

Taking it Personally: Third-Party Forgiveness, Close Relationships, and the Standing to Forgive

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In ordinary language, it is not unusual to talk about forgiving wrongdoers for harms done to our loved ones. I might say to a friend, “I am not sure I will be able to forgive that woman for what she did to my brother.” Or a friend might say to me, “If I could speak to my father, I would want to tell him I’ve forgiven him for what he did to my mother.” In philosophical discussions of forgiveness, however, statements like these are controversial. For as many philosophers see it, *victims* are the only ones with the standing to forgive, and cases that appear to involve third-party forgiveness are in fact cases in which either (a) what looks like a third party is really a victim or (b) what looks like forgiveness is really not forgiveness.¹

This paper challenges this common piece of philosophical dogma. Although there is something right about the intuition that not just *anyone* has the standing to forgive, the standing to forgive nonetheless is not limited to victims; some third parties can appropriately forgive (or refuse to forgive) wrongdoers for wrongs done to victims. In particular, I argue that third parties have the standing to forgive only when it is appropriate for them to take ‘personally’ wrongs done to victims.² This, in turn, is (typically) appropriate only when third parties are in close personal relationships with victims. I thus advance a ‘victim-relative’ account of third-party forgiveness: although one can have the standing to forgive without having been wronged, the standing to forgive does not extend to all bystanders; in most circumstances, the standing to forgive is limited to victims and their loved ones.

I begin in section 1 by presenting a series of cases that provide intuitive support for a victim-relative view. Given cases of the sort I describe, there is *prima facie* support for the

¹ Scholars that explicitly reject third-party forgiveness (3PF) include Murphy (1988), Owens (2012), Haber (1993), Govier and Verwoerd (2002), Zaragoza (2012), Walker (2013), and Warmke (2016a), among others. Many others focus exclusively on victim forgiveness, even if they do not explicitly reject 3PF. Exceptions to this are Bennett (2018), Griswold (2007), MacLachlan (2008 and 2017), Milam (2017), Norlock (2009), Pettigrove (2009), and Radzik (2010).

² I borrow this term from MacLachlan (2008). Although I part ways with MacLachlan on what ‘taking it personally’ requires, my view is greatly indebted to her work.

conclusion that third parties have the standing to forgive when they are in personal relationships with victims. Section 2 considers how opponents of third-party forgiveness would respond to these cases. Typically, opponents of third-party forgiveness argue that apparent cases of third-party forgiveness can always be adequately analyzed as covert cases of victim forgiveness. I argue that this strategy fails on two fronts. First, it fails to capture the nature of our concern for our loved ones when we forgive as third parties. Second, it fails to account for the special norms governing third-party forgiveness. Section 3 turns to the question why some but not all third parties have the standing to forgive. I argue that third-party standing to forgive is grounded in the standing to take wrongs done to victims ‘personally’, which is (typically) limited to those in close personal relationships with victims. Section 4 considers the objection that the standing to forgive in fact extends to all third parties. As I argue, like victim-exclusive accounts, this view fails to account for the special norms governing third-party forgiveness. Section 5 highlights a further benefit of focusing on third-party forgiveness: it can help us adjudicate between competing accounts of the nature of forgiveness. Although I do not attempt to give conclusive arguments against any particular view, I suggest that attitude-based accounts are best able to accommodate our practices of third-party forgiveness.

1. Three Cases: Intuitive Support for a Victim-Relative Account

To begin, consider the following three cases:

- A. Secret: You are attending a block party with your partner, and several of his family members are in attendance. As you stand around the grill with a cluster of neighbors, your partner’s sister intentionally reveals an embarrassing secret of his. You know your partner has asked her to keep the information private, and you’re angry with her for being so inconsiderate. You decide not to forgive your partner’s sister until she sincerely apologizes to your partner.
- B. Bad Ex: Anna and Mayra are close friends, and Mayra has recently gone through an ugly breakup. Mayra decides that she needs to forgive her ex so that she can move on with

her life. Anna supports this decision but feels strongly that she herself should *not* forgive Mayra's ex. It may be best for Mayra to forgive him, Anna decides, but as a staunch friend *she* will continue to hold her ex's bad behavior against him.

- C. Woods: Phoebe and Frank spend weekend afternoons watching SportsCenter on ESPN. It's 2009, and much of the news concerns Tiger Woods's infidelity. After it's announced that Woods has finally admitted to an affair, Phoebe turns to Frank and says, "You know, I really resent Tiger Woods for what he did to his wife. I don't think I'm going to be able to forgive him!"

Intuitively, there is an important difference between Woods, on the one hand, and Secret and Bad Ex, on the other. In particular, Phoebe is behaving inappropriately in claiming that she will not be able to forgive Woods, whereas the third parties in Secret and Bad Ex are behaving in morally appropriate ways. When you consider whether or not to forgive your partner's sister, you are acting out of care and respect for your partner. Likewise, when Anna decides not to forgive Mayra's ex, she is acting out of a desire to protect and defend her friend. In contrast, Phoebe seems to misunderstand that she is *merely* a bystander to Woods's situation. It is not legitimate for her to think of herself as having a personal stake in Woods's behavior, and when she claims that she cannot forgive Woods, she fails to appreciate this.³

If this assessment of the cases is correct, then we can make the following preliminary claims about third-party forgiveness:

1. Third-party forgiveness is possible, and in some cases it is morally appropriate for third parties to forgive or refuse to forgive wrongdoers for wrongs done to victims.
2. Some but not all parties have the standing to forgive. Normally, this standing is limited to those in close personal relationships with victims.

