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HAVE WE NO SHAME? A MORAL EXEMPLAR ACCOUNT OF ATONEMENT

Meghan D. Page and Allison Krile Thornton¹

Although Christ's atoning work on the cross is perhaps the most central tenet of Christianity, understanding precisely how the cross saves remains a theological mystery. We follow the Abelardian tradition and argue that Christ's death on the cross acts as an example of God's love for humanity and a means of drawing us back into communion with the triune God. However, our view avoids the standard objection to exemplar views—that they are Pelagian—by introducing an alternative conception of the problem of sin, according to which Christ's example of God's love is in fact required for salvation and sanctification.

Introduction

Although Christ's atoning work on the cross is perhaps the most central tenet of Christianity, understanding precisely how the cross saves remains a theological mystery. We follow the Abelardian tradition and argue that Christ's death on the cross acts as an example of God's love for humanity and a means of drawing us back into communion with the triune God. However, our view avoids the standard objection to moral influence (or exemplar) views—that they are Pelagian—by introducing an alternative conception of original sin, according to which our fallen state requires Christ's example of God's love in order to bring about reconciliation between humans and God.²

At the heart of our case is a reversal of a standard assumption of many other theories of the atonement, especially satisfaction and penal substitution accounts. Such theories imply that the purging or cleansing of our sins is a precondition for reconciliation with God. In William Lane Craig's terminology, "atonement in the narrow sense" (purging, cleansing) is a precondition for "atonement in the broad sense" (reconciliation).³ For Craig and many others, it is sin that prevents sanctifying unity with God, and so the primary problem that a theory of the atonement must solve

¹Authors have contributed equally.

²This paper was partly inspired by discussions at the Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion on Oliver Crisp's paper "Moral Exemplarism and Atonement."

³Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 1–3.



is atonement in the narrow sense: the theory must explain how Christ's death handles our sins so that we can then engage in broader reconciliation with God. This conviction underlies a typical point of resistance to moral exemplar views, namely that they fail to explain the significance of Christ's death on the cross. As Oliver Crisp writes, "one persistent objection to [a moral exemplar view] is that it is not really a theory of atonement at all, since the logic of this view is that nothing is atoned for."⁴ Crisp's phrasing of the criticism reveals he, too, privileges a narrow understanding of atonement—to atone is to make reparations for wrongs that have been done.

Below we will argue that this standard assumption has it backwards. We will argue, contra Craig and Crisp, that atonement in the broad sense must precede atonement in the narrow sense; that is, reconciliation with God is prior to the process of dealing with sin. We further claim that Christ's work on the cross is the way God chooses to bring about this deep reconciliation.

To understand how Christ reconciles us to God, we first explore what precisely drives a wedge between creation and creator. Thus, we begin by reconsidering the fall of humanity as described in Genesis 3, arguing that what actually causes the relational break between creator and creation is Adam's and Eve's shame. We further develop an account of what shame is and what must be done to resolve it by exploring shame from the perspectives of neurobiology and developmental psychology. We then argue that human shame requires the divine caregiver to become present with us in our shame in order to develop and transmit a new affective blueprint that enables us to transition from shame into communion; this requirement for our salvation is fulfilled by Christ's work on the cross. Finally, we argue that our view avoids Pelagianism and other standard objections to moral influence theories.

Rethinking the Fall

For many atonement theorists, the primary *problem* that Christ's work must resolve is atonement in the narrow sense; it is sin that prevents us from unity with God and only after being cleansed can we enter a sanctifying intimacy with God. This ordering of the solution suggests the following rough characterization of the original rupture between God and creation: an act of brazen disobedience taints the perfect natures bestowed upon Adam and Eve. Humanity is infected with sin which makes union with a perfect God impossible. For such creatures to be reconciled with their creator, this sin must be miraculously (but also justly and legally) removed.

In contrast to this picture, we will argue that what happens at the fruit tree does not signify a movement from perfection to corruption, or from righteousness to debt, but from communion to shame.

⁴Crisp, "Original Sin and Atonement," 435.

We take up the story at Genesis 2:25, which describes Adam and Eve as “naked and unashamed.” Immediately following this description, a serpent entices Eve to take fruit from the forbidden tree by promising her that her eyes will be opened and she will be like God, *knowing the difference between good and evil*. When Adam and Eve eventually take the fruit and eat, “the eyes of both of them” are opened, just as the serpent promised. However, the first knowledge they obtain in this new state of enlightenment is not that they have sinned, or that they have become unclean, but instead “they knew that they were naked.” In response to this knowledge, “they sewed fig leaves together” and “hid themselves from the presence of God.”⁵

In just 8 short verses, Adam and Eve move from being “naked and unashamed” to covering and hiding their nakedness from their creator. This seems to be the explicit consequence of eating the fruit. But how are we to make sense of it? And how does this changed perception of nakedness relate to obtaining knowledge of good and evil?

We think Genesis 2:25 describes the original state of humanity as full communion with both God and one another. Following Irenaeus, we suppose humanity began in a state of immaturity rather than a perfected final state. In the garden, Adam and Eve were naked—weak, vulnerable, lacking the glory for which they were destined—but they were unashamed and in perfect communion with God. When Adam and Eve take from the tree, however, they are instantly afraid of being seen. We take the particular nature of the tree—“knowledge of good and evil”—to represent the capacity for moral judgment. After eating the fruit, Adam and Eve develop the ability to judge things as morally good or bad. However, the development of such a capacity proves rather problematic in humanity’s infantile state. Adam and Eve turn this capacity on themselves and judge their own immaturity to be a lack. They find themselves naked, without glory, and as a result to be unworthy of love.⁶ Genesis 3:7 marks the beginning of humanity’s shame narrative. Acquiring the capacity for judgment suddenly makes Adam and Eve embarrassed of their vulnerability. In response to this embarrassment they cover themselves, hiding from God and one another.⁷

This physical hiding is symbolic of a deeper relational break. Humans were created to be united with God and with each other; this sort of union is required for human flourishing. However, the result of shame is self-isolation and a chasm between oneself and those with which one desires—and needs—to belong.

