

Incarnation and Atonement

James A. Montmarquet

I

Two central mysteries of Christianity are the incarnation – God and man becoming one in the personage of Jesus Christ – and the ‘doctrine of atonement’: the idea that, quoting C.S. Lewis,¹ “Christ’s death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start.” Of these, the atonement has been *especially* intractable to theorists. In his usual plainspoken way, Lewis puts the central problem thus:

If God was prepared to let us off, why on earth did He not do so? And what possible point could there be in punishing an innocent person instead? (44)

What point indeed? And even if Jesus suffering and death are not narrowly conceived as “punishment,” this remains a puzzle² -- and a challenge for theorists.

Now some – Saint Anselm, most notably, but also Lewis himself – have boldly sought to employ their particular explanation of the atonement in order to understand the necessity of the incarnation. In effect they say: ‘in order to accomplish the atonement, God had to become man.’ In the opening sections of this paper (II-V), I am critical of these and other atonement theories, including that of Richard Swinburne. My *main* aim here (sections VI-VIII), however, is more exploratory. My explorations eventually lead me to adopt, then to modify greatly, Philip Quinn’s suggestion that the atonement be conceived as an *unplanned*, spontaneous expression of fatherly mercy, prompted by the death of a favored son. On the resulting account, there is one central act of forgiveness – for the murder of Jesus and, by extension, for all lesser offenses. But what makes all of these – including all other human sins -- ‘lesser offenses’? This is a central role for the incarnation, on the suggested account.

II

We begin with Lewis’s own theory of redemption (atonement). This centrally involves his conception of Jesus as the “perfect penitent” – and may be summarized as follows. In sinning, human beings have alienated themselves from God; restoration of this right relationship will require, at a minimum, due repentance – “a willing submission and a kind of death” – on our part. Yet there is a problem. As Lewis puts it: insofar as one is good, one is quite able to repent but does not need to; but on the other side, “the same badness that makes us need it renders us unable to do it.” Thus, he continues

We now need God’s help in order to do something which God in his own nature never does at all – to surrender, to submit, to die. ... But supposing God became a man – suppose that that human nature which can suffer and die was amalgamated with God’s nature in one person—then that person could help us. He could surrender his will and suffer and die because he was a man and he could do it perfectly because he is God. (45)

¹ *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 42; Lewis’s own term for the doctrine of atonement – and of course there has been no standard term for this across the ages – is the doctrine or theory of “redemption.”

² Thus, one could ask what possible point there is in allowing an innocent person to suffer and die – regardless of whether this qualifies as “punishment” -- so that our punishment (or just our suffering) for our sins would be lessened.

This account is highly relevant to our concerns here (in appealing to the incarnation in order to explain the atonement) yet, in other respects not very satisfactory. Repentance involves, he says, “killing a part of ourselves” – i.e., that part whose pride, selfishness, and so forth have caused us to be alienated from God. But Jesus’ submitting to death cannot accomplish *that*. Perhaps he is killing part of himself; but that is not something that needs, or ought, to die; nor does its death mean that these things are killed in us – which is where they *need* to be killed.³ Again, if Jesus’ repentance is purer than ours (because he is not, as we are, attracted to sin), it has the deficiency of being wholly indirect. Surely, in general, it is better that a bad man repent for his sins (much as he still loves them) than that a good man (who loves sin less) repent for the bad man’s (if this is even possible!).

Beyond these particular difficulties, there is a wider problem well illustrated by Lewis’s theory. In making the kind of employment that Lewis does of the incarnation, there is a danger of the following type of equivocal treatment of the fundamental issues here. If supposing that God becomes man might allow us to explain how God accomplishes X and supposing that God remains God might allow us to explain how God accomplishes Y, there is a temptation to hurry to the conclusion that he now understand how God is simultaneously able to effect X and Y. In this case, we are to suppose that God can repent only as man, but, in remaining God, is able to repent perfectly. This I find puzzling. If God, as a spiritual being, cannot (physically) see, but can do so only as a man (Jesus), does this mean that Jesus has the capacity, or that we can now understand how Jesus might have the capacity, for perfect vision?