Claim 1 is supported by cases like Secret and Bad Ex, where third parties appear to be acting within the bounds of moral propriety when they consider whether or not to forgive a wrongdoer.

³ However, this is not to say that Phoebe cannot have *any* blaming attitudes towards Woods. E.g., it may be appropriate for her to feel impersonal moral indignation. The claim here is just that the subset of blaming attitudes involved in forgiveness are not appropriate for Phoebe to have.

Claim 2 is supported by the above discussion of the difference between Woods, on the one hand, and Secret and Bad Ex, on the other; not every third party can legitimately consider forgiving wrongdoers for wrongs done to victims, since not every third party is appropriately related to the victim.⁴

However, we can also draw a further conclusion from the above cases. Consider the following counterfactual possibilities. Suppose that in Secret you decided to forgive your partner's sister before she apologized to your partner. Or suppose you decided to forgive before your partner was ready to forgive. Intuitively, these decisions would not be morally appropriate. You should show deference to your partner as the victim of the wrong, and forgiving before your partner is ready to forgive undermines this.⁵ Similarly, *ceteris paribus*, an apology to your partner should be a precondition of your forgiveness, for insofar as your concern and respect for your partner made forgiveness a question for you in the first place, your concern and respect for your partner should continue to determine your response to his wrongdoer. Similarly, in Bad Ex, it would be inappropriate for Anna to forgive Mayra's ex before Mayra had forgiven him, and (if she forgives at all) she should do so only after he makes appropriate amends with Mayra. It may even be fitting for Anna to be *less* forgiving of Mayra's ex than is Mayra. For as staunch friends, Anna and Mayra have especially strong duties to support and defend one another; plausibly, this means Anna should continue to hold the ex's bad behavior against him even after Mayra has decided to move on.⁶ With these considerations in mind, we can draw a third conclusion about third-party forgiveness:

3. Our practices of third-party forgiveness are norm-governed. For example, we think third parties should not forgive until victims have forgiven (*ceteris paribus*), and in some relationships third parties should be less forgiving than victims, even after victims have

⁴ I use the term 'standing to forgive' in this paper to indicate the status a person has when it is appropriate for her to *consider* whether or not she will forgive a wrongdoer. A person that lacks the 'standing to forgive' cannot appropriately take up the question "Will I forgive?" in the first place.

⁵ But one could imagine cases where the presumption against forgiving before the victim is overridden (e.g., when a victim is being wholly unreasonable in refusing to forgive).

⁶ Although she does not explicitly endorse 3PF, Priest (2016) offers a competing view according to which victims' forgiveness renders *inappropriate* close associates' continued blame.

forgiven.

Note that claim 3 also provides additional support for claim 1. If third-party forgiveness were either impossible or always inappropriate, there wouldn't be special norms distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate exercises of the third-party prerogative to forgive. This is not to deny that many of the norms governing third-party forgiveness concern the ways in which third parties should be responsive to victims' decisions and circumstances, but this does not undermine the claim that some third parties have the standing to forgive. It simply shows that forgiving third parties are constrained in unique ways by considerations pertaining to victims.⁷

Note also that the claim that third parties sometimes have the standing to forgive should not be mistaken for the claim that third parties can forgive *on behalf of* victims (i.e., that they can co-opt the victim's prerogative to forgive). As one would expect, third parties do not have the authority to forgive *for* victims or to put victims and wrongdoers back on good terms; whether or not victims forgive is up to *victims*.⁸ This may place additional constraints on our general account of the nature of forgiveness (see section 5), but at present I remain neutral on the nature of forgiveness except to stress that third-party forgiveness does not undermine the victim's prerogative to decide for herself whether she will forgive her wrongdoer.⁹

2. Arguments for Victim-Exclusive Views

The discussion above has aimed to provide intuitive support for third-party forgiveness. But how would proponents of victim-exclusive views deal with cases of the sort just described? That is, how would they attempt to establish that forgiveness is the exclusive prerogative of victims?

Broadly speaking, victim-exclusive accounts are motivated by two main kinds of argument.

⁷ Note that if I'm correct that this standing is (normally) grounded in close relationships between third parties and victims, then it makes good sense to say that considerations pertaining to victims play important roles in the norms of 3PF.

⁸ An exception to this may be a case where a victim explicitly grants a third party the power to forgive as a proxy.

⁹ However, I do make some uncontroversial assumptions such as that forgiveness presupposes culpable wrongdoing such that one does not forgive as the result of discovering that a putative wrongdoer was not responsible after all.

One kind of argument appeals to putative facts about the logic of forgiveness to establish that third-party forgiveness is conceptually incoherent (and so impossible). Another strategy appeals to claims about victims to establish that third-party forgiveness is always morally improper.

First consider the claim that third-party forgiveness is conceptually incoherent. A common argument for this conclusion runs roughly as follows:

- (1) X can forgive Y for a wrong done by Y only if X has the standing to resent Y for that wrong.
- (2) X has the standing to resent Y for a wrong done by Y only if X is the victim of Y's wrongdoing.
- (3) Therefore, X can forgive Y for a wrong done by Y only if X is the victim of Y's wrongdoing.