Moreover, given that God intended to bring humans to perfection through unity with the triune God, the wedge that is placed between

⁵Gn 3:7 (Revised Standard Version; all subsequent citations are from this version).

⁶Marilyn McCord Adams offers a similar description of sin, specifically how recognition of the “ontological incommensurability” between God and creatures can result in creaturely shame in Adams, “Sin as Uncleaness” (Adams 1991).

⁷For similar interpretations of Genesis 3, see Prusyear, “Anxiety, Guilt, and Shame in the Atonement,” Watts, “Shame, Sin, and Guilt,” and Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*.

creator and creation blocks the path to salvation and glory. The shame unleashed when the humans eat the fruit turns them from God, amplifies their weakness, separates them from the strength and hope they might find if they turn towards God, and sets the stage for a series of tragedies to follow. Humanity has fallen out of communion with God and is too ashamed to return.

At this point, the reader may wonder whether our interpretation of Genesis is intended to be symbolic or literal. Our own view resides in the middle of this spectrum: we take this symbolic story to characterize the true narrative of a disturbing break between creation and creator. Precisely how this translates into concrete historical fact is outside the scope of this paper, although we take it to be tied to our evolutionary development. However, our view is compatible with any reading of Genesis which embraces that early in the origins of humanity, human disobedience resulted in two serious consequences. First, our neurobiological structure developed such that recognition of our own vulnerability predisposes us to psychological isolation from God and others, and second, as a result, we develop corrupted patterns of resistance to vulnerability that we transmit to others in ways that amplify and intensify our individual and communal experience of shame.

The Experience of Shame

In the previous section, we suggest that shame drives the relational rupture between God and humanity. In this section we flesh out why this is the case, working from a conception of shame informed by neurobiology. We then turn to work in developmental psychology to articulate how shame originates and how it must be overcome.

Features of Shame

For some of us, the problem that shame creates for relationships is all too clear. We may see the story of Genesis 3 recurring in our own: we become aware of our profound inferiority to someone we want to connect with, or with respect to some standard we feel they may hold us to, and this perceived vulnerability infects the relationship. To maintain the connection, we try to conceal the relational threat—ourselves. For example, we distract, blaming others or undercutting those who might highlight our shortcomings. We tirelessly publicize versions of ourselves that we hope others think we are. We withdraw from the very communities we want most to belong to; if we never show up, then we can't be found out. We conceal from our friends our very worst experiences for years or forever, no matter our part in those events or that others might get hurt because of our silence. We meet criticism with anger and insults with rage. We feel envy on Facebook and panic in interviews and debilitating self-consciousness at the lunch break when we don't know who to eat with. We sit in front of our unwritten papers for hours on end, adding nothing significant,

viscerally afraid of rejection by our co-authors and probably everyone else. We consistently strive for a kind of unattainable perfection, taking on more work and more hours, convinced that we would've gotten that job if only we'd exerted more effort. We hide behind rule-following, trying to assure ourselves if we maintain the right behavior we will eventually achieve belonging. In these and many other creative ways we self-protect, cope with fear, and avoid any gaze that may come to know too much. In other words, we plunge again and again into the entanglements of shame.

Variations of these experiences are familiar to most. Shame manifests in countless ways, underlying a great diversity of feelings and behaviors, often presenting in ways that escape recognition as shame.⁸ But despite the numerous guises under which it appears, shame consistently comes out of threatened relationship and acts as a relational threat, isolating the shamed agent from herself and her community.

Psychologists agree: Helen Lewis says shame is "a response to feeling that one's affectional ties are threatened."⁹ Judith Jordan says it is "a felt sense of unworthiness to be in connection, a deep sense of unlovability, with the ongoing awareness of how very much one wants to connect with others."¹⁰ According to Patricia DeYoung, shame is "the experience of the self-in-relation when 'in-relation' is ruptured or disconnected."¹¹

The isolating effects of shame occur not only at the interpersonal level, but are also at work within an agent herself. From a neurobiological

⁸Our view emphasizes a neurobiological understanding of shame; that is, we are interested in the kind of neurological response that shame generates in an agent. In this respect, our view is very different from other discussions of shame which emphasize its moral or sociological functions. For example, Eleonore Stump takes shame as a lack of admirability or honor which is tied to one's relative standing in a community. We want to grant at the outset of our discussion that shame is a complex phenomenon, and we do not believe that it reduces to neurobiology. However, we have chosen this level of description because we believe that it captures features of shame that are crucial to the problem of sin but missed on other analyses. For example, the neurobiological approach clarifies important connections between superficially disparate phenomena in both the fall narrative and in our own experience. Significantly, as will become clear below, it connects the *interpersonal* isolation depicted in Genesis with the *intrapersonal* isolation present in disintegration, shedding light on the depth of the broken communion involved in the fall. Our approach also explains why shame is unavoidable, attaching even to experiences that "should not" elicit shame, like being a victim of sexual assault. From the neurobiological perspective, the shame-filled victim of a wrong and the shame-filled wrongdoer have in common hyperactivity in their sympathetic nervous systems, corresponding behavioral and emotional changes, and resulting isolation. We find this to be a more illuminating explanation for a victim's shame than that the "injustice [inflicted on them] somehow alters their relative standing with respect to other people for the worse." (Stump, *Atonement*, 345). Finally, our approach clarifies why the incarnation, passion, and death of Christ are important and efficacious regarding atonement. In sum, the level of description we have chosen emphasizes the depth, breadth, and bodily nature of shame, features we think are essential to appreciating how the atonement resolves it.

⁹Lewis, "Shame: the Sleeper in Psychopathology" as summarized by DeYoung, *Understanding and Treating Chronic Shame*, 23.

