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Social sin, social redemption

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Abstract: **Eleonore Stump's *Atonement* marks a significant advance in atonement theory, especially in its nuanced approach to ethical and relational complexities, but tends to treat sin as social only insofar as one individual's sin can harm or shame another. I argue that that social sin requires social redemption and that exemplarism would provide a solution. Christ's pursuit of love and justice, in the midst of oppression, temptation, and struggle, offers a distinctive model of virtue, towards collective restoration of the world. While we cannot redeem ourselves, in calling us to effect justice and union with one another, God may also call us closer to Godself.**

Introduction

Eleonore Stump's *Atonement* presents a remarkable and welcome development in atonement theory. Stump manages, simultaneously, to remain deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, yet eschews many unnecessary (and too often disturbing) features of traditional atonement theory that frequently plague it. Feminist theologians, for example, have previously criticized traditional atonement theory as achieving philosophical coherence at the expense of moral perversion, where '[d]ivine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers "without even raising a voice" is lauded as the hope of the world' (Carlson Brown & Parker (1989), 2). Stump treats Christ's suffering in the atonement, and humankind's relation to it, with unusual nuance and sensitivity. However, development of Stump's *Marian*[1] interpretation is premised on a rejection of exemplarism – the view, often attributed to Abelard, that the life and passion of Christ serves, not as payment for sin, but rather as an inspiring example to the world of genuine love. While Stump's *Atonement* marks a decisive moment of progress

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in philosophy of religion, elements of an Abelardian approach are nonetheless worth retaining: social sin calls for social redemption.

Locating the problem atonement is meant to solve

Stump correctly notes that 'interpretations of the doctrine of the atonement that locate the main obstacle to union between God and post-Fall human persons in something in God . . . are unsalvageable' (Stump (2018), 115). In the Anselmian tradition of atonement theory, God's justice is understood as requiring some form of satisfaction for human sin before God is able to forgive. Being merciful as well as just, God provides the life and death of Christ in order to meet this debt. Anselmian interpretations face a problem, then, of explaining how God might meaningfully pay a debt owed to Godself in a way that makes forgiveness possible. But, a 'worse, insuperable problem is to explain why having an innocent person (or God's own incarnate self) suffer torment and death is pleasing enough in God's eyes to count as the needed present' (*ibid.*, 396). In the words of Abelard,

> How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain – still less that God should consider the death of His Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world! (Abelard (1956), 283)

The notion that God's ability to forgive is constrained by his need for payment (via bloodshed, no less) is inconsistent with divine perfection.

Both the Thomistic account (wherein God's forgiveness is not so constrained) and Stump's Marian interpretation of the atonement share the advantage, then, of recognizing that whatever it is atonement is meant to solve, that problem must be located in human persons rather than in God. The Marian interpretation primarily concerns how atonement might repair the distance between human persons and God imposed by division within human will – how union might be achieved. To the contrary, on an Abelardian account,

> Christ saves post-Fall human beings from their sin by modeling for them what a truly good human person is like. His life, passion, and death serve to teach human beings how they should live. On this Abelardian interpretation, Christ counts as nothing more than a teacher; and the purpose of his life, passion, and death are only to provide the basis for persuading a human person to new states of intellect. (Stump (2018), 342)

However, retaining an exemplarist framework, inspired by Abelard, would generate a distinct advantage, too. That is, the problem of sin may begin with individual persons, but it is not only individual in nature.

Stump recognizes that there are social implications of sin in need of remedy: 'Although the guilt and shame consequent on moral wrongdoing constitute the canonical problem to which the atonement is the solution . . . a person can feel shamed or be shamed in consequence of the depredations of other human beings' (*ibid.*, 50). Nevertheless, *Atonement* tends to treat sin as social only

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insofar as individual wrongdoing may harm individual others or cause individual others to feel shame (noting, that as one cannot do everything in one book, '[c]ommunal guilt and shame [were] outside the scope of this' particular work) (*ibid.*, 500). But, just as shame may be directly or indirectly caused by the wrongdoing of others, so too division of the will (or diversion, when our intellect leads us astray) may also be produced by social conditions. Whatever one might believe about original sin or human nature, discrete acts of wrongdoing in the world tend not to arise *ex nihilo*. The social world – as both a product and a source of human agency – can bring about suffering, injustice, and evil beyond the capacity of any particular individual. Systematic injustice inoculates itself against being dismantled in ways that corrupt both our wills *and* our intellects. An extraordinary amount of suffering and injustice results from acts that are thus encouraged, or enabled, by our communally created social conditions, and 'social sin demands both personal conversion and social transformation' (Heyer (2010), 413).

The intellect and social sin

There are multiple kinds of social sin, and they vary in their degrees of sociality. For instance, there are forms of wrongdoing that may be 'an offense against God because they are offenses against one's neighbor' but also unjust 'relationships between the various human communities' (John Paul II (1984), 16). In general, seeking to account for social sin is to 'recognize that, by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others' (*ibid.*). In particular, I am here concerned with the kind of hermeneutical corruption that accrues as a result of injustice, and the challenge it poses for atonement; such hermeneutical corruption vividly illustrates that social conditions may produce division of the will and intellect.

