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Penal Substitution and Divine Forgiveness

Daniel Thweatt

According to Keith Ward, “One must...reject those crude accounts of Christian doctrine which...say that Christ has been justly punished in our place so that he has taken away our guilt and enabled God to forgive us. Almost everything is ethically wrong about these accounts.”¹ This statement is just one instance of a commonly occurring dismissal of the penal substitution theory of the atonement.² For various reasons, many today find the theory morally (and theologically and exegetically) untenable.³ Some, such as Gregory Boyd and Eleonore Stump, formulate moral objections to penal substitution based on beliefs about the concept of forgiveness.⁴ In this paper it will be argued that Boyd and Stump’s objections to the moral plausibility of the penal substitution theory of the atonement that involve the concept of forgiveness are unsuccessful. In so doing, a brief outline of the penal substitution theory will be given, some relevant starting assumptions will be discussed, Boyd and Stump’s objections will be explained, the concept of forgiveness will be explored and analyzed, and a response will be made to Boyd and Stump utilizing the previously developed construal of forgiveness.

Penal Substitution

In brief, “the atonement” in Christian theology is “the saving work of Jesus Christ.”⁵ There are a diversity of theories that have been propounded as explanations of what exactly the

1. Keith Ward, *Ethics and Christianity*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), 240.

2. Steven L. Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (Apr. 1, 2004): 228-9.

3. See, for example, Paul R. Eddy and James Beilby, “The Atonement: *An Introduction*,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 9-10; Thomas R. Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 70-1.

4. See discussion below.

5. Eddy and Beilby, “The Atonement: *An Introduction*,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, 9.

saving work of Christ was (or, perhaps more precisely, what the central component of His work was).⁶ The penal substitution theory began to be developed by John Calvin (1509-64), gaining ground as a prominent theory in Christian thinking in his wake.⁷ Thomas Schreiner explains it as follows:

The penalty for sin is death...Sinners deserve eternal punishment in hell from God himself because of their sin and guilt. God's holy anger is directed...against all those who have sinned...yet because of God's great love, he sent Christ to bear the punishment of our sins. Christ died in our place, took to himself our sin...and guilt..., and bore our penalty so that we might receive forgiveness of sins.⁸

Though various versions of the theory have been developed,⁹ this explication by Schreiner captures two crucial points that shape the penal substitution approach to the atonement. These are: 1) that in His death on the cross Christ (voluntarily!) “bore our penalty,” which we deserve from God because of our sin,¹⁰ and 2) that He did so in order that we “might receive forgiveness of sins” and the propitiation of God’s wrath toward us.¹¹ These two components of penal substitution are what occasion the objections that will be considered here. When the term “penal substitution” is used during the course of the rest of this paper it will denote these two claims about Christ’s atoning work.

6. See Eddy and Beilby, “The Atonement: *An Introduction*,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, 10-20; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 501-9.

7. Eddy and Beilby, “The Atonement: *An Introduction*,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, 16-7.

8. Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, 72-3.

9. Eddy and Beilby, “The Atonement: *An Introduction*,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, 17; Steven L. Porter, “Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors*, eds. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 237.

10. See also Porter, “Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics*, 237.

11. Eddy and Beilby, “The Atonement: *An Introduction*,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, 16.

Background Assumptions

Now, before getting to the issues to be tackled here, it will be helpful to make explicit some important assumptions that will be lying in the background of the discussion. These assumptions will *not* be extensively argued, for they are not the focus of the present paper, but the arguments to follow will depend on them in various, important ways. The first of these assumptions is a rejection of divine impassibility, the second is a rejection of divine simplicity, the third is a rejection of divine timelessness, the fourth is a weak view of divine immutability, and the fifth is a form of divine command theory. These will now be briefly commented on in turn.

To reject divine impassibility is to reject that God “never suffers pain or is changed in attitude, emotion, or behavior by causes external to [God].”¹² Most importantly for this paper, it is to claim that that which is external to God can cause, or be the occasion of, changes in God’s emotions. As Stephen Davis points out, Scripture seems to portray God as interacting with and responding to human agents.¹³ Moreover, God’s emotions seem to be involved in God’s interactions with humans.

Similarly, God seems to have distinct, non-identical attributes, such as omnipotence and wisdom.¹⁴ In other words, divine simplicity, the doctrine that there is absolutely no complexity in God whatsoever,¹⁵ appears to be false. Divine timelessness also seems to be false, for, again,

12. Stephen T. Davis, “Three Conceptions of God in Contemporary Christian Philosophy?” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion [Second Edition]*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008), 492.

13. *Ibid.*, 494-5.

14. *Ibid.*, 495; see also the discussion in William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 524-6.

15. Davis, “Three Conceptions of God in Contemporary Christian Philosophy?” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 492; Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 524.

Scripture seems to portray God as genuinely interacting with human agents in various ways in dynamic time, apparently implying a “*before and after* in God’s life”¹⁶ and thus both divine temporal location and extension.¹⁷ These first three assumptions pave the way for, and seem to entail, a weak view of divine immutability.¹⁸

A strong view of divine immutability holds that there is not any change in God, whether intrinsic (a change of non-relational properties) or extrinsic (a change in relational properties).¹⁹ If, however, one holds, as is being assumed here, that God really interacts with humans in dynamic time, having various emotional responses to what they do and otherwise being variously related to them at different times, then such a strong construal of divine immutability seems ruled out. Thus, a weakening of the doctrine is in order. One plausible weak view, seemingly more in line with the Scriptural depiction of God, is as follows: “God is...constant and unchangeable in his character...[and] is immutable in...existence (necessity, aseity, eternity) and...being omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent.”²⁰ This is the view that will be assumed in this paper.

Moreover, it will be taken for granted in what follows that God is the metaphysical foundation for morality. God’s nature is the paradigm and standard of moral goodness. Thus, on this picture, to say that God is good is to assent to his essential and maximal possession of the moral virtues. Furthermore, God’s commands constitute the moral duties binding on human persons. These commands are not arbitrary, but flow from God’s nature. Such a version of divine

16. Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 512.

17. Davis, “Three Conceptions of God in Contemporary Christian Philosophy?” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 492-5; see also the discussion in Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 511-5, where the relevance of one’s view of time for assessing this doctrine is noted.

18. Consider this discussion in Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 526-7.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 527.

command theory, nestled between the horns of the euthyphro dilemma, seems to be both theologically and philosophically plausible.²¹

Penal Substitution and Divine Forgiveness: Some Alleged Problems

Objection 1: There is No Divine Forgiveness in Penal Substitution

With these five assumptions in place, it is time to consider the objections of Boyd and Stump to penal substitution that are to be tackled. In reference to what she takes to be the popular understanding of the atonement, which is something like the penal substitution view, Stump claims that it does not really involve divine forgiveness.²² According to her, “To forgive a debtor is to fail to exact all that is in justice due.”²³ In the background of this understanding of forgiveness seems to be the idea that when one is wronged by another, the wrongdoer incurs a sort of moral “debt” to the victim, an obligation to apologize to the victim, to “make it up” to the victim or to do some other such thing. This is not an implausible thought.²⁴ Given it, Stump seems to take forgiveness as a sort of “lifting” of this obligation from the wrongdoer by the victim, at least in a sense. When a victim forgives a wrongdoer, Stump apparently thinks, the

21. For a further explication of this view, see Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 529-32. Again, this theory is a theory of moral ontology, not moral epistemology or moral semantics. It splits the horns of the euthyphro dilemma in that on it God’s commands are not arbitrary, nor is the metaphysical foundation of morality something independent of God.

22. Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 427-8. See also Eleonore Stump, “Atonement According to Aquinas,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 61-2.

