

The dilemma of divine forgiveness

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Abstract: The dilemma of divine forgiveness suggests it is unreasonable to be comforted by the thought that God forgives acts that injure human victims. A plausible response to the dilemma claims that the comfort derives from the belief that God's forgiveness releases the wrongdoer from punishment for her misdeed. This response is shown to be flawed. A more adequate response is then developed out of the connection between forgiveness and reconciliation.

People often take comfort in the thought that God forgives wrongdoing. A bit of reflection, however, suggests that their comfort is ill-founded. The Judeo-Christian conception of divine forgiveness faces four challenges.¹ The first arises out of a concern for justice: how can a just God forgive?² If A deserves to be punished, then it is unjust for God to forgive, since doing so would involve giving her something other than what she deserves. If A does not deserve to be punished, then forgiveness seems unnecessary. The second objection stems from God's assumed immutability. In human relationships, forgiveness ordinarily involves a change in attitude toward a wrongdoer from a hostile attitude like anger to a pro-attitude like love.³ Such a change is hard to square with the notion of an unchanging God.⁴ The third challenge is rooted in worries about the possibility of divine emotion.⁵ Emotions are often conceived to be passions that we suffer, rather than actions in which we engage. If God is always and only active and emotions are passive (whether wholly or in part), then God cannot have emotions. Since forgiveness is generally thought to involve emotions, it appears God cannot forgive.

The fourth challenge, which I shall call the dilemma of divine forgiveness, arises from a concern about whether God has the standing to forgive. Ordinarily we think only the victim of wrongdoing has the proper standing to forgive. If X is not the one who was wronged, then it is not X's place to forgive.⁶ This assumption poses a dilemma for the idea of a forgiving God. Either God cannot forgive the

wrongs that usually concern us, viz. those done to human victims, or wrongdoing must always and only be seen as an offence against God. Some, of course, will be happy to embrace one or the other horn of this dilemma. They will maintain either that God cannot forgive wrongs done to human beings or that all wrongs are ultimately (and exclusively) wrongs perpetrated against God.⁷ However, for many, neither horn of the dilemma will appear very inviting. If we choose the second, we end up with the unsavoury conclusion that, in spite of appearances, when we betray a friend's trust we have not really wronged the friend, because offences are always and only offences against God. If we choose the first horn, maintaining that we can wrong other people, then God is incapable of forgiving wrongs done to human victims. Since God was not the one wronged, God does not have the standing to forgive.⁸

Each of these challenges calls into question the reasonableness of taking comfort in the belief that one has been forgiven by God. However, the last is in some ways the most pressing. If God does not have the standing to forgive, then it is irrelevant whether God is capable of emotion or whether forgiving is consistent with immutability and justice. Consequently, this paper will take up the question of God's standing to forgive. A satisfactory answer to that question will not lead to the conclusion that it is sensible to take comfort in the belief that one has been forgiven by God, for the other challenges will remain. But until this worry is addressed, there is little point in discussing the others.

Forgiveness and punishment

One response to the dilemma of divine forgiveness would be to differentiate between divine and human forgiveness. According to this response, divine forgiveness is what we would ordinarily call mercy and is fundamentally about the remittance of punishment. One might think that the reason people take comfort in the belief that God has forgiven them is because they believe God is the cosmic judge whose job is to punish wrongdoers. God's forgiveness is thought to release them from the sentence they would otherwise have received. They now need not fear future (perhaps eternal) punishment.⁹

Such a response gets around the dilemma, because God could have the judicial standing to exact punishment or extend mercy without having been the victim of the wrong. However, there are several reasons one might wish to avoid it, of which I shall mention two. First, it seems to lose sight of the human person who was wronged, so at least some of the force of the dilemma remains. God's forgiveness still seems beside the point, and there remains something unseemly about the person who takes consolation in it. Such a person is like the drunk driver whose first thought after the accident is not, 'Are the people in the other vehicle okay?', but rather, 'Oh no! I'm going to lose my licence'. Second, even if

we set aside worries about the human victim, the solution leaves out something important. The scope of mercy tends to be limited to punishment and whether or not it is exacted: its focus is on whether or not the wrongdoer will have to suffer. Forgiveness has a quite different focus. It is concerned with the good or ill will that exists between wrongdoer and wronged, and with the future of their relationship.

