

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 34 | Issue 4

Article 1

---

10-1-2017

## God's Standing to Forgive

Brandon Warmke

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Warmke, Brandon (2017) "God's Standing to Forgive," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol34/iss4/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.



# GOD'S STANDING TO FORGIVE

Brandon Warmke

It is generally thought that we cannot forgive people for things they do to others. I cannot forgive you for lying to your mother, for instance. I lack standing to do so. But many people believe that God can forgive us for things we do to others. How is this possible? This is the question I wish to explore. Call it *the problem of divine standing*. I begin by cataloging the various ways one can have standing to forgive a wrongdoer. I then provide two solutions to the problem of divine standing.

## I. Introduction

Consider two cases:

LUCY: I lie to my brother, telling him I bought a gift for our parents when I did not do so. Realizing my guilt, I ask my new plumber Lucy to forgive me for my lie. Lucy forgives me for lying to my brother.

GOD: I lie to my brother, telling him I bought a gift for our parents when I did not do so. Realizing my guilt, I ask God to forgive me for my lie. God forgives me for lying to my brother.

The claim that Lucy could forgive me for lying to my brother will, I think, strike most people as strange. And yet for many people, it will not seem nearly so strange to think that God could do so. An apparently central tenet of all three Abrahamic faiths is that God can and does forgive human persons for the wrong things they do to one another. But how is this possible? Because I lied to my brother—and not to Lucy—we are inclined to think that Lucy cannot forgive me. She lacks *standing* to do so. But then why think that God can forgive us for the wrongs we do to others? Just as I did not lie to Lucy about the gift, I did not lie to God about the gift. If Lucy does not have the standing to forgive me, how does God? This is the question I wish to explore: How could God have the standing to forgive us for the things we do to one another? Call this *the problem of divine standing*.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>To avoid confusion, I stress that my question is how God could have the standing to forgive us for the wrongs we do to others. Sometimes I will simplify and speak about “God’s standing to forgive,” but unless otherwise specified this should be taken to refer to God’s forgiveness for interpersonal human wrongs.



I begin with some preliminaries. First, I will assume for present purposes that God's forgiveness is not supremely mysterious. Some may be content to respond to the problem of divine standing by claiming that it is indeed a mystery, but that there is little, if anything, we can say about God that would explain how such forgiveness is possible. I adopt a methodology that allows serious and sustained inquiry into divine forgiveness. If it turns out that this methodology is misguided, or we find no rationally satisfying solution to the problem, we may still perhaps learn something illuminating along the way.

Second, throughout I will use the term "wrongdoer" to refer to an agent who is a putative candidate for being forgiven. I use the terms "wrong" and "wrongdoing" to refer to the conduct (i.e., acts, omissions, or the consequences of acts or omissions) for which a wrongdoer is forgiven. I will say that we forgive each other for "wrongs." In using this term, I do not mean only to refer to failures to comply with moral principles or rules. As to whether we may be forgiven for morally permissible conduct that is morally bad I remain neutral.

Third, let us distinguish the issue of divine standing from other questions we can ask about God's forgiveness. One such question concerns the nature of God's forgiveness. What *is* God's forgiveness? If and when God forgives, what does God do?<sup>2</sup> Another question concerns the norms bearing on God's forgiveness. Under what conditions is God's forgiveness morally good, right, or just? And what reasons or motivations would a morally perfect being have in forgiving? However, to ask how God is in a position to forgive me for my lie is to ask a different kind of question, one about standing. To say that someone has standing to forgive is to say that they have the power to forgive (whether or not they do so, and whether or not their doing so is morally good).<sup>3</sup> If Lucy lacks standing to forgive me, then forgiving is not on the table for her; she is not a candidate for forgiving. Consider an analogy: a priest and I might both sincerely utter "I now pronounce you husband and wife" to a couple seeking to wed. Only the priest would have married the couple, however, because only the priest has the power, or standing, to do so. Similarly, Lucy and my brother might both sincerely utter "I forgive you." Only my brother would have forgiven me because only my brother has the power, or standing, to do so.

We can distinguish two further questions about standing. One question asks *who* has the standing to forgive, either in some particular case or in general. Call this the *identification question* about standing. Answers to this

---

<sup>2</sup>I have explored the nature question in Warmke, "Divine Forgiveness I" and "Divine Forgiveness II." See also Adams, "Forgiveness: A Christian Model"; Bash, *Forgiveness*; Brien, "Can God Forgive Us Our Trespasses?"; Drabkin, "The Nature of God's Love and Forgiveness"; Geuras, "In Defense of Divine Forgiveness"; Londey, "Can God Forgive Us Our Trespasses?"; Mackintosh, *Christian Experience of Forgiveness*; Minas, "God and Forgiveness"; Scheiber, "May God Forgive?"; Strabbing, "Divine Forgiveness and Reconciliation"; and Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*.

<sup>3</sup>As far as I know, Jeffrie Murphy was the first to introduce "standing" as way of talking about who is a candidate for forgiving (Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 174).

question might involve simply listing individual persons who have the standing to forgive in a particular case. More general (and perhaps more illuminating) answers may involve providing a set of features, such that if some individual possessed them, then that person would thereby have the standing to forgive. For example, it might be thought that one has standing to forgive a wrongdoer only if one is the victim of that wrongdoing (in some relevant sense of "victim"). Jeffrie Murphy expresses this view when he writes,

I do not have *standing* to resent or forgive you unless I have myself been the victim of your wrongdoing. I may forgive you for embezzling my funds; but it would be ludicrous for me, for example, to claim that I had decided to forgive Hitler for what he did to the Jews. I lack the proper standing for this. Thus, I may legitimately resent (and hence consider forgiving) only wrong done to me.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, it might be thought that there are multiple features such that possessing any one of them gives someone the standing to forgive. For example, you might hold that someone has the standing to forgive a wrongdoer if either (a) one is the victim of the wrongdoing; (b) one feels resentment toward the wrongdoer because of what she did to the victim; or (c) one has a certain kind of relationship with the victim (such as an especially close friendship).

A distinct question concerning standing asks *why* it is that some and not others have standing. Call this the *explanatory question*. Suppose, for example, that only victims of wrongdoing have the standing to forgive. Why is that so? One way of answering the explanatory question is to advert to the nature of forgiveness itself; there is something about the phenomenon of forgiveness that dictates who can and cannot forgive. Suppose, for example, that forgiving requires the overcoming of resentment, and that only victims of wrongdoing (as opposed to third parties) can feel resentment. This would explain why only victims have the standing to forgive, for only they meet a requirement on forgiveness itself. On the other hand, there may be some other kind of explanation for why only some have standing to forgive—an explanation that doesn't bottom out in the constitutive features of forgiveness itself.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 21, emphasis in original.

<sup>5</sup>Note the following point of clarification. Philosophers writing on moral *blame* have asked their own questions about standing: the identification question as to who has standing to blame, either in some particular case or in general; and the explanatory question as to why some people rather than others have the standing to blame. It is crucial to note, however, that in the blame literature, "standing" is understood differently. To see why, notice that many people claim that one lacks standing to blame if one's blame would be hypocritical (e.g., I blame you for smoking when I am myself a smoker). To say that one lacks standing to blame is not to say that one does not have the power to blame. Rather, it is to say that were one to blame, one's blame would be morally impermissible or inappropriate. When we claim that someone lacks standing to forgive, however, we mean that she cannot forgive. Noting this difference between blame-standing and forgiveness-standing is crucial to avoid confusion. See Todd, "A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame," for further discussion.

