

Conceptualizing the Atonement

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How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of His Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!¹

If belief in the redemptive nature of the life and death of Christ is to be intellectually defensible, Christian philosophers must have an account of it that is not only philosophically coherent, but also morally unobjectionable. In the philosophical literature, there is a significant body of work dedicated to making theoretical sense of the atonement (e.g., whether the debt of sin owed to God may be satisfied by another), but thus far, contemporary philosophers of religion have given little treatment to the atonement by way of social epistemology or feminist philosophy, despite extensive attention to the issue within feminist theology. In order to bring these conversations together, here, I explore some of the epistemological and gendered implications of traditional approaches to the atonement—namely, the normalization of submission to violence and the idealization of suffering. In the first section of what follows, I describe three major categories of atonement theories in the philosophical tradition. The second section surveys some of the feminist criticisms of the atonement tradition that have been put forward in the theological literature, as well as the theological context which motivates those criticisms. In the third section, I examine the implications of such feminist theology for particular theories of the atonement. In the fourth section, I argue that conceiving of redemption as arising out of sacrificial submission to violence—the suffering servant who willingly, though undeservedly, self-sacrifices for the sake of another—has corrupted the shared hermeneutical resources through which we conceptualize ethical conduct, love, and virtue. I argue that the epistemic repercussions of leading models of the atonement are sufficiently harmful to merit their reconsideration. Finally, in the last section, I consider what I take to be the most promising alternative understanding of the atonement. Borrowing in

¹ Abelard 1956: 283.

part from those who have suggested a moral influence view, like Abelard, I argue that Christian philosophers should pursue a new kind of exemplarist model. That is, perhaps death has no central role in what redeems us, nor sacrificial love, but rather a refusal to cooperate with injustice, even when the risks of doing so may be fatal.

1. Traditional Theories of Atonement

Though there is no ecumenically orthodox theory of the atonement (perhaps, all the more reason to think reinterpretation possible), traditional theories of how the atonement works tend to fall under three main categories: Christus Victor theories (of which 'ransom theory' is widely considered to be a paradigm example), satisfaction theories (of which penal substitution theory is usually treated as a species), and moral influence theories. In some respects, these categories are widely divergent from one another. For example, according to Christus Victor theories, the suffering of Christ is a prelude to victory over darkness, where that victory is the heart of atonement. Humankind, through the fall, is under the dominion of the devil. Salvation is attained in the atonement because the death of Christ pays the ransom for our sin; his perfect goodness banishes the evil which was meant for us. God thus conquers evil, and protects us from being consumed by the devil. In contrast, according to satisfaction theories, atonement is not made to release humankind from the hold of evil, but rather to satisfy the debt of sin owed to God. We owe God restitution for our sins, yet are incapable of making appropriate reparations ourselves. God sacrifices his own life in our stead so that we need not be eternally condemned. Moral influence theories tend to question whether the death of Christ was necessary for the precise purpose of satisfying a debt to God. Instead, they tend to hold that the death of Christ was intended to demonstrate God's great love for us so that we might be moved to be better ourselves; on this view, it is not that God requires sacrifice, but rather we do. When confronted by Christ's loving sacrifice we are meant to be inspired to turn away from sin. Divergent as these theories may be, there is one respect in which they are the same: The suffering of Christ is understood as integral to our redemption. Either it pays our ransom, satisfies our debt, or inspires us to commit ourselves to God.

2. Criticisms and Context

In the theological literature, these traditional understandings of the atonement have faced serious criticism from feminist theologians who raise a number of questions about the pastoral efficacy, and cultural influence, of the doctrine so

modelled. What does it mean to find redemption in the suffering of another? For divine love and mercy to find penultimate expression in torturous death? To be called to suffer as Christ suffered? We are told, 'for the wages of sin is death', and yet by the grace of God, we may find everlasting life 'in Christ'. However, if 'in Christ' is to mean that God has accepted innocent blood (even his own) as substitution for, or satisfaction of, some human debt—payment of which is a prerequisite of restored relationship—then it begins to seem as if God's purported perfect goodness is something of a cruel joke. Relationships in which restoration is sought through bloodshed, are the sort, I should think, one would generally want to avoid.

Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker reject entirely that the death of Christ was atoning on account of considerations like these. On their view, in traditional atonement theories, '[d]ivine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers "without even raising a voice" is lauded as the hope of the world' (Brown and Parker 1989: 2). While satisfaction theories have been criticized by many in the contemporary literature for painting God as violent,² Brown and Parker are equally forceful in their criticisms of Christus Victor and moral influence theories as well. On their view, Christus Victor theories trivialize suffering. Even the most heinous instances of cruelty and abuse become, not primarily objects of moral concern and mourning in their own right, but stage elements, from which Christ will eventually emerge victorious.

The death of Jesus is merely a ploy, a sleight of hand, an illusion.... When suffering comes it may be looked upon as a gift, and the believer will ask, Where is God leading me? What does God have in store for me? In this tradition, God is the all-powerful determiner of every event in life, and every event is part of a bigger picture—a plan that will end with triumph. When people say things such as God had a purpose in the death of the six million Jews, the travesty of this theology is revealed. (Brown and Parker 1989: 6–8)

Likewise, Brown and Parker argue that moral influence views have devastating consequences. Here, though, their claim is not that moral influence theories trivialize suffering, but rather that they encourage it. It is being confronted with the suffering of an innocent victim that is supposed to encourage us to face our guilty consciences and inspire us to moral reformation. Victimization provides for the redemption of others, and victimizing, while otherwise regrettable, enables opportunity for redemptive reformation. This is a framework that lends itself too easily to placing inappropriate, unjust responsibility on those who are already victimized to endure and embrace their suffering so that their oppressors might be redeemed.

² See, e.g., Weaver 2006, Ray 1998.

Perhaps these seem like unfair characterizations. After all, even according to satisfaction theories, as the story goes, the atonement event came about precisely because of God's great love for us despite our abject failures—out of a desire for union, not a need to sate some gratuitous violent impulse. As Richard Swinburne puts it, 'Since what needs atonement to God is human sin, men living second-rate lives when they have been given such great opportunities by their creator, appropriate reparation and penance would be made by a perfect human life, given away through being lived perfectly' (Swinburne 1989: 157). Thus, as humans are incapable of offering appropriate reparation to God on their own, God voluntarily became human and lived a perfect life to be given away—in death, and to us—in an act of merciful love, so that we may use God's sacrifice as our own. What greater act of love could there be?

Here, in assessing the merit of feminist objections to atonement theories, it is useful to remember the context in which this debate is occurring—both theological and sociological. We can only superficially divide atonement theories from their contexts of discovery and practice for the purposes of philosophizing about them in the abstract. To understand the epistemological and ethical implications of our theories, though, that context is of the utmost importance. Just as the meaning of language—what it pragmatically signifies—depends, in part, on context, so too the meaning of our ideas may be shaped by the surrounding epistemic context. What feminist theologians are objecting to, then, are not just particular ways of modelling the atonement, but particular ways of modelling the atonement against the backdrop of a sexist tradition that has victimized women (among others).

Women in the Christian Scriptures are often the subjects of abuse. Think, for example, of Jezebel, who is thrown from a window, trampled by horses, devoured by dogs, and scorned by the tradition for sins that were no worse than those of Kings David and Solomon themselves.³ Esther—arguably the most empowered woman represented in the Christian Scriptures—is treated horrifically, courageously endures, and in so doing, is able to secure the salvation of her people. While Esther is certainly treated as something of a heroine by the tradition, her ability to

³ Jezebel's most notable offences include, first, establishing worship of Baal (her native culture's deity), to the exclusion of the God of Israel, in the region through her marriage to King Ahab (see, e.g., 1 Kings 16:29–33), and second, her conspiring to have a man, who refused to sell his vineyard to her husband, killed under false pretences in order to obtain said land (1 Kings 21:1–16). King Solomon, though, is described in Scripture as having 700 wives, and 300 concubines, each with their own gods; as worshipping their native deities alongside them; and building temples for them within Israel (1 Kings 11:1–7). While Solomon has been revered for his wisdom, Jezebel has been despised for her corrupting influence. The story of Jezebel and the vineyard, too, bears a striking resemblance to that of King David and Bathsheba; where Jezebel conspired to take land for the benefit of her husband, King David conspired to take a *person* for the benefit of concealing his own selfish actions. As the story goes, King David witnessed Bathsheba's beauty from his roof as she was bathing, and though he knew she was married to one of his soldiers who was away at war, he sent messengers to bring her to his room. Scripture doesn't say if Bathsheba consented to what followed. As a result, though, Bathsheba became pregnant. When King David heard, he arranged for her husband to be sent to the frontlines of battle, and when he died, David took Bathsheba as his own wife (2 Sam 11:1–27).