¹⁰Jordan, "Relational Development," 147.

¹¹DeYoung, *Understanding and Treating Chronic Shame*, 18.

perspective, shame occurs when the activity of our sympathetic nervous system—the piece of our neural infrastructure that drives arousal and movement and is activated when we do things we expect to end well—is abruptly shut down, often (for example) by an unexpected remark or reaction that communicates disappointment or irritation. Psychologist Curt Thompson fleshes out this understanding of shame by highlighting the mental distress and physiologic changes—like blushing, looking away, and a sensation of heaviness—that accompany a sympathetic crash. We may feel self-conscious, have difficulty thinking clearly, struggle to find the right words, or feel trapped “in a mind-body maze of emotional nausea.”¹² We may make an effort to conceal ourselves from others, as reflected in broken eye contact, elevated blood pressure, or actually exiting the environment. Our need to hide is revealed not only in bodily changes that reduce exposure to other people, but also in neurologic changes that conceal us from ourselves. This inner, individual parallel of the need to hide is known as disintegration, and it is one of shame’s hallmarks. As Thompson discusses it:

In the same way that we turn our gaze down and away, so as to not see anyone seeing us, so also different functional parts of the mind turn away, so to speak, and are disintegrated from other functional parts. Our thinking and feeling and sensing turn away from each other, are disconnected from each other and from the centering, regulating care of the [pre-frontal cortex]. With shame, we involuntarily move out of the sight and the mind of other people as the sensations, images, feelings and thoughts of our own mind move out of the sightline and awareness of each other.¹³

Shame, quite literally, dis-integrates mental function. The pre-frontal cortex—which often unifies different regions of the brain for a common task—effectively goes offline, leaving us unable to regulate ourselves in the midst of an intense affective experience. This neural fragmentation gives rise to an impulse to hide ourselves from others and our community. In other words, shame drives separation.

Given shame’s velocity, its appearance in the garden may well have driven a wedge between humanity and God so deep it can only be remedied by a divine fix. But what precisely is the resolution for shame? And how does it connect to the death and resurrection of Christ?

To clarify what is required for the resolution of shame and how it can be integrated with the broader narrative of atonement, we turn to developmental psychology, looking in particular at how shame appears in the relationship between an infant and her caregiver. Although the impact of shame is relational rupture, the concept of shame can only be understood within a relational framework. Developmental approaches therefore inform our psychological and neurobiological understanding of shame, as focusing on infancy allows us to set aside the neural complexities of

¹²Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, 66.

¹³Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, 67.

maturity and clearly see shame's pathology. Moreover, these cases are crucial to the task at hand, as we think the relationship between God and humanity is in many ways analogous to the parent-child relationship.

A Developmental Perspective

In the context of a healthy child-caregiver relationship, infants receive the constant meeting of their needs and satisfaction of their wills, leading them to experience a strong sense of attunement with their caregiver. When they are hungry, they are fed; when they want to be held, they are picked up; and when they want to relieve bodily fluids, they do so freely. At some point, however, caregivers attempt to curb their child's will rather than satisfy it—in part because the will of the child is often to act in ways that may be harmful (or at the least rather unpleasant) to herself and others. As the child's sense of self as independent from her caregiver begins to develop, usually around 14 months of age, the caregiver tends to mediate the socialization process by failing to match the child's affect, displaying affective misattunement. This misattunement—recognized as a kind of "shaming"—may be expressed through a disapproving look or a firm "no," but somehow the caregiver communicates (at least facially, in her countenance not of joy and interest but of disgust) a different affective state than the child's. The failure to be aligned with and connect with the caregiver comes as a shock to the child, who was expecting her positive, sympathetic-driven affect to be mirrored in the expression of her caregiver, and the shock initiates a transition from an accelerating positive/sympathetic state to a decelerating negative/parasympathetic state.¹⁴

This transition—the same sympathetic-system shut-down that Thompson describes—is stressful for the baby, and it is toxic for her to stay in the negative state for long. But her pre-frontal cortex is not developed enough to regulate it on her own. Thus, her caregivers need to step back in and reestablish the attachment bond in order to help the child manage the transition, metabolize her shame state, and regenerate positive affect. Of course, the ability to communicate a healthy process for mitigating shame states in this way presupposes that the caregiver has developed a somewhat healthy process herself. Her process in turn depends on how she was cared for and what her experiences of shame have been throughout her life. Caregivers' starting points vary widely, and no one comes at it (or any other relationship for that matter) perfectly equipped to manage shame or teach a child how to manage theirs. Nevertheless, imperfect though the process may be, it is through this kind of responsive, physical connection that the basic biological ability to mitigate shame is conveyed.

Even the best caregivers, however, cannot prevent recurrent visits from shame. This sympathetic-system process is an ongoing feature of human life. In older children, as the linguistic centers of the left brain catch up to

¹⁴See Schore, *Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self*, 17–20 and Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self*, 201–205.

the more rapidly developing networks of the right brain, the linguistic components of shame, often called shame narratives, take shape. DeYoung describes the evolution thus:

Without the communion connection she needs to maintain coherence, the child looks to her own observer self to help regulate her distress, a shift I [describe as] a move from right-brain to left-brain functioning. Looking for logic, her observer self borrows her parent's story about her and elaborates from it her own "objective" story. Here is the origin of the disconnection between shame feelings and shame thoughts. Shame thoughts belong to this already objectified self, a self who has exited the intersubjective space where primary communion should be, the space where regulation failed and disintegration rules.¹⁵

For example, borrowing from what the child perceives to be the thoughts of her caregiver, she may construct a shame narrative such as: "I do not deserve love and attention because I am bad. I do not deserve to be part of this relationship." This narrative then becomes associated with the affective experience the child undergoes when she experiences an actual or perceived break in her bond with her caregiver. Shame narratives hang with us and blossom over time to accommodate new data about our ruptured connections. We can become stuck inside of them and are unable to resolve shame from within them. We can't reason our way out of shame.

