




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Communal sin, atonement, and group non-agential moral responsibility

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Abstract

In analytic theology, corporate and/or communal accounts of moral responsibility are gaining recognition as a useful resource in numerous debates. One of the areas to which they have been applied is the atonement. It is thought that when Christ is atoning for the human community, one evades concerns about justice because it seems permissible for a member of a group to suffer punishment for the group's actions even if they are not morally responsible for these themselves. To establish the moral responsibility of the human community, one can either adopt group agency or utilize a non-agential form of group moral responsibility. I shall explore the latter option here and shall outline the understanding of communal sin undergirding the model.

Keywords: atonement; sin; group moral responsibility; human community

Introduction

In the analytic theological literature, scholars have utilized corporate and/or communal models of moral responsibility, in which groups as a whole can be deemed morally responsible for their actions, to inform their accounts of key theological topics such as ecclesiology, worship, and the atonement.¹ I shall focus on the applications of these models to the atonement. Sin is an essential topic here, as one must develop an understanding of how communities, as well as individuals, can be granted and violate their duties to God.

In this article, I shall focus on a particular communal model of the atonement, namely the Communal Substitution Theory (CS) developed by Joshua Thurow. Since this model bestows duties upon the human community, one requires an account of group moral responsibility, and for this one can either argue that the group is a moral agent or that it has non-agential moral responsibility for the relevant action. In this article, I shall explore the second route. I shall not assess the plausibility of group agency and group non-agential moral responsibility themselves, but shall consign my focus to considering their fittingness in models of CS.

I shall start by outlining CS, and shall briefly point out some challenges faced by the group agency option. These concerns are not intended to render this option implausible, but instead to highlight the difficulties one will face when developing an agential account of CS. I shall then outline an alternative, non-agential model of CS, and shall spend some time developing the understanding of communal sin needed to reinforce this account. I

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shall then consider some potential objections. I am not going to argue for the superiority of this non-agential account over those utilizing group agency, but shall instead point to it as a way of establishing the moral responsibility of the human community if the obstacles facing agential accounts prove too great.

The communal substitution theory of the atonement

Let us begin by outlining Thurow's account of CS. Thurow develops the communal understanding of satisfaction or penal substitution models of the atonement to get around the justice worry, the concern that it is wrong to punish an innocent man, Christ, in place of the guilty.² Here, God has bestowed duties upon the human community, as well as upon individuals. The human community has failed to adhere to its duties, meaning that it is guilty of sin, just as the individuals within it are.

In a satisfaction account, Christ pays the moral debt owed to God by the human community, namely a life of obedience and holiness, and in a penal substitution account we can say that through his death on the cross Christ pays the punishment for humanity's sins. This communal account is said to evade the justice worry because it seems permissible for a member of a community, namely Christ, to suffer punishment or offer satisfaction on behalf of the community, even when the individual punished is innocent themselves.³

Thurow argues that those capable of atoning for a group's wrongdoing must be appropriately causally connected to the failure of the group to fulfil the relevant responsibility. These will typically be members of the group, as usually it is the actions of members that result in the failure of the group to fulfil its responsibilities and, even in cases where there has been external involvement, some members should be involved in atonement to acknowledge the harm done by the group.⁴

When it comes to the atonement of the human community, Christ can be seen as an appropriate representative because, although not sinful himself, he is causally connected to the human community's sinfulness. Thurow claims that, as the second person of the Trinity, he created humans, making him causally responsible for the existence of the community. He is also causally responsible for its maintenance due to acts like freeing the Jews from Egypt.⁵ Christ, as the incarnate Word, is both creature and creator.⁶ Thus, Christ is an appropriate representative because he is both a member of the group, in being incarnate, and, as noted by Thurow, causally connected to the sinfulness of the community due to his creation and maintenance of the community.