become one in the first place is predicated on her abuse. In the story of Esther, by proclamation, she and the other virgins were *gathered*. They were *taken* to the palace. They were *put* in the custody of eunuchs.⁴ Then in turn, they were *taken* to the king.⁵ This is not the language of voluntary behaviour, and these were not women who, upon hearing of the former Queen Vashti's fate, lined up outside the palace hoping for an interlude with the king. They were taken from their homes, their families, subjected to months of conditioning, with no hope of a life other than that which was decided for them. The power differential alone, between the women and the king, renders the notion of consent in their situation virtually meaningless; how do you say no to the man who banished from the kingdom, forever, the last woman who did? As opposed to the Jews under the threat of Haman, these women had no Esther and Mordecai of their own to stand up for them—it is not *this* injustice that Esther confronts. Rather, it is this injustice that places Esther in a position to intercede on behalf of the Babylonian Jews, ultimately securing their salvation. Indeed, it is precisely Esther's general tendency towards submission that (along with her beauty) specially distinguishes her as exemplary. Before her night with the king, '[i]n contrast with all the virgins who preceded her, Esther asks for no special aids, and accepts only what Hegai [the eunuch] suggests. It is this expression of Esther's yielding and conformity that immediately precedes the phrase in 2:15, "and Esther won the admiration of all who saw her"' (Berman 2001: 649). Rather than express her own desires, Esther submits to the authority of even the castrated male figurehead. She is rewarded with queenship, and thus, the ability to save her people. That Esther is excluded entirely from the last chapter of her scriptural namesake—which never mentions her, but instead lauds the greatness and courage of Mordecai, naming him as second in rank to the king—is a suggestive and powerful metaphor.⁶

The examples of Jezebel and Esther are significant to contextualizing atonement theories for two reasons in particular. First, they are illustrative rather than exceptional in regards to the representation of women in the Christian tradition. Women have all too often been held to a higher standard than men in regards to sin, and their abuse and submission are all too often framed as standing in positive relation to salvation, covenant, and redemption. Second, these representations (and others like them) have held significant sway in the Christian tradition regarding conceptions of womanhood.

3. Traditional Models and Their Implications

Certainly, there are a variety of ways one can frame the atonement, and some are more palatable than others. Nonetheless, with this background in mind, questions

⁴ Esth 2:8.

⁵ Esth 2:12.

⁶ Esth 10.

regarding implications of violence and victimization become especially acute. It seems that traditional models of the atonement tend to share in these troubling implications (though they may vary in degree). Take, for instance, Swinburne's model mentioned above. First, note what work the passive voice does when Swinburne writes, '[s]ince what needs atonement to God is human sin, men living second-rate lives when they have been given such great opportunities by their creator, appropriate reparation and penance would be made by a perfect human life, given away through being lived perfectly' (Swinburne 1989: 157). That reparation could be made through the sacrifice of an innocent other is easier to imagine when *we need to atone* is rather articulated as *atonement needs to be made*. But second, why should the sacrifice of an innocent life be taken as pleasing to God *at all*? Why is it that submission to undeserved violence should constitute part of having lived perfectly? It is not clear that there are morally unobjectionable answers to these questions—particularly within the larger cultural context. While it seems straightforwardly unproblematic to hold the characteristic of non-violence up as a moral ideal, non-violence is something quite different from allowing others to do violence to oneself.⁷

One might respond by noting John 15:13, 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends', and yet we should be unconvinced. Surely there are circumstances in which laying down one's life would be a decidedly bad thing to do. Suppose a friend and I go out for dinner together and, having excellent judgement, my friend orders herself a dessert, whereas being indecisive, I do not. When it arrives, her dessert looks delicious. I would like to have it. She realizes that I would like to have it, but she would as well (and, after all, she ordered it). Knowing that my friend has a tendency towards acting generously even when she would rather not, I quickly kill myself to spare her the trouble of deciding whether or not to share with me. This would be wrongheaded, and obviously so. Still, in more serious circumstances, laying down one's life may be wrong, and ultimately, unloving. Even supposing we have no moral duties to respect and preserve our own lives, insofar as we are capable of providing comfort, support, friendship, and other goods to those around us while we live, literal self-sacrifice generally ought to be avoided. There are very few circumstances in which we can do more good in death than in life. Sacrificing one's life ought to be a last resort—not a paradigm indication of moral goodness. Of course, being a last resort is not in itself mutually