How, then, do we resolve it? The developmental perspective reveals that shame is rooted in our basic need—not necessarily addressable with logic or theory—to be affectively attuned with others. Therefore, its treatment cannot be purely logical. In the "disruption-repair cycle" between caregivers and infants, for example, the caregivers don't respond to the baby by arguing that they will continue to provide for her basic needs or by spelling out all the ways in which the child's physiological response is an over-reaction (e.g., "You're in fight-or-flight mode, but I don't see any tigers here, do you?"). Rather, they physically reach out to them, restore eye contact, and achieve the affective attunement the infants want. After re-establishing the security of the relationship, they act as a physical model for the child of how to transition through shame. The caregiver, who has learned to navigate the difficult affect of shame, transmits this neural knowledge through her attunement with the infant, instilling through relationship the affective and cognitive capacities required to restore integration.

To summarize, shame responses begin to emerge once an agent conceives of herself as independent from her caregiver. This independence of self, in conjunction with the recognition that she is not perfectly attuned with her caregiver results in sympathetic-system shut-down that leads to mental disintegration and a disruption of the attachment between agent and caregiver. In order to restore attunement, a caregiver must, through physical presence and contact, connect with the infant, reassuring her that the caregiver is not irreparably repulsed, that the caregiver continues to love her, and that

¹⁵DeYoung, *Understanding and Treating Chronic Shame*, 26.

the relationship is secure. Next, the caregiver must actively model a way through the shame state by participating with the infant in the modeled process, transmitting her own capacity for neural regulation to the infant, rather than demonstrating something the infant should mimic.

Genesis Redux

After considering this analysis of shame, the parallels in Genesis are immediately striking. Adam and Eve exert their own wills contrary to the will of God. As a result, they experience shame and hide from God, isolating themselves. God responds by expressing the sort of disappointment and anger a caregiver may show to a child. In Genesis 3:15–19, God details the consequences Adam and Eve will face as a result of their actions. But after delivering these difficult blows, the almighty caregiver restores attunement, and helps Adam and Eve navigate their shame by offering them clothes. God meets Adam and Eve in their shame, provides reassurance and then participates in the solution to mitigate shame's effects.

Providing Adam and Eve with animal skins after disciplining them certainly exemplifies the sort of disruption-repair cycle needed for raising well-adjusted human creatures. And yet, the cycle itself does not seem to have fully closed. Although the animal skins allay the creaturely experience of shame, offering a way to participate in relationship with one another and with God, Adam and Eve remain partially hidden rather than "naked and unashamed." Pure communion has been lost.

The darkness that flows out of Eden is not the result of God's anger at human disobedience but rather of a severe disruption within the creatures themselves: the fruit has unleashed the capacity for judgement of good and evil which, when partnered with the human's self-knowledge of their vulnerable, infantile state, reorients them away from relationship and into hiding. This tendency to resist God connects to what we view as the first problem of sin: the neurobiological structure of humans now predisposes them to resist God. Because of the insight they develop, Adam and Eve recognize themselves as deeply mistuned with God. To follow DeYoung's terminology, they have "exited the intersubjective space where primary communion should be." This break leads God to a rather cryptic musing in Genesis 3:23: "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever—"

What sort of terror might be in store if Adam and Eve were to eat from the tree of life and live forever in their current state is left to the imagination of the reader—sort of. It turns out that the reader is us, and we don't have to imagine the terror because we live it. And who would want to navigate an eternity of shame? Of course, the shame wouldn't go on forever, presumably, if we grew into the glorified state God intends for us. But how can we ever be brought to that state if shame acts as a partition, preventing us from communion with the source of our potential glory?

The insights from developmental psychology suggest that to lift the human creatures from their shame, God must step in as caregiver and

physically stabilize them, modeling the affective process that will carry them through shame into restored connection. But God is not enfleshed and so is not in the position to act as an affective model for the humans. Thus, the creatures remain in a toxic state and rely on flawed processes for mitigating shame which they transmit to one another. This issue leads to what we understand as the second problem of sin: human creatures lack a proper affective blueprint to resolve shame.

The Attuning Atonement

So far, we have argued that the fundamental problem of sin is not that it makes us defective in some way and we can only relate to God in a state of perfection, but that self-judgement mixed with our immaturity drives us to isolate ourselves from God. In that isolated state, we engage in horrific sin, further enhancing our shame and further driving us from communion with God and one another.

Moreover, we cannot break this cycle on our own. We are trapped in a state of emotional disintegration, pushing us towards ever-evolving shame narratives about ourselves, our place in the world, and our relationship with God. To break this cycle, we need visceral reassurance of God's love for us—proof that our vulnerable, lowly state does not repulse the divine—and for God to actively model for us a path through shame.

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ prove God's love for humanity, despite the tendency of our shame to convince us otherwise. In the same way the caregiver lowers herself to meet the child in her state of shame, Christ lowers himself to us by taking human form, and further humbling himself in this human state to take on the shame of the cross. As the author of Philippians writes,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.¹⁶

Christ's humility provides reassurance that God is not irreparably repulsed by us—and in fact loves us—in the midst of our inadequacy: "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."¹⁷ Furthermore, through the cross, Christ establishes a new disruption-repair cycle and actively models it for all of humanity. Prior to Christ our shame drove us away from the divine, forcing us to hide ourselves from God and others. However, Christ overcomes shame, fully enduring and embracing the shame of the cross, and through this is resurrected into joyful union with God. Christ models how we, in our shame, can be vulnerable to God, and ultimately resurrected into a joyful communion with the divine.

¹⁶Phil 2:5–8.

¹⁷Rom 5:8

But Christ's model is not merely a "teaching example." It directly resolves the second problem of sin by both generating and physically transmitting a new affective blueprint for overcoming shame. We believe Christ, in the incarnation, physically initiates a new disruption-repair cycle with his followers, the benefits of which they continue to transmit to others.