In 1963, before the Civil Rights Act was passed, and the same year that Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous 'I have a dream' speech, roughly two-thirds of white Americans surveyed by the Gallup organization reported that they believed black persons were already treated equally in their communities (Wise (2006)). In 1962, the same year that James Meredith's court-ordered admission to the University of Mississippi led to rioting by white Americans, and ten years before the Supreme Court would be forced to rule that public schools could not avoid desegregation through the creation of new, all-white, districts, roughly 85 per cent of white Americans surveyed reported that they believed black children were just as likely as white children to get a good education (*ibid.*).[2] We might well wonder how so many white Americans could be ignorant of basic facts about the political order of the time, with access to such vivid evidence so immediately available. Even setting aside any questions of self-reflective racist animosity and attendant deception, understanding these data through the lens of a strictly evidential failure would be a mistake. In its epistemic dimensions, the civil

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rights movement was not merely making facts about the political order known, but contesting a white supremacist ideology.[3]

Our social structures and epistemic resources share a mutually dynamic relationship. That relationship may be fruitful, as when community enables knowledge-sharing and discovery, or inhibiting, as when polarization, oppression, or widespread prejudice, disorients us from the truth (Mills (2017), 55–59). Where our social environments are marred by systems of domination and oppression, and where our epistemic resources develop within that same socio-political order, there is a risk that our very abilities to recognize and will good may be nearly inescapably compromised.[4] That is, there is a risk that our thinking will become ideological in the sense that we develop 'distorted ways of seeing, feeling, and relating to the world' which function to uphold unjust social structures (Finlayson (2016), 21).

Operating in good faith does not preclude inadvertently exercising ideological judgement to the detriment of the moral right (Mills (2017), 57). For instance, someone who believes sincerely in the inferiority of women's intellectual capacities might discourage women from pursuing professional opportunities in a misguided attempt at benevolence. Such a person might not intend to harm, but rather to shelter women from their own failure. Otherwise virtuous intentions can result in oppressive action when coupled with false beliefs or unjust social conditions. The complexities of social sin highlight that *at-one-ment,* then, or restoration of union, requires social transformation in addition to personal conversion (Heyer (2010), 413).

As Stump explains, on Aquinas's theory of agency, all action involves the coordination of an agent's intellect and will. The will inclines us towards goodness, and the intellect recognizes actions or objects under certain descriptions, such as 'good' or 'bad' (Stump (2018), 47). For example, my intellect might represent a particular act of charity as good, and my will inclines me towards what my intellect takes to be good, and thus, towards that act of charity. On this theory of agency, though, an individual's morally wrong choices may mis-program their intellect, and in succession, lead to ever worse moral decision-making, including potentially, moral monstrosity (*ibid.*, 48). Where what we will conflicts with what our intellect represents as good, the will may direct our attention to only that which supports the object of our will. Suppose for instance, my will is aimed at relaxation. My will might direct my intellect to attend only to that evidence which supports this end, ignoring that I have obligations which cannot wait (e.g. I might only think about how much more productive I could be later, after taking time to recharge, without thinking about the deadlines I would miss in the meanwhile). This example is relatively innocuous, but the phenomenon could lead to more serious moral mis-programming.

> [A] person's will and intellect are in a dynamic interaction that allows each of them to corrupt the other, one step at a time. This account makes it easier to understand the well-documented fact that the descent into moral monstrosity tends to be gradual rather than precipitous; and it

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> also shows, at least in part, how it is that a person's conscience can become horribly dulled. (*ibid.*, 48)

What I am suggesting is not an objection to this view, but an expansion of it. The hermeneutical corruption I pointed to above is mis-programming on a social level. Social injustices often accrue incrementally as well, and social communities iteratively adapt their shared understandings of the world to the way the world is, such that even egregious injustice might simply fade into to the background.

Consider this reflection from Angela Davis on being asked about her attitude regarding the permissibility of violence as a mechanism of anti-racist protest:

> I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. Some very, very good friends of mine were killed by bombs – bombs that were planted by racists . . . From the time I was very, very small, I remember the sounds of bombs exploding across the street, our house shaking. I remember my father having to have guns at his disposal at all times because of the fact that at any moment, we might expect to be attacked . . . In fact, when [one] bombing occurred, one of the mothers of one of the young girls called my mother and said, 'Can you take me down to the church? I have to pick up Carol, we heard about the bombing, and I don't have my car.' And they went down there, and what did they find? They found limbs and heads strewn all over the place. And then after that, in my neighborhood, all of the men organized themselves into an armed patrol. They had to take their guns and patrol our community every night because they did not want that to happen again. I mean, that's why when someone asks me about violence . . . I just . . . I just find it incredible. Because, what it means is that the person who is asking that question has absolutely no idea what black people have gone through in this country, what black people have experienced in this country, since the time the first black person was kidnapped from the shores of Africa. (Davis (2011))

The experience that Davis is describing is one where violence is in the water, so to speak. Violence against the black community in Davis's life has been so inescapably, suffocatingly, pervasive that even its necessitating mechanisms of self-defence has gone unnoticed by her described interlocutor. When such extreme injustice goes unnoticed in a systematic way, social mis-programming – of a sort symptomatic of prejudicial ideology – has occurred. Importantly, such mis-programming is likely to corrupt the epistemic resources of individuals within a social community irrespective of their own prejudice or lack thereof. Someone who is acting in good faith, without operative individual prejudice may form deeply mistaken and morally significant beliefs as a result of relevant information being socially suppressed (Mills (2017), 57). To account for the fullness of human agency, and the ways in which it can go wrong, 'moral theology must take into account not only individual choices but the practices and institutions in which agency takes shape' (Sowle Cahill (2007), 222).

