

ARTICLE

Divine forgiveness II: Reconciliation and debt-cancellation theories

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Abstract

Many people believe that God has forgiven them for the wrong things they have done. What is the nature of God's forgiveness? In this essay, the second in a two-part series, I explore two further approaches to this question. I conclude by noting a few issues that, in my estimation, should be addressed in future philosophical discussions of the nature of divine forgiveness.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many people believe that God has forgiven them for the wrong things they've done. What is the nature of God's forgiveness? In this essay, the second in a two-part series, I explore two further approaches to this question. I conclude by noting a few issues that, in my estimation, should be addressed in future philosophical discussions of the nature of divine forgiveness.

2 | RECONCILIATION THEORIES

In a previous essay, I considered two approaches to the nature divine forgiveness: the view that God forgives by undergoing a certain emotional change (like eliminating resentment) and the view that God forgives by forbearing punishment. One worry about each of these theories is that they do not (at least in any straightforward way) account for the essentially relational nature of forgiveness as something that occurs between a victim and wrongdoer. Persons who are not victims of wrongdoing may eliminate various negative emotions towards a wrongdoer, and they may also pardon wrongdoers provided they possess the appropriate kind of authority. Forgiving a wrongdoer for a certain wrongdoing, however, is typically the prerogative of the victim of that wrongdoing. How can an account of God's forgiving us capture the second-personal relational involvement that God has with us?

One story might go like this. When we wrong someone, we harm our relationship with her. In human relationships, this usually means that trust is lost, friendly relations are withdrawn, and alienation occurs. Something like this also happens with our relationship with God. When we live wrongly, this causes deterioration in our relationship with God. We become alienated and separated from God. God forgives us by restoring this relationship. Therefore, God's forgiveness is God's prerogative (only God can restore God's relationship with us). This is also why God's forgiveness has a direct consequence for our relationship with God: God's forgiveness is what restores that relationship.

It is tricky to say exactly what this reconciling move on God's part amounts to. In the human case, when we are wronged, we reconcile by reestablishing friendly communications, affirming mutual trust and good will, giving gifts or

tokens expressing care and concern, giving assurance that we can go on in relationship together, and so on. What, if any, of these phenomena (or their divine analogues) could occur when God forgives us by reconciling with us I will leave as an exercise for others. It is worth noting, however, that whatever God's reconciling activities are, defenders of reconciliation views will perhaps want to say that sometimes those activities involve God fixing or repairing a relationship with a human person for the *first* time. Other times, God's reconciling activities will involve fixing or repairing a mutually loving relationship that already existed. Further, we need not insist that the reconciling event returns the relationship back to its *ex ante* state (though we also need not rule out the possibility).

One way of developing a reconciliation theory is to say that God forgives by reconciling with the wrongdoer after the wrongdoer apologizes, repents, asks for forgiveness, etc. Because God would not (and perhaps could not) *force* this repaired relationship upon significantly free creatures, God waits until we make a move. Indeed, there is a clear sense in which unilateral reconciliation is *impossible*. You can desire reconciliation, be prepared to reconcile, and even have done a lot of things to extend the olive branch aimed at reconciliation. But if I am obstinately opposed, you cannot be reconciled with me. If this is correct, then this version of a reconciliation theory is committed to the view that God's forgiveness is always conditional upon the wrongdoer seeking reconciliation.

Some might balk at the claim that God's forgiveness is conditional in this way. First, it is not universally thought that for a *human* victim to forgive a human wrongdoer that the wrongdoer must desire and seek reconciliation. You might forgive me for punching you in the face even if I never want to see you or your punched face ever again. And so, if divine forgiveness (but not human forgiveness) requires that wrongdoers desire reconciliation, then this would be a significant difference between divine and human forgiveness: Human forgiveness can be unilateral, divine forgiveness cannot.

Another concern with a reconciliation theory that makes divine forgiveness conditional on a wrongdoer's desire for reconciliation is the thought that God's forgiveness should not be contingent upon the desires of sinful creatures. Who are we to prevent God from forgiving us for our sins? We can't even prevent other humans from forgiving us, so how could we prevent God?

