Toward an African Theory of the Atonement

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary philosophy of religion and analytic theology have recently experienced a revival regarding the nature of the Christian Atonement. The Kaleidoscope theory of the atonement says that the major theories such as Christus Victor, Satisfaction, Penal Substitution, and Moral Exemplar each capture an important aspect of the significance of the atonement. When taken together, they offer a fuller picture of the atonement than they do as individual theories. My goal is to add to the Kaleidoscope theory by drawing on insights from the African religious and philosophical traditions. I argue that there are ideas to be found in the African communitarian ethic of ubuntu that can be mined to help deepen our understanding of the atonement. I thus seek to widen the kaleidoscope theory of the atonement to include important African perspectives.

> "The Savior uses many tones of voice and many methods of salvation of humanity"
> (Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks 1* in Green 2006, 198-199)

1. Introduction

Contemporary philosophy of religion and analytic theology have recently experienced a revival regarding the nature of the Christian Atonement. Discussions often involve using the tools of analytic philosophy to help defend versions of already established theories of the atonement including, but not limited to, the Christus Victor, Satisfaction, Penal Substitution, and Moral Exemplar theories. The Kaleidoscope theory of the atonement says that each of the major theories of the atonement captures an important aspect of its significance, such that when taken together with other theories, they give us the fullest picture of the atonement (e.g., Baker 2006; Green 2006). My goal here isn't to contest any particular theory of the atonement; rather, I aim to add to the kaleidoscope theory by drawing on insights from the African philosophical tradition.

While non-Western philosophical traditions are slowly starting to be incorporated into the work of Western philosophers with more regularity, contemporary African philosophy remains sorely neglected. This is especially disappointing because the lingua franca below the Sub-Sahara is English and as such Western philosophers can access contemporary African philosophy without language training.[1] The lack of interaction with African scholarship is particularly troubling in analytic philosophy of religion because Traditional

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[1] There are multiple possible reasons for this neglect. However, the lack of appreciation of African philosophy by Westerners cannot be attributed to the fact that they have different philosophical concerns. Much of African philosophy deals with issues in ethics and political philosophy that have long been discussed in the Western tradition. Likewise, there has been much recent growth in African philosophy in other areas such as epistemology and logic. See Metz (2021).

African Religion is monotheistic (Mbiti 1991), and monotheism is of central focus in analytic philosophy of religion.

I seek to do my small part to remedy this lack of interaction with African philosophy by gleaning insights from it that will help us to better appreciate the atonement. It's briefly worth noting how I understand the term "African" and what type of philosophy can properly be conceived of as African. I use "African philosophy" to denote long-standing philosophical features commonly found among indigenous Africans south of the Sahara Desert. Consider that:

> The term 'African' has been employed in a variety of ways. Here is one, theoretically useful way to use the term, and those like it such as 'western': to refer to features that have been salient in a locale over a substantial amount of time. In general, I use geographical labels to pick out properties that have for a long while been recurrent in a place in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere. They denote long-standing characteristics in a region that differentiate it from many other regions. (Metz 2022).[2]

Notice that this doesn't imply that such characteristics *only* appear in Africa, but rather they appear more frequently, and over a longer period of time. Whether something is African, then, is a matter of degree. Furthermore, though there are certainly differences among the peoples south of the Sahara, it has long been noted that there are striking similarities that span across different regions.