Ordinarily forgiveness aims at reconciliation.¹⁰ It need not: it is possible to forgive someone at the same time that one realizes one cannot go on with them in the old way.¹¹ However, our ideal of forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness we most want to receive, is one that brings reconciliation. By withholding forgiveness, the wronged may withhold reconciliation and the possibility of a shared future. The consolation provided by an account of divine forgiveness that left out any intimation of the future relationship between the wrongdoer and God would be greatly reduced. The recipient of mercy who has been fully pardoned, when asked why he looks forlorn, might quite reasonably respond, 'I know about me, but I don't yet know about us'. He knows that he will not be punished, but he does not yet know whether he will be treated as the friend he once was. The person who has been fully forgiven knows something about her future relationship with the person she has wronged that the pardoned does not. Thus, while those who take consolation in divine forgiveness may be interested in divine mercy as well, they have at least a *prima facie* reason for keeping forgiveness and mercy distinct, even in God.¹²

Care, benefit, and harm

A more satisfying response to the dilemma of divine forgiveness will need to explain how God could obtain the standing to forgive without undermining the standing of the human victim. The most promising way to do this depends on the rather ordinary assumption that when we benefit or harm X we may also benefit or harm those close to X. Our aspirations, cares, concerns, and identities are tied up with the cares, concerns, and aspirations of others in such a way that how things go for them affects how things go for us. Freud offers a glimpse into the many layers of interconnection that can exist between us when he observes, 'I have to love [X] if he is my friend's son, since the pain my friend would feel if any harm came to him would be my pain too – I should have to share it.'¹³ By benefiting X, an agent may also benefit X's parents, his friends, his parents' friends, his friends' parents, etc. Likewise, if an agent wrongs X, she may also wrong his parents, his friends, his partner, his partner's friends and parents.

Of course, the benefits and wrongs need not be identical in these cases. If someone were to give my daughter a job, that may benefit her and benefit me, but it need not benefit us in the same way. Some of the benefits may be the same, such as the financial benefit if she is contributing to the household income, but other benefits will differ. She gains work experience and the opportunity to prove

herself and make use of her talents, while I gain the delight of seeing my daughter thrive in her chosen career, of seeing her potential realized and her abilities appreciated, of seeing her become the joyful adult I have hoped she would become, and so on. Similarly, stealing from my daughter takes away her sense of security in her own home along with the objects stolen, and thereby takes away the sense of confidence that I have spent so many years working to nurture in her. The thief robs me of the joy of seeing her flourish, diminishing my wellbeing by diminishing hers, since hers factors in mine. His action may also undermine my own sense of safety; after all, if it could happen to her, it could happen to me. Thus, the thief has wronged us both even though he need not have wronged us in the same way.¹⁴

If one assumes that the relationship between God and humans is like the one between parents and children or between friends, then there are two ways in which God can have the standing to forgive A for wronging X without that standing leading to the second horn of the dilemma. First, because of the relationship between God and X, by wronging X, A has also wronged God. Therefore, God has the standing to forgive A. Notice that this standing in no way diminishes the importance of X or of the wrong done to X. On the contrary, it presupposes both X's importance and the significance of the wrong done her. God obtains the standing to forgive A precisely because God values X.¹⁵

Second, the relationship between God and A (the wrongdoer) may also lead to God having the standing to forgive. In the examples considered above, the characterization of the wrong suffered (or benefit enjoyed) by the parent or friend in virtue of the way their beloved has been treated is not dependent on the wrongdoer (or benefactor) standing in a prior relationship to the parent or friend. The employer or thief could be a complete stranger and the parent or friend could nevertheless be benefited or wronged via the treatment of the beloved. However, often the matter is more complicated, because prior relationships exist between the wrongdoer (or benefactor) and the other parties, and these relationships can add to the type and scope of wrongdoing (or benefiting) possible through a single act. So, for example, the child who gets into a fight on the football field during a game may not only wrong the player he has punched (and those attached to that player), he may also let down his own team mates, his coach, his parents, and others. If God stands in something like a parental relationship to A, then the scope of A's wrongdoing may include letting God down as well as harming X. Thus, A's mistreatment of X may give God the standing to forgive A both because of God's attachment to X and because of God's attachment to A.