While this process resolves the second problem of sin—that is, our need for a new affective blueprint—the first problem of sin still lingers. Christ transmits the new blueprint to humans whose neurobiological structure predisposes them to resist God. Although the humility and love of Christ displayed on the cross invites such broken humans to overcome this resistance, the corruptive effects of original sin will continue to wage war against communion.

A full resolution to the first problem requires elevating grace, wider-ranging work that will ultimately eradicate our inclination towards disintegration and resistance to God. As it is, the effects of sin can complicate even our reception of Christ's affective model. Our development requires the ongoing gift of God's grace to make us better able to receive the blueprint Christ imparts and to transform us into creatures who are no longer prone to shame and to sin. We take the work of this grace to begin at the cross, but we believe its completion is tied to our resurrection: we will not see or understand its fullness until then. Beyond these admittedly sketchy thoughts, we set aside the details of this solution to the first problem of sin. Our point is to acknowledge the depth of change that we require after the fall and to suggest that God works that change not only through the communication of a process for mitigating shame but also by radically transforming our capacity to embody that process.

While God could have introduced the work of this grace at some other time—perhaps immediately after the incident in the garden—its effect is importantly tied to the example of the incarnate Christ. Without that example, we would remain without the connection and direction we need to begin recovering from shame. In that sense, the solutions to the two problems of sin are united in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Through Christ, we are restored to unity with God.

Moreover, this union itself could never be initiated by us. Our very nature is to hide from our caregiver, to mask our true selves, to remain hidden. Only through the example of God's humble love can we be drawn into this active model and re-attune with our creator. Christ's death removes the partition between human creatures and the triune God. In taking on the shame of the cross, Christ humbles himself in order to restore contact with shamed humanity. We can once again enter into the presence of the divine because the divine has entered into the presence of our shame.

Summary, Objections, and Replies

In the previous section, we introduced a novel perspective on the connection between shame in the Genesis narrative and the atoning work of

Christ's death on the cross. In this section, we turn our attention to situating our view within the broader philosophical and theological landscape.

Pelagianism

We understand our account of the atonement to be an instance of an exemplar or moral influence view: Christ's death on the cross is an example of God's insurmountable love for us, intended to inspire a response of love within human creatures via an affective blueprint which treats their shame.¹⁸ As a view of the atonement, it is meant to explain "*at-one-ment*" with God—that is, how God and humanity are restored to loving communion after the fall—or atonement in the broad sense. However, it's worth noting that we take the *full* story of atonement to be the complete account of salvation and sanctification and to extend far beyond the reaches of this paper, though we do connect this process to our account by pointing to the work of elevating grace in us that is joined with the new affective blueprint. For this paper, we narrow our focus to what we take as the primary *explanandum* of Anselmian satisfaction and penal substitution views: why Christ's death constitutes a reconciliation or "tearing of the veil" between God and humans that initiates the process of sanctification.¹⁹ It is this fact in particular that we take our approach to explain.

¹⁸We take moral influence theory to be the view espoused by Abelard in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, although we recognize this to be the source of some debate (for a discussion of which, see Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement.") There 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 us to 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. (*Commentary on Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by Eugene R. Fairweather.)

Some interpret Abelard to thus suggest that Christ is "merely an exemplar of right conduct" (Stump, *Atonement*, 478n2) or that his love is an example just in the sense that it's "something displayed in hope that we may see that it is so admirable that we ought to emulate or adopt it" (Taylor, "Was Abelard an Exemplarist?" 213). Setting aside the question of whether it is fair to attribute such a view to Abelard (see Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement" for an argument that it is not), our view differs from it because we take the example through which Christ teaches to be an active model, required to repair the shame state that prevents union between human persons and the divine. We further categorize it as a moral influence view because we think it explains how Christ's work restores unity between humans and God without appealing to what Swinburne describes as "an objective transaction" (Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 162), which is a hallmark of moral influence views.

¹⁹Here's an example of what we mean. One might wonder, for example, precisely *how* Christ's death makes us immortal. We think it makes sense to think of this question as part of the atonement story, given that it is often taken as something we "lost" as a result of the fall and also something that is "restored" through the work of Christ (and our identity in Christ as new creations). Nevertheless, this question tends to be left to the side in contemporary discussions of atonement. For example, while penal substitution accounts explain why it is permissible for God to give us eternal life, they do not explain how this life is transmitted to us (or why, for example, we still have to die and be resurrected in order to receive it.)

One might object that our view of atonement is not *really* an exemplar view, as it posits the mysterious work of grace to partly explain salvation and sanctification. Such an objection, however, misunderstands what a theory of atonement is intended to do, or at least mis-compares our view to other theories of atonement. Note that neither penal substitution nor satisfaction alone explain how it is that Christ's work on the cross brings about behavioral change in human creatures such that they can newly resist sin and/or be resurrected into new bodies; all of this requires additional theological machinery. What such views do aim to explain is why Christ's death on the cross allows for a new human-divine relationship that cannot be instantiated without Christ's work on the cross. Our view also explains this and does so merely by reliance on the example of love needed to address shame.

As an exemplar view of the atonement, it avoids the pitfalls of satisfaction and penal substitution accounts (e.g., worries that God does not actually forgive sins given that some atoning act is required, worries that God is not truly just in requiring the abuse, torture, and death of an innocent person in order to cleanse guilty people, concerns that God is not truly loving since divine love is dependent on our moral goodness, etc.) What is particularly unique about our view is that while it is an exemplar view, it also avoids the standard objection to such accounts: the Pelagian heresy.

