

Charles Taylor's Modern Identity and the "Atonement Muddle"

James Gerrie

Preview

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Keywords: Charles Taylor; Jurgen Moltmann; atonement; patripassianism; passibilism; modalist theology; moral influence theory; substitution theory; ransom theory

In Charles Taylor's exhaustive study of the historical currents that have helped constitute the modern identity he proposes the notion of "the affirmation of ordinary life" as a way of encapsulating the core of that identity. As he states in *Sources of the Self*, "ordinary life is a term of art I introduce to designate those aspects of human life concerned with production, that is, labour, the making of things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family."¹ According to Taylor, this aspect of the modern identity gives rise to a new sense of the almost inestimable value of individuals and their quotidian existence. This modern sense of identity is informed by a combination of a theistic vision of a created natural order and an ideal of disengaged scientific reasoning as a way of exploring that order, and also a sense of the ultimate value of people and their dignity as moral agents. As Taylor states:

If we look for the constitutive goods of this outlook, if we ask what it is whose vivid presence to our understanding empowers us to act for the good, two features spring to mind, the goodness and wisdom of God as shown in the interlocking order, and our disengaged reason as our way of participating in God's purpose. But this picture of disengaged reason is linked as we saw to a conception of human dignity. In particular, it incorporates a sense of self-responsible autonomy, a freedom from the demands of authority.²

¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 211.

² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 245.

Part of the sense of the modern identity that emerges from these sources is a view that moral responsibility is essentially the same for all agents, including God. Therefore:

God's providence becomes more and more scrutable, however much the engineering detail may escape us. Many writers still gesture to higher purposes we don't understand, but the logic of the position drives us towards rational transparency.³

The resulting modern view of the self and of God's purposes leaves little room for the "conflicted sense of human imperfection and obduracy"⁴ of the older theological outlooks that helped form it. It is an outlook that is therefore not open to longstanding understandings of how to resolve the theological issue of the atonement. Taylor points to a powerful need for a new way to conceive of the atonement which can make sense of God's action in terms understandable by modern individuals. He comments in his book *A Secular Age*:

On the older view, wrath had to be a part of the package.... But in the anthropocentric climate, this no longer makes sense, and indeed, appears monstrous.... But as the feeling [for the righteousness of God's wrath] wanes ... he last reason for divine violence, as punishment/pedagogy, disappears.... And hence what was for a long time and remains for many the heart of Christian piety and devotion: love and gratitude at the suffering and sacrifice of Christ seems incomprehensible, or even repellent and frightening to many.⁵

The following is an elaboration of a theory of the atonement based in a moral requirement that any being making a judgement to create persons as they are now conceived, should first undergo an appropriate level of experience of the sufferings of such beings and from a similar finite standpoint of those beings. This theory seeks to provide a resolution of what theologian Inna Jane Ray calls "The Atonement Muddle."⁶ It differs significantly from the theories that have traditionally dominated in the West, such as divinization, debt payment, juridical-penal or moral influence theories. Why must God become human, suffer and die in order to accomplish our salvation? "Atonement" is the category of Christian thought that seeks to answer this question. All of the traditional theories are highly problematic for modern individuals. Taylor elaborates such dilemmas in detail in *The Secular Age* and numerous modern theologians have also addressed

³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 245.

⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 245.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 649-650.

⁶ Inna Jane Ray, "The Atonement Muddle: An Historical Analysis and Clarification of a Salvation Theory," *Journal of Women and Religion* 15 (1997), 12-40.

such issues at great length.⁷ Because of these profound controversies no “Atonement theory nor any other systematic description of what is meant by the Christian claim of salvation has ever been precisely defined by the whole church.”⁸ Unlike, other theological issues, such as the triune nature of God, the nature of the incarnation, the canonical books of the Bible, theories about atonement remain highly conflicted across the spectrum of Christian denominations.⁹