23. Stump, *Aquinas*, 428. See also Stump, “Atonement According to Aquinas,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 62.

24. Nor is such a thought idiosyncratic. Richard Swinburne, for example, holds to something along these lines. See Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 229-30.

victim fails (presumably intentionally) to forcibly obtain from the wrongdoer what the wrongdoer “owes” the victim.

Now, as Stump see it, on the penal substitution account “...God does exact every bit of the debt owed him by human beings...,” even if the debt is not exacted from the party that incurred it.²⁵ Given that the debt is exacted, the one to whom it was owed has not “foregone” one bit of what was owed and thus cannot be said to have forgiven in any sense.²⁶ Boyd seems to pose essentially the same problem, though he elaborates on it even less than Stump. He asks, “If God must always get what is coming to him in order to forgive (namely, “a kill”), does God ever really forgive?”²⁷

Objection 2: The Penal Substitution View Presents an Inaccurate View of God’s Character

Boyd also asks, “how is the view that God requires a kill to have his rage placated essentially different from the pagan or magical understanding of divine appeasement found in primordial religions throughout history?”²⁸ Again, regrettably, he does not elaborate on his question. Apparently, he thinks that the penal substitution presents a primitive, inaccurate picture of God. The idea that God requires death before God’s anger at sin is appeased and God can forgive sin impugns the character of God. The penal substitution theory’s view of God is, allegedly, magical, pagan and primordial, which, it is implied, is unacceptable.

25. Stump, *Aquinas*, 428. See also Stump, “Atonement According to Aquinas,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 62.

26. Stump, *Aquinas*, 428. See also Stump, “Atonement According to Aquinas,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 62.

27. Gregory A. Boyd, “Christus Victor Response,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 104.

28. *Ibid.*

Stump seems to agree with the idea that penal substitution paints an inaccurate and unacceptable picture of God's character, though for different reasons than Boyd. As opposed to her view, which she says conceives of God as something like a parent who is concerned with developing God's children's (God's creatures, that is) character (which is the only reason, on her view, for which God would punish God's creatures), the penal substitution view, allegedly, makes God out to be concerned with "balancing accounts."²⁹ It

rests on a conception of God which makes him seem something like an accountant keeping double-column books on the universe. When a person commits a sin, a debt of guilt is registered in one column which must be balanced on the same line in the other column by the payment of a punishment which compensates for the guilt.³⁰

This, she apparently thinks, is bad, for it is better for God to be more concerned with the development of the character of God's creatures than with balancing moral accounts in this or some similar way. Stump must also be thinking here that these two concerns are mutually exclusive, or at least that they cannot both be pursued fully by God before, after, simultaneously with, one before and one after, etc. forgiving in a way that is morally acceptable (otherwise it is not clear how she could make this complaint).

Objection 3: The Penal Substitution View Paints a Picture of Divine Forgiveness that is Inconsistent with Scripture

Finally, Boyd doubts that the penal substitution view presents a picture of God that squares with the teaching of Scripture. He asks,

How are we to reconcile the idea that the Father needs to exact payment from or on behalf of his enemies with Jesus' teaching (and example) that we are to love

29. Stump, *Aquinas*, 436-8. See also Stump, "Atonement According to Aquinas," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 68-9.

30. *Ibid.*, 436. See also Stump, "Atonement According to Aquinas," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 68.

unconditionally and forgive without demanding payment? ...how are we to reconcile the idea that God cannot be reconciled with sinners without his wrath being satisfied with blood with the pervasive scriptural depiction of God forgiving people without needing his wrath appeased (e.g., Lk 15:11-32)?³¹

Summary

All three of these objections directly concern forgiveness, particularly divine forgiveness of human sins. Collectively, they claim that a plausible and Scripturally informed account of God's forgiveness of sinners rules out the penal substitution theory of the atonement. So, an adequate consideration of and response to these claims calls for some reflection on the concept of forgiveness. That task will be taken up presently.

Forgiveness: Human and Divine³²

Human Forgiveness

According to Jeffrie Murphy, forgiveness is “the overcoming, on moral grounds, of what I will call the *vindictive passions*-the passions of anger, resentment, and even hatred that are often occasioned when one has been deeply wronged by another.”³³ This thought, that

31. Boyd, “Christus Victor Response,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, 104.

32. Much of this section is adapted from a paper submitted to Paul Reasoner on October 17, 2014, which was an assignment for the philosophy seminar he was instructing.

33. Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16. Many others also accept accounts along these lines. See Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 154-5 fn3. Robert Roberts and Charles Griswold should also be on this list. See Robert C. Roberts, “Forgivingness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Oct., 1995): 289-306; Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38-112. As Walker notes, this tradition finds its roots in the sermons of Bishop Joseph Butler, though he did not actually hold Murphy's view. See Sermons VIII-IX in Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2006.), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/butler/sermons.html>.

forgiveness necessarily and centrally involves the rejection of the vindictive passions, seems plausible. If one has forgiven someone who has wronged him/her, then it seems natural to suppose that this forgiver harbors no more vindictive passions aimed at the forgiven.³⁴ At the very least, it seems like “completed” forgiveness would require such a state. It is plausible that one can be said to have forgiven another yet still retain some vindictive passions, for our passions are not directly in our control (in the case of us humans, anyway).³⁵ That being said, if this person has not made some sort of willful decision “against” his/her vindictive passions, a decision to overcome them or set them aside to the highest degree possible, then, plausibly, this person has not forgiven in any sense.³⁶

Now, this claim that a minimum requirement of having forgiven in any sense is a willful decision against one’s vindictive passions indicates that forgiveness is fundamentally a choice, a choice that leads to, or at least has the intention of, a change of heart. It should be noted that in order for such a choice to count as forgiveness, it seems to be the case that it must be made for a morally relevant reason.³⁷ After all, a decision to suppress the memory of a wrong done to one via hypnosis or some similar means for the purpose of improved concentration while playing video games does not seem like a choice to forgive, though it is a choice to overcome vindictive passions. Likewise, as Robert Roberts notes, “Therapeutic motivations in...egoistic form seem to be outside the spirit of forgiveness.”³⁸ This certainly seems so.

34. Surely our forgiveness is typically, even if not necessarily, properly directed at those who have wronged *us*.

35. Walker, *Moral Repair*, 155-6.

36. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 39-43. Griswold makes essentially these points, though only in reference to the overcoming of resentment, which he defines on page 39.

37. Margaret R. Holmgren, “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Oct., 1993): 341.

38. Roberts, “Forgivingness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 296.

These points do not clarify what reasons might count as morally sufficient to motivate forgiveness, however. Murphy and Charles Griswold, among others, argue for limiting the possibly motivating reasons to repentance on the wrongdoer's part. Murphy, who thinks such a move is reasonable,³⁹ takes a weaker position than Griswold, who thinks that the notion of forgiveness is conceptually tied to repentance such that if there is no repentance⁴⁰ (or at least the willingness to repent) by the wrongdoer, there can be no forgiveness.⁴¹ Murphy claims that his position can guard against "sacrificing our self-respect or our respect for the moral order—a respect that is often evinced in resentment and other vindictive passions."⁴² According to him, "hastily forgiving" the wrongdoer may condone his or her action(s) and the degrading message conveyed thereby. Withholding forgiveness until repentance can not only guard one against the harm of not showing self-respect, it can also give the wrongdoer an incentive for "moral rebirth."⁴³ Similarly, Griswold warns that unconditional forgiveness (from here on out referring to forgiveness not conditioned on repentance) may (probably will, in fact) condone or encourage wrongdoing as well as damage victims' self-respect.⁴⁴

This, however, does not seem right. First, there appear to be counterexamples to this view. Consider, for example, the priest who preemptively forgives Jean Valjean in *Les*

39. Murphy, *Getting Even*, 35-7, 77-8.

40. See Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 150-1, for a summary of the conditions he thinks that wrongdoers must meet in order to be forgivable. This author takes it that these conditions constitute repentance, or perhaps repentance "plus some."

