Toward a Psychology of Divine Forgiveness: 2. Initial Component Analysis

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Although divine forgiveness has given rise to a small but growing body of empirical research, no attempt has been made to describe the processes involved when a person seeks divine forgiveness. The present article, therefore, sets out to identify the salient elements or "moving parts" in the human quest for divine forgiveness. Starting from the entry point of what triggers a person to seek divine forgiveness several steps are outlined culminating in the recalibration of behavior that can result from perceived forgiveness offered by a Supreme Being or Higher Power. The model integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions involved in the human experience of divine forgiveness. In addition, the relevance of this analysis for other fields of research in developmental, social, and clinical psychology is briefly illustrated. The article concludes by reiterating the heuristic goal of the model to stimulate research and acknowledging its need for revision as such research proceeds.

Keywords: divine forgiveness, God image, reconciliation, conditional forgiveness

Divine forgiveness (forgiveness by a Supreme Being or Higher Power) is emphasized in the world's longstanding religions (Lundberg, 2010) and is therefore relevant to some 5.8 billion people who profess a religious faith (Pew Research Center, 2012).[1] For example, the centrality of divine forgiveness is readily apparent in sacred texts of the three major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the Hebrew Bible, the prophet Daniel (9:9) notes, "The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him." Christians are instructed to "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians, 3:13). The Quran states, "O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for he is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful." (Sura, 39:53). Consequently, for the majority of the world population who profess a religious faith, divine forgiveness is no doubt a source of great comfort in everyday life, and for many of them, it is potentially a core feature of their lives.

The present article is the second in a two-part series. In the first paper, a review and critique of extant literature on divine forgiveness was offered in the service of identifying general directions for future research (Fincham, 2020). In the current article, we offer a model of the "moving parts" in the human quest for divine forgiveness that might provide an initial roadmap for future studies.

The Problem

Notwithstanding the case that can be made for understanding the role of divine forgiveness in human behavior, relatively little research has been conducted on this topic in the flourishing literature on forgiveness. This is perhaps surprising because early on in the emergence of research on forgiveness it was recognized that:

> "Most of the empirical treatments of forgiveness .... have tended to overlook the deep religious roots of the concept of forgiveness. This oversight is unfortunate, because basic research on forgiveness could probably be enriched considerably by examining the ways that religious traditions, beliefs, and rituals ... influence the common, earthly aspect of forgiveness" (McCullough & Worthington, 1999, p. 1143).

This astute observation, however, was honored more in the breach than in its observance.

The consequences of this oversight are apparent. Following our analysis of available empirical data on divine forgiveness in an initial paper, we concluded that research on divine forgiveness comprises "a scattered body of work that lacks coherence" (Fincham, 2020, p. 10). This analysis also noted that divine forgiveness was seldom the central focus of studies that reported relevant data which gives rise to "questions about the epistemological status of this inchoate literature" (Fincham, 2020, p. 10). This is because studies may simply capture variance that reflects religiosity rather than divine forgiveness, per se. Exacerbating such problems is the almost exclusive reliance on a single-item measure of divine forgiveness, usually "I know that God forgives me" (Fetzer Institute, 1999), which has been criticized on numerous grounds, including its failure to capture any emotional or behavioral aspects of forgiveness (e.g., Toussaint et al., 2012).

What Can Be Done?

In attempting to understand divine forgiveness there is the temptation to turn to philosophical and theological analyses. However, the concerns of philosophers and theologians tend to

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[1] Whether there is a secular analog of divine forgiveness and what form it might take is an open question. In our analysis, this issue is addressed when appropriate.

focus on ontology (e.g., when God forgives, what exactly does God do?). In contrast, the scientist does not focus on God's behavior. The subject matter is instead describing (and then later explaining) natural phenomena, in this case, human behavior concerning the perception/experience of divine forgiveness, including associated antecedents and immediate consequences. Thus, rather than focus on, for example, the philosophical question of the conditions under which God's forgiveness is morally appropriate (e.g., Warmke, 2017), a matter that is clearly up to God, the scientist might explore how a person's view of God as a moral agent impacts the conditions under which they seek divine forgiveness.

In sum, the task of scientists is to identify and study phenomena in the natural world. Observation and description are fundamental to this task and usually give rise to attempts to explain the phenomenon observed. This has not occurred in research on divine forgiveness. We know virtually nothing about when and how people decide that they need divine forgiveness or how they go about seeking such forgiveness. Nor do we know what processes lead people to conclude that they have been forgiven by God. And once divine forgiveness is perceived, how does it manifest in the perceiver's cognition, affect, and behavior? In short, we know very little about how divine forgiveness is perceived and experienced.

The present article, therefore, represents an attempt to identify the "moving parts" in the human quest for divine forgiveness.[2] In doing so, it also endeavors to point out why this is important not only to gain a better understanding of divine forgiveness, but also how this exercise can be informed by, and potentially enrich, other fields of psychological inquiry.

Learning From the Past

In setting out on this task it behooves one to learn from the evolution of research on forgiveness more generally. Scientific research on forgiveness emerged in the latter part of the 20th century. Only five studies on forgiveness were published prior to 1985, a circumstance attributed to the identification of forgiveness with theology (Fitzgibbons, 1986). Because forgiveness is a complex construct, considerable effort was expended initially on defining forgiveness and for several years debate raged on the nature of forgiveness. Although sometimes frustrating, this early debate was helpful and prevented premature closure in conceptualizing forgiveness and its measurement. By 2005, however, definitional controversy abated (Worthington et al., 2007) with broad acceptance of the idea that forgiveness entails a freely chosen motivational change in which the desire to seek revenge and/or to avoid contact with the transgressor is overcome.