III

Before moving on to Richard Swinburne’s important, contemporary theory of the atonement, we should at least briefly advert to Saint Anselm’s classic attempt to solve this problem by reference to the incarnation.⁴ For Anselm, God must become man because the nature of the offense to Him done by human sin greatly (infinitely) exceeds anything we are able to accomplish by way of compensation. Here I quote from Philip Quinn’s incisive rendering:

So man owes a debt but cannot pay it. God, on the other hand, can pay the debt but does not owe it. Only a God-Man could both owe and pay the debt consequent upon sin, and so God must become man if the debt of sin is to be paid.⁵

This account, however, appears but to beg the question of whether, or how, the infliction of this suffering and death can actually achieve the desired outcome. It leaves unanswered, or very unsatisfactorily answered, for instance, Lewis’s question of how punishing an innocent man can free the guilty from their just deserts. But the interesting thing for me here concerns our previous comments, regarding the danger of rather equivocal appeals to one who is at once both God and man. If I may offer I kind of parable, consider the following:

A Persian had killed a Greek, and a Greek court held that even though the crime of murder strictly deserved death, since no mere Persian had the moral personhood necessary to be given that high penalty, all Persians should suffer a serious but lesser penalty. If, to rescue them from this unhappy fate, a Greek somehow ‘became a Persian’ and came forward willing to accept the penalty of

³ They will not be except, of course, to the extent that his suffering and death serves as an example or has some actual effect on our hearts and minds. But that is a different point, to be taken up (if rather briefly and inadequately) later.

⁴ In *Cur Deus Homo* available in English as “Why God Became Man,” in B. Davies and G.R. Evans, eds. *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵ “Aquinas on Atonement,” in R. Feenstra, and C. Plantinga, eds. *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 153.

death, it is not clear how one (as an impartial philosophical observer) ought to react. Inasmuch we continue to think of him as ‘really a Greek,’ we are reluctant to allow that he can pay what is genuinely owed by the Persians; insofar as he is thought of as now a Persian, he can have no different moral standing – regardless of his origins – than any other member of that group. To say, finally, that he is both fully Persian and fully Greek, and that as the former he shares the same guilt as the Persians and that as the latter he has the necessary moral standing to suffer the death penalty – this seems but to ‘darken counsel.’

IV

A philosophically sophisticated account of the ‘doctrine of atonement’ has in much more recent times been propounded by Richard Swinburne, rooted in a quite detailed theory of the relevant moral notions of guilt, moral redress, and the restoration of a due moral order.⁶

We pick up his account, however, with its application to the relationship between God and human sinfulness. Thus, Swinburne: “Each human sinner owes atonement to God for the sins . . . which he has committed himself; and help in making their atonement to God to his fellow creatures . . . (148).” While it is true that ‘no man can atone for the sins of another’, others can *help* in this regard (149).” Such help is provided by God for us, Swinburne ultimately maintains, by “the life and death of Christ – and especially the death, the Crucifixion.” More particularly, this help in our redemption is effected by means of Christ’s sacrifice:

Christ’s laid-down life is there made available for sacrifice, like rain caught in a thicket. Any man who is humble and serious enough about his sin to recognize what is proper reparation and penance for it may use the costly gift which another has made available for him to offer as his sacrifice (153).

But let us recall, at this point, the remark of Lewis with which we began: if God was prepared, in the end, to let us off, why did he not just do so – and why punish (or allow suffering and death to befall) an innocent man instead? In response to this, Swinburne might begin by saying that ‘while God could let sinners off, it is good that he demand appropriate moral redress on our part, that Christ’s sacrifice is helpful in precisely this regard.’ Still, there remains this dilemma. If God would have accepted an offering that did not include the suffering and death of Jesus, just what (if anything) these specifically *have* accomplished is left unclear. If, however, God’s intention is that *only* such an offering would be fully acceptable, is this not itself wrong? Thus, the suffering and death of Jesus seem left as either incidental, even gratuitous evils; or they appear to be evils deliberately inflicted for the sake of some larger good – thus, as morally questionable except perhaps from a utilitarian standpoint.