41. *Ibid.*, 115, 121-2.

42. Murphy, *Getting Even*, 35.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 63-6. On page 46 Griswold defines condoning as either "accepting while not disapproving (by not holding the wrong-doing against its author)," or "tolerating while disapproving (a sort of "look the other way" or "putting up with it" strategy)."

Misérables. His action seems, at least to this author, to be both legitimate forgiveness and not any less morally praiseworthy than an act of forgiveness done in response to repentance.

Consider also the following story, recounted by Margaret Walker during a discussion of unforgivability:

Lawrence Weschler describes Luis Perez Aguirre, a young Jesuit priest from a wealthy family who, during the severe repression under a military government that took power in 1973, was repeatedly imprisoned and tortured after founding a human rights organization in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1981. Still bearing the lines of scarred cigarette burns on his arms, he describes twice encountering on the street the man who tortured him: “He tried to avoid my gaze...But I took the initiative. I called him over...He told me he is very depressed...I showed him in a practical way that I was not angry. I told him if he needed anything to come to me. And I told him I forgave him.”⁴⁵

This apparent case of genuine forgiveness not conditioned on repentance seems, again, by this author’s lights, not only morally praiseworthy, but almost saintly.

On an autobiographical note, this author can also think of instances in his own life where it seems to him that he genuinely and rightly forgave people despite their not repenting. Some of these instances involved vindictive passions that took time to overcome. If the reader has had similar experiences and intuitions about those experiences (to the effect that they constituted cases of genuine and proper forgiveness, that is), then he/she has some motivation to reject the claim that forgiveness should always be conditioned on repentance. Thus, some introspection and reflection are well in order here.

In continuation of this first point of response to Murphy and Griswold, there seems to be a variety of plausibly morally justifying grounds for forgiveness that would apply to various circumstances. Repentance on the wrongdoer’s part certainly seems like one such motivation to forgive, at least in some situations. Among other reasons for this claim, repentance is a sort of

45. Walker, *Moral Repair*, 175.

“self-separation” from the wrong the wrongdoer has done.⁴⁶ However, it does not seem like the only possible sufficient reason in any and all circumstances. Other sufficient reasons may be a divine command to forgive regardless of repentance on the wrongdoer’s part⁴⁷ (which, this author assumes, even theists who are not divine command theorists would give moral weight to), the fact that forgiveness can help realize various goods in the wake of wrongdoing (such as peace and the avoidance of cycles of revenge),⁴⁸ the fact that at least some forgiveness independent of repentance is necessary for the thriving, or perhaps even the possibility, of valuable close relationships, and the fact that unconditional forgiveness may motivate moral reform in the wrongdoer (as it apparently did with Jean Valjean). This list is not offered as exhaustive, but simply as a selection of facts that, if true, can plausibly legitimately motivate a decision to forgive.

Moreover, it is not obvious that unconditional forgiveness sacrifices one’s self-respect or respect for the moral order. It seems entirely possible to still conceive of oneself as having inherent value and still conceive of the wrong done to one as really wrong despite unconditionally forgiving. The beliefs that “I have inherent value” and “What person X did to me was wrong” and even “I am entitled to resentment/anger towards person X for wronging me” are not incompatible with the belief that “I forgive person X (for reason Y).” It should also be noted that if there really are non-repentance-based morally justifying reasons to forgive, then forgiving

46. Holmgren, “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 346. A point made by Joram Haber.

47. If God has so commanded. Murphy does not think so. See Murphy, *Getting Even*, 35-7.

48. A point made by Butler, who held that forgiveness is the forswearing of revenge and excesses of resentment. See his Sermon IX in Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/butler/sermons.html>. See also Holmgren, “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 345, for Holmgren’s comments on the value of forgiveness from a global perspective, as well as Roberts, “Forgivingness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 294, for Roberts’ comments on the kind of ethic in which the practice of forgiveness has a high value.

does not show disrespect for the moral order at all.⁴⁹ Now, the worry may be that unconditional forgiveness fails to express (or communicate⁵⁰) respect for the moral order and/or one's inherent value. However, if such expression really is good, or perhaps even required, then in at least some circumstances these beliefs can seemingly be appropriately expressed in other ways than holding appropriate vindictiveness until repentance. These other ways may be, for example, deep sadness over what was done, verbal repudiation that are not acts of revenge or, again, unconditional forgiveness *if* non-repentance-based reasons to forgive obtain and are morally sufficient.

In addition, Murphy himself outlines how a Christian worldview can furnish one with a conceptual framework that can guard against a loss of self-respect and respect for the moral order while unconditionally forgiving, thus, for Christians, diminishing Griswold and his own worries.⁵¹ To touch on just a couple of the relevant points in his discussion, consider first that on the Christian view God will see to it that the moral calculus of the universe is not ultimately out of balance. This, as Murphy says, can help one to “relax a bit the clinch-fisted anger and resentment with which [one tries] to sustain [one's] self-respect and hold [one's] world together all alone.”⁵² Second, consider the Christian claims that we are all loved by God and that we are all created with inherent value as God's image-bearers. A firm commitment to these claims can shore up one's self-respect regardless of what is done to one.⁵³

49. In fact, unconditional forgiveness may, under some circumstances, even be morally obligatory. Holmgren contends that this is the case. See Holmgren, “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 350-1.

50. *Ibid.*, 347-8.

51. See Murphy, *Getting Even*, 87-93, for the entirety of his quite compelling discussion. Interestingly, he does not end up explicitly endorsing unconditional forgiveness as a general procedure.

52. *Ibid.*, 92.

53. *Ibid.*, 91-92. All this being said, the forgiver, whether forgiving conditionally or unconditionally, may need to take certain steps before being able to forgive while retaining self-respect and respect for the moral order. See Holmgren, “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 342-5, for a

It is also not obvious that unconditional forgiveness risks, or at least necessarily risks, condoning or encouraging wrongs. After all, the claim that “You did something wrong and inexcusable to me” seems implicit in the assertion that “I forgive you.” If the wrong in view were excusable, then it would be *excused*, not forgiven. As Murphy points out, excusing, unlike forgiveness, is a response to *non-culpable* wrongdoing. Forgiveness, on the other hand, responds to *culpable* wrongdoing.⁵⁴ This distinction seems right. So, to communicate to someone that they have been forgiven is necessarily to communicate to that person that they did, or are believed to have done, something wrong and are culpable for it (to the extent that it is communicated to them that they are forgiven). This seems inconsistent with condoning or encouraging wrongs.⁵⁵

Moreover, in at least some circumstances there may be ways to discourage wrongdoing that are not inconsistent with unconditional forgiveness of the perpetrators of those wrongs. Verbal repudiation seems to be one potential possibility. Setting an example of virtuous character in the relevant ways may be another. Shunning reconciliation when so shunning is appropriate and desirable would seem to be yet another in certain situations, such as when responding to a perpetually adulterous spouse, perhaps. Even the act of forgiveness itself may so move the unrepentant wrongdoer as to encourage or bring about moral reform. This list is likely not exhaustive.⁵⁶

All that being said, if unconditional forgiveness does risk condoning or encouraging

suggestion of what such steps may be.