Learning from this past experience, no attempt will be made in the present exercise to provide a formal definition of divine forgiveness or a definitive model of its operation in the human experience. Rather, our observations are guided by the following working definition offered in our initial paper, "Divine Forgiveness is perceived absolution for a transgression or sin from a Supreme Being or Higher Power that is manifest in the individual's cognition, affect, and/or behavior. Divine Forgiveness can occur in relation to one's sinful nature or in relation to individual transgressions/sins, though the topography of its manifestation may differ in each case (e.g., reduced shame may dominate the former and reduced guilt the latter). Although cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations of DF can be pervasive in the individual's life, they are especially likely to be evident in his or her

relationship with the Supreme Being or Higher Power (e.g., increased gratitude, reconciliation)." (Fincham, 2020, p. 14).

We believe that a formal definition will evolve from the debate as scholars turn to study divine forgiveness just as a definition of interpersonal forgiveness evolved as research on the topic grew. Rather than focus on definitions, the goal of this article is decidedly more modest, namely, to set forth something that may be of heuristic value in stimulating empirical research. Thus, what is offered is only one way to conceptualize the various factors relevant to understanding the human perception/experience of divine forgiveness and how they are related. This conceptualization is shown in the following flow chart (see Figure 1).

Working Through the Proposed "Moving Parts" of Divine Forgiveness

Entry Point

As shown in the schematic, the entry point immediately alerts us to something that appears to be unique about divine forgiveness, namely, that it can be sought in relation to a thought. This is not the case in interpersonal forgiveness, where typically forgiveness occurs only in relation to stated thoughts to another (words) or behaviors toward them (deeds).[3] Seeking divine forgiveness for thoughts is not surprising given many religious teachings. For example, Islam emphasizes "qalbin salîm" or a pure heart[4] and Christianity also refers to sin in the heart (e.g., Mathew, 5:28). However, the moral significance of mental events can vary across religions (Cohen & Rozin, 2001) and hence the status of thoughts as wrongs worthy of divine forgiveness is not indubitable.

Perceived Wrong

Because forgiveness only arises in relation to a perceived wrong, the initial thought, word, or deed needs to be viewed as a violation of the social order, moral order, or what Heider (1958) termed an "ought" ("what ought be done or experienced, independent of the individual's wishes," p. 219). Again, a new element is introduced when one considers divine forgiveness as a perceived wrong can occur in relation to religious beliefs/teachings. Indeed, perceived wrongs may be committed against God or in polytheistic belief systems against one or more Gods.

A wealth of factors is likely relevant to the perception of what is seen to be a wrongdoing, ranging from variations in upbringing through social values and mores in different cultures and subcultures to differences in various religious belief systems. The perceived wrong also may occur against people, against God(s), against nature, or against the cosmos. But how does the object of the harm perpetrated relate to divine forgiveness? We turn to this next.

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[2] Given the immense diversity of belief systems and cultures our analysis will necessarily be limited. For example, not all cultures or religions conceptualize God in relational terms, a viewpoint central to several parts of our analysis.

[3] Although it may be theoretically possible to engage in self-forgiveness in relation to one's own thoughts, this issue has not been raised in the self-forgiveness literature.

[4] At the end of a longer Hadith we read "Truly in the body there is a morsel of flesh which, if it be sound, all the body is sound and which, if it be diseased, all of it is diseased. Truly it is the heart."

