

God's Standing to Forgive

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1. 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 very 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? It is natural to suppose that just like I did not lie to Lucy about the gift, I also did not lie to God about the gift. And so 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*.¹

I begin with some preliminaries. First, I will assume that God's forgiveness is not supremely mysterious. If God's forgiveness was supremely mysterious, then there is very little to say about it. We could perhaps, at a minimum, affirm the truth that "God forgives us." Or we could say that, strictly speaking, God does not forgive, but that there is some deep apophatic truth that is best described in metaphorical language using the human practice of forgiveness as a guide. But I will go in for a theology of forgiveness that allows serious and sustained inquiry into how God has standing to forgive.

Second, throughout I will use the term 'wrong' to denote the particular kind of mistreatment that one agent can engage in with respect to another. 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

¹ 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," but unless otherwise specified this should be taken to refer to God's forgiveness for interpersonal human wrongs.

principles or rules. In the sense I have in mind, one may wrong another by subjecting them to bad or vicious treatment as well. To wrong someone is to fail them, morally speaking.

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 the nature of God's forgiveness? If and when God forgives, what does God *do*?² Another question concerns the norms bearing on God's forgiveness: Under what conditions is God's forgiveness morally good, right, or just? What reasons or motivations would a morally perfect being have in forgiving? To ask how it could be that God, unlike Lucy, is in a position to forgive me for my lie is to ask a different kind of questions, one about standing. To say that someone has standing to forgive in some particular case is not to make a normative claim about whether that forgiveness would be morally good, right, or just. Rather, to say that someone has standing to forgive is say that forgiveness is an *option* for someone.³ If I *lack* standing, then forgiving is not on the table for me; I am not a candidate for forgiving. To doubt whether someone has standing to forgive is not to doubt whether someone succeeded in forgiving. Nor is it to doubt whether someone's forgiveness was morally good, right or permissible.⁴ Rather, it is to doubt whether that person can forgive in the first place.⁵

We can further distinguish two questions about the standing to forgive. 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 question might involve simply listing individual persons who have the standing to forgive in a particular case. More general (and perhaps more illuminating) answers to the identification question 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 for a wrongdoer only if one is the victim of that wrongdoing (in some sense of 'victim'). Jeffrie Murphy expresses such a view when he says that "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

² I have explored the nature question in two manuscripts: "Divine Forgiveness I: Emotion and Punishment-Forbearance Theories" and "Divine Forgiveness II: Reconciliation and Debt-Cancellation Theories." See also Bash (2015), Brien (1989), Drabkin (1993), Geuras (1992), Londey (1986), Mackintosh (1927), Minas (1975), Scheiber (2001), and Swinburne (1989),

³ As far as I know, Jeffrie Murphy was the first to introduce 'standing' as way of talking about who is a candidate for forgiving (see Murphy and Hampton 1988: 174).

⁴ This is why the legal term 'standing' is more apt than 'right' or 'authority', which are more normatively loaded terms.

⁵ Philosophers writing on moral blame have asked their own questions about the standing to blame: 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 context of blame, standing is typically taken to be a normative notion. On this construal of standing, many people claim that one can lack standing to blame, for example, if one's blame would be hypocritical (see, for example, Todd (forthcoming) for discussion of this point). In the blame literature, when it is claimed that a person lacks standing, it is not being claimed that a person *cannot* blame. Rather, it is claimed that were they to blame, their blame would be morally impermissible or inappropriate. When we claim that someone does not have standing to forgive, however, we are saying that she cannot forgive. Noting this difference in how philosophers talk about blame-standing and forgiveness-standing is crucial to avoid confusion.

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*” (Murphy and Hampton 1988: 21, emphasis original). 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: one is the victim of the wrongdoing, or one feels resentment toward the wrongdoer because of what she did to the victim, or one has a certain kind of relationship with the victim (such as an especially close friend or family member).

A distinct question concerning the standing to forgive asks *why* is it 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 when wronged. This would explain why only victims have the standing to forgive, for only they meet a requirement on forgiveness. 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.

