

A Participatory Model of the Atonement

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we develop a participatory model of the Christian doctrine of the atonement, according to which the atonement involves participating in the death and resurrection of Christ. In part one we argue that current models of the atonement – exemplary, penal, substitutionary and merit models – are unsatisfactory. The central problem with them is that they assume a purely deontic (or moral) conception of sin and fail to address sin as a relational and ontological problem. In part two we argue that a participatory model of the atonement is both exegetically and philosophically plausible, and should be taken seriously within philosophical theology.¹

What? Humanity sins but it's God's Son who pays the price? I tried to imagine Father saying to me, "Piscine, a lion slipped into the llama pen today and killed two llamas. Yesterday another one killed a black buck. Last week two of them ate the camel. The week before it was painted storks and grey herons. And who's to say for sure who snacked on our golden agouti? The situation has become intolerable. Something must be done. I have decided that the only way the lions can atone for their sins is if I feed you to them."

"Yes, Father, that would be the right and logical thing to do. Give me a moment to wash up."

... What a downright weird story. What peculiar psychology.

— *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel

The atonement is at the heart of Christian theology. However, the attempt to understand and articulate the atonement is not at the heart of Christian philosophy of religion: at least, you would not get the impression that it was from the volume of literature on the topic. Nonetheless, in recent years there has been a noticeable change in the intellectual climate, with a number of philosophers articulating models of the atonement. Although much of this work contains valuable insights, it also suffers from a notable lack of engagement with work in theology and New Testament scholarship. Contributors to the philosophical discussion of the atonement have been almost exclusively concerned with what we might call *Abelard's constraint*: they have been concerned to develop models of the atonement that are “neither unintelligible, arbitrary, illogical nor immoral.” While Abelard's constraint is perfectly acceptable (who would not prefer a theory which was intelligible, non-arbitrary, consistent and morally acceptable?), accounts of the atonement should also be informed and constrained by the New Testament understanding of the atonement and salvation. If they are not so informed, their credentials as *Christian* accounts of the atonement are called into question. In this paper we argue that philosophical accounts of the atonement have much to learn from recent work in New Testament scholarship, in particular, Pauline scholarship.

I. GETTING SITUATED: CURRENT MODELS OF THE ATONEMENT

An illuminating way in which to taxonomize models of the atonement is according to their conception of the problem to which atonement is the solution, viz., sin. Roughly speaking, one might conceptualise sin in three ways: *ontologically*; *deontically*; and *relationally*. An *ontological* conception conceives of sin as a feature or element of human nature; it is something from which we suffer. One might also call it a “pathological” conception of sin, for it conceives of sin as a sickness. A *deontic* conception of sin conceives of sin in moral terms. Sin, on this view, is immoral behaviour, and it results in a moral debt. A *relational* conception of sin conceives of it in terms of broken or alienated relationships. These three models of sin may not be mutually exclusively – perhaps an account of the atonement could view sin through the lens of all three models – but treatments of the atonement tend to privilege one of these three conceptions of sin.

Where do various models of the atonement sit vis-à-vis these three conceptions of sin? The model that is most explicitly directed at sin as an ontological problem is the ransom model. According to the ransom model Christ's death was a ransom paid to the devil to free us from bondage to him. Included under the notion of bondage to the devil was the idea that the devil had human nature under his control. The ransom model tends to be little endorsed nowadays, and we will pass over it without comment.

THE EXEMPLARY MODEL

The only model currently endorsed in the contemporary philosophical literature that might be thought to conceive of sin in ontological terms is the exemplary model. Exemplary models go back to Abelard, and have been recently defended by McNaughton (1992) and Quinn (1993). According to a purely exemplary model, Christ's death was nothing but an inspiring example of love and obedience. The atonement, on this approach, deals with sin by prompting us to do better next time.