Figure 1
Flow Chart for Divine Forgiveness
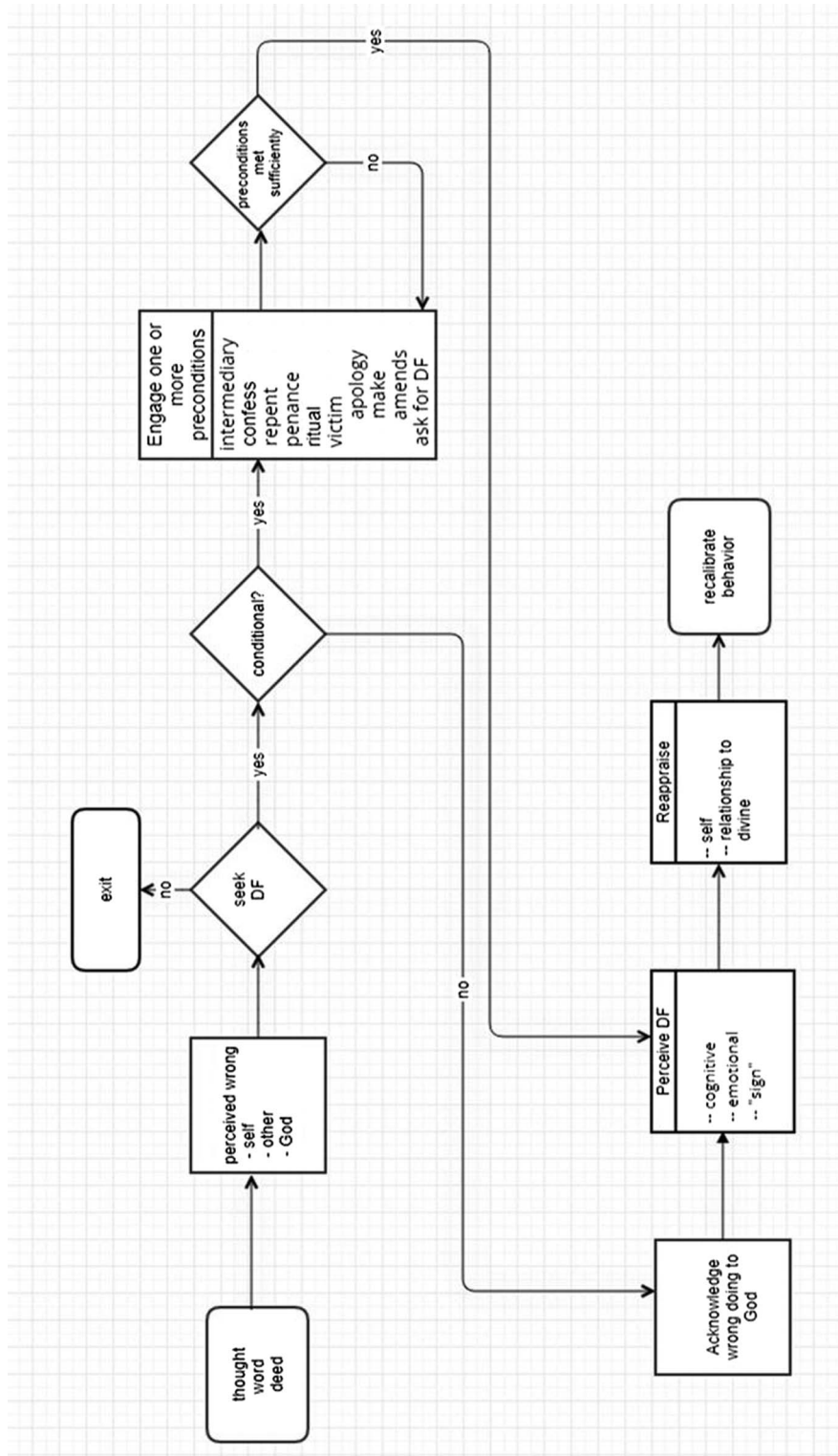
To Seek Divine Forgiveness: Decision Point 1

Once a wrong is perceived, the perceiver may choose to seek divine forgiveness. Whether they do so is likely to be determined by numerous factors. In addition to cultural and subcultural norms/values and the influence of close others (e.g., romantic partner, family members, religious community), perhaps the most obvious determinant is religious/spiritual beliefs. It would seem self-evident that an avowed atheist would not seek divine forgiveness.[5] Being a theist, however, does not guarantee that the person will seek divine forgiveness. Whether the person does so is likely dependent on how they view the deity (their God image) which has been linked to parental attachment (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Several scholars suggest that representations of God reflect everyday social-cognitive processes and that people think about God's agency and attribute in ways similar to those used to think about human agency and attributes (e.g., Barrett, 2004; Gervais, 2013). A body of research has emerged that consistently shows two broad conceptions of God, one of a kindly/benevolent God (e.g., "forgiving," "loving," "merciful") and a wrathful/authoritarian God (e.g., "critical," "punishing," "stern"). For those who see God primarily as wrathful or authoritarian, seeking God's forgiveness is likely to be relatively rare whereas those who primarily view God as kindly or benevolent are more likely to seek forgiveness (Johnson et al., 2015).

Because individuals can hold each view to varying degrees, the issue is not quite as clear-cut as portrayed above. For example, what is the relative balance between benevolent and authoritarian characteristics that lead the individual to seek divine forgiveness or to forego doing so? Pursuing this line of inquiry leads to consideration of how the balance may vary as a function of situational circumstances that might facilitate or hinder seeking divine forgiveness. Thus, one might expect that environmental circumstances (e.g., exposure to images or stories of a benevolent/authoritarian God), might momentarily change the likelihood of seeking divine forgiveness. And if they do, under what conditions does this lead to a lasting effect?

Determining the answers to such questions is not without challenges. Chief among these is the potential conflation of experiential and doctrinal representations of God (for an exception, see Zahl & Gibson, 2012). This is not unique to representations of God. Rather it applies to the various elements in the scheme set forth in this manuscript. Thus, it will need to be addressed in research on the present topic. We know already that assessments allowing for more deliberative processing are more susceptible to social conformity and orthodoxy pressures (Barrett, 1998; Barrett & Keil, 1996; Jong, 2013). In fact, it has been shown that people report more theologically consistent qualities of deities during explicit tasks (e.g., a survey response) than during implicit tasks (e.g., narrative comprehension tasks; Barrett, 1998; Vargas et al., 2004; or reaction time tasks, see Jong, 2013, for review). In short, explicit (deliberate) processes are more likely to proceed through a bias that follows more closely religious teaching and prescribed religious doctrine. In contrast, cognitive load (i.e., the occurrence of any "stressor," such as COVID, financial hardship, time-sensitive decisions, multitasking, and so on) tend to propel decision-making down more of an implicit rather than explicit (deliberate) decision tree and are less likely to simply reflect religious doctrine.

In addition, to a person's general beliefs about the nature of God, how the individual views God in relation to themself is likely to be critical in understanding whether they seek divine forgiveness. For example, a person might well view the deity as benevolent and forgiving, but not be fully convinced that "God will forgive *me*."