Here, however, the incarnation is at least suggestive of a way out of this impasse. For it might be suggested that the infliction of such an evil is not immoral (unjust) inasmuch as it is *self-imposed*: God sacrifices himself, so that these larger goods can be accomplished. We shall return shortly to the possible viability of this proposal, but first we should observe that this appeal to the incarnation is not Swinburne’s. Instead, the relevance of the identity between God and Jesus, for him, pertains only to this more limited point concerning sacrifices. God cannot offer himself up as a sacrifice to himself; but he can make his life available as something *we* are able to offer up.⁷

⁶ *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); in chapter five of this work, he offers, quite a detailed theory of the relevant moral notions, but here we are focusing entirely on the application of this theory to the case of redemption (chapter ten).

⁷ Cf. Swinburne, p. 153: “But in so far as Christ is God himself, he cannot offer a sacrifice to himself. The sacrifice model has then to be somewhat transformed. God makes available the sacrifice (of himself); but it is we whom have to offer it.”

Now, I am not sure that, even so, all air of paradox is removed; for there remains something a bit paradoxical about offering oneself sacrificially in this way – as something to be offered by others *ultimately to oneself*; but there is no need to press this particular point here.⁸ For it seems clear enough that the *previous* suggestion – if it is viable -- offers Swinburne a solution that he greatly needs.

But *is* it viable? One obvious shortcoming of this suggested solution – that the suffering and death of Jesus are acceptable in that they might be judged ‘self-imposed’ – concerns, however, concerns the *distinction of persons*. Inasmuch as God and Jesus are not the same person, inasmuch as ‘persons’ serve as the relevant type of moral subject (the holder of rights, etc.), it may be argued that appeals to the metaphysical identify of God and Jesus are at best obscure and at worst just entirely irrelevant. If Jesus can ask that this burden might be taken off of him, his relation to God is that of patient (and agent) to agent; it mirrors that of one human agent to another. To conclude, then, at this stage of our investigation that this kind of appeal to the identity of God and Jesus as a “solution” to the problem of the atonement is highly *premature*.

V

We return, in any case, to the previous dilemma: that either Swinburne leaves the suffering and death of Jesus as a gratuitous or as an intended evil. Now, in a recent article, Steven Porter has, in effect, chosen the second horn of this dilemma (for himself, if not for Swinburne). That is, he both criticizes Swinburne for leaving Christ’s death (if not his suffering) as purely incidental to the redemption, and opts for the view that the suffering and death of Jesus are best understood as *punishment*, voluntarily undergone.⁹

Thus, to get right to the heart of the matter, Porter claims to find no injustice in such cases of ‘penal substitution’ as the following:

A football player is late for practice. The coach, as punishment, demands that he do five laps. The team captain comes forward and offers to run the laps for him.

Here Porter concludes: “If the coach agrees, there does not seem to be anything unjust about the transfer of penalty.” (226)

Perhaps not, but the issue which must concern us is slightly more involved. For we must contemplate the notion of a *plan* in which an innocent undergoes “voluntary” punishment. The football coach did not “send” the captain to the team, knowing that he would take on a punishment; nor was the assigned punishment anything like that undergone by Jesus. In this same regard, it will be instructive, I believe, to consider the case of two other world redeemers of sorts, Wotan and Siegfried, as they figure in Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen*.

The fundamental philosophical problem of this saga concerns Wotan’s inability to save the gods from the inevitable destruction that would result from the dwarf, Alberich’s reacquisition of the ring. This can only be prevented by someone else, a great hero’s, wresting this prize from the giant who holds it. Yet, such an act cannot have been planned – let alone, orchestrated by Wotan, for then he would be breaking an agreement he has made – to let the giants have the ring. Thus, the “ruler of the universe” is reduced to passively wishing for someone who will freely do the saving work that he himself cannot do – or have done for him.

