order to forgive them. Your resentment can turn to a state where you rather despise them for their weakness and ethical values. You can still decide not to hold a grudge against them. Such a decision does not seem to be obligatory. On my view it counts as generous.[[18]](#footnote-18)

So I am suggesting that while forgiveness may never be made obligatory by the subsequent behaviour of the wrongdoer, it may be obligatory in virtue of the status of the wronged person – the status of loving the wrongdoer. What makes it seem that forgiveness is always optional is that love itself may be optional. Suppose a person you love (for example your partner) wrongs you. If you continue to love them after they have wronged you, then forgiving them is something you should do. It is not generous, but obligatory. But if you love your partner and they wrong you, you are not obliged to go on loving them. And in that case, you do not have to forgive them either. There are two sorts of generous actions open to you in this situation where you have withdrawn your love because your partner has wronged you. One is to forgive your partner (or ex-partner) without loving them. Perhaps you pack your bags and go. ‘No hard feelings. I was hurt, but I’m not going to hold it against you; it was my mistake to think you would behave any better.’ And the other is to go back to loving them and then to forgive them at the same time.

Continuing to love your partner or going back to loving them after they have wronged you is generous on my view only if there is some status (one that you do not have) that would make it obligatory. But how can love ever be obligatory? Here is one suggestion. Once you have taken on the status of someone who loves, you cannot just drop that status for no good reason. Taking on a status with its associated commitments usually carries with it a commitment to continue with that status unless something undermines it. Having the status of a lover whose love has not been undermined obliges you to continue loving. In general, when you have not been wronged by them and your love is not undermined, continuing to love your partner is not generous but obligatory. Sometimes, of course, you just stop loving your partner when you have been given no cause. But this is a failure to live up to the relationship. The love one is owed an apology for your withdrawing your love. You have done them wrong.

But if your partner does *you* wrong that changes things. You now have the status of partner whose love has been undermined. As a wronged partner you do not have the obligations that an unwronged loving partner has. In particular you do not have the obligation to go on loving your partner. If you continue loving them or go back to loving them you are adopting the role of loving partner whose love has not been undermined – a status that would oblige you to go on loving. Your love may be generous in this case.

If forgiveness comes later it is not generous but obligatory. But usually forgiving your partner and going back to loving them come together in the same act; your going back to loving your partner actually constitutes an act of forgiveness. In that case the composite action of forgiving and loving again is a generous one – always assuming it is not presumptuous. It is adopting the role of a status that you do not at that time have, the status of being a loving partner whose love has not been undermined.

Adopting the role of a lover whose love has not been undermined when that love has been undermined may be a proper exercise of generosity, but it may also be inappropriate. It may for example be weak. The wronged and abused lover who keeps on going back to their partner, keeps on loving them and keeps on forgiving them, is not generous so much as lacking in self-respect. It is a failure to take seriously enough the commitments their love imposes on others if they act willy-nilly as if they haven’t been wronged when they have.

It does not sound right to describe this sort of inappropriate adopting of a role you do not already have as presumptuous. That is because it is not the fact that you are not *entitled* to the role that makes adopting it inappropriate in this case. It is the fact that it involves inadequate self-respect. But it may also be genuinely presumptuous to go on loving someone who has stopped loving you and now loves another. It may not be your place to hold on to that role. Once you have been spurned and your lover does not ask for forgiveness you are not being offered the role of unwronged lover as you would be if the lover had asked for forgiveness. It is not welcome to your lover that you adopt this role, and you are not entitled to it. This is presumptuous love and presumptuous forgiveness.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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1. My concern here is just with generous *actions*, since the topic is generosity as an aspect of character. What makes a portion of mashed potato generous is another thing altogether. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gratitude may be appropriate in other contexts. Perhaps you should be grateful to your teachers or doctors, although there is nothing actually generous about their behaviour. But, even if this is true, it does not threaten my proposal, which is that generous behaviour is gratitude-worthy; my proposal is not that gratitude-worthy behaviour is always generous. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am assuming for the sake of this example that my daughter does have perfectly good parents, even though they let her walk home from school by herself. Without this assumption my neighbour’s behaviour does not seem presumptuous after all. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I will return to the case of forgiveness at the end. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I take the term from Brandom (1994). ‘Status’ here is not supposed to carry any connotations of social importance, but is to be understood much more generally. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Incidentally, I am assuming here that the status of *neighbour* does not carry with it any such commitments. Later on, when I consider the parable of the Good Samaritan, I will take there to be a very demanding status of neighbour. But, for the sake of argument we can assume here that just living next door to someone does not oblige you to look after their children. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The example would be spoilt somewhat if picking up the teapot in that situation and pouring the tea was itself a status-generating action, like the performative utterance of saying “I’ll be Mother.” But I think there is a distinction, albeit quite subtle in this case, between adopting the status of Mother and merely adopting the role of Mother. Having poured Mabel a cup of tea, I can withdraw from the role without letting anyone down. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See especially *Nicomachaen Ethics*, Book 2, chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Renouncing a status is not just stopping acting according to its commitments. It is an act of normative significance that may required handing the status over to someone else. It may alternatively be part of a punishment of those to whom you previously had commitments. But if the status is still required and there is no justification for not holding on to it then ceasing to have the status may be a failure to live up to one’s commitments. See the last section of the paper where I briefly discuss what is involved in stopping loving someone. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Langford (1988) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Confusingly the term ‘supererogation’ was initially applied not to the behaviour of the Samaritan, but to the potential behaviour of the innkeeper whom the Samaritan paid in advance to lodge and look after the wounded man. The Samaritan offers to pay when he returns for anything the innkeeper had to do over and above the value of the two denarii he had already been given. And it is this potential doing something over and above what he has been paid to do that is described as supererogatory. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A slightly different interpretation of the parable is available if we say that the Samaritan is adopting the role but not the status of neighbour. In that case, the generosity of the Samaritan would be his acting as if he had the responsibilities that go with the status of being a neighbour to the wounded man, and none of his behaviour towards the man would be required. But this interpretation does less justice to the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Later I will discuss the possibility of generosity *within* friendship. This will depend on there being different possible statuses of friendship such that one can have one status but adopt the role of another. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wolf 2013, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One might take a different stance on moral luck, and regard the truck driver as much more responsible and guilty than the thousands of equally careless drivers who do not kill anyone. But although this would weaken this particular motivation for coming up with an account like Wolf’s, it in no way undermines it. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It sounds wrong to describe him as generous, I think, only because it sounds wrong, to me at least, to say that he does not already have the status of guilty person. (See previous footnote.) But we can think of cases which are more clearly generous, like that of a war criminal’s child taking on the guilt of her father. The child surely has no obligation to take on this status. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Heyd (1982, 159). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is another good example of a generous action that may be in one’s own best interests. It may be better for me that I forgive the robber, but it is still an exercise of generosity. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Thanks to the UCD School of Philosophy Discussion Group, the audience at the Royal Institute of Philosophy conference, and especially to Chris Cowley for very helpful comments on the written version of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)