⁷ Here, it would be natural to object that while non-violence is certainly distinct from simply allowing others to do violence to oneself, non-violence might *involve* allowing others to do violence to oneself. Then, whatever it is that distinguishes non-violence from submission to violence might all be present in the case of Christ. I agree that non-violence may involve allowing others to do violence to oneself, and I agree that this may be present in the case of Christ, but my concern is that there are significant differences in how this can be helpfully framed—the particulars may distinguish between what is morally or metaphysically necessary on the one hand, from what is derivative on the other; what is motivating from what is secondary. Those differences will be discussed in more detail in the last section.

exclusive with being a paradigm indication of moral goodness, but (if the Christian Scriptures are to be believed) we are called to suffer 'as Christ suffered' not 'as Christ suffered, supposing there are no other options available'.⁸

To take another example of a particular atonement theory with troubling implications, Richard Cross argues against Swinburne's satisfaction theory of the atonement and proposes a merit theory instead. However, in rejecting Swinburne's view, Cross does not reject the notion that Christ's death could, in principle, provide payment to God for whatever it is that humans owe. He is explicit that he thinks it could. Rather, Cross argues that all that is required for reparation to God is repentance and apology, but nevertheless, without Christ's interceding death, God would not be *obligated* to forgive even when appropriate reparation is made. For Cross, Christ's death is a supererogatory act that merits some reward from God to do as Christ asks—that is, to offer redemption to those who seek it, thus placing God under an obligation to offer humankind redemption.

While Cross's view does away with the *prima facie* problematic notion that the most appropriate reparation one could make to God involves the death of an innocent person, his view actually makes the problem of self-sacrifice even more acute. Where Christ's death is not necessary, and where God could forgive us our sins without any affront to justice so long as we made reparation through apology, why should his blood be shed at all? Shouldn't we be troubled to think of submission to needless violence as a supererogatory act? Here, Christ's death is not a last resort but something more like an insurance policy—an especially odd insurance policy, as God is both the insured and the insurer. Cross himself notes that even if God wanted to be obligated to forgive us of our sins, Christ's death wasn't the only means of imposing such an obligation: God could simply promise redemption, and so directly generate an obligation, without Christ's 'meritorious' death (409). Cross further notes that Christ's self-sacrifice would not guarantee redemption. God might have chosen to reward Christ with something else (409). On this view, then, the Father might seem even more abusive, and Christ's suffering even more gratuitous, than we would otherwise think.

Swinburne's and Cross's models of the atonement are not alone in their troubling implications. Indeed, these models have significantly *fewer* such implications than many. I offer them as examples for precisely that reason. They are clever and complicated pieces of philosophical work that avoid some of the more disturbing aspects of other models, e.g., that God *requires* blood payment for human sin, etc., while still providing an otherwise theoretically coherent account of how the atonement works. Nonetheless, neither leaves us with a model of how the atonement functions that is morally unobjectionable.

⁸ I take it that, being omnipotent, options other than the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ would be available to God for achieving atonement.

Eleonore Stump's *Atonement* sets out a novel and sophisticated model, drawing on the tradition, yet emphasizing relationality, empathy, and the ethical complexities of justifying suffering. Stump rejects an Anselmian approach to the atonement, like Swinburne's, for reasons similar to those I mentioned above.

[O]ne insuperable problem for the Anselmian approach to Christ's sacrifice for the Anselmian kind of interpretation in general is to explain why God's giving to himself a present makes up for the offense done to God's honor or in some other way enables God to pardon sinners. But another, and worse, insuperable problem is to explain why having an innocent person (or God's own incarnate self) suffer torment and death is pleasing enough in God's eyes to count as the needed present. (Stump 2018: 396)

Rather, for Stump, the passion of Christ serves 'to provide for human beings a metaphysical analogue of the union of the persons of the trinity, in which each person is within the other' (2018: 167). In the incarnation, Christ takes on a human mind. With both his divine and human natures, Christ is able to experience an openness—a mind-reading of sorts—to all human psyches and our associated sinfulness. Much as we might empathetically experience a simulation of pain when we witness someone being hurt, Christ takes on a simulacrum of the stain of all evil committed or desired while on the cross (2018: 164). In taking on the stain of sin without culpability, Christ traverses the barrier between God's perfect goodness, and the fallenness of humankind, allowing us to indwell in God. The passion of Christ, in turn, communicates God's love, allowing us to surrender to God, and so allows, too, for the indwelling of God in us. But Stump's view still raises worries in light of concerns raised by feminist theology mentioned above, as it is the sacrifice of Christ's suffering and death that centrally enables union. To 'contemplate Christ on the cross is to see him as broken and suffering in love for broken human beings' (2018: 282). Stump argues, 'that view of Christ is the most promising way to melt the resistance that keeps a person hardened against love' (282). But, what does this imply for our love of one another?