Premise 1 reflects an assumption about the nature of forgiveness: whether or not forgiveness *always* requires forswearing resentment, if a person has the standing to forgive, then she at least has the *standing* to resent. This claim is compatible with the thought that forgiveness sometimes involves forswearing attitudes other than resentment (e.g., hurt feelings),¹⁰ and it is compatible with the idea that forswearing negative attitudes may be neither necessary nor sufficient for forgiveness.¹¹ Premise 1 simply states that a person with the standing to forgive cannot be morally criticized for resenting *if* she resents (*ceteris paribus*).

Premise 2 makes a claim about the nature of resentment: resentment is a response belonging only to victims. P. F. Strawson (1962) provides one way of motivating this claim when he says that resentment is “essentially [a] reaction[] to the quality of others’ wills towards us.”¹² If this is correct, then it simply makes no sense to say that *I* feel resentment when a wrongdoer shows ill will towards someone *else*. Jeffrie Murphy (1988) also endorses a claim like this when he says that resentment is essentially a response to wrongs against the *self*. As Murphy argues,

¹⁰ See Allais (2008), Bell (2008), Hampton (1988), Murphy (1998), and Richards (1988).

¹¹ E.g., even if forgiveness is best understood in terms of, say, releasing wrongdoers from debts, one could still hold that a person has the *standing* to forgive only if she has the *standing* to resent.

¹² Strawson (1962), 11.

“resentment (in its range from righteous anger to righteous hatred) functions primarily in defense, not of *all* moral values and norms, but rather of certain *values of the self*.”¹³ Thus, the argument goes, if I claim to resent a wrongdoer who has not victimized *me*, I must be confused about what resentment is. Perhaps I am confusing Strawson’s “vicarious” attitudes such as moral disapprobation and indignation for resentment.¹⁴ Or perhaps I am using the claim that *I* resent the wrongdoer as a stand-in for the claim that the wrongdoer has done something worthy of resentment by the appropriate parties. Whatever the case, according to premise 2, only victims can actually resent, and if both premise 1 and premise 2 are correct, it follows uncontroversially that only victims can forgive.

How does a conceptual argument like this fare against the cases discussed in section 1? The central problem with the conceptual argument is that it rests on stipulative considerations about resentment, and considerations of this sort should not count as *evidence* against third-party forgiveness. Consider again Anna’s response to Mayra’s ex. According to the conceptual argument, Anna cannot forgive because she cannot feel resentment, and she cannot feel resentment because she is not a victim. But a proponent of third-party forgiveness can simply reject this assumption about resentment (i.e., she can reject premise 2). Anna *can* feel resentment, she can argue, for Bad Ex shows that resentment is *not* essentially a response to wrongs against the self. If one were to insist that it is simply a matter of *definition* that resentment belongs only to victims, then a proponent of third-party forgiveness would have a new reason to reject premise 1. For premise 1 is appealing only if we have not defined resentment so as to prejudge the question of third-party forgiveness. If it is *not* a matter of definition that only victims can resent, then Bad Ex (and Secret) should count as evidence that premise 2 is false.¹⁵

¹³ Murphy (1988), 16. In 1998, Murphy allows for self-forgiveness and admits that attitudes other than resentment can play a role in forgiveness. However, Murphy does not modify his account of resentment itself or suggest that the other attitudes that can figure in forgiveness make room for 3PF.

¹⁴ Strawson (1962), 11.

¹⁵ Here we might also consider a particular view about blaming attitudes, e.g., that they are forms of protest. The conceptual argument says that resentment *by definition* protests wrongs against the self; moral indignation protests wrongs done to others. The proponent of 3PF wants to show that cases like Bad Ex undermine this view of resentment and indignation; indignation may protest *general* wrongdoing, but resentment protests wrongs done not only to *ourselves* but also to *our* loved ones. For as the case shows, the protest “How dare you do that sort of thing to

If the conceptual argument fails, does the moral argument do any better? Traditionally, proponents of the moral argument appeal to cases like Woods to show that third-party forgiveness is always morally untoward. As the argument goes, all third parties that take themselves to be in a position to forgive are like Phoebe; they fail to appreciate the difference between their own situations and the situations of victims, and because of this, they overstep the bounds of moral propriety.¹⁶ As we have seen, however, cases like Secret and Bad Ex undercut a quick generalization from Woods-like cases to the conclusion that all third parties lack the standing to forgive; in Secret and Bad Ex, third parties seem to be acting in morally appropriate ways when they consider whether or not to forgive their loved ones' wrongdoers.

Does the opponent of third-party forgiveness have a response to cases like Secret and Bad Ex? One natural move is to argue that these cases merely *seem* like legitimate cases of third-party forgiveness and that the forgiving agents are in fact secondary victims. That is, one might attempt to deflate the significance of Secret and Bad Ex by arguing that they are disguised cases of victim forgiveness. As the argument goes, you can forgive (or refuse to forgive) your partner's sister only because *you* are harmed when your partner is harmed. Likewise, Anna is in a position to forgive (or withhold forgiveness from) Mayra's ex only because the injury to Mayra is also an injury to Anna.