The individual's perceived relationship to God, also likely influences whether or not they seek divine forgiveness. Here elements of relationships such as attachment and closeness are likely critical. As in human relationships, it is possible that anxiously attached individuals preoccupied with the availability of the attachment figure (God) are especially likely to seek divine forgiveness. Such individuals are unable to handle their negative emotions and expect significant others, in this case God, to contain their distress (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Seeking forgiveness may be one way of obtaining reassurance in the face of negative emotions occasioned by their transgression. Similarly, feeling closer to God as compared to feeling distant, is more likely to lead to the person seeking divine forgiveness.

The above observations about relationship to God are consistent with the limited findings available on transgressor's forgiveness seeking where relational closeness, severity of the transgression, and rumination prompt forgiveness seeking (Riek, 2010). It is axiomatic that whether a person seeks divine forgiveness will depend on their view of whether the offence is forgivable. We, therefore, turn to this issue.

Is It Forgivable?

One can argue that the paradigmatic case of seeking divine forgiveness occurs when the wrong is perpetrated against the deity/deities or involves a violation of the sacred. In many religious belief systems, such a wrongdoing can be particularly heinous. Indeed insulting, being irreverent, or showing contempt for a deity or the sacred is a grave offence that is not forgivable (for Christianity, Mark 3:29; for Islam, "shirk" is unforgiveable—the deification of any item or person besides Allah; Kamoonpuri, 2001) and may even be viewed as a crime punishable by death (for Judaism and Christianity see Leviticus 24:16; for Islam see Sahih al-Bukhari, 4:52:270). But not all wrongs against God(s) and violations of the sacred are portrayed as unforgivable in sacred texts.

As this is not a theological analysis, there is no need to identify what is and is not unforgivable in sacred texts. Rather, it suffices to note that religious belief systems in describing that which is unforgivable raise our awareness of the possibility that people may hold a variety of views about what is and is not unforgivable. Indeed, there are likely to be important individual differences in this regard and undoubtedly the perception of what is or is not forgivable will impact the decision to seek divine forgiveness. Here it is important to acknowledge the potential influence of close others (e.g., romantic partner, family members) as well as fellow worshipers on the individual's views of what is and is not unforgivable.

But are wrongs perpetrated against the deity/deities or ones involving a violation of the sacred, qualitatively different from wrongs perpetrated against people, the environment, and so on, and do they constitute a class of wrongs that operate differently in relation to divine forgiveness? Or do they just differ on an important

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[5] However, even an atheist may engage in a secular analog of divine forgiveness. For example, it is possible to imagine an atheist following an environmental transgression seeking redress by trying to feel "at one" with nature.

well-established dimension that influences forgiveness, namely, transgression severity? Data gathered from empirical research are needed to address such questions.

For many people, there are likely also earthly transgressions deemed to be unforgivable and many potential examples can easily be generated (e.g., murder, torture, child abuse, human trafficking, attempted suicide, and so on). Allowing the possibility that some transgressions are seen to be so egregious that they cannot be forgiven even by God(s) or a Higher power, prompts one to think about the other end of the spectrum, minor transgressions. It is possible that people may view some transgressions as ones that are not worthy of divine forgiveness. Seeking divine forgiveness for them might be seen as an insult to the deity, a waste of the deity's time, and so on. Again, data are needed to address this issue.

Assuming the existence of such beliefs, what happens when a person holding them is especially troubled by the wrong committed but does not feel that he or she can seek divine forgiveness for it? This may be especially important when earthly forgiveness is not available (e.g., the victim of the wrong is deceased) and/or when the individual is very religious and places a high value on divine forgiveness.

Attribution for Offence

The person's attribution for their perceived wrong is also likely to be important in the decision to seek divine forgiveness. To the extent that a plausible alternative cause for the behavior is seen to be present, we know from the discounting principle in attribution theory (Kelley, 1972) that the perpetrator will assume less responsibility for their wrong. If the perceived alternative cause(s) are perceived to be strong enough, the person may conclude that their responsibility for the wrong is insufficient to justify seeking divine forgiveness.

However, the nature of the alternative cause(s) is likely to make a difference as it may not only decrease felt responsibility but also increase felt responsibility. How so? Consider the case where the perpetrator says, "the gang member threatened to kill my child if I did not do it," as compared to the statement "the devil made me do it." In the former, the probability of the wrong given the situation is high for any reasonable person (the man on the Clapham omnibus or "reasonable man standard" in law) and under such circumstances, a reduction in responsibility for the wrong is likely to occur. This is not to suggest that some people might not still perceive themselves as culpable for the wrong and continue to seek divine forgiveness. This possibility draws attention to documenting thresholds of felt responsibility that trigger the quest for divine forgiveness.

Turning to the second case, in "the devil made me do it" we see that it is structurally similar in that an alternative cause is offered. Yet responsibility is quite different according to the "reasonable man" standard outlined earlier. This is obvious because one ought to resist temptations to do wrong no matter what their source.

Different Systems

To this point, the word "decision" has been privileged in our discussion of the step under consideration. Specifically, it has been portrayed in terms of controlled processing, namely, an effortful conscious process constrained by available attentional resources (System 2). However, it is equally, or possibly more, likely that this step reflects more implicit, intuitive processes that are linked to emotion (e.g., "gut feeling") and occurs outside of conscious awareness (System 1, Kahneman, 2011).