I will call the theory being elaborated in this paper the “Moral Solidarity View” because it is based in a moral requirement of God to undergo the experience of suffering of finite sentient creatures (persons) before undertaking an act of the creation of any world in which such creatures will exist. The theory cannot fully explain why God is justified in creating such creatures or such worlds. It cannot resolve the issue of the Problem of Evil, or as Taylor describes it, “the issue of the meanings of violence” and “its meta-biological motivations.”¹⁰ Instead, the position proceeds from the assumption, voiced by thinkers as far back as Anselm and as recently as Joan Knuth that God is somehow bound by an obligation “by way of an eternal decision, to achieve for human beings the best future possible [and], God will act to bring about this future, no matter the fact of sin.”¹¹ If God is held by some kind of obligation to make sentient beings who are capable of sin then a basic requirement of acting on such a responsibility will be to have to make a decision whether it is morally acceptable for such beings to exist, since they will obviously at least be open to the suffering such sin may cause. Therefore, seeking the expression of such an obligation suggests the possibility of a “suffering God,” as it would not only involve an all-knowing God having to witness the sufferings caused by the moral failings of such beings (and any natural limitations that might characterize their world), but also God’s own first-hand experience of such a finite existence and its worst sufferings, in order to make a proper judgement about the acceptability of the creation of such beings.

It has been a longstanding debate in Christian theism whether God’s witnessing of suffering would actually cause God to suffer, or whether, God is in some sense “impassible.”¹² One can speculate about how a God could take

⁷ See: Ray, “The Atonement Muddle”; Brent G. Kyle, “Punishing and Atoning: A New Critique of Penal Substitution,” *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion* 74 (2013); Paul Dafydd Jones, “Barth and Anselm: God, Christ and the Atonement,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 3 (2010); S. M. Heim, “Cross Purposes: Rethinking the Death of Jesus (Book Review),” *The Christian Century*, no. 6 (2005).

⁸ Ray, “The Atonement Muddle,” 15.

⁹ Stephen J. Burnhope, “Beyond the Kaleidoscope: Towards a Synthesis of Views on the Atonement,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2012).

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 675.

¹¹ Jones, “Barth and Anselm: God, Christ and the Atonement,” 261.

¹² Gilles Emery, “The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the ‘Suffering of God’,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, eds. James F.

sympathy to the greatest metaphysical extent possible, such as complete empathy. Perhaps somewhat akin to a Hindu view of the universe as Brahma dreaming or the Muslim aphorism about God being as close as our jugular vein, one can speculate about a God who knows our own lives so intimately that he/she/it actually shares in the same sensations that we experience. Such speculations raise troubling questions, which for Christians have been dealt with through debates regarding “patripassianism” or “modalist theology.”¹³ In regard to the moral solidarity view being considered here, it is not really necessary to engage with such debates. If one is disposed to a patripassianist perspective and believes that God must bear all suffering continually in order to carry out his/her/its creative responsibilities, then one will be forced to conclude that the entirety of this world’s existence is maintained by an ongoing sacrificial choice of God to bear a degree of sympathetic or empathetic suffering, potentially up to the level of sharing in all our sensations. Indeed one will also be forced to conclude that one’s own unique finite sinful existence has been purchased not only at the cost of God’s ongoing suffering but the suffering of all other finite beings who/that have made one’s own unique existence possible in a particular time and place. Such a view would place a believer in a particularly dour predicament regarding how to weigh his or her own worth and potential guilt. Alternatively, one can posit that God’s omniscience and power might somehow grant immunity from such suffering, and thus avoid the accusation of patripassianism, although it would not free one from having some responsibility for the suffering of all the other finite beings who/that are necessary to have secured one’s own unique existence.

So, whether God as “the father” experiences no suffering whatsoever, only sympathetic suffering, or suffering that directly mirrors our own sensations of pain or discomfort, the modern individual in the “anthropocentric climate” described by Taylor is still likely to ask whether God’s experience could really be fully privy to the experience of the suffering of finite creatures like us. As a kind of “virtual” or purely intellectual experience it would conceivably have a very different character. God might indeed have a perfect immersive way of knowing my life, even to an extent that it includes feeling my sensations of pain, but unless God can also forget about his/her/its Godhood, such sensations could never be experienced in the same way that I experience such sensations—from a finite perspective. Theories of impassibility seem, in part, to be addressing the complexities of such a distinction. Our own experiences of pain are tempered by our level of knowledge. We can bear up to receiving an injection better when we

Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 27-76.