As Juan Luis Segundo writes, 'Our falsified and inauthentic ways of dealing with our fellow men are allied to our falsification of the idea of God. Our unjust society and our perverted idea of God are in close and terrible alliance' (Segundo (1974), 8). A social order infected by injustice may, in turn, produce a hermeneutical framework which presents a corrupted representation of the good, limiting our capacity to recognize and will what is genuinely good. That is, what we recognize as

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normal influences what we take to be normative. Social harms may also be more obviously subversive of union with God, though, when the harm is distinctively religious. For example, as Michelle Panchuk argues, distinctively religious trauma may lead to deconversion (Panchuk (2018), 527).

Atonement and social redemption

In discussing the challenge of Christian exclusivism, Stump writes, 'clearly, it is possible to know a person and know that that person exists but to know that person under only one description and not under other relevant descriptions. One might know the pauper, for example, and not realize that he is the prince in disguise' (Stump (2018), 283). This principle applies to relationship more generally. When Lois Lane treats Clark Kent with indifference, she thereby treats Superman with indifference, though she does not realize it, and would be horrified if she did. Likewise, if it is true that 'any goodness whatsoever in creatures is derived from God directly or indirectly' (*ibid.*, 43) when social sin alienates us from the good in another person – frustrating or actively diminishing one another's well-being – union with God is thereby frustrated as well.

In contrast to an exemplarist approach, on the Marian interpretation of the atonement, 'Christ provides unilaterally one part of what is needed for union between God and human beings, namely, the indwelling of human psyches in God; and he also provides the most promising means for the other part, namely, the surrender to God by human beings alienated from themselves and from God' (*ibid.*, 397). In discussing the scriptural emphasis on relationship in Christ's discussions with his disciples, Stump notes,

> [T]he desire to have from Christ a teaching that includes rules or a set of instructions for human conduct misses the mark entirely. If rules or instructions could produce internal integration around the good in the psyche of a human person, she would already wholeheartedly want to want the good – and that is precisely what a post-Fall human person does not want wholeheartedly. (*ibid.*, 280)

However, just as a person's failure to desire the good cannot be put right by a set of instructions, neither can misapprehension of what the good is be set right by a will's inclination for good, in the absence of social transformation.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the centrality of Christ's suffering to redemption on traditional theories of the atonement has corrupted the shared hermeneutical resources of culturally Christian communities – that the power and permissibility of resisting injustice, rather than enduring it, has been obscured by conceptualizing Christ's suffering as *the* act of love (as opposed to a consequence of some other redeeming action). On these grounds, I have suggested that Christian philosophers pursue a new kind of exemplarist model – one on which death itself has no central role in what redeems us, but rather, a persistent and loving pursuit of justice, even when the risks of doing so may be dire (Pogin (forthcoming)). My advocating for the

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retention of an Abelardian approach, then, is not entirely disinterested. Nonetheless, a form of exemplarism provides a fitting response to the problem posed by social sin. That is, Christ's life, death, and resurrection do not merely offer an inspiring example of love, but simultaneously call us to participate in social transformation, and present us with the tools to begin.[5] Christ's unwavering pursuit of love and justice in the midst of oppression, temptation, and struggle offers a distinctive model of virtue. While we cannot effect redemption ourselves, in calling us to effect justice and union with one another, God may also call us closer to Godself.[6]

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NOTES

1. Stump refers to her interpretation of the atonement as the Marian interpretation, noting that there are many Marys who might rightly be honoured in this way. For instance, Mary, mother of Christ, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, etc. 'In varying ways, each of these Marys exemplifies the understanding of God's love that is fundamental to the interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement' that Stump sets out (Stump (2018), 378).
2. See also The Gallup Organization, *Black–White Relations in the United States, 2001 Update*, 10 July 2001 <https://media.gallup.com/GPTB/specialReports/sr010711.PDF> [last accessed 21 September 2019].
3. For instance, contesting an ideological understanding of 'equality' under which equality was understood to be consistent with segregation.

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4. See also Miranda Fricker's discussion of hermeneutical injustice: '[t]he injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization' (Fricker (2007), 155).
5. Stump notes that many consider exemplarism to be heretical (Stump (2018), 167), but one need not think of exemplarism as a view on which humankind produces redemption, or any form of good, independently of God.
6. Thanks to Michael Rea and Amber Carlson for helpful comments and discussion on this piece.

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