It is conceivable that there may be individual differences in which system dominates when it comes to divine forgiveness. If so, what are the implications for understanding divine forgiveness? Although data will provide the ultimate answer to this question, consideration of System 1 alerts us to something important, the role of emotion. Perpetration of a transgression can give rise to negative emotions such as guilt and shame.

Reclaiming Emotion

Guilt involves tension, remorse, and regret resulting from one's actions (Tangney, 1995a). It tends to focus on what was done and is said to be "other-oriented" in the sense that it focuses on one's effect on others. Guilt facilitates other-oriented empathic concern for the object of one's actions and motivates the offender to exhibit conciliatory behavior toward the victim, such as making restitution, apologizing, or seeking forgiveness (Ausubel, 1955; Tangney, 1995b).

Unlike guilt, which involves a focus on the effects of one's behavior, shame is associated with a focus on the self (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1995a). The distinction between guilt and shame is aptly captured by Lewis (1971):

> "The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but is not itself the focus of the experience." (p. 30).

Thus, shame is more likely to indicate that the offender views the offense as a reflection of their self-worth. That is, they might conclude that I am the type of person who does this type of (unacceptable) thing. It is quite possible that intense shame promotes self-destructive impulses associated with failure to forgive the self and/or seeing the self as unforgivable. Even if this occurs, however, it may or may not translate into seeing the self as unforgivable in the eyes of a supreme being. Again, data are needed to determine the conditions under which shame leads the person to continue in the process or exit from seeking divine forgiveness.

The above account should not be seen as excluding the role of others in dealing with shame. In Asian contexts, for example, shame or "loss of face" is not individualistic. The entire family shares in the shame that is occasioned by an individual's actions (Sue, 1981). Hence responses may vary substantially across Western and Eastern cultures.

Clearly, affect is relevant for understanding the entry point to divine forgiveness. However, it would be a mistake to limit its relevance to only this part of the divine forgiveness process outlined in our figure. Emotion is integral to the entire divine forgiveness process as will become apparent as we turn to them. Before doing so, however, it bears noting that despite any appearance to the contrary our view of emotion is not limited to cognitive or appraisal processes. Rather our goal is to provide a more balanced view of divine forgiveness than the one that has prematurely focused on cognitive judgment. Indeed, emotion plays a role in the next element of the divine forgiveness scheme we propose, whether there is a need to engage in preconditions in order to receive divine forgiveness.

Conditional Forgiveness?: Decision Point 2

Once the individual commits to seeking divine forgiveness, a second decision point occurs. Is divine forgiveness contingent on fulfilling certain preconditions? Some faith traditions have established procedures by which the individual seeks divine forgiveness. For example, there is evidence in early Christian writings of absolution from wrongdoing (sin) following only after auricular confession. According to Brom (2004), as early as Irenaeus (A.D. 180) the Church had instituted verbal confession as a requirement for absolution and he notes from Cyprian's (A.D. 251) writing that such forgiveness can be given only "through the priests." This viewpoint is still evident in some branches of contemporary Christianity such as Catholicism. In a similar vein, Judaism describes t'shuva (a construct often translated as "repentance," but which is closer to "to return") which when properly implemented allows a new beginning. In the Mishneh Torah Maimonides describes t'shuva as a three-stage process, involving (a) acknowledging the reality of the wrongdoing, apology, and making amends, (b) rejecting the behavior for ourselves, and (c) resolving to live differently in the future (Ridberg, 2016).

It is clear that the faith tradition of an individual can prescribe conditions that need to be met before a person can obtain divine forgiveness. For the observant practitioner of such faith traditions, the path forward to obtain divine forgiveness is likely clear. As in Catholicism an intermediary may be involved (the priest) which immediately raises interesting issues. For example, does the involvement of an intermediary impact the perception and experience of divine forgiveness? So, for instance, do people who obtain divine forgiveness via an intermediary have a greater certainty of divine forgiveness than those who do not? Further does this vary as a function of whether the intermediary makes an explicit statement of forgiveness? In one of the very few experimental studies on forgiveness seeking, Struthers et al. (2008) showed that the form victim forgiveness took influenced the transgressor's subsequent response a week later. Specifically, implied forgiveness (e.g., "Oh well, that's okay") was more likely to elicit prosocial behavior and an apology compared to explicit forgiveness (e.g., "I forgive you").

At a broader level, the existence of institutionally sanctioned preconditions raises similar types of questions about preconditions whether institutionally sanctioned or not. For example, does the number and/or type of preconditions engaged impact the perception and experience of divine forgiveness? Do those who experience divine forgiveness following the performance of institutionally sanctioned preconditions perceive and/or experience divine forgiveness more, or less intensely than those who do not? Both possibilities are imaginable. For instance, one can imagine the individual engaging preconditions for divine forgiveness in a proforma or rote manner which may be inimical to an intense experience of divine forgiveness. At the other extreme, would the individual who throws him or herself into engaging in preconditions (e.g., rituals) in a way that could increase physiological arousal have a more intense experience of divine forgiveness?

Viewing divine forgiveness as requiring the individual to meet one or more preconditions is not limited to religious belief systems that embody such views.[6] Individuals not affiliated with formal religions who seek divine forgiveness may impose their own idiosyncratic precondition(s). Here one could imagine the operation of simple heuristics such as the bigger the offence (sin), the more that needs to be done in seeking divine forgiveness. Whether such heuristics operate or not point to an interesting line of inquiry. How do individuals determine that they need to meet preconditions for divine forgiveness when they are not laid out for them by a formal religious belief system? Here again one can imagine that the mental representation of the deity and the individual's relation to the deity play an important role. As noted previously, such decision-making may reflect intuitive feelings rather than conscious, rational decision-making.

