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# What Third-Party Forgiveness Has to Offer

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### Abstract

There are strong moral reasons to acknowledge that third parties can have the standing to forgive. Third-party refusals to forgive can reinforce the moral agency and value of women and disrupt the gendering of forgiveness. Third-party forgiveness can also be crucial for restorative justice aims, like recognizing the value of wrongdoers. Lastly, many victim-only accounts of forgiveness are problematic and utilize an individualistic conception of the self that reinforces the logic of misogyny. Victim-only accounts of forgiveness can also restrict focus to the victim's suffering, thereby neglecting the importance of healing and the relevance of third-party forgiveness for facilitating healing.

### Résumé

Il existe de solides raisons morales de reconnaître que les tiers peuvent pardonner. Les refus de pardonner d'une tierce personne peuvent renforcer la valeur et l'agentivité morale des femmes et remettre en question les idées sexistes sur le pardon. Le pardon par un tiers peut également contribuer aux objectifs de justice réparatrice. De nombreux récits de pardon concernant uniquement la victime utilisent une conception individualiste du soi qui renforce la logique de la misogynie ou limitent l'attention à la souffrance de la victime, négligeant ainsi l'importance de la guérison et la pertinence du pardon d'une tierce partie pour la guérison.

**Keywords:** third-party forgiveness; gendered forgiveness; moral repair; restorative justice; feminist philosophy; normative ethics

## 1. Introduction

A prominent issue that arises around forgiveness is whether the victim has the exclusive standing to forgive. In defence of the victim's exclusive standing to forgive,

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some argue that wrongdoing creates a moral debt that only the victim can alleviate (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Swinburne, 1989). Others argue that only the victim can feel strong moral emotions like resentment, anger, or hatred in response to a wrongdoing (Benn, 1996; Murphy, 1988). Forgiveness on these accounts involves overcoming moral emotions like resentment that only the victim can have, which means that only the victim can forgive. Others argue that only a victim bears the full costs of a wrongdoing and thus only victims should have the standing to forgive (Walker, 2013). Most accounts of victim-only forgiveness allow for a diverse understanding of who counts as a victim, like secondary or tertiary victims who have lessening degrees of connection to the wrongdoing but are nonetheless victims. A secondary victim, for instance, could be the parent of someone directly harmed by gun violence, and tertiary victims could be the surrounding community that feels the broader effects of that violence (MacLachlan, 2017). What is crucial for victim-only accounts of forgiveness, though, is that one *must* fall under the category of ‘victim,’ be it primary, secondary, or tertiary victimhood, in order to forgive. If one is positioned to refuse or offer forgiveness, it is because one is a victim in some capacity.

Against victim-only accounts of forgiveness, some argue that there are strong moral reasons to acknowledge that sometimes third parties — those indirectly connected to the wrongdoing through a relationship with a primary party — can have the standing to forgive (MacLachlan, 2017; Norlock, 2009; Pettigrove, 2009). While victim-only accounts of forgiveness argue that one must have victim-status in order to forgive, proponents of third-party forgiveness argue that one’s relationship to a primary party — *regardless* of one’s victim status — can be sufficient to enable one to offer or refuse forgiveness. Here it’s important to distinguish secondary and tertiary victims from third parties. While a secondary or tertiary victim’s standing to forgive is also based on a relationship to a primary party — like suffering from the harm caused to a loved one — it is argued that secondary or tertiary victims only have the standing to forgive insofar as their relationship to the primary party causes them to be morally harmed by the wrongdoing. Conversely, third parties can have the standing to forgive regardless of whether they have experienced moral harm from a wrongdoing. For Alice MacLachlan, a third-party can have the standing to forgive if that person is connected to a primary party via a relationship of moral solidarity, whereby one is morally, emotionally, and intellectually engaged with the experience and moral interests of a primary party (MacLachlan, 2017). The idea here is that other kinds of relationships with a primary party — not just a relationship that grants one secondary or tertiary victim status — can enable one to forgive.

For proponents of third-party forgiveness, then, it is possible to forgive or refuse forgiveness from outside of the perspective of victimization. What distinguishes the forgiveness of third parties from the forgiveness of secondary or tertiary victims is the focus of the gesture around forgiveness. If the focus of one’s forgiveness or refusal to forgive is the harm one experienced in virtue of one’s relationship to a primary party — like refusing to forgive for the pain one feels from losing a loved one to gun violence — then one is approaching forgiveness as a victim. Conversely, third-party forgiveness is centred around the experience of a primary party — like refusing to forgive a friend’s abuser based on the harm caused to that friend. Of course, a third-party offer or refusal of forgiveness can be morally problematic,

especially when one lacks a relation of moral solidarity to a primary party (MacLachlan, 2017; Norlock, 2009). Though, while some gestures of third-party forgiveness or refusals to forgive can be inappropriate or morally bad, most proponents of third-party forgiveness argue that there are nonetheless good moral reasons to acknowledge that third-party forgiveness is at least *possible* — that is, it is possible to approach forgiveness in a way that does not centre oneself as a victim.