54. Murphy, *Getting Even*, 13. Trudy Govier also notes this. See Trudy Govier, “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Jan. 1999): 59-60.

55. If forgiveness is a response to culpable wrongdoing, and if it is also an overcoming of vindictive passions, then it must be possible for one to judge that one has been wronged without having vindictive passions directed at the wrongdoer. One example of a theory of emotions that allows for this is Roberts’. See Roberts, “Forgivingness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 289-293, 302-303.

56. Holmgren, “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 347-8.

wrongs, it is not clear that it is to be faulted on that account. The pursuit or attainment of some goods often comes at the expense of the attainment or realization of other goods. For example, to choose to become a surgeon may be to forfeit becoming a pastor (presuming that both are viable options). Similarly, spending more time with family entails spending less time with friends (presuming that spending time with friends is often how one spends one's free time). So, even if unconditionally forgiving in some circumstances entails risking being understood as condoning and/or encouraging wrongs, it still may, at least some of the time, be the case that the good(s) attained or realized by having forgiven outweigh(s) the good of not risking being misunderstood.

Now, some argue for always conditioning forgiveness on repentance on the grounds that doing otherwise fails to show respect for the wrongdoer "as a moral agent."⁵⁷ This claim, however, seems badly mistaken. As Margaret Holmgren points out, taking such a position rests on accepting two premises. One is that respecting wrongdoers entails that they should be treated as responsible agents. The second is that "retributive hatred" is the appropriate emotional response to responsible wrongdoers who have not repented.⁵⁸ This second premise seems to rest on a denial that there can be morally justifying reasons for forgiveness in the absence of repentance. So, if one thinks that there can be, as has been suggested here, then there is no reason to accept this premise. The argument is thus unconvincing.

At this point in this analysis, it appears that forgiveness is something like a willful decision, on the basis of one or more of many possible morally relevant reasons that may obtain in various circumstances, against one's vindictive passions that pertain to a certain wrong (or, perhaps, set of wrongs) done to one by a particular person or group (though perhaps there is

57. Ibid., 348.

58. Ibid.

more to it than this).⁵⁹ Whether or not one still has vindictive passions, as long as one has made such a choice it seems right to say that said person has forgiven, even if in an incomplete sense. Once the relevant vindictive passions have been overcome, forgiveness becomes complete. Thus, in cases where completion takes time, forgiveness is both a choice and a process.⁶⁰

It is worth considering here whether or not this conception of forgiveness can accommodate apparently authentic instances of forgiveness that do not involve the overcoming of vindictive passions. Consider the following example, suggested by Roberts:

A graduate-school colleague of twenty years ago phones you out of the blue and asks forgiveness for once enviously slandering you in front of some other students and a professor. Nothing came of the slander and you were unaware of it until now; knowing of it, you are emotionally indifferent. Your forgiveness in this case is not much of a psychological process at all, but simply the act of saying “I forgive you.”⁶¹

In response to this suggestion, probably the first thing worth noting is that cases of this nature are not, or at least do not seem to be, standard cases of forgiveness. Beyond this point, one might be tempted to say that in cases of this sort the one forgiving is really expressing a counterfactual judgment. That is, such an act of forgiveness could be construed as the assertion that in all of the nearest possible worlds in which the forgiver has vindictive passions directed at the wrongdoer over the wrong in question, the forgiver chooses to overcome those passions for a

59. It should be explicitly noted here that it has not been argued that forgiveness should never be conditioned on repentance. Rather, only a case for the claim that forgiveness need not necessarily be conditioned on repentance in all circumstances, and can be properly motivated by other reasons in some circumstances, has been made. This view can even be held by one who, following a line of thought suggested by Paul Reasoner and Charles Taliaferro, agrees that the obtaining of forgiveness on the victim’s part *and* the obtaining of repentance on the wrongdoer’s part is a better state of affairs than merely the obtaining of forgiveness on the victim’s part, even though the latter state of affairs is still a good state of affairs. See Paul Reasoner and Charles Taliaferro, “The Double Movement Model of Forgiveness in Buddhist and Christian Rituals,” *European Journal For Philosophy Of Religion: Journal Of The Central European Society For Philosophy Of Religion* 1, no. 1 (Mar. 1, 2009): 28-9.

60. Holmgren disagrees with this distinction between complete and incomplete forgiveness. She would only count what is being called “completed forgiveness” here as forgiveness. See Holmgren, “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 351 fn6. This distinction is not vital for the arguments made throughout the rest of this paper, but this author, at least, finds it plausible.

61. Roberts, “Forgivingness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 304-5 fn8.

morally justifying reason. On the one hand, assuming that we know ourselves fairly well, this might seem like a reasonable judgment. On the other hand, given the realities of self-deception, construing some acts of forgiveness in this manner runs the risk that the forgiver's claim to forgive is really an assertion of a false counterfactual. An account that allows for this possibility is surely an implausible account.

Perhaps the best way to account for these instances of forgiveness is Roberts' own approach. On his view, in these uncharacteristic cases of forgiveness the one requesting forgiveness is either angry at him/herself or convinced that the one wronged would be justified in being angry, and the one forgiving is communicating to the one requesting forgiveness that he/she is not inclined to anger over the matter. So, Roberts claims, in view of these considerations these nonstandard cases of forgiveness do not undermine the centrality of the notion of "overcoming vindictive passions" (or, on his view, just anger) in the concept of forgiveness.⁶² These points seem plausible.

All this being said, it is still an open question whether or not the definition of forgiveness that has been given here encompasses all that forgiveness is. During the course of Murphy's discussion of his conception of forgiveness, he suggests a broadening of the concept to include the overcoming of "a variety of negative feelings that one might have towards a wrongdoer-resentment, yes, but also such feelings as anger, hatred, loathing, contempt, indifference, disappointment, or even sadness."⁶³ However, to conceive of the act of forgiveness as responding to all of these feelings in light of a wrong done to one seems to be a stretch. As Griswold point out, it is consistent to say that *A* has forgiven *B* but still has, for example, sadness over what *B*

62. Ibid.

63. Murphy, *Getting Even*, 59. Jeffrey Blustein agrees. See Jeffrey Blustein, "Forgiveness, Commemoration, and Restorative Justice: The Role of Moral Emotions," *Metaphilosophy* 41, no. 4 (Jul., 2010):

has done or is still disappointed with *B*.⁶⁴ On the other hand, as noted above, it does not make sense to say that *A* has forgiven *B* but still has unaltered and persisting vindictive passions directed at *B* for the wrong done. If this is right, and it seems so, then the feelings which the act of forgiveness directly and primarily addresses are plausibly only the vindictive passions. It may be that negative feelings other than the vindictive passions are overcome as a component of *some* acts of forgiveness, or perhaps as a *byproduct* of or in *correlation* with some acts of forgiveness, but the point remains that forgiveness is not *primarily* concerned with the overcoming of these feelings.

The 18th century bishop Joseph Butler thought that in addition to the overcoming of excessive vindictive passions, (he thought that one could forgive and still retain appropriate vindictiveness) forgiveness includes the decision to not carry out revenge.⁶⁵ This is plausible. As Griswold notes, if person *A* carries out, or intends to carry out, revenge on person *B* for a wrong done by *B* to *A*, *A* has not forgiven *B*.⁶⁶ It seems, however, that the decision by the forgiver not to carry out revenge can be reasonably thought to be a component of, or entailed by, the notion of a “willful decision against one’s vindictive passions.”⁶⁷ Since it has already been suggested that this notion lies at the heart of the concept of forgiveness, that “*A* decides to not carry out revenge on *B*” need not be explicitly mentioned as a condition of *A* forgiving *B*.