Broadly speaking, Pelagianism is the view that we can achieve righteousness independently of God's grace. According to Eleonore Stump, Pelagianism is

the thesis that there can be some good in a human will that is not provided directly or indirectly by God's grace. The rejection of Pelagianism therefore includes the view that God's help, God's grace infused into a person (though without in any way precluding the freedom of that person's will), is necessary for a person's moral goodness.²⁰

Alternatively, Richard Cross offers a definition derived from Canons 3, 5, and 9 from the Council of Orange on which "the 'Pelagian' view [is] that we somehow cause our own justification," and that "the 'semi-Pelagian' view [is] that the beginning of our justification is from us."²¹ Pelagius himself claimed that humans must be capable of avoiding sin by means of their free will in order for God's judgment of them to be just. Augustine, a contemporary of Pelagius and one of the primary advocates in his condemnation, argued that Pelagius therefore failed to recognize the complete corruption of human nature according to the fall: if we are capable of avoiding sin on our own, we are not in need of God's grace.

Exemplar views face charges of Pelagianism because they typically fail to explain how the example of divine love brings about our moral goodness. If the example of divine love merely inspires us to imitate Christ,

²⁰Stump, *Atonement*, 211.

²¹Cross, "Anti-pelagianism and the Resistibility of Grace," 200.

it seems like the capacity to imitate Christ (and thereby act rightly) was present all along, implying the Pelagian view that we can will morally right action without divine grace.

It is worth flagging this objection's crucial assumption, namely that reconciliation with God is about restoring the lost state of our wills, as suggested by an Augustinian picture, rather than restoring us into a relationship with God through which our wills are transformed.²²

We do not share this underlying assumption. On our reading of Genesis 2–3, the story of the fall does not reveal moral goodness as a precondition for union with God. Rather, our reading suggests the opposite: union with God is necessary for obtaining moral goodness. This view follows from the Irenaean assumption that human nature was created in a state of immaturity rather than a final perfected state. With respect to the fall, Irenaeus did not claim that human nature moved from moral goodness to moral corruption but instead that humans fell out of perfect communion with God. For Irenaeus, this relational break *constitutes* a fall from perfection. While humans were created in the “image and likeness” of God and God’s “likeness” is the mark of perfection, it is not something that belongs to humans independent of communion with the spirit. As John I. Hochban writes,

Man, therefore, in his natural constitution, that is to say, as a rational animal, is the image of God; the likeness of God is received separately through participation in the spirit . . . From the description we are given of the ‘spirit’ through which man is made to the likeness of God, we are forced to conclude to its identity with sanctifying grace. In one passage, ‘spirit,’ ‘likeness,’ and ‘perfection’ are all regarded as correlative concepts. Lack of ‘spirit’ is equivalent to absence of ‘likeness,’ and therefore the man who does not possess the likeness of God is imperfect.²³

We take the fall to be a loss of communion with God (sanctifying communion, by which God’s likeness is transmitted to us through the spirit) rather than the loss of a “good” will. Thus, the standard Pelagian objection does not map neatly onto our view. It’s true that we are not telling a story in which God’s grace immediately enables us to transform our wills to desire goodness. But we fail to give such an account because we deny that our failure to will the good is what prevents our union with God; we believe God brings us to will the good from a unified state.

However, within the framework we propose, we can project a modified Pelagianism: humans in their present natural state are capable of reinstating union with God apart from divine grace, thereby bringing about their own goodness. We argue, on the contrary (and in line with satisfaction

²²Although we represent Augustine’s understanding of original sin as in tension with our own, Megan Loumagne Ulishney points out a strong motif of unity in Augustine, and sin is problematic insofar as it ruptures the unity between humans and each other as well as humans and the divine. See [Loumagne Ulishney, forthcoming](#).

²³Hochban, “St. Irenaeus on the Atonement,” 528–529.

and substitution accounts), that the fall results in a nature that is so corrupt we cannot bring about communion with the divine on our own. What is unique about our view, however, is that the problematic core of this corruption is not our inherent or relative wickedness and inability to desire good, but the disintegrating effects of shame. We do not think, for example, that God requires a blood sacrifice in order to commune with sinners. Nor do we think, following Stump, that the problem boils down to our “relative standing in comparison with other human beings in consequence of something in [our] past life and condition.”²⁴ Stump identifies this phenomenon as “shame” and argues that shame is a problem the atonement must solve. But in light of her analysis, she argues that Christ’s atoning work on the cross must involve Christ altering our relative standing by adding honor or loveliness to us that trumps our shame. Although we agree with Stump both that shame is a problem the atonement must solve and that we cannot solve it on our own, our different understanding of the problem of shame clearly yields a different solution.

We argue that because we are infected with shame—understood as a disintegrating neurobiological phenomenon—we are incapable of engaging in the sort of loving communion with Christ and others that is required for our sanctification. No amount of effort, good will, or therapy can eliminate our fear of vulnerability before God and our susceptibility for isolation from God (though surely effort, good will, and therapy would help). Nor can we simply choose a better way of regulating our shame. Rather, in order to restore and maintain attunement with God, we require God’s own reassurance and presence in the midst of our moral imperfection. It is through this connection that Christ creates and transmits the new “affective blueprint” by which we process the shame that divides us from God. An infant separated in shame from her caregiver needs the caregiver’s connection and active modeling in order for the communion between the two of them to be restored and maintained. Likewise, in order for our sanctifying communion with God to be restored and maintained, we need God to meet us in our shame and use that connection to enable us to process it. The incarnation, particularly the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, offers us this reassurance and active modeling.

This points to another interesting virtue of our view: it provides a *continuous* story of Christ’s sanctifying work. Most scholars agree that prior to (and after) Christ’s death and resurrection, Christ acts as an example of who God is (“He who has seen me has seen the father”²⁵) and of how we are to live. Jesus repeatedly urges the disciples to “follow” him, as is seen, for example, in John 8:12: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Importantly, Jesus’s urging of the disciples to follow him includes the exhortation to imitate his journey to the cross. For example, Mark 8:34 states: “If any man

²⁴Stump, *Atonement*, 69–70.