In this article, I augment the position that we have strong moral reasons to acknowledge the possibility of third-party forgiveness and to reject victim-only accounts of forgiveness. First, I argue that third-party refusals to forgive can be significant for reinforcing the moral agency and value of women and for challenging gendered conceptions of forgiveness. Second, I argue that third-party forgiveness can serve the aims of restorative justice that highlight the need to recognize the inherent value of wrongdoers in processes of moral repair. Third-party refusals or offers of forgiveness can be significant for our moral and social justice aims, then, but the force of these gestures can only be realized if we recognize that third-party forgiveness is possible. In Sections four and five, I offer reasons why we should reject victim-only accounts of forgiveness. I argue that many victim-only accounts of forgiveness are founded upon a hyper-individualistic conception of the self that reinforces the logic of misogyny. Lastly, I argue that even victim-only accounts of forgiveness that are not hyper-individualistic are problematic for focusing too narrowly on the victim's experience of harm, thereby neglecting the victim's agency to heal, the moral significance of healing, and the distinct role that third-party forgiveness can play in facilitating healing.

## 2. Gendered Forgiveness and Third-Party Refusals to Forgive

One of the most compelling moral reasons for recognizing that third-party forgiveness is possible is that third-party *refusals* to forgive can be a powerful way to affirm the value of the victim, and the full efficacy of this gesture requires recognizing that third parties *can* forgive and thus withhold forgiveness (MacLachlan, 2017, p. 148). Indeed, if we fail to acknowledge that third parties can forgive, we commit ourselves to saying that third-party refusals to forgive should not be taken seriously. In this section, I argue that third-party refusals to forgive should be taken seriously, as this gesture can play an important role in affirming the value and moral interests of women as a social group and for challenging gendered conceptions of forgiveness.

Let me begin by explaining why forgiveness is gendered. Research in social psychology that analyzes forgiveness in interpersonal relationships reveals that two qualities are predictive of a victim's willingness to forgive for interpersonal harm: empathy and trait forgivingness (Green et al., 2008, p. 409). Empathy and trait forgivingness are measured by self-reporting tests that score levels of emotional investment in others' wellbeing and willingness to forgive in general (Green et al., 2008, p. 410). The higher someone scores on empathy and trait forgivingness, the more likely that person is to report forgiveness for an interpersonal offence (Green et al., 2008, p. 411). This means that those who are more likely to develop empathy and trait forgivingness will be more likely to forgive for interpersonal harm.

MacLachlan suggests that women might be more likely to forgive because women are more likely socialized to be empathetic and prioritize relationship maintenance over their needs and feelings (MacLachlan, 2009a). This research on forgiveness confirms that gendered qualities like empathy do in fact predict willingness to forgive, so women are more likely to forgive when the victim of interpersonal harm.

One major issue with the gendering of forgiveness is that a gender disparity in willingness to forgive can exacerbate gender inequality, especially when considering the issue of intimate violence. Since women are more likely to be the victims of intimate violence (Kaur & Garg, 2008), women are *doubly* at risk of being more likely to experience intimate violence *and* to forgive their abusers too quickly. The problem with forgiving too quickly is that doing so can undermine the crucial process of holding an abuser accountable. Lack of enforced accountability in intimate violence situations can lead to cycles of abuse that threaten the victim's life, wellbeing, autonomy, and perception of self-worth. The gendering of forgiveness can thus exacerbate gender inequality by making women particularly vulnerable to cycles of intimate violence that undermine their wellbeing, sense of value, and agency.

Though, while women are more likely to forgive when the victims of intimate violence, this research on forgiveness also reports that empathy and trait forgivingness scores are *not* correlated with third-party willingness to forgive (Green et al., 2008, p. 411). That is, *regardless* of empathy and trait forgivingness scores, third parties consistently reported being less willing to forgive than victims. The friend of a domestic abuse victim, for instance, will be less likely to forgive her friend's partner than the victim herself. This means that third-party refusals to forgive can be crucial for holding abusers accountable and disrupting cycles of abuse when victims forgive too easily. Additionally, as MacLachlan notes, when a victim's experience represents harm related to a broader social inequality, third-party refusals to forgive can be crucial for reinforcing the value of the group to which the victim belongs (MacLachlan, 2017, p. 146). Reinforcing the value of an abused woman who is vulnerable to being abused precisely because she is a woman thus challenges patriarchal hierarchies that devalue women and sanction gendered violence. In this way, third-party refusals to forgive can be crucial for affirming the value of women.