591-7. Both Murphy and Blustein follow Norvin Richards’ lead here.

64. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 41.

65. Sermon IX in Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/butler/sermons.html>. See also the discussion in Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 19-37.

66. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 38-9.

67. Assuming Murphy’s definition of revenge as “the infliction of suffering on a person in order to satisfy vindictive emotions or passions.” See Murphy, *Getting Even*, 17. This seems plausible, or at least the connection between revenge and the satisfaction of vindictive passions seems right. Whether or not suffering is inflicted, there is at least some sort of personally carried out retaliation involved in revenge.

Though this point brings out the fact that forgiveness has consequences for the forgiver's relations with others (that is, it entails, at least, not treating people in certain ways), it seems that forgiveness should not be construed in a way that is too strongly relational. Forgiveness should not be confused with reconciliation. We may, apparently rightly, follow Roberts' lead and say that forgiveness, which follows breaches in relationships, generally *aims* at reconciliation,⁶⁸ whatever the morally justifying reasons for engaging in the act are. However, it seems that forgiveness can obtain in instances where reconciliation does not, and perhaps even should not, obtain. Murphy provides a nice example of such a case:

Imagine a battered woman who has been repeatedly beaten and raped by her husband or boyfriend. This woman-after a religious conversion, perhaps-might well come to forgive her batterer (i.e., stop hating him) without a willingness to resume her relationship with him. "I forgive you and wish you well" can, in my view, sit quite consistently with "I never want you in this house again." In short, the fact that one has forgiven does not mean that one must also trust or live again with a person.⁶⁹

This seems eminently plausible.⁷⁰ Thus the impetus to not construe forgiveness *primarily* in relational terms, but rather, primarily, in terms of a change of heart.

So, given the lines of thought in this section taken together, it seems that, indeed, forgiveness is a willful decision, on the basis of one or more of many possible morally relevant reasons that may obtain in various circumstances, against one's vindictive passions that pertain to a certain wrong (or, perhaps, set of wrongs) done to one by a particular person or group. At least this would appear to be the case in human instances of forgiveness. The question of whether or not this conception of forgiveness is an accurate understanding of divine forgiveness remains.

68. Roberts, "Forgivingness," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 293-4.

69. Murphy, *Getting Even*, 14-15. On pages 15-16 he also claims that reconciliation may obtain *without* forgiveness. Cf. Walker, *Moral Repair*, 156.

70. Holmgren agrees, citing a similar case. See Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 342. Roberts also seems to take such a position. See Roberts, "Forgivingness," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 293-4.

Before answering this question, however, some reflection on theological methodology will be useful.

An Approach to Conceiving of Divine Forgiveness

Let us assume that God created us with the ability to know God, or at least something about God, and, correspondingly, with the ability to discourse meaningfully about God. The concept of divine revelation, that is, of God making Godself know to humans, seems to take as much for granted. If this is the case, then, when either doing theology or discoursing about God in general, it seems appropriate to assume that our concepts can accurately apply to God unless we have reason to think otherwise. These reasons can, presumably, come in two sorts. One would be some reason(s) to think that our concept in question is deficient. The other would be some reason(s) to think that our concept in question cannot apply to God, either fully or at all, based on other things we know about God.⁷¹

Taking this approach with respect to the concept of forgiveness, let us start with the assumption that forgiveness for God is the same as forgiveness for humans and consider whether or not there are reasons to abandon this starting position. Assuming that the above argumentation establishes the appropriate concept of forgiveness, the most plausible way to question this initial position is, it would seem, by questioning whether or not it is appropriate to think that God has, or can have, vindictive passions. Recall that the definition of “vindictive passions” operative here is “the passions of anger, resentment, and even hatred that are often occasioned when one has been deeply wronged by another.”⁷² For the purposes of this paper, the question will be narrowed

71. For an incisive response to Kantian, as well as some “Kantianesque,” objections to the notion that our concepts apply to God, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press), 3-63.

72. Murphy, *Getting Even*, 16.

to whether or not it is appropriate for God to be angry in response to being wronged by others. Roberts objects to ascribing resentment to God on the grounds that, as he sees it, it is a passion had by those who, to a degree, conceive of themselves as powerless to exact revenge on those who have wronged them.⁷³ The question of whether or not God can hate seems, at least *prima facie*, more controversial than the question of whether or not God can be angry. Nothing in this paper rests on taking a definitive stance on these issues, so they can be set aside and not debated here.

Problems with this Construal?

Now, one might object to the idea of God being angry in response to being wronged by others in a number of ways. For instance, one might think that the notion of God being angry at all is problematic. Given that the concern in this paper is God forgiving *human* sin, one may also object to the notion of God being angry at *human* wrongdoing.⁷⁴ However, these notions seem on their faces to be coherent and generally unproblematic. In short, God may be (in fact, probably is) morally repulsed by sin, and anger is a common, seemingly appropriate form of moral

73. Roberts, "Forgiveness," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 291. Anne Minas also objects to ascribing resentment, on a certain construal, to God, though for other reasons. See Anne C. Minas "God and Forgiveness." *Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (Apr. 1975): 145-7.

74. As Joel Green and Steve Chalke do. See Joel B. Green, "Must We Imagine the Atonement in Penal Substitutionary Terms?" Questions, Caveats and a Plea," in *The Atonement Debate: Papers From the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, eds. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.), 159-64; Steve Chalke, "The Redemption of the Cross," in *The Atonement Debate: Papers From the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, eds. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 39-42. Their claims here are based primarily on exegetical grounds. For some analyses of the biblical texts that yields a contrary conclusion, that is, that God is indeed angry at human wrongdoing, see I. Howard Marshall, "The Theology of the Atonement," in *The Atonement Debate: Papers From the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, eds. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.), 50-5; Richard Gaffin, "Atonement in the Pauline Corpus," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 150-6. See also the comments on God's wrath in L.J. Kreitzer, "Eschatology," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 262.

reaction to wrongdoing (sin) in at least some circumstances. All things being equal, in at least some cases in which we are wronged by others the appropriateness of anger as a moral reaction is intuitive. If our wrongdoing is directed at God, then it is not clear why God would not properly be angry at us in response. It is, after all, a serious matter to wrong God, the first and most valuable being in the universe, who has graciously granted us existence.

Even when wrongdoing is not directed against us, anger as a moral reaction to wrongdoing does not always seem out of place in virtuous persons. Consider, for example, the moral outrage that many have at the actions of serial rapists whom they have never personally come into contact with. This outrage seems quite appropriate. So, even *if* we humans do not wrong God, God may still be appropriately angry at the wrongs we perpetrate against others.

That being said, the concept of forgiveness argued for here involves an overcoming of anger over wrongs done *against the one forgiving*. Some may be inclined to think that the notion of “wronging God” is incoherent, for, plausibly, God *qua* God (setting aside relevant issues surrounding the incarnation) cannot be harmed or injured.⁷⁵ While this suggestion that God cannot be harmed or injured may be true, though one who, say, thinks that God genuinely grieves over the damage done by human wrongdoing may construe God’s emotional distress as a sort of harm, it need not be debated here. For, there seems to be a sense, at least on the moral ontology assumed in this paper, in which our wrongdoing is directed at God, even if not in a way that harms or injures God. On this view (this form of divine command theory, that is), our moral obligations are constituted by God’s commands. So, a refusal to live up to one’s moral obligations seems to be a refusal to submit to God’s authority, rightfully had in virtue of, at least,

75. See Minas “God and Forgiveness.” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 148-9.

being the metaphysical ground of moral goodness (not to mention everything else⁷⁶). So, then, to do wrong by violating one's moral obligations is, as a refusal to submit to God's rightful authority, directed at God in at least this way.