With those matters out of the way, here is how we will proceed. In Section II, I catalog various forms of standing to forgive. One may think of these forms of standing as comprising different answers to the identification question. In Section III, I assess these forms of standing as potential solutions to the problem of divine standing. In Sections IV and V, I take these results into consideration and offer two solutions to the problem. One solution concedes that God lacks standing to forgive but argues that this is no problem. The other solution shows that God does have standing, identifies which form of standing God has, and explains why it might be that God is able to forgive in this way.

## II. Varieties of Standing

### II.A. Direct Standing

Consider a case of wrongdoing and subsequent forgiveness between two very close friends. Alfred lies to Betty, a lie (we can suppose) that does not affect anyone else. In such a case, Betty was directly wronged by Alfred. Though I will not attempt a full account of what it means to be directly wronged by someone, the general idea is that for Betty to be directly wronged by Alfred means that Alfred's conduct itself constituted a wrong against Betty; he failed Betty, morally speaking. One may be directly wronged in many ways. One may be lied to, cheated on, have something stolen, be kidnapped, or be assaulted. And as stipulated in our case, Betty was the only one wronged by Alfred's lie. We may say that Betty has *exclusive direct standing* to forgive. Her standing to forgive is direct insofar as she was directly wronged, and it is exclusive because she is the only one with the standing to forgive Alfred for that wrong.

It is possible, however, for a single act to result in multiple victims who each have standing to forgive. Suppose that Alfred addressed his lie to Betty *and* Jill, attempting to deceive them both. Betty and Jill are each directly wronged by Alfred, yet neither has exclusive standing to forgive. Call such cases of standing *shared direct standing*.

Yet there is another way for multiple people to have direct standing to forgive a wrongdoer for something the wrongdoer does. Suppose that Alfred lies to Betty, as in the original case. Suppose also that Alfred has made a promise to his mother, Sue, to no longer tell lies. By conducting himself in a certain way, Alfred has at once lied to Betty and broken a promise to Sue. Here, it seems to me, both Betty and Sue have been wronged directly, but in different ways. Betty is the victim of a lie; Sue is the victim of a broken promise (Alfred, we might say, "let her down"). Here, both Betty and Sue are in a position to forgive Alfred for his action, albeit for different kinds of wrongs. Betty may forgive him for the lie, Sue for the broken promise. Call the standing that both Betty and Sue possess *distinct direct standing*.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>It might be thought that this case is not best categorized as a case of distinct direct standing, but rather just a matter of two cases of exclusive direct standing. Each is wronged directly, but only Betty can forgive Alfred for the lie and only Sue can forgive for the broken

### II.B. Indirect Standing

Suppose that Alfred lies to Betty and this results in Betty being an hour late to pick up her brother Todd. Alfred did not lie to Todd, but *by* lying to Betty there is a straightforward sense in which this resulted in a wrong being done to Todd. Had Alfred not lied to Betty, she would have picked up Todd on time. Alfred is responsible for making Betty late to pick up Todd and therefore responsible for wasting Todd's time. It would be appropriate for Alfred to apologize both to Betty and Todd, and it is open to each of them to decide whether or not to accept Alfred's apology and forgive him.

Here, while Betty was directly wronged and so has direct standing to forgive, Todd was not directly wronged. Rather, Alfred's lie to Betty led to Todd's being wronged *indirectly*. And because it would be fitting for Todd to blame Alfred, and for Alfred to apologize to Todd, it is plausible to think that Todd also has standing to forgive Alfred, who is responsible for wasting his time.<sup>7</sup> Call this *indirect standing*.<sup>8</sup>

### II.C. Proxy Standing

Though controversial, it may be possible to forgive a wrongdoer *on behalf of* someone else. Suppose Ted's adult daughter Maria is killed by a drunk driver. If Ted can forgive the drunk driver on behalf of Maria, he does so in virtue of possessing *proxy standing*. It is important to distinguish (a) Ted's proxy standing to forgive the driver on behalf of Maria from (b) whatever direct or indirect standing Ted might possess that would enable him to forgive the driver for killing his daughter. It might be that when people

---

promise. I take this point, and whether it is helpful to distinguish these two kinds of standing may just depend on how we decide to individuate actions and wrongdoings. The reason I think cases of distinct direct standing are interesting is that it appears there is one action of Alfred's that constitutes two different wrongs. Betty and Sue each forgive Alfred for the same token action, but not for the same token wrong. Such a case is, I think, interestingly different from a case in which Alfred lies to Betty and then later on that day breaks a promise to Sue. In the former case, we have two token wrongs attached to the same token action, and in the latter case we have two token wrongs each attached to distinct token actions.

<sup>7</sup>Consider the real-life case of Anne Marie Hochhalter, who was left paralyzed in the 1999 Columbine High School shooting. She wrote to Susan Klebold, mother of one of the shooters, to say "I have forgiven you and only wish you the best." Presumably, Hochhalter was taking herself not to be forgiving Susan Klebold for doing the shooting, but for playing some role in her son's upbringing. If such cases of forgiveness are possible, Hochhalter's standing to forgive appears to be of the indirect variety. (See Kim 2016.) One might reply that Hochhalter was simply mistaken in thinking that she could forgive Susan Klebold in this way. Perhaps that is correct. For now, I see no harm in exploring the possibility of indirect standing.

<sup>8</sup>As with direct standing, indirect standing could be exclusive or shared. If, for example, Alfred's lie resulted in Betty being late to pick up both Todd and his friend Beavis, then each could have shared indirect standing to forgive. Once we allow for indirect standing to forgive, difficult questions arise. Suppose that Todd's being picked up late leads him to default on a loan to his co-worker Joan, which means Joan's daughter Mary's car is seized, and so on. Can Joan forgive Alfred? Can Mary? I leave these matters unsettled. Notice, however, that this "dispersion" of standing affects direct standing, as well (see n. 33). Further, it may not always be clear whether a case of standing should be classified as direct or indirect (or some hybrid of the two). The lines may be blurry, and there may be overlap.

very close to us (like our children) are seriously wronged, we are also wronged. But this would not invoke proxy standing. X's forgiving Y on behalf of Z for what Y did to Z is not the same as X's forgiving Y for what Y did to Z (or for what this thereby did to X).

Even those sympathetic to the possibility of the proxy standing delimit the class of people who qualify for it.<sup>9</sup> If you lie to your best friend, it is hard to see how a random refrigerator salesperson from England could have the standing to forgive you on your friend's behalf. What kind of special relationship is required? A close familial tie or close friendship would be the clearest examples of the required special relationship in order to have proxy standing. This is why it is plausible to think that Ted could forgive on behalf of his daughter Maria, but that Maria's hedge fund manager could not.