⁸ I also pass over here the puzzling matter that, assuming the identity of God and Jesus, God is imposing a kind of punishment on himself, for the sins of man – as though he, as our creator, should bear the ultimate price.

⁹ Steven, L. Porter, “Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution,” *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2004). .

The parallel question, in the case of Christianity, would be this. Even if an entirely free, self-chosen sacrifice on Jesus' part would have great redemptive effects, may God formulate a *plan* whereby these sufferings and this death achieve these? Now, the tension in any such notion may be seen in the Wagner parallel. For it is notable in this regard that neither Wagner nor Wotan is evidently tempted by the metaphysical subtlety that many are, in effect, suggesting has been accomplished by the God (the Father). On this subtlety, Christ's suffering and death are both freely chosen (voluntary) and part of the Father's plan. Now, in the *Ring*, the world can only be redeemed by a genuinely free agent, and this agent cannot be expected to act in accordance with *any* plan of Wotan's. Thus, if Wotan were somehow to orchestrate a scenario in which someone (Siegfried) "freely" chooses the very outcome that he (Wotan) desires, this would be tantamount to Wotan's doing it himself – i.e., himself violating his agreement. Accordingly, Wotan must stand by and simply let Siegfried follow his (Siegfried's) own choices.

In fact, the same appears to be true, or equally plausible, in the case of Jesus. If God elects to bring about a chain of events in which Jesus foreseeably acts in accordance with His desired end, this is the *moral equivalent* of God just bringing this outcome about via some acts of His. That is to say, even if this act qualifies as "voluntary" (uncoerced and perhaps even uncaused) -- so far as the inherent morality of the plan is concerned, it might as well not be so. Just as Wotan would break the agreement if he should create a hero whom he allows to "freely" steal the ring, God would be acting wrongly if he should formulate a corresponding plan for Jesus.

A natural suggestion at this point, then, would be that a morally acceptable theory of atonement must allow that Jesus is a genuinely free agent, not a mere actor in a play authored by the Father. In the next section, we shall begin to explore this very possibility.

VI

Suppose, then, it were the case that Jesus freely – in that 'metaphysically robust' way in which Siegfried takes the ring for *his* own purposes – elected to suffer and die (for his own purposes). In spite – or rather *because* of that element of freedom – Jesus' choice has a great effect on God. Surely, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this effect – the extraordinarily powerful image of the innocent sufferer (in fact, the innocent *son*) on the cross – might be so great as to move, or be capable of moving, God, the Father.¹⁰

In a word, the suggestion is that the suffering and death of Jesus evokes divine *mercy*; and that, in part, through such mercy are sins to be forgiven. But it will immediately be asked, why *should* God be "merciful" in this instance? How can the suffering of an innocent lead to mercy – any more than to a lessening of justified punishment -- for the sinful? If Jesus can do nothing to affect what we deserve by way of punishment, how can he do anything to make us more suitable candidates for mercy?

Consider a parent who is about to give his child a well-deserved punishment. Before he is able to exact this punishment, however, he witnesses some quite moving, albeit logically unrelated event. Perhaps he sees *another* child bearing what must be, given its evident brutality, an excessive punishment – with great courage and dignity. In virtue of this, he is led to adopt a more merciful attitude towards his own child – but not so merciful that the lightness of the punishment offends justice. His action is not unjust; it is simply not compelled by considerations of justice. Surely, there is nothing morally objectionable in this.

The relevant difference, then, between (strict punitive) justice and mercy in this regard is that one may be led to adopt a more merciful attitude even by changes that are logically unrelated to another's fitness for punishment. Something can prompt a more merciful attitude, without its contributing to any change in one's status from the strict standpoint of justice.

¹⁰ Thus, instead of the more familiar 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that sins might be forgiven' I suggest: God so loved his son that, in memory of his death, he elects to forgive sins that would not otherwise be forgiven.