Whether described by a formal religion or intuited by the individual, numerous preconditions are possible. The preconditions listed in our figure are therefore necessarily incomplete. Although a potentially large number of preconditions can be imagined, the question of whether there is a core set of preconditions (e.g., confession with or without an intermediary, repentance, penance, an explicit request for divine forgiveness) that are pervasive is an interesting one. Such questions emphasize the need for descriptive data to better understand the process of divine forgiveness. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that we need an empirically derived catalog of human behavior pertaining to divine forgiveness, something akin to the ethogram used in the study of animal behavior.

Once engaged in fulfilling preconditions, a feedback loop is posited in our scheme. That is, the individual will evaluate whether the preconditions are met sufficiently. If the answer is no, they may forego seeking divine forgiveness for several reasons such as lack of sufficient motivation to continue or the difficulty of meeting perceived preconditions. Alternatively, they will reengage one or more of the preconditions after which they will again evaluate whether the preconditions are met sufficiently. When it is determined that they are met sufficiently the person moves onto the next phase which comprises the perception of divine forgiveness.

Thus far we have considered only one response to decision point 2, that which leads the person to engage one or more preconditions. It is also possible for the individual to view God's forgiveness as unconditional and therefore does not require engaging any preconditions. In this case, it is posited that the individual then acknowledges the wrongdoing to God before moving onto the next phase which comprises the perception of divine forgiveness. How they acknowledge the wrongdoing may also be relevant for what happens in this next phase.

Perceive Divine Forgiveness

How does a person perceive that she or he has been forgiven by God? As noted earlier, this might occur simply by an intermediary saying that they are forgiven and the person accepting that pronouncement. Absent this circumstance we note three elements in this process that could occur singly or in some combination. The first element is cognitive. Having sought divine forgiveness and

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[6] Undoubtedly even some practitioners in such belief systems may not be conversant with, or fully accept, the procedures laid out by the belief system. They may engage in their own idiosyncratic procedure for obtaining divine forgiveness. This potentially gives rise to a line of research investigating divine forgiveness when a person seeks it in a way that deviates from the doctrine of the religion with which they are affiliated.

acknowledged their wrongdoing before God, the individual may simply draw the conclusion that he or she is forgiven. This process, however, likely requires believing firmly in a loving God who is forgiving. But even if that is not the case, the eschatological importance of receiving divine forgiveness could result in motivated cognition that in the absence of evidence to the contrary leads the person to infer that God has forgiven him or her. In the case of meeting sufficiently perceived preconditions, divine forgiveness could be inferred because the person views the process in transactional terms. Having satisfied what is required to obtain divine forgiveness, it is presumed that God's forgiveness follows. This might be particularly the case when the perception occurs after prolonged contrition, pleading, and perhaps even bargaining.

The above description clearly involves System 2 cognition and may not describe the majority of cases. It seems more likely that people will intuit that they are forgiven not knowing exactly how they reach this conclusion. They just "know" it. That is, the process may reflect System 1 cognition. From this perspective, divine forgiveness might be experienced as a spontaneous gift of grace and mercy. Or perhaps it is inferred from the cessation or absence of the suffering they have been experiencing as a result of the wrong. The person may simply feel that their moral standing has been restored and that they can face the future with equanimity.

The boundary between the above process and basing the perception of divine forgiveness on emotional experiences is narrow. The importance of emotion is emphasized by the finding that receiving forgiveness is associated with physiological indices of emotion (i.e., reduced parasympathetic withdrawal) as well as ratings of lower anger, sadness, anxiety, and guilt (da Silva et al., 2017). In the event that the emotional experience is unusual or intense, the person might equate the experience with divine forgiveness with minimal need to draw on contextual cues to infer the meaning of the experience (e.g., "I felt an overwhelming sense of being loved, unlike anything I have experienced before. I just knew God was there reassuring me and offering his forgiveness"). Contextual cues may be relatively more important in attributing a normal emotional experience to being forgiven by God. For example, physiological arousal induced by a ritual, or even apprehension in seeking divine forgiveness, might serve as the basis for inferring that God has forgiven the person (e.g., "I felt a bit emotional which is not always common for me. That surely had something to do with God responding to me and offering forgiveness").

The above account should not be construed to mean that the perception of divine forgiveness is always instantaneous or inevitable. On the contrary, it is quite possible that it can evolve over time. Indeed, the person may struggle, wondering whether they are forgiven or not. Or they may feel nothing in particular and simply resume their everyday life. In both cases, however, over time they might find themselves experiencing a deep calm that leads them to infer that God has forgiven their transgression. Perhaps it is a sense of being at peace and in harmony with a set of moral norms. In any event, the person ends up feeling that their position relative to divine judgment has changed. It is also possible, however, that the person concludes that they have not been forgiven. In this event, the quest for divine forgiveness likely terminates but it is also possible that the person might resume their quest at a later time.

The temporal element posited is likely to be particularly stark when divine forgiveness is inferred from a "sign." Given the eschatological stakes involved, the person may be motivated to look for signs of divine forgiveness. An obvious example here might be the reading of a sacred text which particularly resonates with the person who then sees him or herself reading the text as something directed by the deity and as a sign of forgiveness. However, "signs" likely vary greatly and may be quite idiosyncratic. It is likely that virtually anything can be viewed as a sign such as when someone has sought divine forgiveness sees a Blue Jay on their window-sill (their deceased mother's favorite bird) and views this as a sign of forgiveness. Or perhaps they experience good fortune such as a job promotion and see this as evidence of their absolution by the deity.