Here, then, is another way to develop a reconciliation theory of divine forgiveness. In recent work, Jada Twedt Strabbing has argued that, at least so far as the Christian understanding of divine forgiveness is concerned, God forgives by being *open* to reconciliation with us, where such "openness" means that God has done God's part in reconciling with us by having attitudes and intentions towards us that *would* reconcile us to God were we to repent and take up our own reconciling attitudes (forthcoming). Strabbing wisely points out that forgiveness does not require being open to returning the relationship to its *ex ante* state. The key point, though, is that God can be open to reconciling with us and this does not depend on our also being open to reconciliation with God. God's forgiveness therefore does not conceptually depend on our repenting or other overtures aimed at reconciliation.

Such a view, however, does have some interesting consequences. First, it would seem to imply that, on the assumption that God always stands ready to reconcile with us, God has already forgiven every currently existing person for all the sins they have ever committed. But then we might wonder: Why would anyone ever *ask* for God to forgive them? If God has already forgiven us for everything, we cannot ask for forgiveness in the expectation that God will do something God hasn't already done. God has forgiven us regardless of our asking! Yet we are taught to ask (see, e.g., Matthew 6:12). Strabbing recognizes the worry. In replying to it, Strabbing suggests that such requests make sense because asking for forgiveness is a way of expressing repentance. And since it makes sense to express repentance even though one knows God has already forgiven one, it therefore makes sense to ask for forgiveness.

A few things may be said by way of reply. First, this reply appears to assume that a request for forgiveness is an expression of repentance. But why think that? One may repent without ever asking for forgiveness and one may ask for forgiveness without ever repenting.¹ Indeed, requests for forgiveness are often declined precisely because the wrongdoer has not repented.

Additionally, the writers of the New Testament had a unique term for repentance (*metanoia*). Why would the writers tell us to ask for forgiveness when they had a perfectly good word to be used to tell us to repent (see Matthew 4:7)? Strabbing might reply that she is not intending to *identify* (some) requests for forgiveness with expressions of

repentance. Requests for forgiveness include but go beyond the expression of repentance and include something else in addition. But then what is that something else? If the something else is just the request for forgiveness, then we are back at the original problem: Why are we taught to ask God to do something that God has already done regardless of our asking?

Furthermore, some Scriptures attest both to the fact that God sometimes withholds forgiveness and the fact that there are times at which God is ready to forgive but has not yet forgiven.² Yet if God sometimes withholds forgiveness or is ready to forgive but has not yet forgiven, then either (a) God forgives by being open to reconciliation, but God is not always open to reconciliation with everyone, or (b) God is always open to reconciliation with everyone, but this is not what it means for God to forgive.

Details of Strabbing's approach aside, what can be said about the general claim that God forgives by reconciling with us (or by being open to reconciliation with us)? It should be noted that many philosophers of forgiveness sharply distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation.³ Briefly, here are two reasons why. First, you might think that one can be open to reconciliation with a wrongdoer (say for pragmatic reasons) without forgiving the wrongdoer for her deed. (Though it may be responded that *full* reconciliation—whatever that means—between two persons after a wrongdoing cannot occur without forgiveness. But then again, does forgiveness require “full” reconciliation?) Second, you might think that one can forgive a wrongdoer without reconciling with her. An example often used to illustrate the point is that of a battered spouse who decides to forgive her partner for his abusive behavior, but does so without thereby agreeing to continue the relationship on better footing.⁴

It might be objected that even if we grant that forgiveness and reconciliation come apart in the human case, this is not true in the divine case. For in the human case, when forgiveness does not accompany reconciliation (or openness to it), this is due to distinctively human failings: We may refuse to reconcile due to reasons of safety or psychological health. But because God cannot be harmed in these ways, God's forgiveness will always accompany reconciliation or openness to reconciliation.

In reply, one could grant that God's forgiveness requires either reconciliation or openness to reconciliation without claiming that divine forgiveness *is* reconciliation or openness to reconciliation. To see this, consider Eleonore Stump's Thomistic claim that love requires two interconnected desires: (a) the desire for the good of the beloved and (b) the desire for union with the beloved (manuscript-a; manuscript-b.). These two desires, Stump claims, are necessary and sufficient for morally appropriate forgiveness. There is no forgiveness without a desire for union with wrongdoer (which may be thought of as a kind of openness to reconciliation), and if there is a desire for the good of and union with the wrongdoer, there is forgiveness. Stump is explicit, though, in denying that forgiveness should be thought of as *nothing but* the conjunction of these two desires (i.e., as nothing over and beyond love). Something else must be added to these desires to get to the thing that *is* forgiveness.⁵