For example, Kai Horsthemke writes that "[w]hile there exists no single unified "African ethic" or "African moral outlook", there are nonetheless certain core ideas that appear with *astonishing regularity across African (especially sub-Saharan) societies*" (2015, 1). One such focus of African ethics is on the concept of *ubuntu*. Indeed, sometimes they are considered synonymous with each other. This communitarian ethic stands in stark contrast to many Western ethical theories where the focus is on an individual's behaviour. One major interpretation of ubuntu focuses on the normative conception of *personhood* (e.g., Ikuenobe 2016; Menkiti 1984; Molefe 2019; Ramose 2003). This version of ubuntu says that morality is about personhood in the sense that it is about developing one's character. The way in which one develops as a person is by exercising other-regarding virtues in the context of community. I suggest ways in which the personhood understanding of ubuntu enriches our understanding of the atonement, especially in its focus on other-regarding virtues. I call this the *African Personhood Account of the Atonement*. Another major interpretation of ubuntu is that it is *relational* (e.g., Paris 1995; Metz 2022; Tutu 1999). One well-developed version of this view says that an action is right if it respects our capacity to be party to friendly relationships (Metz 2022). This type of friendship should be understood in terms of exhibiting solidarity with others and also with identifying with others. I argue that understanding Christ's sacrifice in terms of the ultimate act of friendliness (i.e., of solidarity and identifying) also helps to deepen our understanding of the atonement. I call this the *African Relational Account of the Atonement*. Finally, *vitalist* approaches to ubuntu say that everything (both animate and inanimate objects) are imbued with *life force* (e.g., Bujo 1997; Dzobo 1992; Magesa 1997). Morality is about increasing the life force in oneself, but particularly in that of others. I argue that Christ's sacrifice can be understood as one that increased the life force of every human, both past and present, and indeed of all of creation. I call this the *African Vitality Account of the Atonement*. My discussion points toward an

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[2] See also Gyekye (1995, 191).

African Relational Theory of the Atonement that merits serious consideration as a candidate to be added to the Kaleidoscope theory.

2. The Main Theories of the Atonement

In this section I briefly outline some of the main theories of the atonement. My purpose here is not to offer anything close to a comprehensive survey of the literature. I am merely providing the unfamiliar reader with enough background information to appreciate my project.[3] Remember that my goal is to offer a theory (or multiple theories) that help enhance our current understanding of the atonement. I am not attempting to supplant any of the already established theories on offer.

The *Christus Victor* (also known as the Ransom Theory) understands the atonement as the winning act in a cosmic struggle. Jesus's death and resurrection defeats death, the powers of evil, and Satan. This is widely regarded as the dominant view in the history of the church, particularly in the patristic period. It appears to have been held by Irenaeus (AD 130-200) and other early church fathers.[4] The *Satisfaction* theory was developed by Anselm (AD 1033-1109) and to some degree supplanted the Christus Victor theory. This theory says that human sin offends God and that humans, on their own, are incapable of satisfying the demands of God's justice. Thus, Christ's death should be understood as a perfect sacrifice which satisfies the demands of God's justice and allows humans to avoid what would otherwise be their just punishment. A slightly different understanding of this view is that the atonement satisfies the debt that humans owe to God in light of their sin (Green 2006, 198).

The *Moral Influence* theory was first offered by Peter Abelard (AD 1079-1142). This view says that Jesus' life was a demonstration of God's love. The life and work of Jesus ought to move humans to repent and to better love both God and their fellow humans (Green 2006, 198). Without Christ's example to follow, humans would be unable to properly morally reform. The *Penal Substitution* model became popular during the Reformation and was developed, in part, by John Calvin (AD 1509-1564). Today it is the theory of choice amongst various protestant denominations.[5] This theory says that humans are sinful, and God's justice demands punishment for sin. The punishment cannot be avoided otherwise God would fail to be fully just which is impossible. However, a perfect sacrifice can be made on humanity's behalf to satisfy God's justice and this comes from Christ's crucifixion.

Finally, the *Kaleidoscope* theory is a contemporary view which says that a plethora of different theories are required in order to fully grasp the nature of the atonement. Joel B. Green writes that "the ecumenical councils that produced the great creeds of the Christian faith, thus defining classical orthodoxy for us, never selected one interpretation of the saving significance of the cross as definitive" (2006, 197-198). According to Green, the diversity of explanations of the atonement found in both the New Testament and

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[3] Other models I don't discuss in this section include reconciliation, liberation, and mediation. For a survey of some of theories see Murray and Rea (2020, Section 4).

[4] There is debate over the extent to which the Christus Victor model and Ransom theory are really the same, but I needn't enter into that here.