In short, the suggestion would be that the *not* previously planned, freely chosen suffering and death of Jesus evoke divine mercy; and that, in part, through such mercy are sins to be forgiven.

VII

Now, this kind of view was suggested, a decade or so ago, by Philip Quinn, who offers this parable of the atonement:

A great lord makes his two sons stewards of his two finest farms. The older son allows his farm to fall into ruin; and the father appropriately demands that he restore the damage or be disinherited. Unfortunately, he lacks the farming skills to do this. The younger son, meanwhile, has well tended his estate, and now volunteers to help restore his brother's. Unfortunately, while he is in the process of doing just that, he is killed by bandits. The younger son's sacrifices 'so work upon the grieving father's heart that he is persuaded to be merciful, rather than severe, toward his surviving elder son.'¹¹

Recall, then, at this point, C.S. Lewis's question: if God wanted to let us off why did he not do so – and, if not, what is accomplished by punishing an innocent person instead? Here Quinn's core idea is very much the same as my own. God *does* want, in a sense, to let us off – and he does so because of Jesus' suffering and death. These do not replace our punishment; but they motivate its merciful suspension – or alleviation. At the same time, Jesus suffering and death are not punishments for our crimes; *they are crimes*.

This mention, however, of the crime Jesus' suffering and death – leads me to the first evident problem with Quinn's version of the atonement; and this concerns the role of the "bandits." If the world historical redemption of humanity comes through such an event (the bandits' killing the younger son), I am bothered, first, by its utter *fortuitousness* – its status as an unbelievably "happy accident." Suppose that these bandits had not happened by that day: are sins to remain forever unforgiven? For that matter, must our salvation depend on the mere contingency that *someone* should have decided to commit this offense?

There is also the question of the *forgiveness* of this bandit – or of whoever should happen to kill the son. This person, too, is among those for whom the beloved son ultimately has died. Is he, then, not to be forgiven as well? And if he is not, what of those whose crimes might be as great, or approach the greatness of, his? Can they not be forgiven? If they are to be, how will this happen?

A third point of criticism might be this. Of course any suggested "story of the redemption" is apt to be rather incomplete as an explanation. Still, this account seems especially so. Jesus is murdered, and God takes a radically different, a more merciful, attitude towards man. As I have allowed, such a death could be seen as leading to a new, a more merciful attitude on the part of those who have loved the one now dead. One wants not so much to reject this account – as to know more.

I do not claim to "know more" but here, I hope, is an improved parable:

The elder son and his numerous rowdy friends are assigned to take care of the one farm. The shortcomings of this group, however, extend to more than poor farm management. In fact, some of them (including the elder son) murder the younger son as he tries to help them restore the farm. (They are threatened, offended, and led to hate and kill him – by his very goodness as manifest in his desire to help.) Others in the group are indirectly responsible, either for encouraging the murderers or for doing nothing to stop their plot. Still others bear a kind of

¹¹ Cf. "Swinburne on Guilt, Atonement, and Redemption," in Alan Padgett, ed., *Reason and the Christian Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); here all but the final, quoted sentence is my own paraphrase, cf. 298-99. See also Quinn's "Aquinas on Atonement," in Feenstra, especially pp. 174-76.

‘vicarious guilt’ in that they are evidently no better than the responsible parties – but have merely lacked the *opportunity* to participate. Before he dies, the younger son asks the father to forgive his brother and all of his friends, and this the father does – if with a heavy heart and great reluctance.

Now an important feature of the revised account is that there are no more “bandits.” The death of the son results inexorably – not haphazardly – from the moral corruption of those he would help – which ultimately is all humanity. If we are not a part of the first and second groups, we are at least a part of those having a ‘vicarious guilt.’ The idea, then, is that if they can be forgiven for that crime, surely we can be forgiven for our merely vicarious involvement – and (hopefully) all lesser, actual sins as well. In forgiving this most difficult sin to forgive, God will forgive *all* sins.