²⁵Jn 14:9.

would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” But on alternative accounts of the atonement, Christ’s work on the cross is substitutionary rather than exemplary. That is, on views where Christ “takes the place” of humanity in either receiving some punishment or fulfilling some necessary act of worship, Christ’s completion of this act absolves the need for humanity to participate in the same act. If Christ receives our due penalty on the cross, why do we need to follow him and further receive that penalty? On our view, however, Christ’s work on the cross is the defeat of shame through radical vulnerability which we must follow in choosing to make ourselves vulnerable to God. Christ exemplifies how to experience our negative affective feelings and trust that God will resurrect us out of our shame and through grace bring us into new life. Christ on the cross exemplifies both God’s character and the ideal human in a manner continuous with the rest of his ministry.²⁶

Sin

There are three further issues we think it is important to briefly address.

First, we have said little about what we take sin to be. To clarify, we maintain that sin is disobedience to God. Moreover, although we identify shame as the cause of the rupture between humanity and God, and other accounts take sin to be the cause of this rupture, we do not think shame is identical to or a replacement for the concept of sin. However, shame connects with the doctrine of original sin in two ways.

First, shame is a result of sin. Adam’s and Eve’s choice to eat the fruit that delivered knowledge of good and evil, and that sin caused a very large problem: shame. The effects of this sin are transmitted to all subsequent humans in our inheritance of a neurobiological structure predisposed to shame responses. Therefore, humans begin their life in a ruptured relationship with the divine.

Second, we think shame *amplifies* sin. When we are cut off from God, our tendency to engage in sinful acts (and the severity of such acts) is intensified. Shortly after the story of the fall, we are given a biblical example of how shame fuels sin: Abel’s sacrifice receives God’s regard while Cain’s fails to do so. When God disapproved of Cain’s sacrifice, Cain’s “countenance fell” as he slid into a toxic shame state. He responded to his shame by murdering his brother. We think the murder is a sin—and we think it’s a problem!—but we don’t think the mere fact that we sin is what separates us from God. Instead, we think sin is often a consequence of our shame and separation from God.

²⁶Interestingly, Joshua Cockayne argues that the way we imitate Christ is analogous to the way an infant imitates her caregiver (Cockayne, “The Imitation Game”). Our view fits nicely with this account of imitation, pointing out that our ability to imitate Christ is ruptured when shame severs our attunement with our caregiver. By reestablishing attunement, Christ’s work on the cross then makes it possible for us to participate in this sort of imitation.

The Law

The second issue we want to address is the role of “the law.” We take scripture seriously and recognize a substantial portion of it describes the life of the Israelites under the law, and we also recognize that the law serves as a basis for numerous New Testament metaphors concerning Christ’s death on the cross. One might object to our view on the basis that it makes no mention of this law in describing the mechanism of atonement, or at the very least wonder what we have to say about the role of the law in the broader Christian story.²⁷

We think this is an important question, and one that calls for a more substantial reply than we have space to develop here. However, we can offer a rough sketch of our thoughts on the matter.

Returning to the caregiver analogy, we believe that God created us in a state of infancy with the intention of bringing us to perfection. In this perfected state, we would live joyful lives in perfect communion with God and one another. However, early in this process our connection to God was ruptured, and we became like children without parents, cut-off from the caregiver meant to help us navigate the moral landscape of life.

In the absence of this relationship to our caregiver, God provided the law as a way to help us navigate communal life. In this sense, the law acts as a “custodian,” prior to the coming of Christ.²⁸ However, we don’t think the law was ever intended as a way to perfectly restore our communion to God, nor do we think our violation of the law explains our separation from God. Moreover, once communion with the divine is restored through Christ, we no longer need the law, as Christ now works to bring us to perfection (much like the original, pre-fall plan.)

What, then, do we make of the metaphors in the New Testament that compare the death of Christ to a Levitical sacrifice?²⁹ We think they are excellent metaphors, insofar as they effectively communicate, particularly to the original reader, the depth of God’s love exemplified in Christ’s death on the cross. But we also think they are metaphors: not to be applied literally. We deny that Christ’s death is a literal sacrifice to atone for a literal debt generated by our sin, a debt that prevents God from communing with us unless it is paid.

This brings us to the question of the cleansing of sins, or “atonement in the narrow sense.” We began the paper by arguing that atonement in the broad sense precedes atonement in the narrow sense. However, we have

²⁷We take this to be the objection of William Lane Craig, for example, when he claims that moral influence theory is “biblically inadequate” (Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ* 259).

²⁸See Gal 3:24.

²⁹For example, “And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet” (Heb 10:11–13).

yet to answer how God deals with the particular sins we have committed once reconciliation has been achieved.

Given our understanding of the law, we do not think sin must be atoned for in the sense that we must fulfill specific consequences, bear specific punishments, or make specific sacrifices incurred by our wrongdoing. Nevertheless, sanctification requires alignment with the divine will, and to achieve this alignment we must turn and distance ourselves from our wrongdoing. In the context of this process, acts of atonement—that is, acts we perform to display disapproval of our previous actions and to the extent possible repair the harms they have caused—are natural consequences of the work of grace within us. The specifics of these acts will differ on a case-by-case basis. They may involve making reparations, performing acts of penance, publicly denouncing the wrongs we have done, privately apologizing, and so on. The appropriate way to put distance between ourselves and a careless littering habit will differ from the appropriate way to put distance between ourselves and cruelty we showed to a vulnerable person who asked for our help when we didn't want to give it. In the former case, for example, we may turn away from our sin by spending time tending a community garden. In the latter, we may seek out the person we were cruel to, express regret for our behavior, and offer to help. We make no commitments here to any specifics about how to turn away from specific sins and align our wills with God's. However, we take these "narrowly atoning" activities, whatever exactly they turn out to be, to be outgrowths of the broad atonement Christ achieved for us. They are supported, inspired, and made possible by a restored relationship with God.