There is much that is attractive about the exemplary model of the atonement. Unlike some models of the atonement, it offends against neither moral nor metaphysical commonsense. There are no dubious moral transactions at work when we take Christ's death as an example to follow, and we all understand how it is that someone's life can be inspirational. But the exemplary model has weaknesses. One problem concerns what exactly it is that we are meant to emulate. For the emulation to have any purpose, we need to be able to characterize Christ's death as having an objective, intrinsic point. Campbell captures the problem here well:

A meaningless or trivial death cannot reveal love: it reveals nothing – except perhaps foolishness. If I drive my car at high speed into a brick wall, loudly proclaiming my love for all humanity, my surviving family would probably wonder how I had left my senses, not how extraordinarily loving my gesture was (Campbell 1994: 239).

The problem, in a nutshell, is that the exemplary model needs to be able to characterize Christ's death as accomplishing something in and of itself, apart from its inspirational value.

According to McNaughton's version of the exemplary model, "Christ's death can be seen as showing the believer, in the most vivid way imaginable, the costs of human sin" (McNaughton 1992: 144). *How* does Christ's death show the costs of human sin? McNaughton doesn't say. The problem is that we need an account of how Christ's death is a response to – a cost of – human sin, and this is precisely what exemplary accounts fail to provide. (Even if this can be provided, it seems to be overstating the case to suggest that Christ's death reveals the costs of sin "in the most vivid way imaginable." One might think that the death of a child due to child abuse is much more effective in showing the costs of human sin.)

A second problem with the exemplary model concerns its ability to address sin as an ontological problem. The New Testament does present Christ as a model of self-sacrificial love, but it doesn't suggest that our primary problem is a lack of such models, nor does it suggest that we are ignorant of the costs of sin. Instead, it suggests that our sinful nature

puts us at odds with each other and with God. The exemplary model lacks the resources to deal with a problem of this nature.

DEONTIC MODELS

By far the dominant approach to the atonement in philosophical theology construes sin as (generating) a debt. We call these conceptions of the atonement *deontic* models. Penal, satisfaction, merit and sacrificial models of the atonement are all deontic models, for although they disagree in how God deals with this debt (and, sometimes, in the nature of that debt), they are united in their conviction that sin is first and foremost a deontic problem.

How does the atonement deal with the *debt* of sin? Four lines of thought can be identified here. According to Anselm's *satisfaction* model in *Cur Deus Homo*, the debt is paid when Christ gives God the honour that the human race owes him (see Aspenson 1990 for a contemporary discussion). According to the *penal* model (Morris 1966, Packer 1974, Porter 2002), the debt is dealt with in virtue of the fact that Christ is punished for non-payment of the debt. On Swinburne's (1989) *sacrificial* model, Christ's death constitutes reparation and penance for non-payment of the debt. And on the *merit* model, Christ's life and death is a meritorious act that persuades God to forgive the debt (Quinn 1994; Cross 2001; Putrill 1991).

A number of specific objections can be levelled against particular deontic models of the atonement but rather than pursue these objections we want to explore generic objections to deontic accounts of the atonement.

THE GROUNDS OF OUR OBLIGATION

It is a curious feature of deontic models that they spend little time exploring the nature of the moral obligations at work in their conception of sin. There are three issues to be addressed here: (a) to whom are the moral obligations owed?, (b) what is the content of the obligations?, and (c) on what basis are the moral obligations owed?

There is general agreement that the obligations in question are owed to God. Proponents of the deontic model might also regard sin as flouting one's obligation to oneself, or to other human beings, but sin is first and foremost a lack of meeting our obligations to God. But what are these obligations? According to Anselm, we have the obligation to honour God. There seems something morally problematic about this claim. It paints God as a petty bureaucrat, obsessed with being respected by his inferiors.