This response by the opponent of third-party forgiveness brings our attention to an important point: wrongs against our loved ones normally *do* harm us, for part of what it is to be in a close relationship with someone is to have one's own well-being depend on that person's. Nonetheless, to suggest that apparent cases of third-party forgiveness are disguised cases of victim forgiveness misrepresents the nature of our concern for those we love when we forgive as third parties.¹⁷ To see why this is so, consider again Secret. According to the proposal at hand, when

my friend!" has more in common with "How dare you do that sort of thing *to me!*" than with "How dare you do *that sort of thing!*" (i.e., it has more in common with attitudes protesting wrongs to the self than with attitudes protesting general wrongdoing). (See Griswold 2007, 45 and Priest 2016, 627 for related discussion). The conceptual argument appears unresponsive to these considerations.

¹⁶ Zaragoza (2012) offers an argument like this.

¹⁷ Pettigrove (2009, 588-90) also makes this point, as does MacLachlan (2017, 150).

you consider forgiving your partner's sister, you are in fact acting in your capacity as a secondary victim; your partner's sister has victimized not only your partner but also *you*, and this is what grounds your standing to forgive. Notice, however, that if this is correct, then when you consider whether or not to forgive your partner's sister, you should in fact be considering whether or not to forgive her for what she did to *you*. For if you can forgive only in your capacity as victim, then presumably you can forgive only for wrongs done to *you*. But this misconstrues what you care about when you consider whether or not to forgive your partner's sister. Even if you acknowledge that you were wronged by your partner's sister, your primary concern is the wrong done to your *partner*, not the wrong done to yourself. It would be perfectly coherent (and in fact fitting) for you to say that although you were harmed by the wrong to your partner, the question whether you will forgive the sister for what she did to your *partner* is independent of the wrong done to you. Indeed, this helps to make sense of why if your partner's sister apologizes to *you* for what she did, then unless she also apologizes to your partner, you will be unlikely to forgive her. Insofar as your primary concern is the wrong done to your partner, you may even consider the sister's apology to you irrelevant.¹⁸

In short, accounts that make forgiveness the exclusive prerogative of victims fail to capture the important ways in which our concern for our loved ones can make it a question for us whether we will forgive a wrongdoer. And so while it is undoubtedly true that offenses often have multiple secondary victims, and these secondary victims are often those in close relationships with primary victims, it is not merely insofar as we are victims that we have the standing to forgive. One feature of being in close relationships with others is that our well-being comes to depend on the well-being of others, but it is *also* a feature of being in close relationships with others that we care about (and react emotionally to) wrongs done to others *notwithstanding* the

¹⁸ A proponent of victim-exclusive views might point out here that it would make sense for you to consider an apology to the primary victim a precondition of your own forgiveness if the victim's injury were partly constitutive of the injury done to you. Thus, your own injury might justify your resentment, but your focus might still be the harm done to the victim. This view is coherent, but it is a significant cost that it forces us to divorce the *justification* of our resentment (in this case, the fact that we ourselves were injured) from the *target* of our resentment (the harm done to our loved ones).

impact those wrongs have on our own welfare. Hence, we need to acknowledge third-party forgiveness as a genuine form of forgiveness to capture the nature of our concern for those we love.¹⁹

3. What Grounds the Standing to Forgive?

If the arguments above are correct, then some third parties have the standing to forgive. But what explains why not all third parties have that standing? In this section, I argue that third-party standing to forgive is grounded in the standing to take wrongs done to victims ‘personally’, which is normally limited to victims and their loved ones. I borrow the notion of ‘taking it personally’ from Alice MacLachlan’s “Forgiveness and Moral Solidarity” (2008). According to MacLachlan, forgiveness always involves a claim to take a wrong personally, and third parties can legitimately make this claim when they meet two conditions: they must (a) be in caring relationships with victims and (b) empathize with victims’ experiences.²⁰ I agree with MacLachlan that the standing to forgive presupposes the standing to take an offense personally, but I propose a different account of the *ground* of that standing. Rather than requiring empathy, I argue that third-party standing to forgive is (normally) grounded in close relationships alone. Thus, victims can take wrongs personally because *they* were wronged; those with close relationships to victims can take wrongs done to victims personally because of their close relationships. So while some proponents of third-party forgiveness argue that we have drastically underestimated how far the standing to forgive extends, I argue that the standing to forgive extends only slightly farther than traditional accounts of forgiveness take it to; third-party forgiveness is victim-relative, even if it is not victim-exclusive.

First consider MacLachlan’s basic insight about the connection between forgiveness and taking wrongs personally: whenever we consider forgiving, we make an implicit claim to take the

¹⁹ Similar considerations explain why we cannot construe apparent third-party forgivers as harmed members of the moral community forgiving in their capacities as tertiary victims.