Human failure to be virtuous can also plausibly be construed as human moral wrongdoing directed, in a sense, at God. According to Steven Porter, God has given us "the highest good bar none," that is, "the opportunity for loving relationship with himself."⁷⁷ Furthermore, he suggests that we understand "life in friendship with God to be inexorably linked to the virtuous life."⁷⁸ So, to fail at being virtuous is thus to reject God, to push God out of one's life.⁷⁹ This seems right. Plausibly, God, being perfectly good, cannot, all things being equal, tolerate being in a life of friendship with vicious people.

These claims that all wrongdoing is, in some sense, directed at God allay worries that God cannot forgive, either rightfully or in any sense, all sin.⁸⁰ Instances in which Jones' brother forgives him for capriciously punching his classmate are not analogous to instances in which God forgives Jones for capriciously punching his classmate. In the first case, Jones did not wrong his brother (or so let us stipulate), but in the second case Jones' wrong was, in a sense, directed at God as well as at his classmate. In this latter case, then, at least two people can rightfully forgive Jones, that is, God and his classmate, and Jones should probably seek forgiveness from both. In the former case, Jones' brother plausibly cannot forgive him for what

76. Consider the first point made by Murphy in Murphy, *Getting Even*, 91.

77. Porter, "Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," *Faith and Philosophy*, 235.

78. *Ibid.*, 240 fn35.

79. *Ibid.*

80. See, for example, John Gingell, "Forgiveness and Power," *Analysis* 34, no. 6 (Jun., 1974): 180-3; Minas "God and Forgiveness." *Philosophical Quarterly*, 148-9.

he has done.

Interesting epistemic issues do arise here, however. As Porter notes, some may point out that those who are ignorant of wrongdoing in general being in any sense directed at God cannot be culpable for wronging God.⁸¹ This *may* be true in some cases, though, as Porter also notes, the persons who are in this position must be nonculpably ignorant.⁸² However, sorting the levels and forms of particular individuals' culpability in wrongdoing is probably an issue best left in the hands of God. It seems likely that everyone who has some sense of a transcendent moral order, that is, one not just created by humans, that has a claim on their lives, which, this author would wager, is most of us, and does not live up to the requirements of that order is culpable before God for wronging God (from here on out, when God is said to be "wronged" it should be understood in one and/or the other sense described above). In any case, it does not follow from the fact that there may be those who nonculpably wrong God that God is unjustified in being angry at at least some human wrongdoing, all ultimately directed against God.

Returning to the broader question of whether the conception of forgiveness outlined above is an accurate picture of divine forgiveness, it should be noted that this understanding of forgiveness fits readily with the collection of assumptions about God's nature made explicit above, namely that God is not simple, impassible, timeless or strongly immutable. The picture of God these assumptions paint makes God out to be able to have dynamic interactions, including emotional interactions, with human beings over time. On this picture, God's emotions can be occasioned in various different ways at different times by the actions of humans. Thus, at one time God can be angry at person X for wrong Y, and at a later time God can forgive (i.e., cease to

81. Porter, "Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," *Faith and Philosophy*, 240 fn35.

82. *Ibid.*

be angry at) *X* for reason *Z*.

Anne Minas, however, objects to this sort of picture. According to her, given God's omniscience, that is, his perception of everything, God always fully perceives all situations at all times. Moreover, "In perceiving situations, he knows them in a way in which they are fully real to him, meaning that he reacts...with all appropriate feelings. Then, to be omniscient is to have all reactions to all situations equally vivid, regardless of when they happen."⁸³ Thus, even if God is in time, a "dimming of feeling" is impossible on God's part.⁸⁴ So, God cannot literally overcome anger, that is, forgive.

Omniscience, however, is not one of the attributes typically predicated of God. Perhaps Minas takes it that this attribute is somehow implied by divine omniscience, or perhaps divine timelessness. If the latter, then this objection need not be considered any further given the assumption of divine temporality taken here. Moreover, since Minas thinks that her objection applies even if God is in time, she probably does not think this. If the former, then this objection *may* have some weight. However, granting, for the sake of argument, that God perceives things in some sense, it is not at all clear that God, being in time, can perceive all situations in God's life "equally vividly." Presumably, God's omniscience entails perfect memory, including memories of what emotions God felt in times past, and perfect prescience, including beliefs about what emotions God will feel at future times, but, since God is in time, some argument against the *prima facie* plausible position that God only *perceives* what is presently occurring seems in order. Given presentism, there is literally no future or past to perceive, and it seems that

83. Minas "God and Forgiveness." *Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (Apr. 1975): 145. Presumably, Minas is referring to situations in the actual world in this quote.

84. *Ibid.*

the A-Theory of time, married with presentism, is the *prima facie* default position on time.⁸⁵

Thus, if omnipercipience is to be claimed to be an attribute of God that makes his overcoming of anger impossible, then more argumentation is needed in order to justify the claim that God is indeed omnipercipient.

If God only perceives what is presently occurring, then his emotions are plausibly primarily occasioned by what is happening *now*. They will certainly be conditioned by what God remembers and foreknows, such that, for example, God may be angry at Sally for *presently* being in the state of having sinned, a perception that is conditioned by God's memory. Furthermore, even though God may have joy over the foreknown fact that there will eventually be a justifying reason to forgive Sally (in this hypothetical scenario one will obtain, though it has not done so yet), God will not yet overcome God's anger at her, or so it would seem. Plausibly, God would not overcome God's anger at Sally until the morally justifying reason for doing so obtained. So, despite God's omniscience, and in the absence of some reason to accept the doctrine of divine omnipercipience, God can, seemingly, be angry at someone for wronging God at one time and overcome it at a later time for some justifying reason.

Divine Forgiveness: Conclusion

So, then, forgiveness for God appears to be the same, or roughly the same, as forgiveness for human beings. When God forgives, God overcomes God's anger at particular persons or groups for a wrong or set of wrongs that they have perpetrated against God, and God does so for

85. See the discussion in Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 379-389. This author takes the A-Theory of time to be the *prima facie* default position on time because of our universal experience of temporal becoming, as do Craig and Moreland. Moreover, this author takes presentism to be the *prima facie* default position on the existence of temporal entities because of how counterintuitive the notion is that we are 4-dimensional space-time worms. We seem to have, or at least this author has, the intuition that "All of me (not just a temporal slice of the totality of me, like a slice of a loaf of bread) is present."

some morally justifying reason or other, depending on the context. This conclusion is grounded in the claim that we should understand our concepts as applying to God as they are unless we have some reason to think otherwise, and, in this case, no such reason has so far been forthcoming. With this in mind, Stump and Boyd's objections to the penal substitution theory of the atonement will now be assessed.

Penal Substitution Revisited

Objection 1 Considered

Recall, first, the objection that if God "exacts" the debt God is owed by those who have wronged God prior to, after, or simultaneously with "forgiving" them, either from the offending party or by a substitute, then God does not really forgive. Again, to forgive, says Stump, is "to fail to exact all that is in justice due" from those who are in moral debt to their victims in virtue of wronging them.⁸⁶ As we have seen, however, this is not what forgiveness is.⁸⁷ To repeat, forgiveness, in short, is the overcoming of vindictive passions for a moral reason. Perhaps as a corollary of true forgiveness the forgiver will not require the forgiven to satisfy any moral debt he/she has toward the forgiver. However, this is not necessarily so. If Joe allows his friend Jim to borrow his laptop, which Jim subsequently smashes to pieces with a hammer, Joe *may* properly forgive Jim *and*, seemingly, still insist that he pay for the broken laptop (which would seem to be Jim's moral debt to Joe, or at least part of it, for intentionally destroying Joe's property).