Here's the upshot: even *if* reconciliation (or openness to reconciliation) is necessary and sufficient for God's forgiveness, this does not mean that God's forgiveness *is* reconciliation (or openness to reconciliation). We could grant that God does not forgive without also reconciling (or being open to reconciling), but this would not entail that God's forgiveness *is* reconciliation (or openness to reconciliation). We would need something more from an account of the nature of divine forgiveness.⁶

3 | DEBT-CANCELLATION THEORIES

It is not uncommon to find the claim that forgiveness involves the cancellation of a kind of debt. P. Twambley (1976) claims that by “offending you, a man, as it were, incurs a debt (hence we talk of owing recompense, reparation, and apology ... In forgiving him, you readjust your relationship to one of equality” (p. 89). Psychologists Julie Exline and Roy Baumeister (2000) write, “When one person harms or transgresses another, this action effectively creates an interpersonal debt. Forgiveness involves the cancellation of the debt by the person who has been hurt or wronged” (p. 133).

Comparisons between forgiveness and canceling a debt are also common in theological contexts. According to many translations of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, we are taught to ask God to "forgive our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors."⁷ In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18, the importance of forgiving others because God has forgiven us is illustrated by way of a story of a debtor. The debtor who is forgiven an incredibly large monetary sum by the king then immediately refuses to forgive an acquaintance for a much smaller amount. Aquinas held that we become indebted to God in two ways: first, because of the good that God has done for us (here, there is similarity to Anselm's claim that we owe a debt of honor to God) and, second, because of our sin.⁸

There is something about the analogy between moral forgiveness and economic debt cancellation that many have found illuminating. Perhaps, then, divine forgiveness could fruitfully be understood as a kind of debt-cancellation. To do so, however, is to introduce a metaphor. Since the kind of debt-forgiving that God is doing is a nonmonetary, moral kind, how should we understand a "moral debt"? And what does it mean for moral forgiveness to be understood as a cancellation of this moral debt?

In his book *Responsibility and Atonement*, Richard Swinburne offered one kind of debt-forgiveness model. According to Swinburne, when we do wrong, we acquire guilt and subsequently have an obligation to do what we can to remove this guilt (1989: 73, 81).⁹ This, he says, is "somewhat like the legal situation of a debtor who owes money. The wrong needs righting. There is an obligation to do something like repaying" (p. 74). For the "total" removal of guilt, two things must occur: (a) the wrongdoer must atone for his wrong act and (b) the victim must forgive him (p. 81).

This first step of guilt removal is the offering of atonement: As wrongdoers, we do what we can to distance ourselves from our past action and to remove its harmful consequences through some appropriate mix of repentance, apology, reparation, and penance. We thereby offer to our victim something like a payment for the debt we incurred by doing wrong. In the case of divine forgiveness, our payment will involve something done on our behalf: Christ's sacrifice.

The second step in the guilt-removal process falls to the victim. When the wrongdoer makes atonement, she offers something to the victim. The victim forgives the wrongdoer by *accepting* her apology, reparation, and penance. In this act of acceptance, the victim undertakes that in the future, she will not treat the wrongdoer as "the originator of the act" by which she was wronged (p. 85). So understood, forgiveness is a performative act, "achieved perhaps by solemnly saying 'I forgive you', or perhaps by saying 'That's all right', or maybe just a smile" (p. 85). Upon forgiving, the victim removes the wrongdoer's guilt and therefore eliminates their debt. In the divine case, this will involve God accepting our repentance and the sacrifice which Christ offered on our behalf. Swinburne's forgiveness therefore has a dual nature: it eliminates the wrongdoer's guilt, and it commits the forgiver to treat the wrongdoer in certain ways going forward.

A number of objections against Swinburne's debt-cancellation view have been raised. Eleonore Stump argues that Swinburne's account commits him to two mistaken theses.¹⁰ First, she claims that it is mistaken to think that forgiveness requires the wrongdoer to make amends if forgiveness is to be morally appropriate. Such a view implies, among other things, "that the father in the parable of the prodigal son should have waited till his son had made amends before he forgave his son." Second, contra Swinburne, Stump claims that in many cases, repentance, reparation, and penance and subsequent forgiveness are not sufficient for the removal of guilt. At least in the case of serious wrongdoing, guilt can remain.