¹³ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church: The Story of Christianity from the Apostolic Age to the Foundation of the Church of Rome* (Markham ON: Penguin Books, 1967), 87-90.

have had them before and when we understand their relative benefits. Experienced runners can push past pain barriers and reach ‘the zone’ and yogis, reportedly, can discipline the mind to control their experience of pain. If knowledge can temper the experience of suffering, could absolute knowledge completely extinguish the experience of suffering? The arguments for impassibility point to such a possibility.

However, from the perspective of the modern identity discussed by Taylor, such philosophical debates about God’s impassibility point in a radically different anthropocentric direction. A question modern individuals are likely to be inclined to ask is whether God *should* experience suffering in the same way that we experience it, from a position of limited knowledge and profound uncertainty. Modern individualism and democracy, and the sense of the “modern self” discussed by Taylor, and how this view leads to a radical rejection of any justifications of harming others, such as discussed by Steven Pinker in his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*,¹⁴ all speak of an increasing disposition in modern individuals to maintain a proper awareness and sympathetic understanding of the suffering of other persons. It has therefore become increasingly difficult to conceive of a God who is immune to suffering to the point that theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann,¹⁵ have argued for the abandonment of impassibility at least in the form of the second person of the trinity. Theologians still debate whether this kind of knowledge should be purely intellectual “knowledge about,” which more “traditionalist” proponents of impassibility might accept, or the complete “knowledge of” suggested by “passibilists.”¹⁶ Regardless of how such debates might be resolved, modern individuals might still ask whether God can really be said to know the suffering of finite sentient beings without some kind of, to use a traditional Christian term, “emptying”¹⁷ of him/her/itself into some kind of form of existence lacking omniscience.

Should God be required to experience the kind of suffering that can be experienced by finite sentient beings who cannot know with certainty that their sufferings will serve some greater ultimate purpose? In other words, should God experience a kind of suffering that even some absolute degree of empathetic suffering may not be able to provide proper awareness of? Should God also experience “anguish”—the experience of suffering while also being aware that suffering might be ultimately meaningless, which only finite sentient beings like ourselves are capable of experiencing? Only a finite sentient being, for example,

¹⁴ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* [Der gekreuzigte Gott], trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

¹⁶ Jeffrey G. Silcock, "The Truth of Divine Impassibility: A New Look at an Old Argument," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 45, no. 3 (2011), 199.

¹⁷ Philippians 2:7

could possibly view the entire universe as a potentially pointless natural phenomenon. If evil, especially in the form of vast systems of human evil, can possibly ultimately triumph in such a World, then, as Kant suggests, the suffering of innocents might not only be unrecompensed in some ultimate way, it might be entirely pointless.

The following are two moral questions that individuals, who are seeking greater transparency about God's judgment to make a world with finite persons capable of anguish, might pose:

1. Could God be a proper judge of the sins of any finite sentient beings to be created (for example in regard to how they should be assessed if capable of exercising free will), without a full understanding of the kinds of suffering such beings can undergo and how such suffering might affect their choices?
2. Could a creator God, as builder of a universe (or universes) that contain sentient creatures, be a fully responsible builder without full knowledge of the harms such creatures can undergo? By analogy, could an engineer unfamiliar with pain appreciate the gravity of the repercussions that might result from certain kinds of potential failures in the structural integrity of her designs? Another way of putting this question would be to consider what the proper burdens of parenthood are. Should one test the water of a bathtub for an infant by plunging that infant's feet in and seeing how it reacts? Or is not the onus on a parent to dip her own finger in first? Could a purely theoretical knowledge of anguish be morally adequate?

It could be argued that God could not truly know anguish while also still having absolute knowledge and power. If one feels that certain kinds and degrees of direct experience are necessary for a proper understanding of anguish, and if such knowledge would be necessary for God to make a proper judgement about bringing imperfect worlds containing such experiences into existence, then we might have the beginning of a modern explanation of why God must experience suffering of the sort like that apparently undergone by Jesus of Nazareth. It might simply be the moral price that must be paid for obtaining the kind of knowledge necessary to allow for a judgement to be made about the possibility of creating a world like ours.