According to Swinburne, we have an obligation to God to live good lives. We sin when we live second-rate lives, despite having been given such great opportunities by our creator (1989: 157). This too seems problematic: perhaps we have obligations to live good lives, but do we have such obligations *to God*? Swinburne seems to think that we have this obligation to God because God created us, but this seems to be a rather poor justification. Does Frankenstein's automaton have obligations to Frankenstein on the grounds of its origin? This could well be contested. Of course, Christians believe that we owe our being to God in a more thorough-going way than the automaton owes its being to Frankenstein; even so, ontological dependence alone seems a tenuous basis on which to ground a deontological conception of sin.

A second worry with Swinburne's conceptions of sin is that it sits uneasily with the biblical claim that all are subject to sin. Is it true that all have lived second-rate lives? It is not at all clear that it is. Finally, we note that if we have an obligation to God to live first-rate lives, then God has an obligation to us to give us the opportunity to live first-rate lives. Given the prevalence of evil and suffering, one might think that God has failed in his obligations in this respect. Someone brought up in a violent and abusive household might be thought to have had little opportunity to live a first-rate life.

MODELS OF SIN

Another objection to deontic models concerns their exclusive focus on the deontic conception of sin.² Deontic models give very little attention to sin as either an ontological or relational problem. Is this due to a presumption that there is no ontological aspect of sin, or is there an assumption that the deontic aspect of sin is primary and that any ontological understanding of sin is secondary and only to be understood in the light of the deontological account? We suspect that most proponents of deontological accounts are to be found in the second camp.

According to what might be thought of as the standard view, sin is a deontological property that has relational effects. The idea is that sin involves a failure on humanity's part of fulfil their moral obligations. This, in turn, leads to a breach in the relationship between God and humanity, a breach which God repairs by means of the atonement. This repair job – so the story goes – involves solving the deontological problem: the restoration (and continued health) of the relationship is conditional on the good standing of humanity *vis-à-vis* our moral obligations to God. Since we are unable to secure that good standing by our own merits alone, God must take the appropriate actions to secure it for us (or with our help). Models of the atonement differ on exactly how this good standing is achieved (and maintained) – some models give a role to restitution, others to punishment, others to

forgiveness – but there is a broad consensus that reconciliation in the relationship between humanity and God is conditional on a solution to the deontological problem.

There are a number of reasons to question this picture of things. For one thing, the two accounts do not fit neatly. There is more than a little tension between deontological and relational language. Even where it is justified, the language of rights and duties is ill-suited to the most intimate of human relationships. The surest sign that a marriage or friendship is in trouble is when the participants start invoking their *rights*, or calling attention to their partner's *obligations*. Friends do indeed have obligations to each other, but it is not in the nature of friendship for friends to call attention to such obligations, nor is it likely that outsiders seeking to understand the relationship will resort to talk of obligations to explain how the relationship works. Consider also another intimate relationship, that between children and parents. Although there may be *some* room for a deontological approach to the parent-child relationship, this is surely not how such relationships ought to be understood in the first instance. Children may have an obligation to care for their parents in old age simply because they are their parents, but their primary motivation and ground for such activity ought surely to be that of love. Similarly, parents may have obligations to care for their children simply because they are their children, but their primary motivation here should be based in the love they have for them. At the very least, if the obligation has to play an important motivational or explanatory role, there is something deeply wrong with the relationship. Invoking deontological language is unlikely to mend an intimate relationship, and may well sour it further. There is a deep tension between a relational conception of sin and a deontological understanding of it.

Although this point has been extensively discussed in recent theological literature, it has been only dimly appreciated in the philosophical literature. Richard Swinburne rejects penal models of the Atonement on the grounds that “talk of law courts and punishment makes the whole process too “mechanical” for a means of reconciliation that ought to be intimate and personal” (1989: 152). This is surely true, but Swinburne fails to notice that the same objection applies to his model of the atonement, which also assumes a deontological model of sin: Swinburne describes sin as a debt (1989: 149) that we have incurred as a result of failing to fulfil our obligations to God. Consider also Porter's modified version of the penal account. Porter claims that “fundamental to sin is a prideful usurpation of God's rightful place in one's life and thereby a rejection of God's offer of intimate friendship. Hence, sin is a form of rebellion that cannot be repaired by positive efforts, and thus, reparation and penance can be better captured by punishment” (Porter: 603). Is punishment really an appropriate response to a rejection of intimate *friendship*? One wouldn't have thought so, especially if the aim were to restore the relationship.