4. The Atonement and Epistemic Injustice

There is more at stake in how the atonement is understood than whether there is inconsistency between God's purported perfect goodness and theories of atonement offered to date. The ways in which various religions conceptualize their doctrines has a significant impact on our broader understanding of the world. With respect to the atonement in particular, as the most salient example of divine love for Christians, how the atonement is conceptualized has significant

consequences for how, in religiously or culturally Christian communities, right-relationship is understood, and thus, ethical conduct and love more generally.

Consider this:

[My husband] beats me sometimes. Mostly he is a good man. But sometimes he becomes very angry and he hits me. He knocks me down. One time he broke my arm and I had to go to the hospital. But I didn't tell them how my arm got broken... I went to my priest twenty years ago. I've been trying to follow his advice. The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, 'Jesus suffered because he loved us.' He said, 'If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.' I've tried, but I'm not sure anymore. My husband is turning on the kids now. Tell me, is what the priest told me true? (Brock and Parker 2002: 20–1)

This is not a fiction, and instances like it are not uncommon.⁹ While the story may be morally shocking, it should not be surprising. When one takes redemption to be the result of a moral exemplar obediently and willingly submitting to unjust violence so that others might be saved—when one takes Christ's suffering to be *the* act of love—it is natural to see suffering as something that we should take on cheerfully if we are to be godly. Indeed, sociological data indicates that while domestic abuse might not be any more common within the Christian community than it is within the broader cultural context, religious Christian women are

more vulnerable *when abused*. They are less likely to leave, are more likely to believe the abuser's promise to change his violent ways, frequently espouse reservations about seeking community-based resources or shelters for battered women, and commonly express guilt—that they have failed their families and God in not being able to make the marriage work. (Nason-Clark 2004: 304)

This difference is not reducible to belief in Christian theologies of divorce. Recent research suggests that conservative Protestants have higher than average divorce rates and Evangelical Americans have higher divorce rates than atheists and agnostics (Park, Tom, and Andercheck 2014). However theologies of divorce impact the marital lives of Christian women, they cannot fully account for a

⁹ Relatedly, in 2018, Paige Patterson was removed from his post as head of the Southwestern Theological Seminary, after he 'was accused of telling a victim of domestic abuse to stay with and forgive her husband, encouraging a rape victim not to come forward, and telling jokes in sermons that sexualized teenaged girls. Initially, Patterson apologized for his tone but argued, "I do not apologize for my stand for the family and for seeking to mend a marriage through forgiveness rather than divorce"' (Burton 2018). Similarly, multiple former students of Bob Jones University have publicly alleged that when seeking counsel regarding sexual abuse and assault, they were discouraged from reporting their experiences by university officials who cited that they should defer to an authority, like a father, or that in reporting they would 'hurt the body of Christ' (Pérez-Peña 2014).

special vulnerability to abuse while simultaneously failing to prevent divorce in any remarkable way.

Certainly, we may think that suffering through domestic violence is so dissimilar to the suffering of Christ in what it can achieve that this clearly would be a simple, though devastating, misapplication of the theory. However, in the context of a tradition that has highly valued submissiveness and nurturing behaviour in women, intact families, male authority, patience through tribulation, and forgiveness, even if it is simply a misapplication of the theory, it is a misapplication that would be natural. Further, unfortunately, it seems a fair number of pastors agree: in a submission to the Royal Commission on Family Violence in Australia, one woman reported having been encouraged by five different ministers to stay with her abusive husband (Anonymous 2015).¹⁰ After he violently attacked her, one minister said her survival was evidence of God's continuing protection, and indicated she ought to return to her marriage (Anonymous 2015). In 2014, a twenty-five-year-old woman was told by her church that she should return to her abusive husband. She did. He stabbed her to death shortly thereafter (Baird and Gleeson 2017). In response to a 1989 survey, 26 percent of pastors 'agreed that a wife should submit to her [abusive] husband and trust God would honor her action by either stopping the abuse or giving her the strength to endure' (Johnson and Bondurant 1995: 425). Whatever nuances the various traditional atonement models might have, they all seem to lend themselves too easily to an interpretation with potentially horrific consequences for human relationships: the idealization of the suffering servant, understanding self-sacrifice as the ultimate expression of love, toleration of violence insofar as submission to it is how Christ redeemed us, or the glorification of obedience, even until death, to those with authority (real, purported, or imagined) over us.