Similarly, *if* we have a penal debt to God in virtue of our sin (or, in other words, if we

86. Stump, *Aquinas*, 428. Ward makes essentially the same point. See Ward, *Ethics and Christianity*, 241.

87. Stump's definition of forgiveness seems to be modeled after a conception properly pertaining to the economic sphere. See Griswold, *Forgiveness*, xviii.

deserve punishment in virtue of our sins), then, perhaps, God *may* justifiably forgive us and still insist, and bring it about, that punishment for our sins be exacted, even if from a penal substitute. Moreover, if this is so, then perhaps God *may* even properly consider the exaction of the punishment we have earned from a penal substitute the morally justifying reason, or at least part of one, to forgive us of our sins, which is precisely what the penal substitution view claims.⁸⁸ If these things are so, then Stump and Boyd's complaint that the penal substitution theory does not actually involve God forgiving us of our sins is out of place. On the theory God justifiably overcomes his anger towards us (i.e. forgives us) on, at least in part, the basis of Christ being our penal substitute.

Now, the question of whether or not this basis is actually a justifying reason, or at least a part of one, for God to forgive us remains. If the answer is "No," then Stump and Boyd's first objection still goes through. If what the penal substitution theory claims is God's reason to forgive, or at least a part of it, does not actually morally justify God's overcoming of anger towards us for our sin, then the theory does not actually portray God as forgiving. Forgiveness, again, is the overcoming of anger *for a morally justifying reason*. Overcoming anger is not forgiveness without such a moral dimension. However, this remaining question seems to be answerable in the affirmative. Consider the following.

Porter has argued, as follows, that we sinners do, in fact, deserve physical and spiritual death because of our sin, as well as that there is great moral worth in God exacting the punishment due us from Christ in our stead. According to him, retributive punishment is punishment that is not justified on the basis of the consequences of the punishment, but rather on the basis of the inherent appropriateness of the punishment in virtue of the wrong it is a response

88. See above.

to.⁸⁹ More precisely, it is “the forcible withdrawal of certain rights and/or privileges from a wrongdoer in response to the intentional misuse of those rights and/or privileges by the wrongdoer.”⁹⁰ Though retributive punishment may not be morally required as a response to every single instance of wrongdoing,⁹¹ it at least seems morally permissible.⁹² For example, “if you loan me your car and I intentionally crash it, it would seem that not only do you have the right to demand that I pay for the damages..., but you also have the right to withhold from me the privilege of borrowing your car again.”⁹³ Moreover, it seems justifiable that the wife of an unrepentant adulterous husband kick him out of the house, at least for a while. She can rightfully withdraw her husband’s “rights and privilege of family life” in response to his abuse of them, even if she is not obligated to do so.⁹⁴

Furthermore, retributive punishment is not only permissible, but good to exact in some cases. For, it “takes the harm done with due moral seriousness,” “treats the wrongdoer as a responsible moral agent,” “expresses the value of the victim as well as the value of the personal relationship involved” and can give the wrongdoer an opportunity to appreciate the moral gravity of his/her action(s).⁹⁵ Passing over punishment has the potential to trivialize the harm,

89. Porter, “Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics*, 238-9 fn12. See also Jonathan Jacobs, “Luck and Retribution,” *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 74, no. 190 (Oct., 1999): 535-55.

90. Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 234.

91. Porter, “Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics*, 239 fn13.

92. *Ibid.*, 238-9; Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 233-4.

93. Porter, “Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics*, 238.

94. Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 234.

95. *Ibid.*

wrongdoer, victim and relationship. The avoidance of this plausibly renders retributive punishment a good action in at least some circumstances.⁹⁶

Now, we sinners have abused the rights and privileges of “earthly human life,” including the opportunity of “eternal friendship” with God, all of which God in grace has granted us, and so “deserve the divine punishment of physical and spiritual death.”⁹⁷ Moreover, given the goods that retributive punishment secures, there is “great moral worth” in God in exacting our due punishment from us, for it would avoid trivializing sin, us as morally responsible agents, God and “the divine/ human relationship.”⁹⁸ However, if God undergoes punishment Godself in Christ in our stead, then God can secure all of the goods realized by the exaction of retributive punishment *in addition* to the good of showing mercy to us sinners in not requiring us to undergo our own punishment.⁹⁹

So Porter’s argument goes. His train of thought seems quite plausible. It provides a model of retributive punishment,¹⁰⁰ a picture of our moral standing before God and an account of the moral worth of Christ’s substitutionary death in our place that apparently gives the penal substitution view moral coherence. He seems correct in saying, “The goodness of [Christ’s]

96. Ibid., 234-5; Porter, “Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics*, 239-40.

97. Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 235. In other words, we deserve the removal of these rights and privileges, which we have abused.

98. Ibid. See also Porter, “Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics*, 240-2.

99. Porter, “Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics*, 242-3. See also Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 237.

100. Though one might object to his understanding of retributive punishment, at the very least Porter offers a model of some sort of punishment. For *some* alternative views of retribution, see Marshall, “The Theology of the Atonement,” in *The Atonement Debate*, 56-7; Oliver D. Crisp, “The Logic of Penal Substitution Revisited,” in *The Atonement Debate: Papers From the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, eds. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.), 209-212.

punishment...is seen in that Christ's going to the cross *for our sins* takes sinners and their sin with utter seriousness and objectively reexpresses the value of the Godhead in response to the devaluing of the Godhead expressed by human sin."¹⁰¹ More to the point, however, Porter's argumentation seems to show that Christ's substitutionary death on our behalf is plausibly a morally appropriate reason for God to ground God's overcoming of God's anger at us for our sins in, that is, it is a properly motivating reason for God to forgive us (at least in part-see below). Stump and Boyd's first objection, then, is unsuccessful. It is not the case that the penal substitution theory does not actually involve divine forgiveness.

Objection 2 Considered

Their second objection is, essentially, that the idea that God needs "appeasement," or to have the moral "accounts" balanced, before forgiving impugns the character of God. However, it is not clear that this accusation is accurate. Forgiveness just *is* the overcoming of vindictive passions for a morally appropriate reason, and it has been argued that it is appropriate that God be angry at human sin and that God overcome God's anger towards us on the basis of Christ's substitutionary death in our place. If Boyd insists on describing this picture as pagan, magical and primordial, then so be it. That is not so much an argument against penal substitution as, seemingly, an expression of disdain towards it.

Further, *contra* Stump, the penal substitution view does not make God out to lack concern for the character development of God's creatures. On the view it is the Father, Son and Spirit that collectively plan and carry out (in their respective roles) Christ's work *out of love* for

101. Porter, "Dostoyevski, Woody Allen, and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," in *Contending with Christianity's Critics*, 243.

the salvation of sinners.¹⁰² It is no part of this paper to claim that salvation is limited to God's forgiveness of sinners, predicated on Christ's substitutionary sacrifice.¹⁰³ One of the goals of salvation, at least as it is typically conceived of in Christian theology, is *sanctification*.¹⁰⁴ The penal substitution theory does nothing to rule this aspect of salvation out. The two concerns of "balancing of moral accounts" and the character development of sinners do not seem to be mutually exclusive, and Stump offers no reason to think that God cannot be concerned with both. Stump and Boyd's second objection, then, is also unsuccessful.