#### *II.D. Third Party Standing*

Finally, consider *third party standing*. Third party standing enables one to engage in third party forgiveness. What is labeled "third party" forgiveness in the forgiveness literature is often a source of confusion. Charles Griswold rightly points out that some forms of standing are misleadingly labeled "third party." For example, he asks us to imagine the murder of a loved one, and the question of whether to forgive presents itself to us in light of the loss we've sustained. "This sort of case," he says, "is not a matter of third-party forgiveness."<sup>10</sup> The standing to forgive that would accrue to such a person would be (to put it in our above terminology) of the direct or indirect variety, depending on how the case is fleshed out.

Griswold's own view is that third party forgiveness involves the following:

A situation in which the question of forgiveness arises in light of your indignation at the loss suffered by another person, thanks to someone else's actions: here the matter concerns your forgiving their offender on their behalf for the harm done to them (not to you).<sup>11</sup>

Yet because Griswold has in mind forgiving "on behalf" of the victim, this is instead best thought of as proxy standing.<sup>12</sup>

I reserve the designation "third party standing" for another possible (albeit controversial) form of standing in which a non-victim forgives a wrongdoer, but not on behalf of the victim. We may distinguish between a

<sup>9</sup>See Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 119. However, also see below for clarification about Griswold's view.

<sup>10</sup>Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 117.

<sup>11</sup>Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 117.

<sup>12</sup>Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 119. Griswold argues that to engage in what *he* calls third party forgiveness, the forgiver can do so only if she has "standing," and one receives such standing only if one has an "identification with the victim." How does one come to identify with the victim? According to Griswold, one identifies with a victim only if one has (1) "ties of care for the victim"; and (2) "reasonably detailed knowledge not only of the offender's wrong-doing and contrition, but especially of the victim" (*Forgiveness*, 119).

non-victim being able to forgive a wrongdoer on behalf of the victim and a non-victim being able to forgive a wrongdoer full stop. One could, it seems to me, have one kind of standing but not the other. I identify as third party standing what both Glen Pettigrove and Margaret Urban Walker have in mind in their recent discussions of third party forgiveness.<sup>13</sup> Such cases, Walker writes, involve “the scenario in which A forgives the offender B for something B did to the victim C, where A is not plausibly seen as a fellow victim, and where A forgives B on A’s own behalf, not on behalf of C or anyone else who might be a victim of the wrong.”<sup>14</sup> Such a putative for-giver, she says, is one who “suffered no wrong” by the offender’s actions.<sup>15</sup> This putative standing to forgive, therefore, is not reducible to any of the aforementioned varieties.

We arrive at four basic forms of standing: (1) direct standing (and its attendant varieties); (2) indirect standing; (3) proxy standing; and (4) third party standing. There is at least one other potential form of standing, but it is not relevant to the question of how God could forgive us for the wrongs we do to others, so I will set it aside.<sup>16</sup> Do any of these forms explain how God has standing to forgive? To this question we turn.

### III. Assessing the Options

#### III.A. Divine Forgiveness and Direct Standing?

Consider whether God has direct standing to forgive us for the wrongs we do to others. Recall that in order to have direct standing to forgive an agent for something, one must have been directly wronged by that agent. And so if God has standing to forgive me for, say, my lie to my brother, that lie must in some sense also be a wrong against or an affront to God.

One way that God might have direct standing in such cases is if God has exclusive standing to do so. That is, only God has the standing to forgive me for my lie to my brother. This is implausible, not only because in

---

<sup>13</sup>See Pettigrove, “The Standing to Forgive”; and Walker, “Third Parties.”

<sup>14</sup>Walker, “Third Parties,” 495. Pettigrove has in mind the same logic of third party forgiveness: “Forgiving B for a wrong he has done to C is not the same as forgiving B *for C*” (“The Standing to Forgive,” 591, italics original). I take the italicized “for” to mean “on behalf of.”

<sup>15</sup>Walker, “Third Parties,” 496.

<sup>16</sup>For example, it may be possible to forgive *oneself* for something. This might happen in two ways. First, you might forgive yourself for something you did to yourself, such as the self-infliction of wounds. Here, though, one might argue that, as it turns out, one has direct standing to forgive in virtue of being directly wronged (the wrongdoer and the victim just happen to be the same person). Perhaps the more interesting case is that of the wrongdoer forgiving herself for something she did to someone else, for in this case, the wrongdoer is not indirectly or directly wronged in the above senses. If such cases of forgiveness are possible (and some have argued they are—see Milam, “How is Self-Forgiveness Possible?”), then we need a variety of standing that allows for them. Call this *reflexive standing*. Since our question is how God would forgive *us* (and I take it that we and God (or the Godhead) are separate persons), reflexive standing is not an option. It might be thought that reflexive standing is a species of third party standing: In both cases a non-victim has standing to forgive the wrongdoer. Yet only in the reflexive case is the non-victim *identical* to the wrongdoer. This unique feature may require special explanation regarding the possibility of standing.



this specific case it rules out the possibility that my brother could forgive me for the lie, but also because, were we to generalize, it would mean that human persons never have the standing to forgive one another. Only God does. This would effectively make interpersonal human forgiveness impossible. I find it difficult to take this view seriously. Not only does it seem obviously true that sometimes humans can forgive one another, but also we are taught to forgive one another in Scripture (see, e.g., Matthew 6:12,15; Mark 11:25). I therefore set aside exclusive direct standing as a solution to the problem of divine standing.<sup>17</sup>

What about shared direct standing? Here, if you recall, an action constitutes multiple wrongs of the same type against multiple victims. Each victim has the standing to forgive the wrongdoer for the same type of wrong occasioned by the act in question. One act of lying, for example, gives two victims of my lie standing to forgive me for the lie. How might this explain how God could forgive us for interpersonal wrongs? In my lying to my brother, I would be creating two victims who each have direct standing to forgive me: my brother and God. Immediately, this avoids the problem of exclusive direct standing, for it allows that others besides God can have the standing to forgive me. However, this strategy gets something else wrong; it misconstrues the nature of the wrongdoing vis à vis God. This is because every wrong that I commit against my neighbor is not the same *type* of wrong that I commit against God. To punch a neighbor in the face is not to punch God in face. To murder an enemy is not to murder God. (Perhaps clearer examples could be given; I will not do so.) The point is that the wrong against our neighbor is not necessarily (and perhaps rarely, if ever) of the same kind as our wrong against God. Shared direct standing will not do.

Distinct direct standing, however, can do better. It gives multiple victims who were directly wronged the standing to forgive. It also allows that those victims may forgive the wrongdoer for different types of wrongs. Consider my lie to my brother. In this one act, I have committed two wrongs, one against my brother and one against God. But because we have allowed that one act can constitute two different kinds of wrongs, we avoid the above problem with shared direct standing. My brother can forgive me for lying to him, and God can forgive me for, say, disobeying

---

<sup>17</sup>In recent work, Martha Nussbaum claims that the Christian understanding of forgiveness attributes to God exclusive direct standing to forgive. In the "transition from Judaism to Christianity," she says, "the independent human-human forgiveness process, already de-emphasized in Judaism, simply drops away: all forgiveness is really from God (sometimes mediated by clergy). If you square your relationship with God, then the other person is by definition satisfied, and you do not need to engage in separate negotiations with that person" (*Anger and Forgiveness*, 69). But this is an egregious misunderstanding of Christianity. Christ commands interpersonal forgiveness (Matt. 18:21–35), Paul encourages it (Col. 3:12–13), and, as noted above, Christians are positively taught to forgive other humans (Matt. 6:9–15). Perhaps most forceful is Christ's teaching at Mark 11:25 (NLT): "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

God's command not to lie.<sup>18</sup> This looks like a promising solution to the problem of God's standing to forgive.