²⁰ See MacLachlan (2008), 8-9. See also Priest (2016) for a discussion of “relationship-centered blame” (or “Associate Blame”), which I take to be closely related to ‘taking it personally’.

wrongdoing ‘personally’. This view is appealing in at least two respects. First, it allows us to map out the standing to forgive such that (i) victims always have the standing to forgive (barring defeating conditions),²¹ (ii) perfect strangers to victims rarely have the standing to forgive,²² and (iii) close family and friends of victims normally have the standing to forgive (again, barring defeating conditions). This coheres with our considered judgments about when it is morally appropriate for agents to consider forgiving wrongdoers. Second, insofar as we understand taking a wrong ‘personally’ in terms of reacting with personal as opposed to impersonal attitudes, MacLachlan’s suggestion is consistent with the idea that forgiveness presupposes the standing to resent (and not merely the standing to blame with impersonal attitudes such as indignation). When I am in the position legitimately to consider whether to forgive as a third party, I can react emotionally in ways that would not be appropriate if I had no relationship to the victim. This is explained by the fact that close relationships legitimize attitudes that express a special concern for the well-being of the victim; resentment is one of these attitudes.²³ Thus, although we should resist the idea that forgiveness is appropriate only when we *ourselves* are harmed, the idea that forgiveness paradigmatically takes place in personal as opposed to impersonal situations is compelling.

What about the idea that an ability to empathize with the victim is required for ‘taking it personally’?²⁴ In my view, this demand is too restrictive. For consider a case where a family member is seriously wronged: suppose you discover that your brother or son was abused by a teacher at school. The idea that your standing to forgive (or refuse to forgive) his wrongdoer depends on your ability to empathize seems inappropriate here; even if you are unable to empathize with the experience of your family member, you can legitimately consider whether to

²¹ E.g., hypocrisy might undermine the standing to forgive if it undermines the standing to blame.

²² An exception to this is discussed in section 4.

²³ For recall that refusals of forgiveness can help us stand up for and defend our loved ones. So insofar as I have special obligations to stand up for and defend my loved ones, refusing to forgive their wrongdoers can help me meet these obligations. See Radzik (2011) for the related idea that refusals of forgiveness often function as forms of social sanction (593).

²⁴ Recall MacLachlan’s claim that “a third party prerogative [to forgive] is doubly grounded: first, in a prior relationship of identification with or care for the victim or wrongdoer, and second, in a careful and attentive empathetic engagement with the victim’s experience of having been wronged” (2008, 9).

forgive his wrongdoer.²⁵ Or alternatively, suppose a friend is wronged but is either unaware of or unbothered by the offense. In a case like this, your friend lacks the kind of subjective experience that would be an appropriate object of empathy, but it seems you are still in a position to ask yourself whether you will forgive the wrongdoer. Thus, good empathizers and poor empathizers alike have the standing to forgive wrongs done to their loved ones, and we can forgive (or refuse to forgive) as third parties even when empathy cannot get a hold.

In contrast, the idea that caring relationships ground third-party standing to forgive is compelling. Consider again Secret and Bad Ex. In both these cases, the relationships between third parties and victims make it appropriate for third parties to take a special interest in the victim's well-being and to treat wrongdoers in ways that mere bystanders cannot appropriately treat them. In Secret, your relationship with your partner legitimizes your resenting his sister. Plausibly, this is because your relationship involves a commitment to standing up for your partner; insofar as resentment can protest his injury and socially sanction his sister, refusing to forswear resentment helps you satisfy your obligations to him. Similarly, in Bad Ex, Anna's friendship with Mayra makes appropriate her decision to continue holding the ex's behavior against him; for if friends have special obligations to protect and defend one another, and if refusing forgiveness can affirm a victim's value and defend her worth, then Anna's refusing to forgive Mayra's ex is part and parcel of her being a good friend to Mayra.²⁶

The picture I am recommending, then, is as follows. Our close relationships give rise to special obligations and entitlements, and these obligations and entitlements explain why third-party standing to forgive arises just where it does.²⁷ For instance, our relationships with our

²⁵ A similar criticism applies to MacLachlan's more recent (2017) suggestion that forgiving third-parties must engage in "imaginatively sympathy"; if I stand in the right relation to the victim, it doesn't matter whether I'm able to imagine what her experiences are like.

²⁶ Note: on my view, an account of 3PF is better off if it is permissive with respect to the function of attitudes like resentment; they can express protest, serve as social sanctions, stand in defense of a person's value, and so on. Attending to the variety of roles played by these attitudes can help us see why they serve such an important function in our ongoing efforts to fulfill the obligations of our close relationships.

²⁷ I hope to remain relatively neutral on exactly which special obligations and entitlements particular relationships give rise to, as this no doubt varies greatly from case to case. It is enough for my purposes that relationships (such as friendship, romantic partnership, siblinghood, and so on) give rise to special obligations and entitlements and that these obligations and entitlements make 'taking it personally' appropriate.

family members typically require us to take a special interest in their well-being; this requirement entitles us to the class of ‘personal’ attitudes that reflect this interest (a class that includes attitudes like resentment). Moreover, insofar as attitudes like resentment are especially powerful forms of social sanction and especially effective affirmations of value, they often prove indispensable to us in our ongoing efforts to fulfill the obligations of our close relationships. Without the ability to withhold forgiveness from our loved ones’ wrongdoers, we would be deprived of an important means of standing up for those we care about. Undoubtedly, there are forms of relationships that present borderline cases in which it is difficult for us to determine whether third-party forgiveness is appropriate, but this is to be expected insofar as it is sometimes unclear exactly which obligations and entitlements our relationships give rise to. To the extent that it is unclear whether a particular relationship gives rise to the obligations and entitlements that make ‘taking it personally’ appropriate, it will also be unclear whether third-party standing to forgive arises in that relationship.²⁸