With a clearer picture of the question of divine standing, here is how we will proceed. In Section 2, I will catalog a variety of potential forms of standing to forgive. One may think of these forms of standing as different answers to the identification question. In Section 3, I turn to assess these forms of standing as solutions to the problem of divine standing. I take these results into consideration, and in Sections 4 and 5 I offer two different 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 such standing, identifies which form of standing God has, and explains why it might be that God is able to forgive in this way.

2. Varieties of Standing

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 directly be wronged in many ways. One may be lied to, cheated on, have something stolen, be kidnapped, or be assaulted. All of these ways of mistreating someone will typically be counted as ways of directly wronging someone. And as stipulated in our case, Betty was the only one wronged by Alfred’s telling of the lie. In such a case, we may say that Betty has *exclusive direct standing* to forgive. Her standing to forgive is direct insofar as she was directly wronged, and her standing 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 of wrongdoing to result in multiple victims who each have the standing to forgive. Suppose, for example, that Alfred addressed his lie to Betty *and* Jill, attempting to deceive them both. Here, both Betty and Jill are each directly wronged by Alfred, yet neither of them has exclusive standing to forgive Alfred for the lie. Were Betty (but not Jill) to forgive Alfred for the lie, Jill could not justly criticize Betty for trying to forgive Alfred because only she, Jill, was in a position to forgive. There are *both* in such a position. 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. But 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 both lied to Betty and broken a promise to Sue. Here, it seems to me, that 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*.⁶

b. Indirect standing

Suppose that Alfred lies to Betty and this results in Betty being very late in picking 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 the waste of 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 we can say that Betty was directly wronged and so has direct standing to forgive, it is not true that Todd was directly wronged by Alfred. Rather, it was something Alfred did to Betty that 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

⁶ It might be thought that the case I have imagined 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 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 what I call distinct direct standing are interesting as distinct from ordinary cases of exclusive direct standing is because in the case I have imagined, it is plausible that there is one action of Alfred’s that constitutes two different wrongs. There is one way of reading the case such that both Betty and Sue each forgive Alfred for the same action, but not for the same wrong. Such a case is, I think, interestingly different from a case in which Alfred lies to Betty and then later on that day also breaks a promise to Sue.

forgive Alfred.⁷ Call this *indirect standing*.⁸ 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. I would suggest, however, that in such cases, what matters is not the precise *manner* in which one accrues standing, but that one does so and what one does with it.

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 have to forgive the driver for killing his daughter. It might be when people very close to us (like our children) are seriously wronged, we are also wronged. But this would be different than proxy standing. X's forgiving Y on behalf of Z for what Z did to Y is not the same as X's forgiving Y for what Y did to Z.

Even those sympathetic to the possibility of the proxy standing typically delimit the class of people who qualify for it.⁹ 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 much more plausible to think that Ted could forgive on behalf of his daughter Maria but that Ted's hedge fund manager could not.

d. *Third-party Standing*

Finally, consider *third-party standing*. Third-party standing allows 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 cases of standing are misleadingly called "third-party." For example, he asks us to imagine a case in which the murder of a loved one injures us, and the matter 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" (2007: 117). The standing to forgive that would accrue to such a person, Griswold says, would be

⁷ Consider the real-life case of Anne Marie Hochhalter, who was left paralyzed in the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. 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: <http://www.today.com/parents/paralyzed-columbine-survivor-dylan-klebold-s-mother-i-have-forgiven-t73151> [Accessed 13 February 2016].

⁸ As is the case with direct standing, one's 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.

⁹ See Griswold (2007:119), though see below for a clarification about Griswold's view.

(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 of the matter is that third-party forgiveness involves "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)" (117). Yet because Griswold has in mind an activity that involves forgiving "on behalf" of the victim, this kind of standing to forgive is best thought of as proxy standing. Indeed, he argues that in order to engage in what *he* calls third-party forgiveness, the forgiver can only do so if she has "standing," and one receives such standing only if one has an "identification with the victim" (119).¹⁰ I have called this proxy standing.