[5] Some argue that the Satisfaction theory was transformed into this one (Green 2006, 199).

throughout church history support this view. In what follows I seek to add an African understanding of the atonement to the kaleidoscope.

3. Personhood Accounts of Ubuntu

In African philosophy, the normative conception of personhood is hotly debated. This conception is not about the biological features of humans, or what features constitute personal identity over time. Instead, it is a concept used to make moral assessments. For many African philosophers, this normative understanding of personhood just is ubuntu. It will perhaps be strange to Western readers to think of the term 'personhood' as one used to make moral assessments.[6] Motsamai Molefe helpfully explains that "[t]he idea of a person … is a moral concept assigning "high praise" to the conduct of the human individual" (2019, 39).[7] Furthermore, "[t]he high praise arises as a moral response to the quality of the performance of the agent in the light of the norms prescribed by society" (2019, 39).[8] Saying that someone is a non-person is not claiming that they don't have basic human rights, it is to say that they have acted immorally (Molefe 2019, 39; see also Ikuenobe 2016).[9] This normative conception of personhood can only be applied to humans.

What criteria are used to evaluate personhood in this normative sense? Unlike certain Western ethical theories, the community plays a central role here.[10] Molefe explains that "[t]he African metaphysical view is that a human being is believed to be essentially communal by nature. In other words, on this view, social relationships are not optional or escapable. To be human just is to be involved in social relationships" (2019, 41).[11] Human nature is fundamentally *social*. This entails that "human beings by nature are wired for relationships or are equipped to enter and continue relationships. Without, and outside of relationships the human project is not possible at all or will be severely handicapped" (Molefe 2019, 41). Thus, personhood ought to be understood as a type of moral achievement; it is something that one could fail to achieve (Molefe 2019, 43).[12] Since it takes time to develop personhood, it makes sense that elders are so revered in traditional African culture (Molefe 2019, 43).[13]

Developing as a person means developing a morally virtuous character (Molefe 2019, 44). On this type of character-based approach "morality is not a function of actions *per se* (though actions are important), but actions are a function of the quality of the character of the agent" (Molefe 2019, 45). All of this means that personhood accounts of ubuntu should be considered *agent-centered*. Examples of other-regarding virtues include hospitality, friendliness, caring, group solidarity, conformity, and collective unity (Mokgoro 1998, 3; Molefe 2019, 51; Tutu 1999, 35). Thus, "the moral achievement of character perfection, while being an achievement of the individual, manifests through the exhibition of other-regarding duties or virtues" (Molefe 2019, 51). Notice that other-regarding virtues can only be developed within the

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[6] With the possible exception of debates about the permissibility of abortion.

[7] See also Tutu (1999, 35).

[8] See also Presbey (2002).

[9] See also Wiredu (1996, 159).

[10] This is also what distinguishes it from Western virtue theory. See Metz (2012a).

[11] He further cites Tutu (1999, 35); Gyekye (1992, 104); Dzobo (1992, 132).

[12] Molefe notes that Menkiti (1984, 173) and Ramose (2003, 438) as two prominent African philosophers who clearly share this view too. See also van Niekerk (2007).

[13] See also Menkiti (1984, 172-176).

context of community, which emphasizes the communitarian nature of African morality. While on Western virtue ethics it might make sense to think that a reclusive, solitary monk who has very little interaction with other people, is highly virtuous (or at least possibly so), those who accept the African normative account of personhood could never offer a positive moral evaluation of such a life.

4. The African Personhood Theory of the Atonement

Consider that in many ways we might take Christ's sacrifice as a paradigmatic example of virtues like hospitality, friendliness, caring, group solidarity, etc. On the surface one might object that Christ's earthly life was at least partly divisive and non-conformist. Jesus challenged the Jewish religious establishment which, to some degree, explains why he was sentenced to death. But according to the Christian tradition, humanity is in some sense in conflict with God and subject to death and separation from God. Thus, stepping back in this way we can see that Christ's sacrifice is really an act of hospitality and friendship in that it sets right the relationship between humans and God. In this way it is actually an act of solidarity, conformity, and collective unity from the perspective of cosmic significance. In living a perfect life and by perfectly exemplifying these other-regarding virtues by making the ultimate sacrifice in giving up his life via torture, Jesus can be thought of as fully developing his personhood (in the normative sense of the term). Notice too, how nicely this interpretation is consistent with the communitarian nature of ubuntu. For Jesus could not have developed as a person in this way apart from the rest of humanity (i.e., apart from the community). He needed a community (and here the community turns out to be all of humanity) to save in order to exemplify other-regarding virtues and hence in order to develop as a person.[14]