Note also that on my view taking it personally is not equivalent to identifying with victims such that one sees oneself as a victim. Indeed, this would threaten the claim that forgiving third parties can forgive not only in their capacities as victims but also in their capacities as third parties. Instead, as suggested above, I understand taking a wrong personally in terms of responding with attitudes that reflect a special, personal interest in the well-being of the wronged. When I take wrongs done to loved ones personally, my attitudes make an implicit claim that my loved ones’ well-being and hence their victimization is *my* business. My partner’s victimization is my business because *I* have made a special commitment to supporting him. My friends’ injuries are my business because of *my* special obligations to standing up for them. This is not to say that there are no limitations on the ways in which the lives of our relationship partners are *our* business, but, as a general matter, wrongs done to our loved ones are *our* concern.²⁹ And

²⁸ For example, can a parent forgive or refuse to forgive an estranged child’s wrongdoer? The central point here is just that when we are unsure whether a third party has the standing to consider forgiveness, our uncertainty should be explicable in terms of uncertainty with respect to the nature of the relationship between the victim and the third party and the obligations and entitlements to which that relationship gives rise.

²⁹ In contrast, Phoebe cannot take what Woods did to his wife personally because she does not have any of the

because they are *our* concern, we can legitimately consider forgiving our loved ones' wrongdoers.

Finally, note that we could also describe this distinction between personal and impersonal reactions to wrongdoing in Strawsonian terms. Just as Strawson argued that there is a difference between our demand that others express goodwill towards *ourselves* and our demand that they express goodwill towards *all people*, so too there is a difference between our demand that others show goodwill towards *our loved ones* and our demand that they show goodwill towards all people. Attitudes that pertain to our own treatment and the treatment of our loved ones are 'personal', and we explain their appropriateness by appealing to special features of our *own* circumstances. When we ourselves are victims, our status as victim is the feature that explains the appropriateness of our response; when our loved ones are wronged, our special relationship with the victim plays this role.

4. Why Not Extend the Standing to Forgive to All Bystanders?

At this point, one might object that it is not clear why we shouldn't extend the standing to forgive to *all* bystanders.³⁰ Two strategies suggest themselves here. First, one might resist the claim that only those in close relationships with victims have the standing to take wrongs done to victims personally; perhaps there are cases in which perfect strangers to victims have good reasons to take wrongs against victims personally. Second, one might resist the claim that forgiveness requires taking wrongs personally *at all*; perhaps one merely has to have the standing to blame (impersonally) to have the standing to forgive. I consider these objections in turn.

What considerations could motivate the idea that perfect strangers to victims have the standing to take wrongs against victims personally? One could imagine several different lines of argument. First, consider MacLachlan's suggestion that common experiences can build relations of moral solidarity that make third-party forgiveness appropriate.³¹ For instance, victims of hate crimes or sexual assault may have moral solidarity with other victims such that it is appropriate

obligations or entitlements that would make wrongs done to his wife *her* business.

³⁰ See Radzik (2010).

³¹ MacLachlan (2008), 9.

for them to consider forgiving or refusing to forgive perpetrators for crimes against other victims. If common experience makes all crimes of the relevant type personal for past victims, then any bystander with the relevant type of shared experience can in principle forgive. Or consider the idea that taking it personally is appropriate whenever one is in a position to be sensitive to issues such as when deference to the victim is needed, when the victim has truly forgiven, and so forth. Arguably, it is simply a practical matter of fact that those in close relationships with victims are best able to appreciate these facts about victims, and for this reason, any third party can in principle forgive.

Although I do not think third-party standing to forgive frequently extends beyond those close to victims, I am willing to concede that shared experiences *may* enable third parties to legitimately take wrongs done to victims personally.³² So long as ‘taking it personally’ in these cases reflects a legitimate special interest in the well-being of the *victim* (and does not simply involve conceiving of oneself as a secondary or tertiary victim of the wrong), a third party with an experience similar to a victim’s may have the standing to forgive.³³ However, I would more strongly resist the second proposal. For although it is true that people close to victims are typically best able to show deference and sensitivity to victims and to understand their situations, it is not merely the information that they have that gives them the standing to forgive. Even if Phoebe were given all the information about Woods and his wife that a close family member had, her relationship with Woods’s wife is not the right sort of relationship to ground third-party standing to forgive. So while information and understanding may be the *result* of close relationships, they alone cannot ground third-party standing to forgive.

A second objection is that third-party standing to forgive does not presuppose the standing to take wrongs personally *at all*. Perhaps forgiveness requires nothing more than forswearing

³² For this reason, my view is best described as a “victim-relative” view of 3PF. Close *relationships* are the paradigmatic setting in which third-party standing to forgive arises, but an appropriate *relation* to the victim may sometimes suffice.

³³ If a third party takes a victim’s injury personally because her shared experience makes her feel newly threatened or degraded, then we may not have a genuine case of 3PF. However, if her shared experience engenders a legitimate, special concern for the *victim*, and if this concern reflects a legitimate sense in which the victim’s injury is *her* business, then the case may be a genuine case of 3PF.

moral indignation. If this is correct, then third-party standing to forgive extends to anyone who can appropriately express this attitude. And so while the standing to forgive might be undermined by defeaters such as hypocrisy, it would not depend on a putative forgiver's relationship to the victim.