Yet here is a further difficulty. If there are two wrongs—one against God that only God has standing to forgive and one against our neighbor that only our neighbor can forgive—then it appears that there are some wrongs that God can never forgive. This is because God does not have direct standing to forgive me for lying to my brother. God can forgive me only for disobeying the relevant command. It seems to me, however, that many people who believe that God can forgive them for what they have done, believe (and desire) not just that God can forgive them for some of their wrongs, but for *all* of them. Many, I think, pray to God, not only that they would be forgiven for breaking God's commands, but that God would forgive them for *lying to their brother*.

Of course, there is a sense in which, on this view, God can forgive people for what they do to others. The disobedience for which God is putatively able to forgive us is something that implicates us in doing something to another person. This much is true. But there is a difference between forgiving someone for disobedience (in treating another person in this way) and forgiving them *for* the wrong done to the other. A teacher might forgive a student for breaking her appointed classroom rules, but the teacher cannot forgive the student for lying to a fellow student. Only the student can do that. This brings into relief a problem for any proposed solution to the problem of divine standing that invokes a "two wrongs" approach. If we posit multiple wrongs, one of which God *can* forgive, there remains a wrong that God *cannot* forgive, and perhaps will never be forgiven (if the relevant human with standing to forgive never forgives).<sup>19</sup> If we want to preserve the notion that God can forgive *any* wrong committed, then we cannot construe God's standing to forgive simply as a matter of possessing direct standing.<sup>20</sup>

### III.B. Divine Forgiveness and Indirect Standing?

What about indirect standing? If we want both human victims and God to be able to forgive a wrongdoer, we need not insist that God and human

---

<sup>18</sup>For present purposes, I do not think it matters how we construe the specific way in which such actions constitute wrongs against God. What matters is that God can forgive us for something other than the wrong against a fellow human person. I'll use disobedience simply as a placeholder. It may be thought that God cannot be wronged (see, e.g., Minas, "God and Forgiveness."). I will not address this possibility here, and I simply assume that God can be wronged in whatever sense that is relevant to forgiveness. But for discussion of the various responses to Minas, including my own, see Warmke, "Divine Forgiveness I."

<sup>19</sup>Notice that the problem also faces views of divine standing that invoke shared direct standing as discussed above.

<sup>20</sup>It might be thought that with additional theological premises, we could avoid this conclusion. For example, suppose one adopted a kind of eschatological universalism such that eventually all human persons will be reconciled with their wrongdoers and forgive them. But this would only secure the claim that all wrongs are (eventually) forgiven. It would not give the result that *God* can forgive everyone for every wrong they have committed.

victims both have *direct* standing to do so. One or the other could instead have indirect standing. There are at least two ways this could work.

First, when I lie to my brother, this results in an indirect wrong against God. On this view, God has been wronged, but only indirectly, through a direct wronging of someone else. In other words, when I lie to my brother I directly wrong him. This gives him direct standing to forgive me. In directly wronging him, however, this results in indirectly wronging God. This gives God indirect standing to forgive me.

Second, we might argue that when I wrong God, this results in an indirect wrong against my brother. My brother has indeed been wronged, but only indirectly, through a direct wronging of God. In other words, when I disobey God I directly wrong God. This gives God direct standing to forgive me. In directly wronging God, however, this results in my indirectly wronging my brother. This gives my brother indirect standing to forgive me.<sup>21</sup>

On either reading, however, we are still left the general “two wrongs” problem encountered above. On the first indirect strategy, there remains the question of how God could forgive me for my lie to my brother. When Alfred lies to Betty and this results in her being late to pick up Todd, it is true that Todd gets standing to forgive Alfred. But he does not get standing to forgive Alfred for lying to Betty. Rather, he gets standing to forgive him for something that is expressible by a statement such as “I forgive you for delaying my pick up” or “I forgive you for making me wait in the rain.” A similar problem affects the second indirect strategy. Even if God can forgive me for that direct wrong against God, this would not mean that God could also forgive me for the indirect wrong against my brother. In either case, there are interpersonal wrongs that God does not have standing to forgive.<sup>22</sup>

### III.C. Divine Forgiveness and Proxy Standing?

The options canvassed thus far attempt to ground God’s standing in the fact that God was wronged. But as we noted in Section II, there are putative

---

<sup>21</sup>In the previous section, we developed the notion of being indirectly wronged (and possessing indirect standing to forgive) in what looked to be causal terms: Alfred lied to Betty and this caused her to be late in picking up Todd. Alfred’s wronging Betty causes Todd to be wronged, too. I am not sure it makes sense to put matters in this way when it comes to that matter of wronging God. To whatever extent it makes sense to say that we wrong God, it is strange to say either (a) that my lying to my brother causes God to be wronged; or (b) that my disobeying God causes my brother to be wronged. But we need not understand indirect wrongness in terms of causation. We might simply say that being indirectly wronged by *s* is the result of someone else being directly wronged by *s*. The relevant claim, I think, is that being indirectly wronged by a person somehow depends on someone else being directly wronged by that same person.

<sup>22</sup>I briefly mention two further potential problems with the indirect strategies. The first strategy is open to the charge that it miscasts the nature of my wrong against God. Is God wronged as a *result* of lying to my brother? Or is my wrong against God immediate and direct? The latter strikes me as the correct interpretation. The second strategy doesn’t strike me to be an accurate read on the situation either. This view would have it that my wronging my brother is a result of my wronging God. But here again, it seems that I have immediately and directly wronged each.

varieties of standing that do not require that one be wronged by X in order to forgive X for that wrong. One such way is to forgive on behalf of the victim. Does it make sense to explain God's standing to forgive us for wrongs we do to others by adverting to proxy standing? I can't see how.

One reason is this: typically, proxy standing is in play because those who have (or would have had) direct or indirect standing to forgive are not actually able to forgive. They are incapacitated or deceased, for example. In such cases, the standing to forgive can be transferred to a proxy in special relationship with the victim. If this is how the story is supposed to go, then as a general theory about how God has standing to forgive, this will not do. Perhaps God has proxy standing to forgive us when our victims are incapacitated or deceased, but this would not explain God's standing in the other cases.

Second, if God's standing is proxy, then the best we can reasonably do is to ask that God forgive us *on behalf* of our victim. Yet this miscasts the nature of what I believe many to be asking for when they ask God to forgive them for such interpersonal wrongs. They are not asking God to forgive them *in lieu* of their victim's forgiveness. I may think that my brother is perfectly capable of forgiving me and yet think that God can do so as well, and that this has nothing to do with God's forgiving me on his behalf. Proxy standing does not sufficiently capture the way that God is thought to forgive us for our interpersonal wrongs—God forgives us on God's own behalf, not on anyone else's.