One area worthy of further consideration is the degree to which this account is consistent with the Moral Exemplar Theory. Jesus' life can be understood as perfectly exemplifying these other-regarding virtues and as such we should emulate Jesus in order to develop our own personhood. Jesus' sacrifice should also motivate us to love God and develop our own personhood in the normative sense. More remains to be said but even this brief discussion points the way toward an African Personhood Theory of the Atonement that enriches our current understanding and thus should be added to the Kaleidoscope theory.

5. Relational Accounts of Ubuntu

The best-known relational account of ubuntu can be found in Desmond Tutu's book, *No Future without Forgiveness* (1999). Another important relational account is in Peter J. Paris's *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (1995). However, in this

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[14] One worry might be that this implies that Jesus (who is traditionally understood to be fully God) lacked something. For without humanity he would not have been able to develop as a person in the normative sense. This is a fair question worthy of serious consideration and one that perhaps can be answered by appealing to the human nature of Jesus. Consider that as an infant Jesus would have needed the same physical care from his earthly parents that all normal infants require. The human part of him what not yet fully developed physically. It's plausible to think that the same considerations can be applied to with respect to his moral development as a (human) person.

section I'm going to focus on the work of Thaddeus Metz who is on of the most influential philosopher currently working on African ideas. His work has become particularly well-known for interpreting African ideas in ways that are palatable to an analytic readership. I focus on his most recent statement of relationality from his new book, *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent* (2022).[15]

Metz (2022, 90) says that "harmonious or communal relationship of a certain kind is ultimately what should be pursued as an end", as a way to treat others respectfully. He calls these kinds of harmonious relationships *friendliness*, explaining that they are best understood as being exhibited in identity and solidarity. The *capacity* for friendliness serves as the basis for human dignity, which, in turn, calls for honourific treatment. Metz explains each of identity and solidarity in terms of "cognition, emotion, volition, and motivation." With respect to the cognition of identifying with others, Metz explains that the cognition of identifying with others implies that one considers oneself to be part of a group, frequently taking on the perspective of others. One is both proud of the accomplishments of others and embarrassed by the wrong acts by others. Helping members of one's community achieve their goals is extremely important. One is willing to do this even in cases where doing so does not advance one's own goals. The opposite of identifying with others is creating division, while the stance of neither identifying nor creating division is perhaps alienation (e.g., living as a hermit) (Metz 2022, 93-95g). The cognition of solidarity primarily involves having empathy for others. Understanding what motivates other people is an important way of building emotional solidarity. Again, this type of empathy means helping others to achieve their goals even when doing so does not directly benefit oneself. The opposite of solidarity is "ill will," while the expression of neither solidarity nor ill will is indifference (i.e., one neither helps nor harms others) (Metz 2022, 95-97).[16]

What separates Metz's relational account of ubuntu from others is that he focuses on the *capacity* for friendliness as the warrant for treating humans with dignity. Accordingly, "[i]instead of deeming relationships of identity and solidarity themselves to be a highest good to be promoted, [Metz] take[s] the *capacity* to be party to them to have a superlative non-instrumental value and to warrant *respectful* treatment" (Metz 2022, 104).[17] People can exercise this capacity by being a *subject* or *object* of friendliness or both. Metz's theory can be captured by the following principles:

> 1. An act is right if and only if it respects individuals in virtue of their capacity to be party to harmonious ways of relating.
> 2. An act is wrong insofar as it degrades those with the capability of relating communally as subjects or objects.
> 3. An action is permissible if it treats beings as special in accordance with their ability to be friendly or to be befriended.