Notably, third-party refusals to forgive can also reinforce the agency of women and disturb gendered ideas of forgiveness. Since third parties are less likely to forgive regardless of empathy and trait forgivingness scores (Green et al., 2008), women may be better positioned to hold wrongdoers accountable and engage in broader processes of moral repair as a third party. Refusing forgiveness as a third party can thus be a significant way for women to express their moral agency. Recognizing the validity of women's refusal to forgive as a third-party can also challenge gendered ideas of forgiveness. As Kathryn Norlock states, forgiveness is "expected of women" (Norlock, 2009, p. 7). When women withhold forgiveness as a third party, they challenge the idea that women should be forgiving. Denying the possibility of third-party forgiveness undermines the legitimacy of third-party refusals to forgive, which consequently undermines an important expression of women's moral agency and a significant avenue for challenging gendered conceptions of forgiveness.

### 3. Third-Party Forgiveness and Wrongdoers

While holding abusers accountable and challenging gendered ideas of forgiveness is crucial for advancing the aims of gender equality, it is also important to hold wrongdoers accountable for their own sake. As moral agents, it is vital that our moral value is not contingent, i.e., that it cannot be nullified or weakened by certain circumstances. The abuse, exploitation, and withdrawn voting rights of prisoners is a salient example of what happens when a person's social and moral value becomes degraded in the aftermath of a wrongdoing (Dhami & Cruise, 2013; Weill & Haney, 2017). Certainly, if committing a wrong is enough to make one's value contingent on the ability to serve the good of the moral community, then the value of moral agents is contingent on being morally unflawed. In order to secure the unwavering value of moral agents, we should approach processes of moral repair through restorative justice frameworks that emphasize the need to hold wrongdoers accountable for their own sake and not just for the sake of the moral community (Strang & Braithwaite, 2001). Chronic abusers, for instance, should not be held accountable *just* for the sake of others but also for their own sake, so they can heal and develop more stable and fulfilling relationships.

Third-party forgiveness is relevant for enacting restorative justice frameworks during processes of moral repair because third-party forgiveness and refusals to forgive can play a crucial role in affirming the value and agency of wrongdoers. According to Norlock, sometimes wrongdoers cannot forgive themselves until the relevant third parties have forgiven them (Norlock, 2008). The inability to forgive oneself is a problem, as it can inspire shame that makes a person feel incapable of changing and unworthy of recovering, which can lead to alienation from the moral community when one fails to meet demands for moral repair (Norlock, 2008, p. 24). Self-forgiveness can be important, then, for a wrongdoer's moral agency and sense of worth, and sometimes self-forgiveness hinges on the forgiveness of third parties. Thus, third-party forgiveness can play a crucial and unique role in facilitating self-forgiveness and restoring a wrongdoer's sense of value and agency. Recognizing the value of wrongdoers during processes of moral repair thus involves recognizing that the emotional and psychological need for third-party forgiveness can be a valid and value-affirming part of the moral repair process.

Furthermore, third-party refusals to forgive can be a crucial part of holding wrongdoers accountable for their own sake. While I previously argued that forgiving too easily can be detrimental for victims, it can also be detrimental for wrongdoers. When we do not hold wrongdoers responsible, it signals to them that they lack agency because they are not responsible for and thus should not be held accountable for their actions. Accordingly, when victims forgive too quickly and do not hold wrongdoers accountable, this can undermine a wrongdoer's agency and impede moral repair for both victim and wrongdoer. Since third parties are less likely to forgive than victims (Green et al., 2008), third parties can be better positioned to withhold forgiveness, demand accountability, and thus reinforce the agency of wrongdoers when they are forgiven too easily (Norlock, 2008, p. 24). In this way, third-party refusals to forgive can play a vital role in reinforcing the agency of the wrongdoer, which is not only important for facilitating moral repair but also for recognizing the unwavering value of moral agents.