The deontological model of sin is also in tension with an ontological understanding of sin. If sin is something under which we (together with the rest of creation) labour, then it is not clear that we are morally responsible for those actions that result from our sinful nature. An inability to do something is normally thought of as excusatory. The sick need a doctor not a jailor or judge. Even if deontic models of the atonement are able to deal with sin as a deontological problem, they fail to deal with it as a problem of human nature.³

ATONEMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE INCARNATION

A satisfactory model of the atonement should explain exactly how Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection play a role in the atonement. Arguably, an account of the atonement needn't show that the incarnation was the *only* way that the atonement could be brought about, but it should draw a meaningful connection between the atonement and the incarnation. It is a powerful objection to any Christian theory of the atonement if it fails to explain how the atonement is related to the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

Few conceptions of the atonement are able to do this. Consider, for example, Quinn's modified version of the substitution model:

Christ's life and death persuade God to be lenient rather than severe in his treatment of human sinners. Just because the supererogatory goodness in Christ's life and his voluntary submission to suffering and death are a sacrifice that is enormously pleasing to God, their effect is to forestall the severe but just demand for reparation and not to make the reparation that would be demanded in their absence. They function not to remove a debt of punishment that human sinners owe by paying it, but to persuade God to remit or cancel the debt. (1994: 298)

Quinn fails to explain how Christ's life and death persuades God to be lenient. Why was the sacrifice that Christ paid to God enormously pleasing to him? If it were sacrifice alone that God desired, why must God incarnate make that sacrifice? Why couldn't someone else make the sacrifice? Quinn fails to address any of these questions.

Brümmer's accounts of the atonement raises similar questions. Brümmer summarizes his model as follows: "through sincere penitence and divine forgiveness I can be restored to loving fellowship. Such fellowship bestows ultimate meaning on my very existence and enables me to 'live with myself.'" (1992, 451) Why does divine forgiveness require the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection? Brümmer's answer is this:

... the person who forgives us is the person who has to pay the price for reconciliation. Since in restoring our fellowship with God it is God who forgives, it is also God who has to pay the price and has to absorb into his own suffering the consequences of the wrong that we have done to him. On Calvary God reveals to us the cost of his forgiveness.” (1992, 452).

This is clearly unsatisfactory. What does God’s forgiveness cost God? Does God have to struggle to overcome feelings of anger and resentment towards us? That doesn’t sound like the God of the New Testament – a God whose very essence is love. Why can’t God simply *decide* to forgive us? What exactly is the price that God must pay, and to whom must it be paid? What are the consequences of the wrong that we have done to God, and how does Christ’s death and resurrection reveal them?⁴ Again, Brümmer fails to address these questions.

Perhaps the most developed account of how a deontic model of the atonement can account for the role of the incarnation is Purtill’s. Purtill suggests that “in suffering and dying, Christ was giving God a *good reason* to punish us less and reward us more than we deserve on our own merits. His suffering and death for our sake give us a claim on God’s mercy and generosity. God become a man; as a man he offered his suffering and death for our sake. God now has *good reason* to show us justice and mercy” (1991: 44; italics in original).

What is the “good reason” that Christ’s death provides? According to Purtill, God could have forgiven us without Christ’s suffering, but to do so would have removed our motivation for gratitude and repentance: “we do not value what seems easy” (1991: 44). On Purtill’s model Christ’s death is only externally related to the atonement. Dealing with sin is costly, but only because it is necessary that it appear to be costly. Purtill’s model appears to suggest that our salvation *is* easy, but God doesn’t want us to think that it is easy. It is important for us that our salvation appears costly to God (but not costly for *us*, since it is Christ who dies, and not us) for otherwise we will take it for granted.