### *III.D. Divine Forgiveness and Third Party Standing?*

If God had third party standing to forgive us our interpersonal wrongs, then we could satisfy what I take to be the primary desiderata for a solution to the problem of divine standing. We could affirm the following: (1) humans are wronged and have direct standing to forgive; (2) God is wronged and has direct standing to forgive; and (3) all wrongs can be forgiven by God. Even though we would advance a "two wrongs" solution, if God could forgive me for lying to my brother as a third party, then there would be no wrongs God cannot forgive. All would be well.

The trouble is that it is very difficult to explain how third parties have standing to forgive. Indeed, this difficulty was built into the way I set up the problem of divine standing at the outset. If Lucy, as a third party, cannot forgive me for lying to my brother, how could any third party? How could God? For now I simply point out that third party standing, if it offers a solution to the problem of divine standing at all, does not offer an easy one. I will return to this issue in Section V.

### *IV. Solution 1—Concession and Comfort*

Our goal has been to account for the way that God has standing to forgive us for interpersonal wrongs. The assumption has been that God *does* have such standing. Yet the prospects for an acceptable solution to the problem of divine standing look dim. In the next section I will defend what I take

to be the best strategy for solving the problem. Before doing so, I pursue a different response to the problem of divine standing: conceding that God *cannot* have the standing to forgive interpersonal wrongs. For many, this will be an entirely unsatisfactory response. I share the concern. But I want to offer comfort for those who either find this response attractive or who worry that ultimately, we may not be able to give a satisfying account of God's standing to forgive interpersonal wrongs.

Here is the picture. When I lie to my brother, I commit two wrongs: I lie to him and I, say, disobey God. But just like my brother cannot forgive me for my disobedience to God, God cannot forgive me for my lie to my brother. We can think of the matter as involving two cases of distinct direct standing. This is the concession: there is no "solution" to the problem of divine standing.

Here is the comfort: Upon careful reflection, there is little reason to expect that God *would* have the standing to forgive us for the things we do to others. And since there is little reason to expect this of God, there is little reason to be disappointed to find out it is so. But why shouldn't we expect God to be able to do this? It is important to keep in mind that there are just some things God cannot do. That is okay. God cannot sin or self-annihilate. Nor can God possess any standing—such as the standing to repent—that would require previous fault on God's part.<sup>23</sup> The standing to forgive human interpersonal wrongs may just be one of those things that God cannot possess. This may seem more plausible when we remind ourselves of the relational nature of forgiveness. The reason that others cannot forgive me for lying to my brother is just the fact that they are not members of *that* relationship in which the lie was told. But it is no indictment against God if God is not a member of *that* relationship and so cannot do things that only the members of that relationship have standing to do. Just like God does not possess the "standing" to keep your marriage vow to your spouse (only you have "standing" to do that), there are other things that God cannot do because of their inherently relational nature. Possessing the standing to forgive humans for their interpersonal wrongs may simply be one of them. If so, then God's lack of standing to forgive you for lying to your wife is no less a problem than God's lack of standing to keep your wedding vows to your wife.

It might be objected that these cases are not relevantly similar. Keeping wedding vows is not something we would expect (or want!) God to do or be able to do. But this is not so with forgiveness. We *should* expect God to be able to forgive us for the things we do to others.

In reply, the concessive comforter should say the following. First, she should remind the critic that there is a sense in which God *does* forgive her for her interpersonal wrongs. Because she (by lying) acts in a way that disobeys God, God can forgive her for this. Yet God can only forgive her for the things for which she does in relation to God, and this is why God

---

<sup>23</sup>I thank Mark Murphy for the example.

can only forgive us for the disobedience, and not for the lying. The critic can be comforted with the thought that God can forgive all wrongs committed against God. Every single one of them.

Second, the comforter should ask the critic to consider a benefit of a theory that limits God standing to forgive, namely that it secures for the *victims* of interpersonal wrongs a unique kind of standing to forgive. Why is this a benefit? Because it offers a way of explaining why, on the Christian view at any rate, it is so important to forgive those who wrong us.<sup>24</sup> Victims of typical interpersonal wrongs are the only ones who can forgive their wrongdoers for those wrongs. So if forgiveness for a wrong is to take place at all, it will only take place if the victim forgives the wrongdoer for it. God will not and cannot do it instead of me or on my behalf.

Third, recall that one concern with certain kinds of “two wrong” strategies is that they make it in principle impossible for some wrongs to be forgiven by God. And if there are some wrongs that God cannot forgive, then there will be “sins” that cannot and never will be forgiven. However, the comforter will want to show the critic that worries about perpetually “unforgiven wrongs” can be overblown. For insofar as a wrong is a wrong against God, it can be forgiven by God—there are no wrongs against God that God cannot forgive. And so as far as God’s relationship with us is concerned, there are no “remainder” wrongs that must remain unforgiven. That other people may not forgive us for the wrongs we commit against them is something that God has allowed. But whether we are forgiven by others, it might argued, has no bearing on whether God can forgive us.<sup>25</sup> God extends the offer of forgiveness to all those who would ask.

#### V. Solution 2—God’s Third Party Standing

I can sometimes work myself into feeling the comfort in concession. But it still seems to me that it would be better—in some respect or other—if God could forgive me for my interpersonal wrongs. I confess the feeling (I am not sure it is much more than that) that there *must* be a way of making sense of this possibility.

So in what follows I will sketch a way of securing God’s standing to forgive. Here are the basics of the solution, which is, except for one amendment, much the same at Concession and Comfort. When I wrong my brother, I commit two wrongs: I lie to him and I, say, disobey God. My brother has direct standing to forgive me for the lie because he was directly wronged by the lie. And God has direct standing to forgive me for my disobedience because God was directly wronged by it. Now here is the difference: God can *also* forgive me for my lie to my brother because God possesses *third party standing* to do so.

<sup>24</sup>I am grateful to Matthew Benton for suggesting this thought.

<sup>25</sup>Some biblical texts appear, on their face, to complicate matters: “But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:15). Cf. Mark 11:25: “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

If this solution is viable, it meets several desiderata for a solution to the problem of divine standing. First, it captures the way in which our interpersonal wrongs are distinctive wrongs against both another human and against God. We do not have to deny that when humans wrong each other that there are two direct victims of those wrongs. This is why God and our human victim each has direct standing to forgive us (albeit for different wrongs). Second, the solution I offer doesn't require that one wrong is the result or consequence of the other, such that either my brother or God gets the standing to forgive only in virtue of the fact that someone else was wronged. Third, while I offer a "two-wrongs" solution, it doesn't have the consequence that there are wrongs that cannot be forgiven by God. Fourth, this solution does not rely on any notion of proxy standing. God does not forgive me for lying to my brother on my brother's behalf. God straightforwardly forgives me for lying to my brother on God's own behalf.

The trick in pulling off this solution is to give a plausible account of third party standing to forgive, not just in general, but such that God could possess it with respect to the wrongs we do to others. Because this is, as I see it, the biggest hurdle, I will proceed as if it is unproblematic that human victims have direct standing to forgive us for our wrongs against them and that God has direct standing to forgive us for our wrongs against God. This is not actually the case, of course. These are difficult questions in their own right and any *complete* solution to the problem of divine standing of the sort I defend here will have to say something about each of them. But for now, I will simply focus on giving an account of God's third party standing to forgive.