I reserve the designation "third-party standing" for another possible (albeit controversial) kind of standing to forgive in which a non-victim forgives a wrongdoer, but not on behalf of the victim. We may distinguish between a 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. What I identify as third-party standing is what both Glen Pettigrove (2009) and Margaret Urban Walker (2013) have in mind in their recent discussions of third-party forgiveness. 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 on behalf, not on behalf of C or anyone else who might be a victim of the wrong" (495).¹¹ Such a putative forgiver, she says, is one who "suffered no wrong" by the offender's actions (496). This putative standing to forgive, therefore, is not reducible to any of the aforementioned varieties: the forgiver was not wronged by the offender (directly or indirectly) and she does not forgive on behalf of anyone else.

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.¹² Do any of these forms of standing explain how God could have standing to forgive us for the wrongs we do to others? To this question I now turn.

¹⁰ 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" (119).

¹¹ 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" (2009: 591, italics original). I take the "for" here to mean "on behalf of."

¹² 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 (though in such case both the wrongdoer and the victim 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 (forthcoming)), then we need a variety of standing that allows for them. Call this *reflexive standing* to forgive. Since our question is how God would forgive *us* (and I take it what we and God (or the Godhead) are separate persons), reflexive standing is not an option.

3. Assessing the Options

a. Divine forgiveness and direct standing?

Consider attributing to God 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 to forgive 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 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, 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 God's standing to forgive.¹³

What about shared direct standing? Here, some 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 the standing to forgive me for the lie. How might this explain how God could forgive us for wrongs to others? 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 a 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 kind of wrong against our neighbor is not necessarily (and perhaps rarely, if ever) the same kind of wrong against God. If this is correct, then shared direct standing will not account for God's standing to forgive interpersonal wrongs.

¹³ 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" (2016: 69). But this is a serious misunderstanding of Christianity. Christ commands interpersonal forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35), Paul encourages it (Col. 3:12-13), and, as noted above, Christians are positively taught to forgive other humans (Matthew 6:9-15). Perhaps most forceful is Christ's teaching at 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."

Distinct direct standing, however, can do better. It allows that multiple victims who were directly wronged can possess standing to forgive, but it also allows that those victims may forgive the wrongdoer for different types of wrongs. So 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 God's command not to lie.¹⁴ 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, 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 only forgive me 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).¹⁵ If we want to preserve the notion that God can forgive *any* wrong committed, then we cannot construe God's standing to forgive as direct standing.¹⁶

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 for the things she does to others, we need not insist that God and human 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Notice that the problem also faces views of divine standing that invoke shared direct standing as discussed above.

¹⁶ 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.

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.¹⁷

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. That’s his prerogative alone.¹⁸ In either case there are interpersonal wrongs that God does not have standing to forgive.

c. Divine forgiveness and proxy standing?

All of the options we have canvassed thus far attempt to secure God’s standing to forgive us for interpersonal wrongs by grounding that standing—in one way or another—in the fact that God was wronged. But as we noted in Section 3, there are putative varieties of standing that do not require that one be wronged by someone in order to forgive them 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 to do so? I can’t see how.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.

One reason is because proxy standing is usually 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 gets the proxy standing to forgive us when our victims are incapacitated or deceased, but this would not explain how God presumably gets the standing to forgive us for interpersonal wrongs in all the other cases.

Second, if God's standing to forgive interpersonal wrongs 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.

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 that: (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 my lie 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 can 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 5.

4. 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 were we to find out that this 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. Forgiving interpersonal wrongs may just be one of those things. This may seem more plausible when we remind ourselves of the relational nature of forgiveness. The reason that others besides the victim cannot forgive me for my lie 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 cannot 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. Forgiving 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 his 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* want 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 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.¹⁹ 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 for me or instead of me.

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,

¹⁹ I am grateful to Matthew Benton for suggesting this thought.

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 has no bearing on whether God can forgive us.²⁰ God always extends the offer of forgiveness to all those who would ask. And this is, according to the concessive comforter, what ultimately matters anyway.