The psychological point here is, I think, rather persuasive. If we are even to begin to conceive of a ‘forgiveness of all,’ this is surely most easily conceived as beginning with, and deriving its impetus from, a forgiveness of that which is most difficult to forgive – whatever this may be for any given agent. Consider, as illustration, the memorable episode from *War and Peace*, in which Prince Andrey, himself wounded and in the surgeon’s tent, forgives the man responsible for the destruction of his last hopes for happiness in life:

In the miserable, sobbing abject creature, whose leg had just been cut off, he recognized Anatole Kuragin. He recalled now the bond that existed between him and this man, who was looking vaguely at him through the tears that filled his swollen eyes. Prince Andrey remembered everything, and a passionate pity and love for that suffering man filled his happy heart. Prince Andrey could contain himself no more and swept tears of love and tenderness over his fellow-men, over himself, and over their errors and his own.¹²

A difficulty now arises, however. How can we – whose guilt for this offense is only ‘vicarious’ – be *forgiven for it*?¹³ Surely we can only be forgiven for what we’ve done, not for what we might (or even would) have done. Moreover, if we cannot be forgiven for this vicarious guilt, what bearing does any forgiveness for it have on forgiveness for our actual offenses? Well, consider still one more parable:

A father had two sons, both extremely bad. While one of these was away, the other stole something from him, a crime the other had often done, with the other, in the past. When the father discovered the offense, he was first angered, but then led to be merciful – and forgave the son. As he was pronouncing that forgiveness, the other son appeared, now back from his trip. The father immediately thought of this son’s equal tendency to such acts, and how he would have surely participated in the offense, if he had been able. Yet, being of a mind to forgive, he was naturally led to forgive – or, at any rate, for a while to stop thinking harshly of this son. Filled with love for both his sons, he comes to enjoy, at least for a time, a new reconciliation with them.

Forgiveness of one sin can thus lead to atonement with respect to offenses that are merely hypothetical; for that matter, it can lead to forgiveness of other offenses – so long as they are not perceived as greater than the original. Thus, the returning son may enjoy atonement with respect to what he might

¹² Constance Garnett, translation (New York: Modern Library, 1994), p. 930.

¹³ Lurking here, of course, is the problem of *moral luck*. Cf.: “Someone who was an officer in a concentration camp might have led a quiet and harmless life had the Nazis never come to power. And someone who led a quiet and harmless life in Argentina might have become an officer in a concentration camp if he had not left Germany for business reasons in 1930,” Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 26. One might say that it is our “moral luck” not to have been in a position to have anything to do with Jesus’ death.

have done and forgiveness with respect to other as yet unforgiven offenses – at least, if they are not greater than his brother’s offense.

Finally, there was our third criticism of the Quinn parable, which was that its explanation of the forgiveness of all – in terms of divine mercy induced by the death of the younger son – was rather incomplete and sketchy. We will eventually be able to offer, I think, an improvement: an explanation that leaves fewer questions unanswered. But this is something I postpone until our discussion of the incarnation in the next section.

VIII

Let us quickly review the course our narrative has taken. We began with the death of Jesus as both a crime and a planned means, supposedly a necessary means, to human salvation. This had the (I think, more than minor) defect of implicating the moral ruler of the universe in one of history’s worst crimes. We moved on to a conception in which this same death was the unplanned occasion of this same salvation; this was an improvement but left too much, it seemed, to mere accident. On our revised account, fundamentally two things have changed. First, the suffering and death of Jesus are now seen as inevitable. If “we” have not literally killed him, his death is seen as the inevitable result of our wickedness, indifference to suffering, and the like. His death does not break into the drama of human sin and salvation from the outside; it emerges from within. Second, this murder is not merely the occasion of forgiveness and atonement; rather, in *its* forgiveness lies the key to our own -- if not forgiveness, atonement.

At this point, however, we are reminded of an important question: how, if at all, if at all, does the *incarnation* enter into our account?