That agents can possess third party standing is far from obvious. In fact, the Lucy case with which we began might suggest that it is downright counter-intuitive. We need some kind of argument for its palatability. Let us begin by considering one such argument by Glen Pettigrove.<sup>26</sup> His strategy first identifies a plausible account of the nature of forgiveness. According to Pettigrove, we can forgive a wrongdoer by (a) overcoming hostile reactive attitudes provoked by the wrongdoing, (b) restoring a relationship disrupted by the wrongdoing, and (c) reassessing the wrongdoer's moral character. The argument for third party forgiveness then proceeds as follows:

1. If an agent accomplishes (a–c), then she has forgiven.
2. Agents other than the victim can accomplish (a–c).
3. Therefore, agents other than the victim can forgive.<sup>27</sup>

This is a simple, clever, straightforward argument: because victims can forgive by accomplishing (a–c), then non-victims can do so as well. Standing

---

<sup>26</sup>Pettigrove, "The Standing to Forgive"; *Forgiveness and Love*.

<sup>27</sup>Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 34.

to forgive is built right into the very conditions on successful forgiveness. Suppose you blow up my best friend's car. I take up hostile reactive attitudes, disrupt my relationship with you, and think less of your character. However, were I to overcome these attitudes, restore our relationship, and reassess your character (say, after your sincere apology, remorse, and restitution), then I would have forgiven you for torching my friend's car. Third party forgiveness is therefore established.

However, I am not convinced that this argument provides us with the materials to secure third party standing in general or God's third party standing to forgive in particular. The argument doesn't secure God's third party standing in particular because it is unlikely that God forgives by overcoming hostile reactive attitudes (on the assumption that God cannot have such attitudes in the first place<sup>28</sup>). Of course, this is not a criticism of the plausibility of the argument as it stands; Pettigrove was not using it to establish God's third party standing in the first place.

But even if the argument is taken only to support the plausibility of third party standing in general, I think the critic has a reply open to her. The problem is not premise (2); I do think that agents other than the victim can accomplish (a-c). And there is an important sense in which I do not deny premise (1). Although I am not convinced that one can forgive by accomplishing (a-c), I am happy to grant this point for the sake of argument. The problem with premise (1), however, is that it obscures an important distinction concerning the conditions on forgiveness.

To see the problem, notice that Pettigrove claims that accomplishing (a-c) is sufficient for forgiveness (even if accomplishing neither (a), (b), nor (c) is individually necessary for forgiveness). I think Pettigrove has in mind what we can call a set of sufficient *constitutive* conditions on an instance of forgiving. These are the conditions that attach to the various behaviors or attitudes that the putative forgiver exhibits in forgiving. To put matters crudely, the constitutive features of forgiveness are those things that the putative forgiver "does" when she forgives. It is in *this* sense that I am happy to grant that Pettigrove identifies a set of features that is sufficient for forgiveness.

However, just because an agent meets sufficient constitutive conditions on forgiveness, this does not mean that she forgives. This is because an agent may fail to satisfy another kind of condition that is necessary for forgiveness: an *enabling* condition. Enabling conditions on forgiveness put one in a position to forgive in the first place. If enabling conditions are not met, then even if an agent succeeded in meeting a set of sufficient constitutive conditions on forgiveness, that agent would fail to forgive. It is widely thought, for example, that unless someone does something that is morally wrong (or perhaps morally bad or morally vicious), then forgiveness cannot take place. Furthermore, it is commonly thought that forgiveness cannot take place unless the wrongdoer in question was

---

<sup>28</sup>Warmke, "Divine Forgiveness I."



morally responsible for her conduct.<sup>29</sup> The fact that morally responsible wrongdoing is an enabling condition on forgiveness explains why we cannot forgive bears, bees, or babies—they simply aren't candidates for forgiveness.

Once we are reminded that there are enabling conditions on forgiveness, we see that simply meeting sufficient constitutive conditions does not mean that one has thereby forgiven. One might have failed to meet a necessary enabling condition. Having standing to forgive is a plausible necessary enabling condition. Here then is the reply open to Pettigrove's critic. We cannot show that third parties can forgive simply by showing that they meet a set of sufficient constitutive conditions on forgiveness unless we already assume that third parties have standing to forgive (or perhaps don't need standing). But this is to beg the question against those who claim that such parties lack standing to forgive.

Because I am unsure about the soundness of Pettigrove's strategy for securing third party forgiveness, I will suggest another kind of strategy and then apply it to the problem of divine standing. The common and perhaps even natural way to argue for third party standing involves the methodology of *expanding* the class of potential forgivers. This expansion strategy begins with the assumption that direct victims of wrongdoing have standing to forgive their wrongdoers. We then provide reasons for widening the circle of those with standing. The trouble with this strategy is that arguments for expanding the class of forgivers must begin with certain standard assumptions about standing, such as the assumption that one must be the victim of a wrongdoing to forgive one for it. This puts the burden on the expander to defend third party standing on the home turf of standard views.

But here is another strategy: assume provisionally that *everyone* has the standing to forgive a wrongdoer and then identify reasons for limiting the class of potential forgivers. This *contraction* strategy forces us to rethink why one must have standing to forgive in the first place. Instead of asking, "What reason is there for letting more people have the standing to forgive a wrongdoer?" we ask, "Why *doesn't* everyone have the standing to forgive a wrongdoer?" I will turn to answering this question shortly, but first I want to identify two reasons for being amenable both to the contraction strategy and ultimately to the possibility of third party standing.

First, as Glen Pettigrove points out, "People often say things like, 'I will never forgive him for what he did to her,' or 'It has taken a very long time, but I have finally forgiven him for what he did to her.'"<sup>30</sup> Suppose, for example, that I treat my mother very rudely and that my brother personally and deeply cares about both her and me. It strikes me as being perfectly felicitous if he were to say something like, "It has taken a very long time, but I have finally forgiven him for what he did to her." Taken

<sup>29</sup>For discussion of these assumptions, see Hughes and Warmke, "Forgiveness."

<sup>30</sup>Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 34.

at face value, ordinary language gives us some reason to be open to third party forgivers.

Second, if forgiveness is limited only to victims of wrongdoing, then there is a curious feature of our moral responsibility practices: there is no third-person analogue to forgiveness. It is important to keep in mind that both the victim of wrongdoing and a third party can blame wrongdoers *for the same wrong* (e.g., by resenting them, censuring them, altering respective relationships). If I lie to my brother, then both you and my brother can blame me for doing so. But suppose that both you and my brother give up your respective blaming stances against me. If only victims have standing to forgive, then only my brother would count as forgiving me. But what would we call *your* pivot away from blame? If it cannot be forgiveness, what is it? I don't mean this to be an argument for third party standing. However, I do think it gives us reason to be open to third party forgivers.<sup>31</sup>

With the ground softened a bit, I now want to see where the contraction strategy can take us. We begin with the assumption that everyone has standing to forgive any interpersonal wrong. One way to contract standing is to ask: What is the complaint we would have against someone who claimed to forgive but was not appropriately positioned to forgive? I suggest that the heart of our complaint is not (merely) that the person is not the victim of the wrongdoing. Rather, the complaint is a more general one: that the person is not appropriately involved in the relationship between the victim and wrongdoer. If Lucy my new plumber claims to forgive me for lying to my brother, I think that the appropriate response is to say that the fact that I lied to him is, as it were, none of her business. "This is between him and me," I would say, and if it were true, then I think I have provided a sufficient reason for thinking that Lucy lacks standing to forgive me. The crucial point is that I need not advert to the claim that Lucy was not the victim of my lie to show that she lacks standing to forgive me. I can advert to a more general explanation: this is not her business.