5. 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 if it’s much more than that) that there *must* be a way of making sense of the possibility of God’s forgiving me for my interpersonal wrongs.

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.

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 both God and our human victim each has direct standing to forgive us (albeit for different wrongs). Second, the solution I will 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. If this strategy works, there are no interpersonal wrongs that God cannot forgive and so no “remaining” unforgiven wrongs. Fourth, the way it secures God’s standing to forgive us for interpersonal wrongs is not by proxy. 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

²⁰ Although 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” (Matthew 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.”

others. In developing this solution to the problem of divine standing, I will therefore 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 us for the wrongs we do to others.

Whether agents can possess third party standing to forgive is controversial. Let us consider one kind of strategy for defending the plausibility of third party forgiveness, one pursued by Glen Pettigrove (2009, 2012). The strategy begins by identifying a plausible account of the nature of forgiveness. According to Pettigrove, we can say that an agent 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 then proceeds as follows (2012: 34):

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.

This is a simple, clever, straightforward argument: because victims can forgive by accomplishing (a-c), then non-victims can do so as well. Standing to forgive is built right into the very conditions on successfully forgiving. 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 secures either third party standing to forgive in general or God's standing to forgive for interpersonal wrongs in particular. That this argument doesn't secure God's third party standing to forgive in particular because it is unlikely that God forgives by overcoming hostile attitudes (because God cannot have such attitudes). Of course, this is not a criticism of the plausibility of the argument as it stands; Pettigrove was not using it to try to establish God's third party standing to forgive in the first place.

But even as an argument aimed only at securing the plausibility of third party standing as such, I think the critic of third-party standing 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 the critic is within her rights to reply 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).

What I think Pettigrove has in mind with conditions (a-c) is 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 sufficient conditions on forgiveness.

However, just because an agent meets these sufficient constitutive conditions on forgiveness, this does not mean that she thereby succeeds in forgiving. 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 certain 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 morally responsible for her conduct. 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 remember that there are enabling conditions on forgiveness, then we see that simply meeting certain sufficient constitutive conditions on forgiveness does not mean that one has thereby forgiven. One might have failed to meet a necessary enabling condition. Having certain kind of 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 and then seeks to provide reasons for widening the circle of those who have standing to forgive. The trouble with this strategy is that arguments for expanding the class of forgivers must begin with certain standard assumptions about what standing involves, such as the assumption that victims of direct wrongdoing have the standing to forgive. 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’” (2012: 34). 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 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 both 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.

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 to forgive is to ask: What is the complaint that we would have against someone who is 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 were to claim 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 me and him,” 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 both her and me very much. 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 here is a complaint that would hit the mark: Suppose my brother was long-lost, had just finally met my mother and I, and just recently found out that I treated our mother rudely. Here I think I would be in the right to say: this isn’t really your business. But if, on the contrary, he had known me and our mother his entire life and 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.²¹ 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, familiar relationships, and marriages. Personal cares are things members of those relationships have for one another. This is why 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.²²

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 1). 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.

But what work is his having relationships 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 with him is one of personal care, it is difficult to see why she would regard my lying to him as something that would cause damage to her relationship with me. "You're just a playing 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.

²¹ For more on knowing persons see Benton (forthcoming).

²² 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) in order 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 2. Presumably there are grey areas even on the widely-accepted views about standing. If they are not problems for those victim views of standing, I cannot see why they are problems for personal care views.

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 damages 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.

6. Conclusion

Many questions remain. I have not explained why wronging a person can harm one’s relationship with another person. Nor have I discussed cases in which a third party has a relationship of personal care only with the victim or the wrongdoer but not both. Nor have I said much more about the nature of divine forgiveness than just that it involves not allowing an interpersonal wrong to harm or destroy one’s relationship with God. 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 does not have standing to forgive, I have sketched a strategy that, if successful, secures God’s standing not only to forgive us for our wrongs against God but for our wrongs against others, and does so using 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.²³

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