#### 4. Forgiveness and the Self

So far, I have only considered moral reasons to recognize that third parties can have the standing to forgive. Moving forward, I focus on why we should reject victim-only accounts of forgiveness. In this section, I consider Norlock's argument that most victim-only accounts of forgiveness are founded upon a hyper-individualistic, gendered conception of the self that does not align with moral reality (Norlock, 2009, p. 42). In doing so, I develop the argument that hyper-individualistic victim-only accounts of forgiveness reinforce the logic of misogyny. To begin, Norlock claims that traditional conceptions of forgiveness are based on Kantian ideas of the self as wholly individualistic, autonomous, and self-interested (Norlock, 2009, p. 17). On these accounts of forgiveness, only victims can forgive because only victims can have the kind of emotion (say, resentment) that one must transcend in order to forgive (i.e., Murphy, 1988). In this way, many victim-only accounts of forgiveness assume a conception of the self that is fundamentally self-interested and individualistic, as one can only incur strong moral reactions on one's own behalf. The idea here is that harm and repair occur strictly between individuals rather than in a web of social relations (Norlock, 2009, p. 45).

However, as Norlock argues, it is a mistake to think that the self is atomistic or that harm and repair occur solely between individuals. For Norlock, we are "selves-in-relation," individuals that are constituted by and embedded in our relations (Norlock, 2009, p. 41). For instance, we come to define ourselves as we relate to others positively, by seeing that we are like them, or negatively, by seeing that we are not (Norlock, 2009, pp. 43–44). Indeed, the relational self becomes clear when considering the extent to which our autonomy depends on the caregiving labour of others. Given that humans go through various stages of dependency throughout a typical lifecycle, be it when they are babies, children, or seniors, our capacity to be autonomous relies greatly on the caregiving labour of others (Fineman, 2008). As Martha Albertson Fineman argues, individualistic notions of autonomy isolate the human experience to a narrow stage of life when we are more autonomous and self-reliant; however, even in this stage of our lives, we are always vulnerable to becoming increasingly dependent on others in the event of injury or disablement (Fineman, 2008, p. 9). It's also worth noting that while the traditional individualistic notion of the self as autonomous and self-reliant does not accurately represent general human vulnerability, it is particularly exclusionary in failing to recognize the autonomy of disabled people who can require extra assistance in navigating a world made for able-bodied people. A more inclusionary and accurate approach to the self must recognize that our autonomy depends largely on the caregiving labour of those who not only help shape who we are but also help us realize varying degrees of independence throughout our lives.

This brings me to my main point, which is that hyper-individualistic conceptions of the self reinforce the logic of misogyny by invalidating the role and labour of caregivers (who are predominately women) in fostering one's self and autonomy. I borrow the logic of misogyny from Kate Manne. For Manne, misogyny stems from a moral distinction between *human beings* and *human givers* (Manne, 2019). While the *human being* is obligated to realize his humanity, the *human giver's*

humanity is a resource, something she must use to provide the *human being* with goods (sexual, moral, social) so that the *human being* can realize his humanity (Manne, 2019, pp. 486–491). In erasing the value and role of feminized labour in cultivating one's self and autonomy, hyper-individualistic conceptions of the self narrowly represent the experience and entitlement of the *human being* to the labour of the *human giver* and, in this way, reinforce the logic of misogyny. Thus, victim-only accounts of forgiveness that are grounded in hyper-individualistic conceptions of the self reinforce the logic of misogyny.

## 5. The Moral Significance of Healing

More work needs to be done to show that victim-only accounts of forgiveness are inadequate, since it is possible to have victim-only accounts of forgiveness that do not rely on atomistic conceptions of the self. Indeed, Margaret Urban Walker gives one such account. While Walker affirms that individuals are embedded in a web of social relations, she argues that third-party forgiveness is not the “the right way, descriptively or morally, to honor this insight” (Walker, 2013, p. 499). For Walker, third parties are relevant to processes of harm and repair not because they can forgive but because they “have key roles in affirming norms, sanctioning offenders, and vindicating victims” (Walker, 2013, p. 506). Third parties can thus engage in moral repair without giving or refusing forgiveness. It is important to give victims the sole standing to forgive, Walker argues, because “[o]nly a victim is left with the damage; that is what it is to be a victim, and that is at the core of the problem to which forgiving is a response” (Walker, 2013, p. 502). For Walker, to be a victim is to be alone in the distinct costs one must bear — costs that can remain even after there is reparation. Thus, only victims should be able to forgive (Walker, 2013).

Like many proponents of victim-only forgiveness, Walker places an emphasis on the victim's distinct experience of harm in arguing for the victim's exclusive standing to forgive. The problem with this, however, is that focusing too narrowly on one's status as a victim by only considering how one has been harmed (and not enough on how one can heal) can undermine one's agency. The reason that many sexual assault victims prefer to be called sexual assault *survivors* is because it is important to define them not by what others did to them but by their agency in overcoming it. Solely focusing on the experience of harm can risk branding someone as a mere victim rather than an agent who can heal and move on. Certainly, honouring victims requires not just looking at their suffering but also at their capacity and need to heal.