Purtill’s suggestion is ingenious, but there is something unsavoury about it. Consider the following analogy. An eight-year-old wants a bicycle. Her parents can *easily* afford it, but they worry that if their daughter realises this then she won’t value it. So they pretend that they can barely afford to purchase the bike for her. No doubt there is something honourable about the motives of such parents, but there is something dishonourable about their means. Similarly, one ought to wonder about a God who makes a process that is not intrinsically costly appear to be so.

There is a further problem with Purtill’s account. The costliness of an action can be a motive for gratitude, but the costliness has to be seen to be internally related to the offence

in order for this to happen. Should the eight-year-old discover that her parents could easily afford the bike, she would be annoyed that she had been duped, and rightly so. Her parents take a risk in pretending that their daughter's present cost them more than it did. Should she discover the true state of their finances, she will be further alienated from them. Similarly, on Purtill's account, God takes a risk when he makes our atonement appear costly. The motivational force of the atonement is dependent on our failure to realize that the atonement doesn't actually cost God anything.

ATONEMENT AND THE TRINITY

We end this section with some brief comments on deontic models of the atonement in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity. The general worry here is that such models posit problematic intra-Trinitarian relations. Consider, for instance, the penal model. The idea that God might punish God for a debt owed to God is a strange one. Is God punishing Godself? That seems pathological. Is God the Father punishing God the son? That seems sadistic. It also seems to posit a kind of disunity in the being of God that is foreign to Christian thought.

Consider also the merit version of the deontic model, according to which Christ's life and death persuades God to forgive the debt of sin. This also posits the kind of intra-Trinitarian relations that is foreign to Christian doctrine. In his letter to the Romans St. Paul claims that the Father sent the son for our salvation (Rom. 8: 3). The entire thrust of Paul's thought sees the atonement as the unified work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. It is difficult to reconcile this with the thought that Christ's death persuades God the Father to cancel the debt of sin.

Finally, consider the Anselmian line, according to which Christ pays God the honour that we owe him. There are two ways to understand this position. On one view, Christ honours God the Father and not God as such. If this is Anselm's view it is a strange one, for it is surely God as such who ought to be honoured, and not solely God the Father. So perhaps Christ honours God. This view too is strange, for Christ as a member of the Trinity *is* God. Is Christ honouring himself? Is that what atonement is all about? That too seems hard to square with what Christian tradition takes the atonement to have achieved.

2. THE PARTICIPATORY MODEL

In light of the above considerations we would seem to have ample justification for exploring alternatives to exemplary and deontic models of the atonement. In what follows we will do just that, not by introducing a new model, but by rehabilitating an ancient model that has been undeservedly neglected: the participatory model.

ST. PAUL AND THE LANGUAGE OF PARTICIPATION

The participatory model of the atonement goes back not to Calvin, Luther, Abelard Aquinas or Anselm, but to Paul. Consider the following excerpt from a summary of Paul's thought:

The sin of Adam was reversed and the possibility of restoration opened up when Christ lived and died in obedience and was raised from life to death. Those who are 'baptized' into him are able to share his death to sin (Rom. 6: 4-11) and his status of righteousness before God (2 Cor. 5: 21). Since Adam's sin brought corruption to the world, restoration involved the whole universe (Rom. 8: 19-22; Col. 1: 15-20) ... [Christ] shared our humanity, and all that means in terms of weakness... in order that we might share in his sonship and righteousness. To do this, however, Christians must share in his death and Resurrection, dying to the realm of flesh and rising to life in the Spirit. Thus Paul speaks of being crucified with Christ in order that Christ may live in him (Gal. 2: 19-20). The process of death and resurrection is symbolized by baptism (Rom. 6: 3-4). By baptism 'into Christ', believers are united 'with him', so that they now live 'in him'. These phrases (in particular 'in Christ') express the close relationship between Christ and believers that is so important for Paul. (Hooker 2000: 522; see also Hooker 1994 and Campbell 1994).