By whatever means the person gets to perceive divine forgiveness, it bears noting that the forgiveness may occur not only in relation to a discrete wrong or even a set of such wrongs. In our comments on shame we hinted at a second possibility, namely, forgiveness for being what Worthington labels "a Wrong-Be-er" (personal communication, October 7, 2019). That is, the person may be seeking forgiveness for a self that he or she believes is unacceptable (sinful). The distinction between a wrong-doer and a wrong-be-er is likely to have profound implication for the reappraisal that is posited to occur next in our scheme.

Before turning to the reappraisal phase, however, numerous questions arise regarding the perception of divine forgiveness that needs to be addressed. First, does the perception of divine forgiveness depend on the person's mental representation of the deity? Second, to what extent is the perception of divine forgiveness dependent on the person's perceived relationship with the divine? Third, does this perception simply reflect the theological beliefs embodied in the religion with which they are affiliated? Fourth, is their perception influenced by the beliefs of others that they care about (e.g., family members, friends, or those in their religious community)? Fifth, how do positive and negative affect more broadly impact subsequent reappraisal?

Reappraisal

As the recipient of divine forgiveness, it is posited that the individual will engage in a reappraisal of the self and of his or her relationship to the divine. As noted earlier the distinction between being a wrong-be-er versus a wrong-doer is likely to be pivotal here.

Turning to reappraisal of the self it is conceivable that divine forgiveness for being a wrong-be-er can lead to a dramatic change in self-concept. Its most stark instantiation is likely illustrated by those who experience divine forgiveness as (or part of) their conversion to a religion. The existence of terminology like "born again" (Christianity) points to the magnitude of the change. However, not all cases of perceived divine forgiveness for being a wrong-be-er will be this dramatic. But even when established practitioners of a religion seek divine forgiveness for being a wrong-be-er (e.g., recognizing their sinful nature) a substantial change in the understanding of the self is possible.

It is also the case that divine forgiveness for a discrete wrongdoing has the potential to induce substantial change in the understanding of the self. Even here divine forgiveness might be viewed as a gift that changes one's identity. On average, however, one might expect the change to be greater for wrong-be-er forgiveness than wrongdoer forgiveness, though this is an empirical question that awaits investigation.

Positing that the perception of divine forgiveness gives rise to a reappraisal of the self, begs several questions. Under what conditions is this reappraisal of the self, most pronounced? Are there circumstances in which this process occurs minimally or not at all? What dimensions of the self are most likely influenced by the experience of divine forgiveness (e.g., the self as a moral agent, spiritual agent, social actor, etc.)?

What happens vis-à-vis the self as a result of this reappraisal is likely relevant for the second element posited, reappraisal of the perceiver's relationship to the deity. Here it is worth noting a difference between earthly forgiveness and divine forgiveness. Earthly forgiveness is clearly differentiated from reconciliation which is viewed as a dyadic process that can occur with or without forgiveness. In contrast, divine forgiveness restores the wrongdoer's relationship with God in that the act of divine forgiveness necessarily involves reconciliation. It is likely that this newly reconciled relationship with the deity will involve a heightened sense of gratitude. After all, the most powerful force in the universe took the trouble to offer forgiveness to someone who likely felt humbled by their wrong and their felt need to obtain divine forgiveness. How enduring is this gratitude and what factors erode or facilitate its endurance?

It is possible to consider change in numerous relationship factors besides gratitude following divine forgiveness. These would include dimensions like attachment, commitment, closeness, intimacy, and so on. Determining which dimensions change, the degree to which they do so and what factors (e.g., individual differences, offence characteristics, divine forgiveness processes) predict such change remains to be determined.

Recalibrate Behavior

Divine forgiveness is often sought with the implicit or explicit realization that a change in behavior will follow. Thus, the final element in our scheme is one that involves recalibrating behavior. One behavior that is most likely affected is the person's propensity to forgive others and possibly the self. How so? First, it is the case that asking for forgiveness can by itself generate factors that facilitate earthly forgiveness. Simply admitting one's wrong (sin) and repenting or changing one's mind about the wrongful behavior is humbling, and humility has been shown to be related to earthly forgiveness (e.g., Krause, 2018). Such humility is likely amplified when the penitent experiences God's forgiveness in the knowledge that what they likely consider the most potent entity in the universe has taken the time to grant them forgiveness. Humility is also likely accompanied by gratitude, which was highlighted earlier, and this is another factor that has been associated with earthly forgiveness (e.g., Neto, 2007). Having been the perpetrator of a wrongdoing who needed to be forgiven is also likely to facilitate empathy. Subsequently, when the victim of a wrongdoing, the person is likely to show greater empathy with the perpetrator (whether another person or the self) having been him or herself in need of divine forgiveness (i.e., in the role of the wrongdoer). Presumably, the more a person experiences divine forgiveness, the greater the experience of humility, gratitude, and empathy. In turn, this is likely to facilitate greater levels of self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness and thereby increase the association between them. In fact, there is already preliminary evidence to support this last proposition (Fincham & May, 2021).