In my view, the point of particular relevance of the incarnation would be this. The underlying assumption of our account is that this crime is, to say the least, *special*. Other offenses are forgiven (or atoned) through it; it is not forgiven (or a cause for atonement) through anything else. How, then, is this rather impressive status to be accounted for? One answer, certainly, might be this. God became man, in some sense, to help us. Man responded by killing this man whom God had become – and what crime could be worse than that?

But here we must be careful. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Part of the meaning of this plea is clearly that they do not know that they kill the “Son of God.” Not knowing this (nor, presumably, being able to know it), their actual, fairly estimated guilt cannot possibly equal the objective magnitude of their offense.

The real weight of this crime, however, does not have to lie in the guilt of its perpetrators. Realize, it only need be perceived by the forgiving agencies: Jesus and God. They understand the significance of this crime; they are the ones who forgive – and their resistance (or at least the Father’s resistance) to forgiving must be understood as lying partly in this significance. Here, as one might put this, the psychological and the ontological dimensions, if they do not coincide, certainly move in the same direction. Psychologically, we are to understand God as resistant to forgiving those who have killed his son. Ontologically, we are to understand God as resistant forgiving the murder of someone who is objectively (ontologically) ‘of divine nature.’ Together, then, these must make the crime of killing Jesus particularly difficult to forgive.

The real heart of the matter, then, must lie in this: *of course*, this crime is difficult to forgive – but, for our account to work, such must be the case. The closer the connection, the more difficult this forgiveness, this atonement will be – yet, by the same token, the more difficult the forgiveness, the greater its natural and supernatural outreach.

Finally, let us return to the question of the explanation of the atonement. Insofar as we have succeeded in linking the first and all other acts of forgiveness, we have achieved a connectedness that the Quinn accounts lacks. But, of course, it may be questioned whether we have satisfactorily explained that *first* act of forgiveness. To be sure, we cannot explain this very satisfactorily or very fully but recall: it is

part of our account that there should be no very easy explanation of this. The Son has asked for this; and the father complies. On this miracle – or mystery, certainly -- what is otherwise a reasonably well connected structure must rest.

One last matter of concern. I have criticized the use of the incarnation by Lewis and Anselm, mainly on the grounds that they appeal to the dual nature of Christ in order to explain how this one individual achieves simultaneously what only a human being can do and what only God can do – without explaining how this *coincidentia oppositorum* is possible – let alone plausible. Have I, though, materially *improved* on this deficit?

My answer is that I do not appeal to the incarnation in anything like the Lewis-Anselm way. That is to say, I do not suppose the kind of ‘coincidence of opposites’ whereby the radically different aspects of this one being explain radically different and seemingly incompatible things. On the view I propose, Jesus and God are taken as separate persons of radically different natures. However, insofar as Jesus is assumed to have a divine origin (the incarnation), we allow this to add *weight* to claims that are otherwise merely psychological in nature. The incarnation, then, serves to strengthen my proposed account of the atonement -- but it does not require the metaphysical legerdemain of the Anselm-Lewis approach.

IX

Having outlined my own theory of the atonement and its relation to the incarnation, let me close by answering some likely objections:

The first could well be that Jesus appears not to accept his fate as a *divine decree*, yet my account denies this. Am I saying that Jesus is wrong – on such a fundamental matter as the very purpose of his existence? As a *man*, of course Jesus cannot be assumed omniscient, so perhaps he does not fully understand who he is and the purpose of his existence. Libraries, after all, are full of books clamoring to give accounts of just this mystery. Still, inasmuch he does possess extraordinary insight and powers of knowing, he may well foresee that his death will allow sins to be forgiven. But, of course, for reasons we have amply explored, this does not mean that he has been, or can be, directed to die for this purpose.