There is a notable lack of exemplary and deontic language here. Christ's life and death is not presented as something we must emulate, nor is it represented as persuading God to forgive us, constituting restitution for our debts, or punishment for our misdeeds. Paul's writings do contain moral, legal and commercial terms, but Paul's thought has an ontological and relational focus. The ontological focus of Paul's thought is encapsulated in his frequent references to Christ as the Second Adam. Christ's resurrection inaugurates a new humanity and indeed a new creation (Rom. 8:19-22; Col. 1: 15-20); we are quite literally born again (Gal. 2:20).⁵ This new identity – grounded in the Christian's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ as the Second Adam – is symbolized by the rites of baptism and the eucharist. Participatory language also infuses Paul's conception of the Church, which he describes as the body of Christ. (It is hard to imagine a more participatory relationship than that which a person has with their body.) Paul describes the Spirit as marrying the Christian to Christ so that "the two become one flesh" (Rom. 7: 1-4; I Cor. 6:15-18).

How does participation deal with sin? According to Paul, our change of identity liberates us from sin: since we are no longer bound by (or under the sway of) sin, we are free to participate in a restored relationship with God. In fact, Paul seems to think that we in some

way participate in Christ's relationship with God (cf. Romans 6:8–11: the believer is "alive to God *in Christ Jesus*").⁶ The central point to note here is that Paul's conception of sin is not, primarily, deontic. Paul doesn't see Christ's death and resurrection as a salve for troubled consciences – indeed, Paul is adamant that his conscience was clear (Acts 23:1, 2 Cor. 1:12). Instead, he seems to see Christ as dealing with sin as part of the human (indeed: cosmic) condition.

But isn't there some sense in which sin is a deontic problem? How does the participatory model deal with sin as a problem of moral culpability? There are a couple of lines of thought one might pursue here. One might develop a hybrid model of the atonement, where participation in Christ's death and resurrection deals with sin as a relational and ontological problem, and some form of the deontic model deals with sin a deontic problem. While there is certainly room for such hybridisation, we are more inclined to adopt the view that the atonement deals with sin as a deontic problem by dealing with the sinner: if the sinner is the "old person," and the old person died with Christ on the cross, then there is no longer anyone who ought to feel guilty for their sin.⁷ The moral debt we owe to God (if such there be) is not punished, neither satisfaction nor reparation is made for it, and Christ's death does not persuade God to forgive it. Instead, it is dealt with by changing the identity of sinner: strictly speaking, the person who is in the wrong before God no longer exists. We think that this is an advantage of the model. God's forgiveness cannot be coerced or merited, even by Godself.

That, in outline, is the participatory model. Of course, there is much more that should be said here, but we believe that enough has been said to warrant taking this understanding of the atonement seriously. Its biblical credentials are clear, as are its theological credentials: it doesn't involve any problematic intra-Trinitarian transactions; it does justice to a relational and ontological conception of sin; and – unlike other models of the atonement – it forges a deep connection between the atonement and the death and resurrection of Christ. But if the model is so powerful why has it been neglected? Why does one struggle to find any reference to it within contemporary philosophy of religion?⁸ There are, we think, two central reasons for its neglect: one philosophical, one exegetical.

EXEGETICAL CONCERNS

One reason for the neglect of the participatory model is that Paul's thought has all-too-often been understood in terms of deontic terms: specifically satisfaction and penal terms. Within the Western tradition Paul has been presented as concerned with the question of how guilty man can be justified – that is, declared morally pure – before God. Although the news has been slow in getting through to philosophers, most Pauline scholars reject this

reading of Paul. Recent scholarship suggests that participatory notions lie at the heart of Paul's understanding of the atonement (see Campbell 1994, 2001; Hooker 1994; Sanders 1977; Ziesler 1990).