Objection 3 Considered

The third objection, which is solely Boyd's,¹⁰⁵ is that the penal substitution theory portrays God in a way that is at odds with other portrayals of God in Scripture. First, the idea that God conditions God's forgiveness on meeting out punishment, albeit on a substitute, is, Boyd thinks, inconsistent with God in Christ's teaching to forgive unconditionally. Second, God is portrayed in places in Scripture as forgiving without needing his wrath appeased, *contra* the picture of God penal substitution gives. Given these apparent inconsistencies, the God of penal substitution cannot be the God of the Bible, or so it seems to Boyd.

102. *Ibid.*, 236; Marshall, "The Theology of the Atonement," in *The Atonement Debate*, 62; Richard Gaffin, "Atonement in the Pauline Corpus," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole*, 157-6. One might wonder whether God can simultaneously love and be angry at us, as Chalke seems to in Chalke, "The Redemption of the Cross," in *The Atonement Debate: Papers From the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, 42. There does not seem to be any reason to think that God cannot do so, however. It is not obvious that even we humans cannot simultaneously love and be angry at someone, but even if we cannot, some powerful argument seems to be required to think that God cannot do so. After all, God's cognitive capacities are far greater than ours.

103. Nor does this paper claim that the *atonement* is limited to its penal substitutionary aspects.

104. Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 648-9.

105. Though others have raised it. See, for example, Green, "Must We Imagine the Atonement in Penal Substitutionary Terms?" Questions, Caveats and a Plea," in *The Atonement Debate*, 160-1.

To take these issues out of order, the second component of this objection seems to be confused. If forgiveness just *is* the overcoming of vindictive passions for a moral reason, as has been argued, then God never forgives without having his wrath “appeased.” Though it *may* be the case that God forgives in nonstandard ways at times, these instances would not undermine the overall picture of divine forgiveness as the overcoming of anger for a moral reason being put forward here.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps Boyd’s objection here could be enhanced by being slightly altered to say that there are instances in Scripture where God is portrayed as forgiving without exacting *punishment* from anyone, assuming there are some, which would seem to contradict how the penal substitution theory portrays God. This adjustment seems to give this worry more bite, but, in the end, it does not seem to be insurmountable. For, it is open to the defender of penal substitution to say that no one is ultimately forgiven of all sin except on the basis of Christ’s atoning work.

Now, perhaps not everyone requires *conscious knowledge* of Christ’s work in order to reap this benefit of divine forgiveness from it. Plausibly, God conditions his forgiveness of our sin on not only Christ’s atoning work on our behalf, *but also* our appropriation of it. Otherwise, it would seem that everyone would be automatically forgiven in virtue of Christ’s atonement, which does not appear to be the vision of the New Testament. This appropriation is probably through repentance and faith, for these are repeatedly mentioned as conditions of salvation in the New Testament.¹⁰⁷ However, God *may* forgive sinners in response to appropriate repentance and faith, *even where there is not conscious knowledge of Christ or his work.*¹⁰⁸ In other words, some

106. See the discussion of cases of forgiveness not involving the overcoming of vindictive passions above.

107. See, for example, Acts 2:14-41; 13:16-41; 16:25-34; 17:22-31; 26:9-23.

108. That being said, if this does happen, then, presumably, those whom God forgives in this way will be expected by God to accept Christ’s substitutionary death on their behalf once they become consciously aware of it, either in this life or the next.

form of inclusivism may be true.¹⁰⁹ A further exploration of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems to be a live option that makes sense of instances in Scripture in which God forgives and accepts those who know nothing of Christ's atoning work, and there is no punishment in sight.¹¹⁰

The first component of Boyd's objection, that is, the worry that penal substitution makes God out to forgive on different terms than he commands of us, seems misplaced as well. We who know God are in the position of having been graciously forgiven much by God,¹¹¹ who desires us to be reconciled to God as well as to each other.¹¹² As Roberts argues, this reality will prompt gratitude to God and empathy for others in similar situations (that is, of needing forgiveness) in those with a properly formed character, properly motivating a forgiving disposition.¹¹³ As Jesus likewise taught in Matthew 18:23-35, though not in as much philosophical detail, only vicious persons would not be so moved. Thus the reason, or part of it, at least, for God in Christ to command us to forgive those who wrong us.¹¹⁴ As Paul instructed, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."¹¹⁵

It has been argued that there is no one morally sufficient reason to forgive in all circumstances. In God's case, it has been argued that Christ's substitutionary death in our place is plausibly at least part of a morally appropriate reason for God to ground God's forgiveness of

109. For some further discussion of inclusivism, see John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation Into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 215-280.

110. Assuming there are such instances. Boyd only cites a parable.

111. Col 1:13-14.

112. 2 Cor 5:14-21.

113. Roberts, "Forgivingness," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 298-9.

114. Mt 18:21-22.

115. Eph 4:32 NIV

our sins in. In our case, God's command to forgive, motivated by, at least in part, our standing before God as forgiven, is a properly motivating reason to forgive. So, Boyd's third objection is unsuccessful as well.

A Final Problem

All this being said, one might backtrack and call into question whether or not Christ's substitutionary death on our behalf really is, in whole or in part, a morally appropriate reason for God to forgive human sin. After all, it has seemed to many that it is either unjust or otherwise problematic to exact punishment from an innocent person instead of a guilty party.¹¹⁶ If this is so, then God could not rightly forgive us on this basis. So, the penal substitution view still seems to be in trouble.

In response to this worry, however, Porter seems to have another compelling case. He makes three points. First, there is nothing logically impossible in the notion of punishing an innocent party in place of a guilty party. Second, doing so is not unjust if the substitute is willing and fully informed. Third, the securing of the goods which would motivate the punishment on Porter's view is still possible in some instances wherein a substitute takes on the punishment.¹¹⁷ Moreover, "the victim, within limits, has the freedom to decide to what extent and in what manner to inflict punishment," and there does not seem to be a reason to think that this freedom

116. See, for example, Porter, "Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," *Faith and Philosophy*, 236; Green, "Must We Imagine the Atonement in Penal Substitutionary Terms?" Questions, Caveats and a Plea," in *The Atonement Debate*, 160-1; Crisp, "The Logic of Penal Substitution Revisited," in *The Atonement Debate*, 222-223; Stump, *Aquinas*, 428; Ward, *Ethics and Christianity*, 240-241. David Lewis has argued that we are actually double-minded on the matter. See David Lewis, "Do We Believe in Penal Substitution?" *Philosophical Papers* 26, no. 3 (Nov. 1, 1997): 203-9.

117. Porter, "Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," *Faith and Philosophy*, 236.

does not include “accepting a penal substitute.”¹¹⁸ So, given that Christ voluntarily dies on the cross in our place, that God considers Him so doing as taking on our due punishment¹¹⁹ and that, as argued above, this action secures the goods motivating the punishment, Christ’s substitutionary death on our behalf does not seem unjust, pointless or otherwise problematic.¹²⁰ Porter appears to be on track again. Thus, this final issue does not derail the above argumentation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, it seems that Boyd and Stump’s objections to the moral plausibility of the penal substitution theory of the atonement that involve the concept of forgiveness are unsuccessful. That is not to say that all moral objections to the theory have been dealt with, though some related issues, such as retributive punishment, have been touched on. Nor is that to say that penal substitution is the most exegetically or theologically plausible theory of the atonement there is, or that it is the only dynamic to Christ’s atoning work. In regard to this last point, and to borrow someone else’s phrase, the atonement may very well be like a diamond, sparkling with many facets.¹²¹ All that has been argued here is that Boyd and Stump have not shown that penal substitution is not one of those facets, at least with their particular objections considered here.

118. Ibid.

119. Even though, perhaps, our “deservingness of punishment” is not transferred to Christ.

120. Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 237.

121. This author has heard this phrase on the lips of more than one person, but is not sure where it originated.

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