How, then, does a wrong between persons become "your business?" One obvious way is if you are the victim of the wrong. But another way in which a wrong can become your business is if the wrong is done *by* someone you personally care about and *to* someone you personally care about. Recall the case in which I treat my mother very rudely, and suppose that my brother personally cares about each of us. Suppose he were eventually to tell me, "It has taken a very long time, but I have finally forgiven you for what he did to her." Complaining that he lacks standing to forgive me because I did not treat *him* rudely seems to miss the mark. But suppose my brother was long-lost, had just finally met my mother and me, and just recently found out that I treated our mother rudely. Here I think I would be in the right to say that this isn't really his business. But if, on the contrary, he had known me and our mother his entire life and

---

<sup>31</sup>For further discussion of why it is reasonable to start with the assumption that everyone has standing, see Radzik, "On Minding Your Own Business."

cared for each of us deeply, it is much less clear that the same complaint is sufficient to show that he can't forgive me.

In the kind of case I have in mind, then, the third party (my brother) personally cares for both the victim (our mother) and the wrongdoer (me). This is why he is able to forgive me for wronging her. At minimum, I think this gives us good reason to allow at least some cases of third party forgiveness, cases in which the third party has deep personal cares for both the victim and the wrongdoer.

What are personal cares? To say that S personally cares for P is to say that S's relationship with P minimally involves two aspects. First it is to say that S personally knows P.<sup>32</sup> Close friendships, familial relationships, and marriages typify this kind of personal knowledge. Second, S's personally caring for P involves S's seeking P's objective good. S wants what is best for P and is invested in this outcome. Without developing an entire account of what such caring involves, personal cares are best identified by ostension. Imagine close, loving friendships, familial relationships, and marriages. Personal cares are things members of those relationships have for one another.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, Lucy would not have standing to forgive me for treating my mother rudely, but my brother would; she lacks the personal cares that he has.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>For more on knowing persons, see Benton, "Epistemology Personalized."

<sup>33</sup>Note that both personal cares and the way that wrongs affect one's relationship with the wrongdoer come in degrees. One might object, then, that on this view, there is some grey area about the extent to which one must personally care about a victim (and the extent to which the interpersonal wrong affects my relationship with the wrongdoer) to have standing. But if this is a problem, it is a problem for commonly accepted views of standing to forgive in which one receives standing by being the victim of a wrong. This is because there is a spectrum along which one is counted as a victim of wrongdoing. If I witness someone slapping a friend and this causes me distress, am I a victim? Suppose I hear about a burglary in my neighborhood and so feel less safe in my own home, am I a victim? And of course, there are the cases of indirect victimhood discussed in Section II. Presumably there are grey areas even on the widely-accepted views about standing. If they are not problems for victim-only views of standing, I cannot see why they are problems for personal care views.

<sup>34</sup>An objection might be the following: Stalkers might have these kinds of personal cares, and so possess the standing to forgive. Yet there is something fishy about Lucy possessing the standing to forgive me for my lie to my brother because she is my stalker. Here are three kinds of flat-footed replies. First, we could bite bullets: Insofar as Lucy is a stalker of a certain sort (she truly does know and personally care for me and my brother), she can forgive me for the things I do to others. That she is a stalker is irrelevant. Second, we could deny that stalkers have personal cares in the relevant sense. I said above that personal cares are typified by relationships of certain sorts: close, loving friendships; familial relationships; and marriages. Stalking is unlike the other kinds of relationships because stalking relations are typically not welcomed by the one being stalked. Perhaps, then, for a personal care to give one third party standing to forgive, the forgiven party must welcome or accept the personal cares of the third party. A third reply is that for personal cares to give a third party the standing to forgive, the caring must be appropriate to the kind of relationship one has with the wrongdoer. If one's cares for the wrongdoer are inappropriate given the kind of relationship one has with the wrongdoer, then one will not have standing to forgive. Lucy does not get standing to forgive me even if she has deep personal cares for me because those cares are not appropriate for the relationship we have with one another. What gives one third party standing are *appropriate* personal cares, viz. when one meets the conditions for caring in a

Even if personally caring for both the victim and wrongdoer can give one standing to forgive, this is only to provide an answer to the identification about standing, not the explanatory question (from Section I). We may still ask: *Why* do personal cares for the victim and wrongdoer give one standing to forgive? To see why, consider the perspective of the wrongdoer who is asking a third party for forgiveness. After treating my mother rudely, I might say to my brother, "Please forgive me for treating mom that way." Among other things, I am asking that the wrong that I committed against her not cause harm to *our* relationship that he will not allow to be healed. That I've wronged someone *he* cares about harms (or can harm) *our* relationship. For him to forgive me for wronging her therefore crucially involves, among other things, allowing his relationship with me to be healed after my wrongdoing.<sup>35</sup>

But what work is the relationship of personal care doing in this explanation of his standing to forgive? Suppose instead that the case under consideration is one where I lie to my brother and the issue is whether Lucy the plumber can forgive me. Because neither her relationship with me nor her relationship with him is one of personal care, it is difficult to see why she would regard my lying to him as something that would damage her relationship with me. "You're just a paying client," she might say, "whether you lie to your brother or not doesn't really affect us." That Lucy lacks relationships of personal care with both of us explains why this case is different than the previous one.

It also explains why God can have third party standing to forgive us for wrongs we do to others. And so here—finally—we can apply our results to the case of divine standing. Here is the basic picture, no doubt in need of much further elaboration. If third parties who personally care for both victim and wrongdoer can have standing to forgive the wrongdoer then *a fortiori* God can as well. This is because there is no agent who personally cares more for a victim and wrongdoer than does God. When we wrong others, this causes damage to our relationship with God. And because God is in relationships of personal care with both us and our victims, this gives God standing to forgive us. This distinctive divine third party forgiveness is God's way of not allowing our wrongs against others to harm or destroy our relationship with God.

Here's an objection. One goal of the paper has been to show that there are no wrongs that God cannot forgive. Suppose I've shown this. You

---

way that is not inappropriate to the relationship between the parties. I thank Mark Murphy for raising the stalker case and for suggesting this third way of replying to it.