But what are we to make of those passages in which Paul does seem to endorse a deontological conception of sin, such as Rom. 1:16–4:25, and Gal. 2:15–4:7? There are a number of options here. One option is to adopt a two-crater view, on which Paul endorsed (perhaps at different times) two models of salvation (see Sanders 1977). Another option, which we prefer, is an argumentative reading of these passages, in which Paul's use of deontic language is largely a dialectical device, forced on him by the rhetorical framework of the theological battles he is waging (see Campbell 2001). But we needn't argue for this position here. For our purposes we need only claim that Paul places participatory notions at the heart of his conception of atonement.

PHILOSOPHICAL CONCERNS

We suspect that the central objection to the participatory model is that it is metaphorical at best, and unintelligible at worst. The objection can be phrased in the following way: the Christian doesn't *literally* die on the cross with Christ, and she isn't *literally* reborn with Christ in his resurrection. There is really no such thing as a participatory *model* of the atonement; instead, all we have are a motley and confusing assortment of metaphors. What sense can we make of participating in the death and life of Christ, however these notions are to be understood? The participatory model might not be immoral or arbitrary, but it is – the critic claims – both illogical and unintelligible.

This is a serious objection, and it deserves a detailed response. We can begin by noting that any religion that is committed to a Trinitarian and Incarnational view of the divine has reason to be cautious about a thoroughgoing application of Abelard's constraint. It would be puzzling, to say the least, to endorse (say) a realist conception of the incarnation or the Trinity only to dismiss the participatory model of the atonement on the grounds that it is difficult to conceive of how we might participate in the Cross. Indeed, it is tempting argue that the conceptual difficulties involved in unpacking the participatory model are similar to those involved in the trinity and incarnation, and that this is a benefit of the current approach: it is tempting to think that participatory notions should play a role in our understanding of both the incarnation and the trinity. However, we will not develop this line of thought here. Suffice to say that questions of personal identity feature prominently for Christian philosophical theology, and it should be no surprise that these issues are to be found at the heart of the Christian doctrine of the atonement.

But although not without merit, this point evades the central question for us: is the participatory model really intelligible? What can be said by way of making the model less obscure? What can be said by way of clarifying the real *content* of this picture of the atonement?

There are really two questions here: (1) what can be said by way of explicating what it is to be “in Christ,” and (2) what can be said by way of explicating the relationship between the old person and the new person. (These two questions are, of course, not unrelated.) We cannot hope to answer these in any detail, but we can offer some tentative thoughts.

We can go some way towards understanding participatory identity by considering the difference between what we might call numerical (or thin) personal identity and moral (or thick) personal identity. The standard accounts of personal identity (dualism, Animalism, Lockeanism) are best understood as accounts of personal identity in the numerical (or thin) sense of the term.⁹ The question these accounts attempt to answer is this: what, fundamentally, are we? What are our identity conditions? In addition to the question of numerical identity, one might also think that there is such a thing as moral identity. One’s moral identity is one’s identity as a moral agent, as an entity that is responsible for its actions. The need to distinguish between numerical and moral identity is, we think, amply motivated. Think about actions performed while asleep, or under the influence of a drug, or in a fugue state, and so on. Are such actions things one has done? Should one feel guilty for them? In some sense these are things that one has done – and some feeling of responsibility for them *might* be appropriate. (Think, for instance, of a motorist who runs over and injures a young child who runs out in front of her. The motorist might not be morally responsible for the child’s injuries, but she will – and arguably should – feel some sort of responsibility for her actions.) But at the same time we might want to distance ourselves from such actions in a certain way, and such distancing seems defensible. Such actions are not a part of one’s *real* self: they are not expressive of one’s identity as a moral agent.