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[15] While Metz has published an enormous amount on African ethics, he takes this book to be his definitive statement. See Metz (2022).

[16] Metz (2022, 97-101) argues that identity and solidarity need to work in conjunction with one another in order to avoid counterintuitive results.

[17] Metz's relational ethic differentiates itself from other African theories in focus on the capacity for relationship, instead of on the value of community itself. He explains that his "view is not that communal relationship itself has a moral status, nor that only those who are in such a relationship have one, but rather that those who in principle could relate in that way have it" (2022, 106). Metz observes that in light of this it's fair to characterize his theory as a modal view. See Samuel and Fayemi (2020).

4. An action is impermissible to the extent that it disrespects beings with the ability to be part of relationships of identity and solidarity. (2022, 110)

6. An African Relational Theory of the Atonement

Metz's relational approach to ubuntu can also enhance our understanding of the atonement. Consider first the claim that harmonious or communal relationship is the end that ought to be pursued. In sacrificing his life for humanity this was indeed the end that Christ was pursuing. On certain understandings of the atonement, there is a gulf between humanity and God created by sin. As a result, humans are unable to be in a positive communal relationship with God. The atonement, then, paves the way to re-establish harmony between God and the rest of humanity.

There is also a sense in which on Metz's theory Christ's sacrifice is a paradigmatic example of "friendliness." Consider the identity component of friendliness. Jesus identified with the rest of humanity in taking on all of their sins. It's fair to think that in light of this Jesus considered himself part of the group of humanity, in particular when one considers he was advancing the well-being of humanity without regard for himself. Christ was not separated from God (the father), nor was he a victim of a losing battle to evil and the devil; the rest of humanity suffered these ills. And it is the rest of humanity that benefits from Christ's sacrifice, not Christ himself. Notice too that the atonement represents the very opposite of creating division and an us-versus-them mentality (that which is the opposite of identifying with others). Since the solidarity component of friendliness involves acts of service, the atonement must be understood as a great act of solidarity. Solidarity also involves empathizing with others and being moved to improve their condition. Again, it's quite clear that when framed in these terms, this is a helpful way to understand the atonement. Christ empathized with humanity's fallen condition and was motivated to help remedy the situation. Furthermore, he sought to help humanity beyond their own limited self-interest. Note too that here the atonement is the opposite of "ill will" (i.e., the opposite of having solidarity with others). Again, though my comments here are brief, we can start to see the makings of an African Relational Theory of the Atonement.

7. Vitality Accounts of Ubuntu

Vitalist approaches to ubuntu hold that everything, including both animate and inanimate objects, are imbued with *life force*, a kind of imperceptible energy (e.g., Bujo 1997; Dzobo 1992; Magesa 1997; Tempels 1959).[18] God has the most life force, humans have less than God, animals have less than humans, all the way down to things like rocks. Indeed, life force exists in everything and is originally derived from God, the foundation of life force. That everything has life force also explains why everything is, to at least some degree, intrinsically good (Metz, 2022). On this view right actions are those that protect and promote life force, while wrong

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[18] Of course, not every indigenous African worldview believes in life force. The Akan peoples of Ghana are a notable exception. See Wiredu (1998).

actions are those that fail to protect it or cause it to weaken.[19] For example, Peter Kasenene explains that "[e]veryone strives to make life stronger and to be protected from misfortune or from a diminution of life or of being … In ethical terms, any action which increases life or vital force is right, and whatever decreases it is wrong" (1994, 140). How is life force exhibited in humans? Metz (2022, 80g) tells us that it is by "exhibiting a superlative degree of health, strength, growth, reproduction, creativity, complexity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage, and confidence." On the other hand, a lack of or weak life force will include "disease, weakness, decay, barrenness, destruction, disintegration, lethargy, passivity, submission, insecurity, and depression."(Metz 2022, 80) And finally, Metz rightly observes that "most readers will share the judgment that there is something strongly to be preferred about persons with more liveliness than less. They are better (more excellent) people, if not also better off (happier)" (Metz 2022, 80).