Two additional observations about Swinburne's account warrant attention.¹¹ First, Swinburne writes that "Insofar as guilt is analogous to a debt, it can be removed by either the action of the wrongdoer (in some way) paying it off; or by the action of the victim in (in some way) taking compensation" (p. 81). But this gives the impression that moral forgiveness is a matter of *receiving* payment from the wrongdoer and not forgiving or cancelling the debt altogether. Indeed, he appears to say as much: "Your *acceptance* of my reparation, penance, and, above all, apology, is forgiving" (p. 85, emphasis added). Insofar as God has been paid what is owed, what more is there for God to do except accept payment? I believe it more natural, however, to think of forgiveness as giving something, not as accepting something.

Furthermore, as noticed by Stump, it may be a mistake to think of forgiveness as being tied to guilt in the first place. Consider the fact that it is often permissible for persons other than a victim to blame a wrongdoer or at least

judge her blameworthy. This remains the case even if the victim has forgiven the wrongdoer. Plausibly, what makes potential third-party blame appropriate going forward is a certain fact about the wrongdoer: that she is guilty and responsible for what she did. If so, then forgiveness does not remove guilt, for that one is guilty of something could continue to justify future punishment or third-party blaming (see Hughes, 1993).

Whatever we make of Swinburne's view, I do believe that there is something illuminating about modeling forgiveness—both human and divine—on the practice of debt-cancellation. To see it, consider what typically happens when we forgive someone a financial debt. We give up the right to treat them in certain ways (e.g., demanding payment), and we release them from certain obligations (e.g., to pay us). In effect, cancelling a debt alters the operative norms governing how the relevant parties are obligated or permitted to regard and treat one another. Something very similar occurs in the case of moral forgiveness. I'll explain.

Consider the fact that when we are wronged, we typically are permitted to treat and regard our wrongdoers in ways constitutive of moral blame. We are licensed to censure, denounce, make moral complaints, withdraw friendly relations, demand apology, request restitution, etc. However, upon forgiving, such behaviors become *prima facie* morally impermissible. In forgiving, we relinquish certain rights to blame the wrongdoer. This is why we should no longer hold wrongs against those whom we have forgiven. Forgiving therefore changes how the victim may interact the wrongdoer (Warmke, 2016a, 2016b). But alternatively, forgiveness also changes the norms governing how the wrongdoer should interact with the victim. When we wrong others, we typically owe them something: We are obligated to apologize, make restitution, give penance, show remorse, etc. Yet forgiveness can release the wrongdoer from many of these personal obligations (see, e.g., Nelkin, 2013).¹² When we forgive our wrongdoers, we release them from certain kinds of personal obligations to us. Forgiveness therefore alters the normative landscape between victim and wrongdoer.¹³

I suggest that we can fruitfully think of divine forgiveness as way for God to alter the normative landscape between sinner and God. The challenge is to say exactly what this alteration of the norms is supposed to be. What are the operative norms that are altered when God forgives? I offer a brief proposal. I suggested above that in the paradigmatic cases of human forgiveness, we relinquish rights to blame and release wrongdoers from certain personal obligations. Can something similar be said in the case of divine forgiveness? Perhaps so. One of the primary functions of interpersonal human blaming behaviors is to get a wrongdoer's attention, draw attention to her misdeeds, and call her to apologize, repent, and reconcile. It might be, then, that God engages in an analogous form of "divine blame." Our doing wrong elicits from God a certain kind of response—an intervention into our lives that draws our sin to our attention, prompts us to apologize (perhaps both to those we wrong and to God), make restitution, provide penance, and repent.¹⁴ When God forgives us, God does so by giving up this "divine blaming" stance. God moves on and no longer holds this wrong against us. But we are to move on too. Upon being forgiven, we are no longer obligated to keep on apologizing, repenting, offering penance, etc. We are not required to wallow in our failure and defeat.¹⁵

The proposal, then, is to think of debt-cancellation as a metaphor for divine forgiveness insofar as God's forgiveness alters the operative normative relationship between human and God. Let me draw attention to some things I think such a view has going for it. First, unlike emotion theories, a normative alteration theory does not require that God experience an emotional change in order to forgive. Of course, a normative alteration theory can hold that divine forgiveness *can* accompany a change in God's feelings towards us, but it need not claim this. Nor need it make the much stronger claim that God's forgiveness *is* the change in emotion.

Second, a normative alteration theory is not committed to the view that God will punish us for our sins unless we are forgiven for them. In other words, those who deny that God punishes unforgiven humans can adopt normative alteration theories. Of course, such a theory is *consistent* with the view that God punishes the unforgiven. Yet the theory does not require it.