In regards to the religion of Christianity, such a possibility seems present in the Gospel message that "the son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men,"¹⁸ for in addition to suffering anguish, we are all clearly experts at producing it. The moral solidarity view suggests other novel readings of Biblical passages. In the light of this view, Jesus' statement that we must "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,"¹⁹ could mean, in part, that people

¹⁸ Luke 24:7.

¹⁹ Matthew 5:48.

must sometimes risk, just as God did, opening themselves to the possibility of being harmed by others as an unavoidable price of opening oneself to the possibility of loving imperfect others. In terms of other religions, perhaps there are similar ideas of the necessity of God's suffering on our behalf. For example, the adventures of Rama as he seeks his beloved Sita might be an instance of God experiencing the suffering, heartbreak, and grief of romantic loss.

Such considerations would force several conclusions upon theists. If it is good for a sensitive being like God to experience anguish as a result of a moral requirement for considering the possibility of creating imperfect finite sentient creatures, then this implies that one also believes it is morally laudable for morally sensitive beings to be forbearing of the harms caused by others. This is not a surprising conclusion. All theistic traditions speak of grace and mercy in laudatory terms, especially God's. But this more mundane conclusion leads to some other interesting implications. Such beliefs about the virtue of forbearance suggest possible lines of thought about why it might be morally obligatory for God to create imperfect realities/worlds/universes and creatures (because forbearance of imperfection is morally laudable) and regarding inclusivism (perhaps even Non-Christians "know Christ"²⁰ through the practice of such forbearance arising from suffering originating from love).

Such a view of atonement differs substantially from traditional views. Instead of being couched in terms of an example of the depth of God's love presented simply for our moral edification, as in moral influence theories, or as the satisfaction or punishment of justified divine wrath at our moral shortcomings, as in substitution, governmental, or satisfaction theories, or the somewhat mysterious accounts of divinization and ransom theories, atonement could be viewed as a morally necessary metaphysical event that makes the existence of apparently natural and imperfect worlds like ours possible. Viewing the historical event of Jesus' life in this way would allow one to reject traditional exclusivist teachings about the nature of salvation, such as that given voice to by Charles Blow in a *New York Times* Op Ed, while still maintaining a certain vision of the unique significance of the life of Christ and the meaning of the Christian message:

In June, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a controversial survey in which 70 percent of Americans said that they believed religions other than theirs could lead to eternal life. This threw evangelicals into a tizzy. After all, the Bible makes it clear that heaven is a velvet-roped V.I.P. area reserved for Christians. Jesus said so: "I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." But the survey suggested that Americans just weren't buying that.²¹

²⁰ Philippians 3:10.

²¹ Charles Blow, "Heaven for the Godless?" *New York Times*, December 27, 2008.

Does one have to accept the religious exclusivism so often attributed by religious conservatives to a passage like “I am the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by me?”²² Such a view as a basis of exclusivism is clearly increasingly not accepted by Christians. But the solidarity view of atonement would provide a possible alternative reading. It would suggest that this passage would be better understood as a statement about metaphysics. That is to say, it should be read as suggesting that it is only through God living a life like that of Jesus, that a world such as ours, which contains finite imperfect sentient beings, could come into existence. Without such an act, our world would be trapped forever in a state of only notional existence in the mind of God. In other words, this passage might not be expressing the idea that people must believe in certain doctrines about Jesus in order to achieve salvation but rather simply pointing to the metaphysical/ethical truth that any worlds with beings needing salvation in them would require an event like that claimed by Christians, if those worlds could even be considered as possibilities for actualization. Obviously, such a judgement would have to be made before any decisions about individual salvation could even be possible.

Questions about why such an experience on God’s part would have to occur at any particular time (c. 33 CE for example) would obviously be germane. The nature of temporality in general and especially God’s relation to history are extremely difficult issues to comprehend. However, one could tentatively argue that for a divine being who/that somehow transcends time, any time could be as good as any other. Clearly certain kinds of “historical” prerequisites might be required for God to be able to properly partake of the experience of anguish as I have defined it. It would have to happen in some particular form of life that was conscious and also at a point in any process of natural, intellectual, and individual stages of development that it would be capable of having a sense of its metaphysical predicament and a concept of justice profound enough to allow for an experience of anguish. And such an experience would have to be of a sufficient level of verisimilitude that God could not in some way spy his/her/its omnipotence and omniscience, as it were, “through the curtain.” In other words, perhaps God choosing to actually live at some specific point in a naturalistic world with the characteristic of a certain degree of theistic ambiguity, such as we can find in our own world, might be necessary.