The Necessity of the Cross

Finally, we want to address whether on our view the cross is necessary, an idea emphasized by both satisfaction and substitutionary accounts of the atonement. There are two ways to interpret this question: on the first interpretation, the question is whether there are other ways for us to achieve salvation apart from the cross. We argue that there are not. On the second interpretation, the question is whether God could have saved us in some other way. We argue that he could have.³⁰

³⁰We take worries about the necessity of the cross to underlie the classic objection to moral influence views formulated by James Denney, who distinguishes between the case where someone drowns from jumping into the water to save someone and someone who just voluntarily drowns to show their love for someone (Denney, *The Death of Christ*, as discussed in Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*). It's unclear in the latter case why drowning is supposed to signify an act of love, given it is not required by the needs of the beloved (e.g., in the case where I am drowning, I need you to jump in the water.) On our view, our shame necessitates an intervention by God, so we take it to be like the first case, insofar as this analogy can be applied. Perhaps a better description of our view would be that Christ jumps in the water to save us from drowning, and does so by physically connecting with us, and swimming to shore while the movement of his muscles simultaneously provide our muscles with the physical knowledge needed to swim.

Regarding the first interpretation, because we think that shame is what separates us from God, our view may seem to permit means of reconciling with God that have nothing to do with Christ's atoning work, like psychotherapy or medication. If that were the case, our view would be Pelagian. (It would also have the unreasonable implication that God demanded the brutal death of his innocent son when something much less violent and gruesome would have done the trick.) We deny, however, that we can achieve salvation apart from the cross. As we argued above, the cross is the means by which God passes on to us the pattern for processing shame. It is his chosen mode of reattunement. Therapy and related interventions are not enough. Therapy, for example, does not remove shame and its effects completely, especially in the context of our relationships with God. To be reconciled with God in particular, we need God to reach out to us, to be present with us in the midst of our wrongdoing, and to use that loving connection to get us through the shame that infects that relationship. As we argued above, the cross offers us those things. Therapy, drugs, and TED talks, in contrast, do not. Thus, we affirm that the cross is necessary in the sense that there are no other ways for us to achieve salvation.

However, we reject the idea that in saving us, God had no alternatives to Christ dying on a cross. In other words, we do not think that our need for divine intervention fully fixes the nature of the intervention. To illustrate this point, consider the exchange between Jean Valjean and Monseigneur Bienvenu in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Valjean, full of despair after nineteen years in prison and struggling to find work as an ex-convict, seeks shelter for a night at Bienvenu's house. Valjean receives a warm meal and a comfortable bed, but in the middle of the night, he decides to run off with most of Bienvenu's silver, leaving behind just a pair of candlesticks. The next morning, the police capture Valjean and drag him back to the priest to return what was stolen. To everyone's surprise, Bienvenu suggests that there was no burglary at all and gives Valjean the candlesticks, too:

"Ah! here you are!" [Monseigneur Bienvenu] exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"³¹

This moment marks a turning point in the character of Valjean. Although his future still involves both difficulty and sin, because of Bienvenu's generosity before the police, Valjean is set free and goes on to become a successful and generous leader, dedicating his life to justice and charity.

It is clear that the gift of the candlesticks plays an important role in Valjean's transformation, but we might wonder whether the candlesticks were necessary for it. On one hand, they seem to be, though not primarily because as a former convict, Valjean was struggling to earn enough

³¹Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 101.

money to turn his life around (he never does sell the candlesticks). Nor even because in giving them away, Bienvenu convinced the police that Valjean was innocent (Valjean later proves to be adept at escaping imprisonment on his own). Rather, the candlesticks are important primarily because their gift begins to heal Valjean's bitterness and brokenness and because Bienvenu's generosity with respect to them models and inspires a new way of life in Valjean. And yet it's clearly a stretch to say the candlesticks were *necessary*. What mattered is that Bienvenu freely gave Valjean something that everyone in the room recognized as valuable and which Valjean knew he did not deserve. In a different time or place or given a different past for Bienvenu in which he had acquired not silver candlesticks but works of art, the same transformation could have taken place without them.

Likewise, on our account, atonement does not seem to necessitate something as specific as Christ's passion and death on a cross. Nevertheless, like Valjean, we require *some* outside intervention, and that intervention is constrained to some extent by both our circumstances and the nature of our brokenness.

One might object, as Stump does, that "if Christ's passion and death are gratuitous, then it is unjust on God's part to require that Christ suffer and die."³² Even though we do not think that Christ's passion and crucifixion are metaphysically necessary, our view avoids this objection. First, on our view, it is not the demands of God that lead Christ to suffer but *our* need for a humble, shamed savior. Moreover, while it's true that Christ endures a particularly violent and painful death, he does so out of a voluntary desire to connect with us and share in our suffering. Finally, although we admit that Christ's passion and death are in some sense gratuitous, we argue that they are fitting given the context of the incarnation, God's relationship with creation, and the nature and consequences of shame.³³

Conclusion

In sum, we argue that we should rethink the mechanics of the atonement in light of shame, understood here as a fundamentally neurobiological and interpersonal phenomenon that results both from and in ruptured connections. Shame, we contend, not only isolates us from God, but also renders us incapable of resolving the isolation ourselves, a pattern we see not only in Genesis 3, but also in the socialization of young children and in our own experiences of shame. Careful reflection on shame highlights our need for a loving caregiver to reach out to us, meet us in our shame state, and actively model the way out. Christ's life and death, we have argued, meet these criteria. The view we defend, therefore, is an exemplar account: in brief, Christ exemplifies how to break the shame cycle, and his

³²Stump, *Atonement*, 30.

³³On fittingness in the context of the atonement, see Jeffrey, "Is Atonement Necessary or Fitting?"

example—as opposed to his participation in an objective transaction—is the key to restoring communion with God. But because of the nature of shame and the limitations of our regulatory capacities, our view avoids the pitfalls of Pelagianism: we require the model of our caregiver, passing along the ability to transition out of the shame state by means of attunement with us.³⁴

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