However, this proposal is unsatisfying in two respects. First, it forces us to revise too many of our considered judgments about when it is appropriate for us to contemplate forgiving as third parties (recall our assessment of the differences between Secret, Bad Ex, and Woods). Even more importantly, however, proponents of universal standing to forgive cannot tell a unified story about how the standing to forgive relates to the norms governing third-party forgiveness. I have argued that many of the norms governing third-party forgiveness have their bases in the obligations associated with particular kinds of close relationships. For example, close friends should be relatively unforgiving of one another's wrongdoers because they have especially strong duties to protect and defend one another. I have also argued that the very same relationships that explain these norms also make 'taking it personally' appropriate. If the proponent of unrestricted third-party forgiveness is correct, however, then the standing to forgive has a generic basis, and an explanatory story of this sort is not possible. That is, there would be a generic ground for third-party standing to forgive, and yet the norms of third-party forgiveness would (at least sometimes) have their grounds in particular forms of close relationships. While this is not impossible, an account according to which norms and standing share a common ground is explanatorily more compelling.³⁴

5. Theorizing with Third-Party Forgiveness: The Nature of Forgiveness

In the remainder of this paper, I consider the implications of third-party forgiveness for our

³⁴ Here is another objection a proponent of universal forgiveness might raise. Suppose all third parties have the *standing* to forgive, but practical constraints prevent them all from engaging in the practice. Perhaps most third-parties lack the information that makes following the norms of 3PF feasible, or perhaps 'taking it personally' is too emotionally burdensome for us to be doing all the time. Then, our intuitions about standing might be faulty, merely tracking the facts about how far our practices of 3PF happen to extend. I think the existence of norms governing 3PF helps to answer this objection too; it would be surprising if the norms of 3PF were grounded in particular forms of close relationships, and yet the standing to forgive had a fully generic basis.

overall account of the nature of forgiveness. Although I do not aim to provide a full defense of any particular account of forgiveness, I hope to bring out some of the challenges facing alternatives to attitude-based accounts. As I argue, these challenges provide a defeasible reason to favor attitude-based views.

As acknowledged at the outset of this paper, I have assumed that the standing to forgive presupposes the standing to resent. Although this claim about standing is strictly speaking neutral between various accounts of the nature of forgiveness, it naturally suggests an account according to which forgiveness consists in forswearing negative reactive attitudes. After all, it would be strange for the standing to forgive to presuppose the standing to resent if negative attitudes like resentment played no role in actual acts of forgiveness. I have also further reinforced these suggestions by placing ‘taking it personally’ at the center of my account of third-party forgiveness. If taking it personally is best understood in terms of responding with personal attitudes such as resentment, then it makes sense to say that paradigmatic instances of forgiveness involve forswearing these attitudes. Hence, my discussion above fits well with ‘attitude-based’ accounts: in paradigmatic cases, forgiveness centrally involves forswearing negative attitudes such as resentment.³⁵

But there are other ways in which one might think about the nature of forgiveness. Consider the view that forgiveness consists in a commitment to seeing wrongdoers in a new way.³⁶ At least on the face of it, it looks like this account can accommodate third-party forgiveness, since victims and third parties alike can commit to seeing wrongdoers in a new way (e.g., as separate from their wrong actions or as better than their wrong actions indicate they are). However, this view fails to explain why only some third parties have the standing to forgive, for it seems perfect strangers to victims can legitimately commit to seeing wrongdoers in a new way. One might argue that those close to victims have access to a unique set of reasons to commit to

³⁵ See Murphy (1988) and Hieronymi (2003), among many others.

³⁶ See Ware (2014). Allais (2008) also emphasizes the importance of “seeing in a new way” in forgiveness, but for Allais this is meant to help flesh out the intentional content of the attitudes involved in forgiveness rather than to serve as an alternative to attitude-based accounts.

seeing (or refusing to see) wrongdoers in a new way, but one would still need to explain why having just *these* reasons makes forgiveness appropriate. This is not a decisive strike against the view, but it shows that its proponents need to say more about why the standing to forgive does not extend to all third parties.

Other views face still greater challenges in accommodating third-party forgiveness. Consider the view that forgiveness involves restoring relationships with wrongdoers. It is clearly possible for third parties to restore relationships with wrongdoers, but consider the following dilemma. In cases of third-party forgiveness, either the relationship that is restored is the relationship between the victim and the wrongdoer, or it is the relationship between the third party and the wrongdoer. For the same reasons that third parties do not have the standing to forgive *on behalf of* victims, forgiving third parties do not have the authority to restore relationships between victims and wrongdoers. But if this is true, the restoring-relationships model must hold that third-party forgiveness involves restoring relationships between forgiving third parties and wrongdoers.³⁷ On the face of it, this may look plausible, but recall that when we forgive as third parties, what we care about is the effect that wrongdoers' actions have on *victims*. Suppose you decide to forgive your partner's sister for embarrassing your partner. Although your forgiveness may have as a *consequence* a restored relationship between you and your partner's sister, that relationship is not your fundamental concern; what you care about is the injury to your partner. One could insist at this point that third-party forgiveness consists in restoring relationships between wrongdoers and third parties even though that relationship is not the primary concern of the forgiving third party, but a compelling account of forgiveness should tell a more satisfying story about the link between the nature of forgiveness and the considerations that most concern forgivers. Indeed, in the case of third-party forgiveness, the issues that concern potential forgivers seem to be compatible with there being no relationship at all between forgiver and wrongdoer. If forgiving third parties are not motivated by the status of their relationship with wrongdoers and could in principle forgive (or refuse to forgive) in the absence of having *any* relationship with

³⁷ Pettigrove (2009) takes this route in his defense of relationship-restoration as an important part of 3PF.

wrongdoers, the view that third-party forgiveness consists in restoring relationships is poorly motivated.