Third, normative alteration theories explain how forgiveness can *promote* or *aim at* reconciliation with God without *identifying* forgiveness and reconciliation with God.¹⁶ This is because changes in the operative norms governing the interaction between two persons can facilitate positive relations between them. Here's a simple example in the human context. Suppose I lie to you. You now have the license to blame me in certain ways. When you give up this

right, it helps facilitate reconciliation. This is because knowing that another is permitted and stands ready to blame you is typically not conducive to positive social relations (this is perhaps why we often avoid those we have wronged—we are unwilling to take the sting of blame, even when the blame is done in love.). Yet on the other hand, when someone you have wronged has relinquished this right to blame you (by saying something like “I forgive you”), this new normative context paves the way for renewed pro-social behavior. We can expect our victim no longer to hold our wrong against us, and this expectation helps facilitate positive relations. Something similar may be the case in one’s relationship with God.

Such a view encounter problems, though. First, it may be difficult to provide a compelling account of the notion of divine blame. What exactly is the thing that God “gives up” when God forgives? Humans blame, but there may not be a divine analogue that gets the right notion of normative alteration off the ground. Second, even if we abandon the notion of divine blame, it is perhaps controversial whether the operative norms governing our relationship with God really do change in the way suggested by this model. Is it true that God releases us from certain obligations once God forgives us? Upon forgiving us, does God give up rights or permissions to treat us in certain ways? This may be a case of mistakenly thinking that God’s forgiveness must possess (what is to my mind) a central feature of human forgiveness.

4 | COMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this series on divine forgiveness, I have discussed four contemporary philosophical approaches to theorizing the nature of divine forgiveness. This survey is not exhaustive, but it does address the major approaches to divine forgiveness in the contemporary philosophical literature, such as it is. Theologians and exegetes will no doubt have more to say. Let me conclude by addressing a few issues that should, in my estimation, guide further philosophical discussion of divine forgiveness.

First, the nature of divine forgiveness brings to the fore apparent conflicts between so-called perfect being theology on the one hand, and popular interpretations of revelation about a personal God on the other. On the perfect being strategy, we first posit the existence of a perfect being and then ask what forgiveness could be for that sort of being. Such a being, we may discover, is impassible, simple, atemporal, and exists *a se*. The relevance for forgiveness may be that we discover that God is incapable of suffering or negative reactive emotions, that God does not have desires or make decisions, and that God’s attitudes towards us do not change or progress through time. To the extent that such a being can forgive at all, that forgiveness will look much different than our own. On this view, to describe God as “forgiving” is metaphor. Strictly speaking, God does not forgive us—at least not in any sense that is recognizably similar to human forgiveness. Yet there is some deep truth about God that is best communicated to us using the idiom of human forgiveness. Here, we would need an account of the “deep truth” that is explained using the metaphor of forgiveness in particular (as opposed to other potential metaphors: atonement, justification, love, etc.).

On the other hand, many revelations of Scripture ostensibly present a God who not only forgives but who shares emotions with us and has emotional responses toward us. We are presented with a God who rejoices at our repentance, desires to forgive us, and is related to us differently before and after our being forgiven. What are we to do with these depictions? It seems to me that for many perfect being theologians, developing an account of forgiveness will be very difficult, at least if we think divine forgiveness at all resembles the way humans forgive (such that it would make sense to teach someone “forgive others as God has forgiven you”). Divine forgiveness is an excellent platform on which to have this discussion about the merits of perfect being theology.

This brings us to the second issue, one that has already been raised throughout our discussion: How should we think of the relationship between human forgiveness and divine forgiveness? At times, I have implied that if a theory of divine forgiveness diverges radically from human forgiveness, then that is a strike against that theory of divine forgiveness. But why think that? Perhaps divine forgiveness is radically different than human forgiveness. But then what are the boundaries of acceptability? How different can our theories of human and divine forgiveness be such that