When we acknowledge the moral significance of healing, we open the space to consider the moral significance of third-party forgiveness for facilitating healing. In the social psychology research on forgiveness that I previously mentioned, the authors report that while victims and third parties state similar severity in recounting the details of a wrongdoing, victims often *perceive* the wrongdoing as less severe (Green et al., 2008, p. 414). While Walker is right that victims face distinct burdens, it's important to recognize that sometimes the victim's unique relation to the wrongdoing is epistemically disadvantageous (MacLachlan, 2008, p. 5). As the research shows, being a victim can indeed be epistemically disadvantageous because perceiving a wrongdoing as less severe can disrupt the victim's sense of worth or

impede demands for accountability. If third parties are often better positioned to see the full severity of harm caused to the victim, they are consequently better positioned to withhold forgiveness and thereby hold a wrongdoer accountable, affirm the value of the victim, and facilitate the process of healing.

One might object that third parties can support the victim's healing without having the standing to forgive by protesting the harm, demanding that the wrongdoer be held accountable, and providing emotional support for the victim. However, this account of the third party's role seems dangerously paternalistic. For instance, if a third party expresses discontent with the moral outcome of forgiveness, say, when the victim forgives too quickly and the wrongdoer does not take accountability, that third party is in some sense invalidating the victim's response by insinuating that the victim *should've* held the wrongdoer accountable. It thus seems like the third party intervenes as a moral referee who gives a penalty to the victim. MacLachlan quotes Martha Minow, who writes that "restoring dignity to victims ... should at a minimum involve respecting their own responses" (Minow in MacLachlan, 2009a, p. 195). When a third party intervenes, then, it should not be to pass judgement on the victim's response. In cases when a victim forgives too quickly, the kind of third-party interventions that Walker allows for can undermine the victim's response.

However, when third parties withhold forgiveness, their judgement situates *them* as the subject, *not* the victim. Recall that third parties are less willing to forgive *because* they are third parties (Green et al., 2008). When third parties refuse forgiveness, then, their decision reflects their unique position to the wrongdoing and situates them as the subject. If practicing third-party forgiveness well, a third party should say, 'I cannot forgive him, even if you do' instead of '*you* shouldn't forgive.' A third-party refusal to forgive may appear to undermine the victim's decision to forgive, but the point is that to respect the distinct agency/experience of all those involved in a wrongdoing, third-party evaluations of whether to forgive should situate the third party as the subject, not the victim. Moreover, the concern that sometimes third-party forgiveness can undermine the victim's experience merely indicates a need for further specification about appropriate boundaries around third-party forgiveness. Though I cannot explore the details of that here, I want to clarify that the need for boundaries around third-party forgiveness does not preclude the moral significance of recognizing that third-party forgiveness is possible.

Lastly, Walker wants third parties to be able to affirm the value of the victim, hold the wrongdoer accountable, and uphold social and moral norms, but having the power to forgive and thus withhold forgiveness may, in some circumstances, be the most salient way a third party can achieve these goals. As MacLachlan argues, when someone has a moral power, that person can enact moral change (MacLachlan, 2009b, p. 138). When someone has the moral power to forgive, for instance, that person can provide relief to the wrongdoer (MacLachlan, 2017). Thus, third parties can be significant to the process of moral repair when they have the power to offer or refuse forgiveness. If we care about the victim as an agent who deserves the support needed to heal, we should acknowledge the power that third-party refusals to forgive can have in facilitating healing.



## 6. Conclusion

If we fail to recognize that third parties can forgive, we commit ourselves to saying that third-party forgiveness should not be taken seriously. I have argued that we should take third-party forgiveness and refusals to forgive seriously, as these gestures can offer a unique contribution to our moral and social justice aims. Third-party forgiveness and refusals of forgiveness can play a crucial role in affirming the value and agency of women, challenging gendered ideas of forgiveness, and serving the principles of restorative justice that recognize the value of the wrongdoer in processes of moral repair. Conversely, many victim-only accounts of forgiveness are problematic and reinforce the logic of misogyny or restrict focus to the victim's experience of harm, thereby neglecting the moral importance of healing and the role that third-party forgiveness can play in facilitating healing. While there needs to be further discussion about what moral boundaries need to be placed around third-party forgiveness, there are nonetheless strong moral reasons to recognize that third-party forgiveness is possible.

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