While in some contexts a willingness to take on suffering for the sake of others can be good, in many contexts it is not. For those who are oppressed, abused, subjected to systematic injustice and interpersonal violence, what is needed is not a model of how to serve through suffering, but rather how to respect oneself and love through resistance.¹¹ It could be of some comfort to the marginalized that Christ could identify with their pain, but it would be of more comfort to think that the suffering is *going* somewhere—that one need not continue to suffer unjustly.

¹⁰ The letter is not dated, but the closing date for submissions was in May 2015, so I have set 2015 as the date for the letter.

¹¹ In situations of injustice, self-sacrifice may be both valuable and inevitable (with thanks to Faith Glavey Pawl for this point). For instance, a victim of domestic violence may deeply value their relationship with an abuser, despite the destructive nature of the relationship. Indeed, many victims have described such relationships in cyclical terms—alternating between incidents of violence and loving reconciliation. Precisely because domestic violence often constitutively involves the cultivation of social isolation, a victim's relationship to an abuser may be of central social significance to her. To the extent that a victim is divided against herself about whether to leave, choosing self-love will risk sacrificing fulfilment of any desire for union with the abuser (Herman 1997: 79–80). Self-sacrifice, then, cannot and should not be set aside entirely—but it must be balanced with self-love.

Applying one of the traditional understandings of the atonement as a model of ideally loving action to one's own life is likely to, through the subversion of self, damage one's ability to wholly engage in authentic relationship, particularly for those who are already oppressed.¹² When we valorize self-sacrifice and suffering to the exclusion of self-love, we normalize those factors which make self-sacrifice and suffering possible in the first place. Like the woman who believes it is her duty to accept domestic violence, limits have been imposed on our moral imagination.

Miranda Fricker argues that our conceptual resources can be distorted by hermeneutical injustice, which she defines as the 'injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization' (Fricker 2007: 155). Roughly, the idea is that what we can know and think about depends on our conceptual resources; our conceptual resources, in turn, depend crucially on society. For example, '[a]n ancient Greek could not know she had contracted a virus, she could not even think about viruses, because the concept of a virus was not yet socially available' (Pogin 2019: 304). Concepts that reflect the needs and experiences of marginalized social groups might not get a foothold in our shared hermeneutical resources if our theories, language, cultural narratives, and so on, are developed primarily by, or revolve around, those social groups which are dominant. Where hermeneutical injustice occurs, the resultant conceptual landscape will be ideological in Charles Mills's sense; that is, 'in the pejorative sense of [being] a set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege' (Mills 2005: 166).

Fricker gives several examples illustrating hermeneutical injustice, some of which are drawn from Susan Brownmiller's memoir of the women's liberation movement in the US. For instance:

Wendy Sanford, born into an upper-class Republican family, was battling depression after the birth of her son. Her friend Esther Rome, a follower of Jewish Orthodox traditions, dragged her to the second MIT session. Wendy had kept her distance from political groups. 'I walked into the lounge', she recalls, 'and they were talking about masturbation. I didn't say a word. I was shocked, I was fascinated. At a later session someone gave a breast-feeding demonstration. That didn't shock me, but then we broke down into small groups... In my group people started talking about postpartum depression. In that one forty-five-minute period I realized that what I'd been blaming myself for, and what my

¹² Social cooperation with those who actively or consistently harm you can effect a kind of violence to the self. Incidentally, high sociability tends to correlate with resilience in the face of certain kinds of trauma such as on the battlefield, or in the aftermath of a natural disaster, while it can exacerbate traumas like that of rape or domestic violence—attempts to empathize with one's assailant can be psychologically damaging, whereas teamwork is valuable in the face of shared danger (Herman 1997: 58–89).

husband had blamed me for, wasn't my personal deficiency. It was a combination of physiological things and a real societal thing, isolation.

(Brownmiller 1999: 182)

Without the requisite language, access to a shared narrative, or a common understanding, Sanford was suffering not only from postpartum depression, but also an inability to adequately articulate her own experience—even to herself. The experience of Carmita Wood was similar; Wood left a staff position in Cornell's Nuclear Physics Department in the 1970s in order to escape a pattern of unwanted physical and verbal advances from a professor in the department. She was subsequently denied unemployment benefits when, on the unemployment form, not knowing what else to say, she described her reasons for leaving as 'personal'. Wood, and other women involved in the feminist movement, eventually came to recognize the behaviours they had been subject to as particular kind of behaviour, and together coined the term 'sexual harassment' to name it (Brownmiller 1999: 150).