8. An African Vitality Theory of the Atonement

In light of the vitalist approach to ubuntu, it's possible to add to our understanding of the atonement. Being both fully God and fully human, Jesus had the maximal amount of life force. His sacrificial death can be understood as a way of sacrificing his own life force, in order to promote the life force in others. Indeed, the sacrifice increased the life force of *all of humanity.* Furthermore, this theory fits nicely with the idea that Christ's sacrifice restores all of fallen creation, not just humanity. Christ is typically thought to be restoring the fallen natural world too. Since everything in the natural world has life force, it makes sense to understand Christ's sacrifice as also increasing the life force of everything in nature. Indeed, promoting the life force of others is a plausible way to understand the sacrificial nature of the Christian ethic more generally.

      It's important to observe, however, that it's doubtful Christ's sacrifice includes inanimate objects. Vitalist approaches to African ethics used in this way will thus need to cut inanimate objects from moral consideration. One worry is that this response might fairly be considered *ad hoc.* While more work needs to be done here, it's noteworthy that Metz has explicated a secular vitalist theory that he calls *liveliness* (e.g., Metz 2012b, 24-25). So, this is one way of modifying vitalist approaches to include just humans, and one that has been offered independently of this project.

9. Conclusion and Future Directions

African philosophy, and in particular the ethic of ubuntu, offers novel insights into the atonement. I've briefly introduced the African Personhood Theory of the Atonement, African Relational Theory of the Atonement, and the African Vitality Theory of the Atonement. I submit that they ought to be added to the kaleidoscope theory of the atonement. Personhood accounts of ubuntu perhaps help to expand character-based theories of the atonement by focusing on practicing other-regarding virtues within a community. Relational accounts of

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[19] Admittedly, many African scholars claim to only be offering the most accurate *description* of African morality, not necessarily defending it as a plausible *normative* theory. Metz forthcoming Chapter Five is one place where life force is critically evaluated as a moral theory.

ubuntu demonstrate how Christ's sacrifice sought to restore harmony and is also a paradigmatic case of friendliness or relating well. Finally, vitality accounts of ubuntu show how Christ's sacrifice increases the life force of humanity and the entire natural world. While much more remains to be said, this is a first statement toward an African Theory of the Atonement.

A number of areas are ripe for further research. Personhood, relational, and vitality accounts of ubuntu are often understood as competing interpretations of African communitarian ethics. For instance, personhood accounts are agent-centered while relational accounts are action-centered. While there might be ways to synthesize these two views, if they are at odds with one another then it is implausible to include them both in a unified Kaleidoscope theory of the atonement. Addressing this consistency issue ought to be of central importance in future discussions of African inspired understandings of the atonement. Another topic that deserves further exploration is the extent to which ubuntu (personhood, relational, and vitality accounts) is consistent with other theories of the atonement. The most obvious candidate here for a potential conflict is with penal substitution. This is because in issues of justice, ubuntu tends to focus on reconciliation and a good outcome for all parties involved, instead of on punitive punishment. In light of this maybe penal substitution would have to be jettisoned from any kaleidoscope theory which includes insights from ubuntu. Furthermore, the death penalty is almost universally eschewed by those who embrace ubuntu, so more work has to be done in order to show a sacrificial death can contribute to (any type of) justice. Finally, if it turns out that there are just too many conflicts between the current theories of the atonement and ubuntu, then the Kaleidoscope theory itself will have to be given up. In this case, the African Theory of Atonement will have to be defended on its own instead of in conjunction with other theories. Or maybe one could conclude that even if there is no direct conflict between ubuntu and the other theories, that it is a superior way of understanding the atonement and so should still be defended on its own. This strategy requires emphasizing the unique insights gained from ubuntu that cannot be enjoyed on the other theories. In any case, I take what I've said here to be the first word, not the last. Much more remains to be said about how the African philosophical tradition can contribute to our understanding of the atonement.[20]

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