Here another important consideration comes into play. We may regard ourselves as fulfilling what another, a superior, wishes – but which, for one reason or another, cannot command. There is an episode in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (II, vii) in which Pompey’s aide asks him whether he should seize the present opportunity to poison his three rivals for supremacy in Rome. In some anger, Pompey replies:

Ah, this thou shouldst have done;
And not spoken on it. In me ‘tis villainy,
In thee’t had been good service . . .
Being done unknown,
I should have afterwards found it well done,
But must condemn it now.

If there is dirty work that needs simply to be done, there may also be good, self-sacrificing work that also cannot be thus ordered. Jesus, then, may regard himself as fulfilling a kind of plan, or certainly a *mission* – in which he does what he cannot be ordered to do: namely, work for the good of those who will eventually kill him and forgive those very persons. He may and presumably does regard himself as obliged to do these things; he may even regard the basis of this obligation as what his Father would want, but, unlike Pompey’s aide, he understands that he cannot ask for, or await, an order. Rather, he must simply do.¹⁴

¹⁴ Of course, he can and does ask that the Father forgive his murderers. What he cannot ask or be commanded to do, again, is to carry out the entire sequence: to work for those who, he foresees, will kill him; forgive them and ask that the Father do so. Again, as conceived here, this sequence must be at his initiation.

Another objection might be that I am supposing (as Quinn is supposing) God to be ‘moved’ (to mercy for a sinful humanity) thus *changed* in some way. But God, the objection would go, is held by the Judeo-Christian tradition, to be *immutable*. To this, however, several replies ought to be made:

First, ‘being moved’ may involve nothing more than the activation of standing dispositions; thus, it does not have to involve ‘changing one’s basic nature’ in any sense that would violate the postulated immutability of God.

Second, the idea that God can be moved, and in that sense be ‘changed’ by human pleas and prayers, is hardly new or strange. The very idea of ‘petitionary prayer’ seems to involve exactly that. Now, perhaps such prayer is itself incoherent or incompatible with the divine nature. That would be a subject for another discussion. Here it suffices to point out that petitionary prayer appears to involve exactly the same view of God and the divine nature as we are supposing to be true in our account of redemption. In such prayer, we suppose that God’s mind is not yet “set,” that he can be “moved” by our pleas – that he can be so moved, but also that there is no *necessity* that this happen. He may also choose, for his own very good reasons, to reject our petitions.

Moving to a slightly different topic now, it might also be objected that in denying a divine plan for redemption, in conceiving of this as a kind of spontaneous response to the suffering and death of Jesus, I deny God’s *omniscience*. An omniscient being, it might be objected, cannot (or would not) make any such spontaneous responses; nor could one coherently expect such a being to act in this way. Here, again, though, several replies are available:

In reference to the second point just above, I would point out that my account supposes God to be capable of the same type of (seemingly) spontaneous reply that we presuppose in our everyday petitionary prayers. If these presuppose a lack of omniscience, – my own account does so as well, I suppose. But at least it thus stands in fairly good company. If, however, such replies are consistent with omniscience, so much the better, I say.

Finally, I take note of the fact that in his instructive study of these matters, Richard Purtill has held that appeals to mercy are out of place in treating the problem of atonement, as they must imply that God would mercifully forgive us even without Jesus suffering and death – so long as we are repentant.¹⁵ But, of course, nothing like that is even suggested on my own account. On the contrary, I would allow that mercy on this scale does require more than mere repentance; on the account I have suggested, it is evoked only by the suffering and death of Jesus.

¹⁵ “Justice, Mercy, Supererogation, and Atonement,” in Thomas Flint, ed., *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 41. Purtill’s own theory of atonement (cf. pp. 46-47) appeals to a kind of unity of all believers within the ‘mystical body’ of Christ. Such an appeal, however, leaves it entirely unexplained *how* the suffering part of this unified body brings rewards, let alone redemption, to another part. Thus, such an appeal offers what is, at best, a metaphysically *necessary* condition of redemption; it can hardly constitute a sufficient explanation. For my part, once a sufficient explanation is given (via divine mercy), we can see that no murky appeal to the ‘mystical body’ is necessary. We can allow for separateness of persons *and* redemption.