While this argument avoids the second horn of the dilemma, it appears to push us toward the first. Although it is not, strictly speaking, irrelevant, God's forgiveness might still strike us as 'secondary and incomplete'.¹⁶ If I have wronged my wife and through wronging her have wronged my in-laws, obtaining my in-laws' forgiveness may matter to me. But surely obtaining their forgiveness will be little

consolation if I have not yet obtained the forgiveness of my spouse. Avoiding this horn requires attending once more to the tie between forgiveness and reconciliation.

The forgiving partner

Imagine A has wronged X. For a while both she and her partner are angry with A. After some time has passed, during which A has shown repentance, done penance, and the like, X's partner comes to forgive A. Of course, being forgiven by X's partner may bring A comfort in its own right, but it may also increase A's hope that he may be reconciled with X. There are two reasons for A's hope. First, if the partner has displayed good moral judgement in the past, A has reason to think there are (now) good reasons for him to be forgiven, reasons that X might see and to which she might respond.¹⁷ The anticipated effects of the partner's forgiveness provide the second reason for A's hope. When the occasion arises, A expects that her partner will try to help X see and respond to the same reasons he has. Thus, A expects X's partner will work to promote reconciliation between A and X.

If we substitute God for X's partner, A's hope may reasonably increase to the level of confidence. Given God's power, God's standing as an ideal moral agent, etc., the promise of reconciliation with X is even more sure than it was when A obtained the forgiveness of X's human partner. As the ideal moral agent, God's judgment is *ex hypothesi* impeccable. So if God forgives A, then there really must be good reasons to forgive him. As a supremely powerful agent, if God sets his mind to helping X see and respond to these reasons to forgive, then A may be reasonably confident that God will make headway in this endeavour. Thus, even though God's forgiveness is not the whole of what A wants, a belief in God's forgiveness can reasonably console him because of the future reconciliation with X that it portends.

At this point, two further objections might be raised. Both of them boil down to the worry that God might be too soft on offenders, which could undermine the comfort one can reasonably take in divine forgiveness. The first stems from the thought that one is less likely to take wrongs done to others as seriously as one takes wrongs done to oneself.¹⁸ Consequently, one might expect the partner (or God) to be readier to forgive than X. The partner's forgiveness, then, would prove a less reliable source of hope than it at first appeared.

However, the assumption on which this objection is based is dubious. Perhaps in the case of minor transgressions or in the case of wrongs done to strangers, other people tend to be easier on wrongdoers than the primary victim would be. But in the case of serious wrongs done to intimates, such is not the case. The person who breaks the heart or betrays the trust of my daughter will have a much harder time securing my forgiveness than he will my daughter's. Friends and family are often much more resistant to one's being reconciled (and slower to be

reconciled themselves) to one's faithless friend than one is oneself. There are moral reasons for this difference in attitude that undergird the psychological ones. One of our tasks as members of the moral community is to stand in solidarity with victims of wrongdoing and to assert their moral worth in the face of the wrongdoer's devaluing actions. This task rests more heavily on the bystander than it does on the victim, since the victim has no particular obligation to stand in solidarity with or defence of herself. Given that the partner is less likely to forgive for both moral and psychological reasons, if X's partner comes to forgive, there is good reason to hope X will as well.

Nor is the case altered significantly by thinking of God as the parent of both A and X, rather than as X's partner. Some parents, of course, will be unduly inclined to indulge or excuse their children's wrongdoing, even when their actions have hurt a sibling. However, parents of this sort are readily seen to be in the wrong. The fair-minded parent who desires what is best for both of his children will not downplay a serious wrong in pursuit of an easy peace. If we assume that God is at least as admirable as the fair-minded parent, then there is no reason to expect his attachment to A to skew his response when A has wronged X.

The second worry is that God is a profligate forgiver.¹⁹ One might think that God throws around forgiveness like a millionaire throws around £100 notes. If God is always forgiving everybody, then what reason does one have to hope that the human one has wronged will eventually come to forgive as well? After all, she is working with a more limited expense account and may not be able to afford the same extravagance that God can.²⁰

There are two responses to the second worry. The first would accept the premise that God is always forgiving everyone, but maintain that this is exactly how an ideal moral agent *should* respond to wrongdoing. For God's forgiveness to provide comfort, this respondent would then need to add a premise to the effect that God is in the business of turning people into ideal moral agents, whether in this life or in the life to come. So eventually God will help X develop to the point where she, too, can forgive everyone.