Although recalibration of forgiveness behavior is likely the most obvious behavioral change to follow the experience of divine forgiveness, it is not the only behavior subject to recalibration. This is made obvious when one considers the above argument about the underlying elements that facilitate greater forgiveness, namely, humility, gratitude, and empathy. Each of these constructs has the potential to influence a wide variety of behaviors. Examples for each construct are briefly described. Humility, for instance, has been shown to manifest in leadership behavior that facilitates team performance as well as members speaking up and speaking out (Li et al., 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2016). In a similar vein, gratitude can strengthen a relationship with a responsive interaction partner (Algoe, 2012) and has been shown to facilitate costly prosocial behaviors, including assistance given to strangers (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). Finally, empathy has been associated with decreased bullying (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015) and its activation has been shown to decrease the odds of cyber bystander behavior that reinforces bullying, namely, the forwarding of a bullying message (Barlińska et al., 2015).

There are doubtless many behaviors that could be recalibrated as a function of experiencing divine forgiveness. The above examples, however, suffice to illustrate our proposal that divine forgiveness can lead to recalibration of behavior. The question that arises in this regard is what about the divine forgiveness experience determines the specific behavior(s) that are changed? Is it possible that no behavior or only a single behavior is changed and, if so, why does this occur versus the situation in which multiple behaviors change? One obvious possibility is the earlier distinction between forgiveness for being a wrongdoer versus a wrong-be-er. It is easy to imagine that the latter leads to more widespread change than the former. However, there may be boundary conditions defined by the severity of the offence committed by the wrongdoer. In the case of a very severe offence (e.g., murder), the distinction may lead to minimal, if any, differences in behavioral change following divine forgiveness. Conversely, the difference may be stark when the offence is a relatively minor one (e.g., a rude comment).

No Construct Is an Island: The Potential for Cross-Fertilization

The study of divine forgiveness should not be a solitary, idiosyncratic enterprise. Rather it has the potential to enrich, and be enriched, by current avenues of research in different areas of psychology. Three examples are briefly described.

Developmental psychology might profit from investigating how, when, and why the concept of divine forgiveness initially emerges. Doing so will likely lead to an extension in the growing research that is emerging on the development of beliefs about God's mind (Di Dio et al., 2018) that draws heavily on the Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM pertains to concepts concerning beliefs, desires, and intentions a human develops that are necessary to understand why an agent (person) acts in a prescribed manner. Existing research indicates that the cognitive architecture required to understand a deity's intentions/feelings appear at roughly the same time as that required to understanding intentions/feelings of other people (Kapogiannis et al., 2009). The proliferation of research on God's mind has led Wigger (2016) to suggest that it be labeled "theory of religious mind." However, absent from this work is a focus on divine forgiveness. Thus, this field of inquiry might be enriched by

examining aspects or circumstances that promote (or delay) developing concepts regarding divine forgiveness (as it represents a relational construct pertaining to divine agency). The application of ToM methodologies to this topic would both extend ToM research and make a critical contribution to understanding the perception and experience of divine forgiveness.

Social psychology in differentiating divine forgiveness from related constructs, especially earthly forgiveness, might invigorate social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Analysis of social comparisons, defined as the "process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self" (Wood, 1996) has robustly established that (a) a comparer largely places emphasis on similarities or differences from the target of comparison regarding a specified dimension, (b) the comparer predominately chooses a target for comparison that is superior (upward as opposed downward comparison) to them in a specified dimension, and (c) the resulting comparison worsens the comparer's mood and leaves the comparer with a lowered sense of efficacy/ability for the appraised dimension (Gerber et al., 2018). Given these findings, divine forgiveness could provide many novel research avenues from a field that has existed for over six decades. For example, how an individual perceives their ability to forgive (i.e., earthly forgiveness) in contrast to how God is perceived to forgive has implications for both mood and self-efficacy. Additionally, social comparison theory has shown threat regarding the comparison sometimes determines if an upward (God's forgivingness is more "important" than the forgiveness I can display) or downward (vice versa) social comparison is made. As perceptions of God as benevolent as opposed to authoritarian influence other decisions, for example, helping and inclusivity (see Johnson & Cohen, 2016), this circumstance may have implications for research within social comparison.

With its eschatological implications, divine forgiveness is also relevant to clinical psychology, especially end-of-life issues. This is indeed the case in that people who feel forgiven by God experience less death anxiety (Krause, 2015), a phenomenon that has emerged as "a 'trans diagnostic' factor deserving attention in a great variety of mental and behavioral disorders" (Abdel-Khalek & Neimeyer, 2017). This association is not only relevant to older persons, as might be expected, but also to emerging adults as death anxiety somewhat surprisingly peaks in the 20s (Russac et al., 2007). The potential exists not only to make a contribution to applied research but also to advance basic understanding of death anxiety as divine forgiveness is conspicuous by its absence from a substantial body of research on religious correlates of death anxiety (see Jong et al., 2018), relevant theories (e.g., Terror Management Theory; Solomon et al., 2015), and even self-proclaimed "comprehensive" models of death anxiety itself (e.g., Tomer & Eliason, 1996).

Conclusion

The preceding analysis has attempted to capture salient elements or moving parts in the human experience of divine forgiveness. Being the first attempt to do so in the literature on forgiveness, it will no doubt require refinement or even merit rejection in the light of new data. Its contribution therefore does not lie in offering a definitive analysis but in its heuristic value in stimulating research that might ultimately lead to its rejection in favor of a better model.

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