Questions could also be raised about what could properly qualify as a sufficiently profound experience of anguish in the sense I have discussed here only in a preliminary fashion. Could the life of Christ even qualify? Can anguish really be distinguished from suffering in general as I have suggested? These are profound and difficult questions, to which I can only provide as yet, tentative answers. For instance, in the case of whether a life like that of Christ could even serve as a benchmark for making a general judgement about the anguish of sentient creatures, one could argue that perhaps only a human being with the

²²John 3:16.

level of “metaphysical understanding” (that is to say knowledge about the natural world, the real possibilities of a coherent “atheism,” history, ethics, etc.) of someone living in first century Palestine and of the kind of evil capable of being wrought by a totalitarian force like Rome, would be able to provide the conditions needed for a morally adequate sense of anguish. Or perhaps, different “Christs” for different races of sentient beings or different kinds of anguish would be necessary.

If these additional speculations regarding the moral solidarity view can hold together then this would leave us with a theory of the atonement that would suggest that the most critical event of atonement would not be the crucifixion of Jesus, nor his resurrection, but his cry of dereliction on the cross: “Eloi, Eloi lema sebachthani” “God, God, why have you forsaken me”.²³ If this question was an outward manifestation of the experience of the possibility of the complete meaninglessness of his suffering and impending destruction, then this moment could represent God, at least “according to his passible flesh,” experiencing anguish. If so, it would represent the moment that God satisfies the moral precondition for the existence of an imperfect world like ours. Thus, in such a moment, at least according to the moral solidarity outlook, Christ would truly represent a being through whom “no one comes to the father but by me” and “through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”²⁴ Such a view would also explain why God must put him/her/itself “forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood,” (i.e., undergo an experience of anguish) in order to allow imperfect persons the possibility of existence such that they could even partake in any possibility of redemption made “...effective through faith,”²⁵ as opposed to simply being trapped forever in non-existence.

However, a critic might still ask why it would not be possible for God to achieve such knowledge of finite suffering “virtually” without actually having to participate in the reality of an imperfect creation. Indeed, one might suspect that the morally responsible thing for God to do would be to place him/her/itself into a virtual reality, and here I am obviously drawing on imagery from the movie “The Matrix,” of a sufficient level of realism that the credits could contain the statement “no real imperfect finite persons were harmed in the production of this Godly experience.” There are three ways to respond to such concerns. One could argue that this is indeed what happens and that Christ and his Church only represent instances of an understanding of the moral solidarity view of atonement (perhaps only in inchoate form) entering into human historical consciousness. Or one could argue, in a certain Platonic fashion, that if everything that exists is fundamentally ideas, it really makes no difference to draw hard distinctions and

²³ Mark 15:34.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 8:6. The first verse of the letter to the Hebrews also expresses the idea that the Son plays an essential role in the creation of ‘worlds’ like ours: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last day he has spoken to us by the Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (NRSV).

²⁵ Romans 3: 25.

absolute barriers between our physical reality and God's thought. If the thought of God is so powerful that it can make any "virtual" experience real, then drawing absolute distinctions between our world's operation and God's mental trial run(s) might not be necessary or useful. Finally, it might be necessary for certain reasons of fidelity to any particular imperfect universe's unique characteristics, or those of particular kinds of finite sentient beings, or of different kinds of anguish (e.g., existential, romantic), that God should participate in an actual World he/she/it is considering to create. From a standpoint of temporal transcendence in which temporal sequence may not be relevant, it might be possible for God to "run his scene" (or "her" or "its scene") and then bring the rest back together "in editing" so to speak. Such possibilities might raise spectres of theological determinism, but it might be possible for such scene cutting to still involve some degree of latitude for freedom to exist.