Finally, consider the view that forgiveness involves releasing wrongdoers from moral debts.³⁸ Call a debt-release model ‘strict’ if it says that debt-release is necessary for forgiveness. On a ‘strict’ debt-release model, third-party forgiveness must consist either in third parties releasing wrongdoers from debts owed to victims or in third parties releasing wrongdoers from debts owed to third parties. The first interpretation is objectionable for familiar reasons; third parties cannot cancel debts on behalf of victims. The second interpretation of the debt-release model is not straightforwardly objectionable like the first, but it is not clear *how* wrongdoers could incur debts to third parties in the absence of having wronged them. The proponent of third-party forgiveness must not appeal to wrongs done to third parties to explain the debts owed to them because she is committed to saying that third parties forgive in their capacities as third parties and not only in their capacities as victims. But this leaves it unclear exactly what generates the required debts or what they would be; wrongdoers do not seem to owe third parties apologies, and they certainly do not owe third parties compensation (at least not insofar as third parties are not also victims).

If a ‘strict’ debt-release model cannot accommodate third-party forgiveness, perhaps a related account of forgiveness can. Consider Nelkin’s (2013) suggestion that the insight at the core of the debt-release model is the idea that forgiveness involves ceasing to hold offenses against wrongdoers.³⁹ If we take the notion of ‘ceasing-to-hold-against’ as fundamental (rather than debt-release *per se*), then perhaps we *can* accommodate third-party forgiveness. For instance, consider the idea that ceasing-to-hold-against involves relinquishing certain rights. If ceasing-to-hold-against is equivalent to rights-relinquishment, then perhaps forgiving third parties forfeit rights to demand that wrongdoers apologize to victims, compensate victims, make amends with victims, and so forth. Since third parties and victims alike can make these demands (even if only

³⁸ See Warmke (2016b).

³⁹ See Nelkin (2013), 179.

victims can release wrongdoers from obligations to victims), a rights-relinquishment model appears promising.

Nonetheless, a rights-relinquishment model faces familiar problems when it comes to explaining why only some third parties have the standing to forgive. For it seems that *all* members of the moral community have at least some prerogative to demand that wrongdoers apologize to victims, compensate victims, and so forth. What the rights-relinquishment model needs is a distinction between these rights (which all members of the moral community enjoy) and a special set of rights enjoyed only by victims' family members, close friends, etc. It is plausible that victims' loved ones have special *kinds* of rights to demand that wrongdoers fulfill their obligations to victims, but one would still need to explain why these rights (as opposed to the rights that are enjoyed by all bystanders) are precisely those rights whose relinquishment constitutes forgiveness. Again, this is not to say that a rights-relinquishment model cannot be appropriately developed, but it is to say that the model is unsatisfying as it stands.

In contrast, the appealing feature of an attitude-based account is that it can tell a clear story about how the nature of forgiveness relates to the standing to forgive and the norms of third-party forgiveness. Close personal relationships make it appropriate for us to respond personally to offenses against our loved ones, and the personal attitudes involved in these responses are the very attitudes we forswear in paradigmatic cases of forgiveness. Moreover, as argued above, the relationships that originally make having these attitudes appropriate also explain the norms governing third-party forgiveness. Our relationships with our family members and close friends require that we take a special interest in their well-being, and this means that we should be relatively unforgiving of our friends' and families' wrongdoers, that we should not forgive before our friends and family members have forgiven, and so on. Finally, we can also note that refusing to forswear reactive attitudes like resentment helps us satisfy the demands of care and partiality to which our close relationships give rise. For retaining attitudes like resentment helps us demand of wrongdoers that they treat our loved ones with respect and goodwill. In short, attitude-based accounts can not only accommodate third-party forgiveness but also paint a compelling picture

of how third-party standing to forgive and the norms of third-party forgiveness share a common ground in special relationships. And by appealing to the idea that reactive attitudes play a role in making moral demands, protesting wrongdoing, and affirming value, they can explain why decisions to forswear (or, more commonly, refuse to forswear) negative attitudes can help us fulfill our obligations to our loved ones.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the standing to forgive is not limited to victims and that third parties in close relationships with victims can appropriately consider forgiving wrongdoers for their wrongs. This is explained by the fact that third parties in close relationships with victims can appropriately take wrongs done to victims personally, which is itself justified by the special obligations and entitlements to which our close relationships give rise. I have attempted to diffuse several common objections to third-party forgiveness by showing that we need to acknowledge third-party forgiveness to account for the ways in which we respond to offenses against those we care about. Finally, I have also aimed to show that the existence of legitimate third-party forgiveness provides at least a preliminary reason to endorse attitude-based accounts of the nature of forgiveness. For attitude-based accounts not only accommodate third-party forgiveness, but they also tell an explanatorily compelling story about the way in which the norms of third-party forgiveness, the grounds of third-party standing to forgive, and the nature of forgiveness fit together.⁴⁰

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