There are other examples, as well. Veterans returning home from war, suffering invisible wounds of battle, faced especially brutal challenges prior to the development of the conceptual resources that were necessary to make trauma culturally legible (e.g., recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD). For example, being labelled as morally deficient, lacking in courage, pushed out of social life, or back onto the battlefield—alienated from both their communities and their own experiences.¹³ When certain experiences tend to be distinctive of particular social groups (like postpartum depression, sexual harassment, or PTSD), and those groups lack significant power to influence the conceptual landscape, it can create hermeneutical lacunas.¹⁴

There is a distinct but related way in which a hermeneutical injustice might be generated: when a normative ideal is corrupted by the socio-epistemic context in which it is born or put to use. Here, there is not a conceptual lacuna, but rather conceptual resources that 'have been shaped in such a way that they *create* a certain reality rather than merely reflect it'.¹⁵ Dominant concepts of the atonement in Christian communities—of what it is to be morally ideal and perfectly loving—they have been shaped without proper regard for the experiences of the oppressed, the ubiquity of violence, and the destructive nature of injustice. This, in turn, has implications for how ethical conduct proper to right relationship, especially regarding suffering as a result of unjust treatment, is understood more

¹³ Herman 1997: 20–8.

¹⁴ Fricker 2007: 149–51.

¹⁵ Pogin 2019: 305. Also, Charles Mills argues in 'White Ignorance' that concepts like 'savage', 'civilization', and 'discovery' as they functioned in the history of American epistemic communities failed to reflect empirical reality but rather justified imperialism. Likewise, Mills notes that 'color-blindness' functionally erases the systematic effects of history, disparities in resources, and socio-economic opportunities (Mills 2008: 238–40).

generally. By implying that Christ's sacrifice in death was the ultimate expression of love and that we are called to suffer as Christ suffered, where Christ's suffering was taken on *in order to* redeem us (rather than taken on as a necessary consequence of some other redeeming action), we obscure the power and permissibility of resistance to injustice. We prioritize the perceived well-being of others at the expense of our own.¹⁶ We justify submission to violence. This problem of conceptualization is distinct from Fricker's notion of hermeneutical injustice insofar as this distortion comes about through the social generation of corrupted ideals rather than through being socially cut off from conceptualizing a particular kind of experience. It is relevantly similar to Fricker's notion, though, in that our collective resources for understanding the world are distorted by a failure to take appropriate account of the social experiences of the marginalized and oppressed.

One might well question what difference any of this makes to the epistemic status of a model of the atonement. Some Christians might think that if an atonement theory is otherwise philosophically compelling and consistent with Scripture, it is our moral understanding that should be questioned rather than our theory. However, to the extent that implications of a model of the atonement serve to perpetuate injustice and suffering, whatever it is that God is owed on account of human sin, it is well-nigh impossible to see how understanding the atonement should prove useful in the lives of religious believers.¹⁷ I take it that usefulness is a practical constraint on philosophy of the atonement; that is, if your theory is of the sort that it cannot helpfully be preached, then there is some sense in which the theory has failed. Thus, atonement theory ought to be held accountable to the surrounding context of its religious tradition and practices. If the atonement provides an exemplar of loving action, applying our theory of it should not frequently result in a distorted understanding of love and relationship. Applying a proper understanding of the atonement should be useful in promoting justice, particularly just relationship; if it is not, then either justification for belief in the Christian conception of God is seriously undermined, or the justification for belief in one's atonement theory is seriously undermined.

5. An Alternative Way Forward

I am not certain these problems can be solved in a way that maintains that the life and death of Christ is redemptive in nature—however, it does seem that there is an

¹⁶ I say perceived, because while it is common, e.g., for victims of abuse to believe that it is in their abuser's best interest that they endure the abuse without protest and maintain relationship with their abuser, I doubt that is actually the case.