A more traditional response to the worry would deny the premise that God is always forgiving everyone. It would insist that God's forgiveness is always predicated on the wrongdoer having had a change of heart, accompanied by an attempt to repair the damage his act inflicted and acts of penance.²¹ For this respondent, God is a very tough critic, perhaps even tougher than we are, so that if one secures God's forgiveness one may be reasonably confident that one will secure X's.

Whether one employs the first or the second response, it appears that God's forgiveness can provide reason to hope that one will enjoy X's forgiveness. The comfort A takes in God's forgiveness in such a case might be expected to vary on the basis of whether he thought God's reasons for forgiving made it compulsory or merely permissible to forgive him. One might think that there would be greater

comfort to be had in a situation where forgiving is obligatory than in one where it is merely permitted. However, there are reasons to wonder whether the distinction between permissible and compulsory cases is relevant to forgiveness. Many have argued that forgiveness is always elective, never required.²² Even if it turns out that forgiveness is sometimes compulsory and that A's case is one such instance, it is unclear what impact that should have on how A feels. If it increased A's consolation, it certainly would not be through the thought that God might tell X that she was obliged to forgive A. There is scant comfort in being told, 'I forgive you', by one's sister when one knows that the only reason she has done so is because your mother said she must. If there is consolation to be had in believing that God is responding to reasons that make it obligatory to forgive, it must either come from the thought that God will help X come to feel the internal force of those reasons or from the thought that A has at least done all that could be required in his efforts to make amends.

This paper has not settled the question of whether it is reasonable to take comfort in divine forgiveness, for it has not provided any reason for thinking God exists or is inclined to forgive. Nothing has been said about the objections from justice, immutability, or emotion. Nor have I said anything about the conditions under which it would be reasonable for a particular wrongdoer to *believe* himself to have been forgiven by God. But if the foregoing argument is correct, I have shown that the dilemma of divine forgiveness does not make it unreasonable to take comfort in the belief that one has been forgiven by God. For God can have the standing to forgive and God's forgiveness can bring one comfort without disregarding the moral standing of the human person one has wronged.²³

Notes

1. Anne Minas articulates and defends each of these objections in 'God and forgiveness', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 25 (1975), 138–150.
2. For an especially provocative response to this question, see Thomas Talbott 'Punishment, forgiveness, and divine justice', *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), 151–169. Talbott argues that divine justice is not only compatible with forgiveness; it actually requires it.
3. See Peter Strawson 'Freedom and resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 48 (1962), 1–25; Norvin Richards 'Forgiveness', *Ethics*, 99 (1988), 77–97; Cheshire Calhoun 'Changing one's heart', *Ethics*, 103 (1992), 76–96; Margaret Holmgren 'Forgiveness and the intrinsic value of persons', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 30 (1993), 341–352; Paul Hughes 'Moral anger, forgiving, and condoning', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 25 (1995), 103–118; Piers Benn 'Forgiveness and loyalty', *Philosophy*, 71 (1996), 369–383; David Novitz 'Forgiveness and self-respect', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 58 (1998), 299–315; Pamela Hieronymi 'Articulating an uncompromising forgiveness', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 62 (2001), 529–555; Jeffrie Murphy *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12ff.; and Glen Pettigrove 'The forgiveness we speak: the illocutionary force of forgiving', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 42 (2004), 371–392.
4. For one attempt to circumvent this objection, see Douglas Drabkin 'The nature of God's love and forgiveness', *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), 231–238.
5. Linda Zagzebski has recently offered an account of divine emotions that attempts to get around this sort of worry. See her *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 203–213.
6. For a defence of this claim, see R. S. Downie 'Forgiveness', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 15 (1965), 128ff.