It is plausible to think that moral identity should be understood in terms of one’s commitments, values and relationships. My identity qua moral agent is bound up with those projects and values with which I identify. I could survive the transition from one set of relations and commitments to another as one and the same person, but not as one and the same moral agent.

The notion of moral identity gives us some handle on what it is to be in Christ. To be in Christ is for one’s identity as a moral agent – as a moral self – to be centred on Christ and Christ’s participation in the life of God.

What about the second problem: how are the old and new persons related? The first thing to note is that Paul seems to think that the transition to our new identity is not complete; we are, in some sense, caught between the new and old creation; the process of identification has begun and is continuing (Rom 5:5; 8:1ff). Paul seems to think that continuity of personal identity can straddle the transition to being in Christ.

Here too the notion of moral identity is useful. Whether or not numerical identity is always determinate (and reductionists claim that it isn't), moral identity is certainly not always determinate. One and the same person can be caught between two or more moral identities, as they endorse and affirm different sets of relations, values and commitments. Paul's lament of feeling torn between the old humanity and the new humanity is not unfamiliar to us.

3. CONCLUSION

We have argued that the participatory model should be taken seriously within the contemporary philosophical discussion of the atonement. It has strong Biblical credentials, and it avoids many of the objections that plague other models. But embracing the participatory model doesn't demand that one reject all other accounts of the Atonement; there is certainly room for hybrid accounts of the atonement. Indeed, the participatory model can illuminate a number of the other models of the Atonement.

The Atonement does indeed involve sacrifice on the part of God, although it is not a sacrifice that God makes (to Godself) as restitution for our debt (Swinburne), or in order to convince God to forgive us of our debt to God (Quinn). As is often noted, Paul's participatory language draws on Old Testament conceptions of sacrifice and expiation, on which one's transgressions are transferred to the animal, so that they die with the animal (see e.g. Childs 1992). Although the participatory notion does not, as such, see participation as a *mechanism* for the transfer of sin, it does build on the idea of participation and identification that is inherent in the notion of the sacrificial animal.

The participatory model can also make sense of exemplary language, although it will regard such language as highly impoverished if it is left to itself. The Christian is, of course, invited to emulate Christ's life and death, but this is not where the heart of the atonement. The language of the New Testament tends not to be one of encouraging the Christian to do good works, but reminding them that since they are in Christ they must act in accordance with who they are. That is, they must live up to those commitments, values and relations that they have.

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NOTES

- ¹ Thanks to Christine Parker, Andrew Howie, Douglas Campbell and Alan Torrance for illuminating conversations on these topics.
- ² This notion is particularly strong in Hare's writing on the atonement (1996). Hare sees the need for atonement as deriving from the *gap* between what morality requires of us and what we *can* achieve.
- ³ Fiddes makes this point powerfully (1989, 70).
- ⁴ Perhaps the best that can be made of Brümmer's line is this. The death of Christ is a manifestation that God has forgiven us. It isn't, in any way, a mechanism, or a means of forgiveness, but it functions as an outward manifestation of God's attitude toward us. It is akin to the election of the pope. But now one wonders why God would choose to reveal the fact that we are forgiven in this peculiar and costly way, unless that action was more than simply a *revelation* of God's love.
- ⁵ Of course, this conception of the new life of the believer is not just Pauline, but also Johannine (John 3:16).
- ⁶ This phrase "in Christ" and related forms occurs about 165 times in the letters of Paul.
- ⁷ There are echoes here of Kant's account of the atonement. See Quinn (1986).
- ⁸⁸ There are hints of it in the final paragraph of Quinn (2000), and also in Hare (1996). Fiddes (1989) makes frequent references to atonement as participation, but he seems to

understand the participatory model primarily in the context of penal approaches to the atonement (see especially p. 95), rather than as an independent model in its own right.

⁹ The distinction between numerical and moral identity is complicated by the fact that Lockeans typically take the concept <person> to have moral content.