<sup>35</sup>It may be objected that by admitting that my wrongdoing harmed my relationship with my brother, I have thereby wronged him and so he is a victim of one sort or another and that therefore I have smuggled direct or indirect standing through the back door. But simply damaging or harming a relationship does not mean that anyone was wronged. I have moved away from close friends. This harmed our relationship. But my moving and damaging those relationships did not itself mean that I morally wronged those friends. Breaking up with a partner also damages a relationship, but breaking up with a partner does not itself entail moral wrongdoing.

might still worry that after God has done all the forgiving that God can do, there remains forgiveness that has not been accomplished that one should want to occur. Suppose that God third party forgives me for lying to my brother. If my brother does not forgive me, then there is still “leftover” forgiveness that has not been accomplished. So, here’s the objection: if part of the motivation for showing that God can forgive interpersonal human wrongs is the conviction that there are no wrongs that God cannot forgive, isn’t it a weakness of my proposal that it permits unaccomplished acts of forgiveness?<sup>36</sup>

One response is the following. Once you have God’s forgiveness for every wrong you have committed, you do not need forgiveness from anyone else, including the victim. But this is mistaken. Interpersonal human forgiveness between victim and wrongdoer accomplishes many good things: the overcoming of anger and bitterness on the part of the victim, the rebuilding of trust and restoration of a relationship, and the equalizing of a moral relationship between victim and wrongdoer. These things cannot be accomplished by God’s forgiveness, and they are valuable in addition to God’s third party forgiveness for those same wrongs. In fact, interpersonal human forgiveness is so important that in the Christian tradition it is commanded.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, we cannot dismiss so easily the importance of forgiveness that may still be accomplished even after God has forgiven all the possible wrongs there are to forgive.

The correct reply to this objection is simply to point out that a full theory of the economy of forgiveness, at least in the Christian tradition, will preserve two thoughts: (1) that there are no wrongs that God cannot in principle forgive; and (2) that interpersonal human forgiveness is so important that it is commanded. We should preserve (1) because there is no wrongdoing for which one cannot approach God and request forgiveness, knowing “he will forgive our sins and purify us from *all our wrongdoing*.” (1 John 1:19, emphasis added) We should preserve (2) because there are uniquely good things that only human interpersonal forgiveness can achieve. A view that allowed for some wrongs to be outside the reach of God’s forgiveness would contravene (1). On the other hand, claiming that once God forgives no other forgiveness needs to take place would contravene (2). The theory I have presented preserves both (1) and (2). There are no wrongs that God cannot forgive and yet there are still some acts of forgiveness only other humans can accomplish. God’s forgiveness can achieve things that human forgiveness cannot and vice versa. We should not be worried that there are remaining acts of human forgiveness that can and should take place, even after God has done all the forgiving that God can do. This is precisely what a theory should say.

---

<sup>36</sup>I am grateful to Mark Murphy for pressing this point.

<sup>37</sup>See n. 17 above.

## VI. Conclusion

Many questions remain. I have not explained how exactly it is that wronging one person can harm one's relationship with a third person. Nor have I discussed cases in which a third party has a relationship of personal care with only the victim (or the wrongdoer). Nor have I said much more about the nature of divine forgiveness than that it involves not allowing an interpersonal wrong to harm or destroy one's relationship with God. There is also much more to be said about personal cares and how they secure standing to forgive. But for those who think the problem of divine standing is a real puzzle and are dissatisfied with conceding that there are some things God cannot forgive, I have sketched a strategy that secures God's standing to forgive us for our wrongs against God and our wrongs against others. Further, this strategy does so using three plausible premises about God: (1) that God personally cares for all of us; (2) that God's relationship with us is damaged when we wrong others; and (3) that God's forgiveness involves, at least in part, reconciling that relationship.<sup>38</sup>

*Bowling Green State University*

## References

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1991. "Forgiveness: A Christian Model." *Faith and Philosophy* 8: 277–304.
- Bash, Anthony. 2015. *Forgiveness: A Theology* (Cascade Books).
- Benton, Matthew A. Forthcoming. "Epistemology Personalized." *Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Brien, Andrew. 1989. "Can God Forgive Us our Trespasses?" *Sophia* 28: 35–42. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02789857>
- Drabkin, Douglas. 1993. "The Nature of God's Love and Forgiveness." *Religious Studies* 29: 231–238. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500022228>
- Geuras, Dean. 1992. "In Defense of Divine Forgiveness: A Response to David Londey." *Sophia* 31: 65–77. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02772354>
- Griswold, Charles L. 2007. *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge University Press).

---

<sup>38</sup>I am grateful to the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, whose faculty, students, and visiting fellows read and offered illuminating discussion about this paper in the spring of 2016: Matthew Benton, Michael Bergmann, Max Baker-Hyitch, Liz Jackson, Anne Jeffrey, Rachel Jonker, Jeffrey McDonough, Sam Newlands, Michael Rea, and Allison Krile Thornton. I am also grateful to the audience at the 2016 Theistic Ethics Workshop at Georgetown University and to Craig Warmke for discussion about the topic. Finally, three sets of comments, from two anonymous referees and from the editor, Mark Murphy, helped me to clarify many points and avoid some errors. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Marilyn McCord Adams. Professor Adams wrote a paper on Christian forgiveness which appeared in this journal in 1991. A few months before her death, she told me she wrote that paper because she was having a difficult time forgiving a colleague, a reason that seemed to me to be as good as any.

- Hughes, Paul M., and Brandon Warmke. 2017. "Forgiveness." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2017 edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/forgiveness>.
- Kim, Eun Kyung. 2016. "Paralyzed Columbine Survivor to Dylan Klebold's Mother: 'I Have Forgiven You.'" *Today*, 12 February 2016: <http://www.today.com/parents/paralyzed-columbine-survivor-dylan-klebold-s-mother-i-have-forgiven-t73151>.
- Londey, David. 1986. "Can God Forgive Us Our Trespasses?" *Sophia* 25: 4–10. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02912217>
- Mackintosh, H. R. 1927. *Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (Harper and Brothers).
- Milam, Per. 2015. "How is Self-Forgiveness Possible?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 96: 49–69. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12091>
- Minas, Anne C. 1975. "God and Forgiveness." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 25: 138–150. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2217629>
- Murphy, Jeffrie G., and Jean Hampton. 1988. *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge University Press).
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2016. *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford University Press).
- Pettigrove, Glen. 2009. "The Standing to Forgive." *The Monist* 92: 583–603. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist200992432>
- Pettigrove, Glen. 2012. *Forgiveness and Love* (Oxford University Press).
- Radzik, Linda. 2011. "On Minding Your Own Business: Differentiating Accountability Relations within the Moral Community." *Social Theory and Practice* 37: 574–598. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract201137434>
- Scheiber, Karin. 2001. "May God Forgive?" In *Forgiveness and Truth: Explorations in Contemporary Theology*, edited by Alistair McFadyen and Marcel Sarot (T&T Clark), 173–180.
- Strabbing, Jada Twedt. 2017. "Divine Forgiveness and Reconciliation." *Faith and Philosophy* 34, no. 3: 272–297. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil20178283>
- Swinburne, Richard. 1989. *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford University Press).
- Todd, Patrick. Forthcoming. "A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame." *Nous*.
- Walker, Margaret Urban. 2013. "Third Parties and the Social Scaffolding of Forgiveness." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41: 495–512. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12026>
- Warmke, Brandon. 2017a. "Divine Forgiveness I: Emotion and Punishment-Forbearance Theories." *Philosophy Compass* 12, no. 9. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12440>
- Warmke, Brandon. 2017b. "Divine Forgiveness II: Reconciliation and Debt-Cancellation Theories." *Philosophy Compass* 12, no. 9. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12439>