7. Those who accept the second horn of the dilemma often appeal to the language of Psalm 51.4, in which the Psalmist addresses God, saying, 'Against you, you alone, have I sinned'.
8. John Gingell posed this dilemma in 'Forgiveness and power', *Analysis*, 34 (1974), 180–184. He was neither the first to raise it nor the last. John Milbank has recently attempted to answer it in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (New York NY: Routledge, 2003). However, he does so by introducing a robust theological and metaphysical framework that, while important for his larger project, brings in significantly more than is needed to respond to this question. I offer a simpler answer with fewer metaphysical commitments.
9. Of course, such a response immediately raises the justice-based objection mentioned above.
10. See Paul Tillich 'To whom much is forgiven', in *idem The New Being* (New York NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 7–10; Jean Hampton 'Forgiveness, resentment, and hatred', in Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton *Forgiveness and Mercy* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37, 83; Robert Roberts 'Forgivingness', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 (1995), 294, 299–300; John Hare *The Moral Gap* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 223–225; Eve Garrard and David McNaughton 'In defence of unconditional forgiveness', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 103 (2003) 41–46; Milbank *Being Reconciled*, 47; and Eleonore Stump 'Love, by all accounts', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 80 (November 2006), 36–37.
11. See Hampton 'Forgiveness, resentment, and hatred', 37; Marilyn McCord Adams 'Forgiveness: a Christian model', *Faith and Philosophy*, 8 (1991), 299; Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger 'Forgiving abusive parents', in Alistair McFadyen and Marcel Sarot (eds) *Forgiveness and Truth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 96–97; Trudy Govier *Forgiveness and Revenge* (New York NY: Routledge, 2002), 47–48, 141ff.; Jeffrie Murphy *Getting Even*, 14–15; Glen Pettigrove 'Unapologetic forgiveness', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 41 (2004), 351–353; and Jessica Wolfendale 'The hardened heart: the moral dangers of not forgiving', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 36 (2005), 349.
12. For more on the difference between forgiveness and mercy, see Jeffrie Murphy 'Forgiveness and resentment', in Hampton and Hampton *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 20ff; and Jean Hampton 'The retributive idea', in *ibid.*, 158f.
13. Sigmund Freud *Civilization and Its Discontents*, James Strachey (tr.) (New York NY: W. W. Norton, 1961), 66.
14. See McCord Adams 'Forgiveness', 293–294.
15. There are competing accounts of the relationship between God's valuing X and X's having value. According to some, X comes to have value because God values her. According to others, X has value on some other grounds, to which God, as the ideal moral agent, is appropriately responsive. The argument of this paper is meant to remain neutral on this issue.
16. Gingell 'Forgiveness and power', 182.
17. For a discussion of what might constitute good reasons to forgive, see Murphy 'Forgiveness and resentment', 24–32; Holmgren 'Forgiveness and the intrinsic value of persons', 349; Hieronymi 'Articulating an uncompromising forgiveness', 542–549; Wolfendale 'The hardened heart', 354–361; and Glen Pettigrove, 'Hume on forgiveness and the unforgivable', *Utilitas*, 19 (2007), 457–460, 464–465.
18. Joseph Butler, for example, makes this assumption a centrepiece of his account of forgiveness. See 'Upon forgiveness of injuries', in his *Fifteen Sermons* [1729] (Charlottesville VA: Lincoln-Rembrandt Publishing, 1993).
19. Martin Hughes raises this worry in 'Forgiveness', *Analysis*, 35 (1975), 113–117.
20. See Holmgren 'Forgiveness and the intrinsic value of persons', 350–351.
21. See Richard Swinburne *Responsibility and Atonement* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), ch. 5.
22. See Aurel Kolnai 'Forgiveness', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 74 (1973/74), 98–102; Calhoun 'Changing one's heart', 78–81; Holmgren 'Forgiveness and the intrinsic value of persons', 350–351; Novitz 'Forgiveness and self-respect', 313; Jacques Derrida *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (tr.) (New York NY: Routledge, 2001), 31–35; Nancy Potter 'Is refusing to forgive a vice?', in Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh (eds) *Feminists Doing Ethics* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 138–139. For arguments to the effect that forgiveness may, at times, be obligatory, see Downie 'Forgiveness', 133; Berel Lang 'Forgiveness', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 31 (1994), 109–111; Hare *The Moral Gap*, 230–231; Tara Smith 'Tolerance & forgiveness: virtues or vices?', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 14 (1997) 37–39; Wolfendale 'The hardened heart', 356–360.
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