¹⁷ Or, for that matter, how the death of Christ, in itself, could do anything to mitigate the evil in the world.

alternative way forward which is at least far more promising than models of the atonement that have been offered to date. That is, borrowing from Abelard, a new kind of exemplarist model. Abelard writes,

Now it seems to us that we have been justified by the blood of Christ and reconciled to God in this way: through this unique act of grace manifested to us—in that his Son has taken upon himself our nature and persevered therein in teaching us by word and example even unto death—he has more fully bound himself by love; with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him. (1956: 283)

On the view expressed in this passage, at least part of our redemption is to be found in that Christ offers an inspiring example of a life and death of love and charity. Swinburne and Thomas Williams both object to an exclusively-exemplarist¹⁸ theory of the atonement on account of the fact that there is no ‘transaction’ within the atonement itself that offers payment to God for human sin. Williams describes exemplarism as follows:

On an exemplarist theory, the Passion works for our redemption only by presenting an extraordinary example of love that inspires an answering love in our hearts. But the Passion is not an example of love at all if Christ was not in some way acting for our benefit by allowing himself to be delivered up unto death. So exemplarism turns out to be incoherent. Only if there is an objective transaction can there be the subjective transformation. (Williams 2004: 262)

Here, among other possibilities, one could borrow nicely from Cross and reject the notion that the atonement must include some such transaction. To the extent that any such transaction is necessary, we need not find it in the atonement itself; humans can make reparation (to God) for sin through apology and penitence (reparation to others whom our sin harms may require much more).¹⁹

However, the question of transaction aside, Abelard’s exemplarism falls prey to the same sorts of worries I raised above regarding other theories of the

¹⁸ There are competing interpretations of Abelard on this point. Philip L. Quinn takes Abelard to offer a model of the atonement that includes both exemplarism and penal substitution. Cf. Quinn 1993 (reprinted in Rea 2009).

¹⁹ For my own part, I’m not inclined to think that transaction is necessary for reparation (though a transaction may be a means of reparation), nor that apologies are inherently transactional (what exactly is transacted? Embarrassment? Words? It seems to me that apologies matter more because they signify care and mutual understanding of shared norms, thus enabling the re-establishment of trust, and less because something is traded), but I’m happy to concede the point for the sake of argument (especially because, to my mind, death doesn’t seem particularly well suited to transaction either).

atonement.²⁰ On this sort of view, sacrificing oneself in death for the sake of others is understood to offer an exemplar of loving action, but those who are already unjustly subjected to suffering at the hands of others are in need of the means by which they can maintain an integrated sense of self, respect for their own person, and develop the tools required for resistance where possible.²¹ What they do not need is an understanding of love and moral duty which effectively promotes the status quo by encouraging those who are oppressed to see self-sacrifice into suffering as the ideal expression of love.

To account for the redemptive nature of the atonement, consider why Rosemary Radford Ruether rejects the notion wholesale:

Suffering is a factor in the liberation process, not as a means of redemption, but as the risk one takes when one struggles to overcome unjust systems whose beneficiaries resist change. The means of redemption is conversion, opening up to one another, changing systems of distorted relations, creating loving and life-giving communities of people here and now, not getting oneself tortured to death.

(Ruether 1998: 279)

What Ruether believes is grounds for rejecting the notion of atonement provides fertile ground for constructing a new, less problematic, exemplarist model. Christ's life and death can provide an example of a life dedicated to the struggle to overcome injustice and a refusal to give up that struggle even under threat of death. Christ refused to cooperate with injustice and was crucified, at least in part, for precisely that reason. Submission to violence need not represent a general ideal nor an inconsistency. Allowing himself to be crucified was itself an act of resistance. This is what distinguishes Christ's *non*-violence from submission to violence. In allowing violence to be done to himself, Christ subverted the intentions of his oppressors rather than allowed them to achieve their aim. The purpose of crucifixion was not simply to kill those who were so sentenced by the state, but rather to silence those who would fear such a fate. Christ was certainly not silenced.

Importantly, the suffering of Christ was not unqualified suffering—it was the result of his unwavering pursuit for justice in an unjust world. Rather than being called, then, to suffer in submission to violence, perhaps we are called to unreserved resistance of injustice, even though suffering is surely an inevitable result of doing so.²²

²⁰ Stump likewise rejects Abelard's exemplarism for reasons related to ethical concerns regarding suffering.

²¹ For those who are particularly vulnerable and oppressed, in some circumstances, merely ensuring one's own survival may itself function as a form of resistance.

²² Thanks to Michael Rea, Jason Stanley, Jennifer Lackey, Baron Reed, Amber Carlson, Meghan Page, Faith Glavey Pawl, Michelle Panchuk, Michael DePaul, participants in an Analytic Theology Workshop at Southern Methodist University, and participants in a Baylor Georgetown Notre Dame Philosophy of Religion Conference for discussion and/or comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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