both qualify as theories of forgiveness? I hope these questions are found worthwhile and interesting. I leave them for others.¹⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ Linda Radzik (2009) makes a similar point regarding apology and forgiveness: they are distinct practices with distinct purposes (p. 96). Here's an example: imagine a wrongdoer saying to her victim "I'm so very sorry I did that, I apologize and I won't do it again. I am not asking you to forgive me, nor do I expect you to." To the extent that such a statement is felicitous, there is good evidence for thinking that requests for forgiveness and apology/repentance come apart conceptually and in practice.
- ² "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."
- ³ See, for example, Murphy (2003, pp. 14–15) and Griswold (2007, pp. 110–111).
- ⁴ The original example is Jean Hampton's (Murphy and Hampton, 1988, pp. 42–3, fn. 9). Note that in the case as we might imagine it, the victim is not just refusing openness to restoring the relationship to its *ex ante* state. Rather, she refuses to be open to *any* kind of reconciliation. Is such a refusal compatible with forgiveness? I'm not sure. I think it's at least an open question.
- ⁵ She gives the following analogy (manuscript-b): "Being risible is necessary and sufficient for being human—anything that is risible is human and nothing that is not risible is human—but being human is not reducible to being risible. Risibility picks out human beings by an accident which is had by all and only human beings, but the nature of human beings is not nothing but risibility."
- ⁶ For further discussion and replies to many of these objections to reconciliation theories, see Strabbing (forthcoming).
- ⁷ Anthony Bash (2015, p. 105) notes that *aphiemi* and *aphesis* are the only words that Matthew uses for forgiveness and that these are the Greek words for forgiveness used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Bash points out that these words, "taken from the world of business and commerce," are used when one person remits the debts of another and are commonly taken to mean "to free or release someone from something" (pp. 26–27). Luke also uses *aphesis* at 1:77 and 11:4 in his Gospel. A less commonly used word to refer to forgiveness in the New Testament is *charizomai*, which "carries the idea of giving a gift or giving freely" (Bash, 2015, p. 27). Like *aphesis*, *charizomai* can be used of canceling a debt (see Luke 7:42–43) but connotes further the idea of doing something gracious and kind. According to Bash, Apostle Paul uses *charizomai* at Col. 2:14 in conjunction with a phrase that means "to erase the record that stands against us," strengthening the thought that "forgiveness is likened to the erasure of debt" (p. 28). (An anonymous reviewer tells me that these words have a much broader range than "debt," and that it may be a bit misleading to leave this note as it stands. Since I am no expert in biblical Greek, I defer to others in this matter.) The word *apoulo* is also used once in the sense of "forgive" at Luke 6:37. Here, the word points to another aspect of forgiveness: "the idea of offering release to someone from that wrong that he or she has done" (Bash, 2015, p. 28).
- ⁸ See *Summa Theologica*, Question 13, Article 1.
- ⁹ Swinburne distinguishes objective guilt (the status one incurs from the failing to fulfill one's obligations) from subjective guilt (the status one incurs from failing to try to fulfill one's obligations) (p. 73). For purposes of presenting the general framework of Swinburne's view, this distinction does not matter.
- ¹⁰ See Stump (manuscript-b).
- ¹¹ For further discussion of these points, see Warmke (2016a).
- ¹² The obligations from which we can release others are *personal* in the sense that we can only release others from obligations over which we have normative authority. Forgivers cannot, for example, release wrongdoers from legal, rational, or all things considered obligations, even if those obligations involve treating the victim herself in certain ways.
- ¹³ If it helps, one can think of forgiving like promising. While differing in significant respects, both forgiving and promising are ways to alter the normative landscape between agents. In promising, we impose obligations on ourselves (to do what we promise) and confer rights on others (to claim what we promise). In forgiving, we relinquish certain rights (e.g., to blame) and release others from certain personal obligations (e.g., to further apology or restitution).
- ¹⁴ See, for example, John 16:8, where we are taught that the Holy Spirit "convicts" us of our sin so that we may come to repentance.
- ¹⁵ In my view, this approach nicely captures the connotations of the three Greek words translated as forgiveness in the New Testament noted above: *aphesis* (as a letting go of being wronged), *charizomai* (as a gracious and kind gift), and *apoulo* (as giving the wrongdoer a kind of release).
- ¹⁶ As Robert Roberts (1995) puts it, reconciliation is the "teleology" of forgiveness, that to which forgiveness aims or aspires (p. 299).

¹⁷ I am grateful for the feedback I received from an audience at the University of Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion, where I presented an earlier version of this paper in December 2015. I also thank Craig Warmke for his thoughtful comments on an earlier draft. Two anonymous referees for this journal also helped improve the paper. Remaining errors are my own.

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How to cite this article: Warmke B. Divine forgiveness II: Reconciliation and debt-cancellation theories. *Philosophy Compass*. 2017;e12439. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12439>