There are undoubtedly other concerns that can be voiced about the picture of atonement presented above. My greatest concern is that such a view may already have been developed in detail by theologians of whom I am simply unaware amongst the "kaleidoscope"²⁶ of Christian views of atonement. There are at least some instances of partial expression of some of the ideas presented here in various aspects of the major traditional atonement theories. For example, the theory closest to the moral solidarity view is probably the moral influences theory, because it does not hinge on a notion of God's wrath at our wrongdoings being satisfied by an act of punishment. Taylor presents his own version of the moral influences view of the atonement as a partial response to the dilemmas thrown up by the development of modern visions of the self in regard to the problem of the meaningfulness of violence and suffering. He equates God to a "supreme tennis player"²⁷ who eternally responds to our tendencies towards violence with non-violent acceptance. God's non-violent response is supremely exemplified in Christ, which becomes essentially a "pedagogy"²⁸ used by God in a process of soul building like that proposed by Irenaeus.²⁹

However, unlike the moral influences theory, the moral solidarity view rejects the idea that "Christ's sacrifice has no effect on God, but is meant primarily to affect humanity."³⁰ The "Parable of the Ant" presented by Billy Graham contains such a suggestion. God becomes an ant in order to allow for the possibility of communication with humankind about how to escape destruction. While such an action might be laudable, such imagery lacks any clear expression of why God becoming an ant represents any kind of "sacrifice" on God's part. Moral influences theories also suggest a certain necessity for God to suffer to some degree, but not really any necessity for God to identify with our sufferings

²⁶ Burnhope, "Beyond the Kaleidoscope," 346.

²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 671.

²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 670.

²⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 668.

³⁰ J. M. Hicks, "What did Christ Accomplish on the Cross? Atonement in Campbell, Stone, and Scott," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1995), 152.

and limitations. This can leave one to wonder why an all-powerful God could not simply find other means to convey the message of the depth of his/her love without the payment of a price like that of the anguish and humiliation of a cross. Another type of atonement theory with overlapping aspects is the “Christus Victor”³¹ type, with its central claim that the forces of evil, often expressed in the form of the Devil, are what hold human beings in some kind of bondage. However, such theories often skirt close to dualism in their portrayal of the Devil’s power, and assert the baffling (especially to modern people) requirement for the torture and destruction of an innocent life in order to satisfy the demands of evil forces or moral restitution.³² They also do not explain why such victory can also represent a “reconciliation” between sinful humanity and God, since “reconciliation implies a prior relationship of estrangement.”³³ The Solidarity Theory avoids such pitfalls. Morally imperfect beings are certainly, in this view, under the power of death, which is to say an initial sentence of non-existence (purely notional existence) due to their imperfections. But under the solidarity view, the source of this “power of death” is not simply a result of the power of evil (our inevitable wrongs and sufferings) but also a moral requirement for God to properly understand those kinds of sufferings first hand. Such a moral hurdle would certainly be brought to God’s attention by Satan, that is to say, the speaker for the defense or “opposition” in the heavenly court, as the original term “Satan” in Hebrew implies. In this respect, the fulfillment of this final moral requirement of God’s personal experience of finitude would represent the first step in a victory over death (escape from permanent non-existence), and the overriding (i.e., defeat or dispelling) of the Devil’s challenge.³⁴ But God would still have to decide after having such an experience, whether the creation of such an imperfect world considered as a whole and in terms of the individual sufferings within it could be ultimately justified, which is to say that even armed with first hand knowledge of anguish, God would still have to resolve the wider problem of evil. Such a theory of the atonement would only be comprehensible by individuals who had a powerful appreciation of the value and importance of individual human lives and a desire to demand a certain transparency even regarding God’s actions. In other words, only modern individuals armed with a sense of identity, like that discussed by Taylor, would be able to wonder whether God could adequately know what human anguish is like. So, contrary to what Taylor suggests, perhaps modern individuals, rather than being beset by an increasing array of difficult dilemmas regarding traditional Christian doctrines, might actually be uniquely equipped to finally resolve one of them. While certain issues like the “idea of God” and the problem of evil remain highly problematic, perhaps the “atonement muddle” has remained a muddle for so long simply

³¹ Alan Spence, *The Promise of Peace: A Unified Theory of Atonement* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 2.

³² Heim, "Cross Purposes," 20.

³³ Spence, *The Promise of Peace*, 15.

³⁴ Hebrews 2: 14.

because it had to await the blossoming of a certain kind of modern human self-conception and sense of individual self-worth.