In fact, only Christ, as God incarnate and thus creator, can bear the appropriate causal connections to the sinfulness of the human community. Although individual humans and groups are partially responsible for humanity's sinfulness as a result of their own sins, they cannot be deemed causally or morally responsible for the sins of someone in a different country with whom they have not been involved, or those of someone who existed hundreds of years ago, and so on. They thus cannot be deemed appropriately causally connected to the sinfulness of the entire human community. This means that only Christ can bring about atonement, establishing the need for incarnation.⁷

In this article, I shall not critically assess Thurow's model. Instead, I shall consider the options one has for developing an account of how duties can be bestowed upon the human community as a whole, a key component of CS. The obvious way of doing this is to advocate group agency and deem the human community a moral agent. Alternatively, one could endorse a model of non-agential group responsibility. Thurow points to both as potential options.⁸

Some scholars have opted for the group agency route.⁹ However, this comes with significant challenges. The literature on group agency is firmly focused on complex, well-

integrated groups like businesses and governments, meaning that its insights are not readily transferable to unstructured groups like humanity.¹⁰ This does not mean that such accounts are impossible, only that their development shall be complex and difficult.¹¹

In an approach incorporating group agency, because Christ is acting as a representative of the human community as a whole, the responsibility of the group must be sufficiently connected to that of individual members such that, in atoning for the sins of the group, Christ atones for the sins of the individual members as well. Furthermore, for Christ's sacrifice to be capable of atoning for all humans in CS, we need the human community not just to be granted agential status, but to retain its agential status through time. Christ's atoning work is for all humans throughout time, and for the moral responsibility of the human community to act as the catalyst through which their sins are atoned for, the human community must be capable of bearing moral responsibility when all humans are parts of the community. It must thus remain a group agent across time. Given the size of the human population and the unstructured nature it has, certainly in its current state, this is difficult to account for.

Models of group agency fit into two broad categories: rationalism and sentimentalism. Rationalists typically argue that rational agents are moral agents, and thus groups must be rational if they are to be moral agents.¹² Sentimentalists, on the other hand, claim that normative competence requires the ability to have moral emotions like guilt and gratitude. This entails that collective agents can only be moral agents if they have moral emotions.¹³

A communal account of the atonement utilizing a rationalist form of group agency has been produced by Jonathan Rutledge. Rutledge points to God's omnirationality, and suggests that God could consider all the reasons for and against something and in the process take into consideration the inputs of individual humans. He then claims that this could form the basis for a rational decision-making procedure coordinated by the Son, granting us a way of deeming humanity a group agent.¹⁴ He leaves open exactly what is involved in this decision-making procedure.¹⁵

As one can see from this proposal, although providing an understanding of humanity as a group agent is perhaps possible, due to the fact that humanity does not appear to be a well-integrated group supported by some form of structure capable of generating actions and decisions at the level of the group, such an undertaking is a significant challenge. Any explanation that attempts to establish the agency of humanity is likely to be enormously complex and speculative, as Rutledge's model, although ingenious, is.

Instead of further exploring the group agency option here, I shall propose that if proponents of the view should fail to establish the idea that humanity is a group agent, or dissatisfaction is expressed towards the models they present, one can still defend the bestowal of moral responsibility on the human community in CS.¹⁶ This can be done by opting for the non-agential route. Building on accounts of group non-agential moral responsibility that have been proposed in the philosophical literature, I shall develop an account of CS that does not require group agency in its construction and shall also outline the account of communal sin undergirding it.

The non-agential model

I shall now outline the non-agential version of CS. An example will help us understand how this works. To argue for group non-agential moral responsibility, Gunnar Björnsson came up with the case of the lake. Here, three people are all individually polluting a lake with the solvent they use when painting their boats, and it is killing the fish in the lake. At least two of them need to refrain from polluting the lake to save the fish.¹⁷

This example allows us to sketch, in a preliminary manner, how unstructured, non-agential groups can bear responsibility. In this example, it is the group that carries the obligation to save the fish because none of the three individuals can do this on their own. This means that the group is non-distributively responsible for the death of the fish if they fail to stop polluting. This is still the case if the three boat owners do not form a group agent. They do not need to decide to refrain from polluting the lake using some decision-making procedure. They do not even have to consult each other. Each of them can decide individually to stop polluting the lake. Regardless, the obligation to save the fish and the responsibility for not doing so still applies to them as a group.¹⁸

Developing an account of such obligations in non-agential models is crucial, and scholars working in this area have provided proposals for how one might understand these. Björnsson, for example, has provided an account of essentially shared obligations in which the three people in the boat example together have an obligation to save the fish, but may not have such an obligation individually, depending on the actions of the other members.¹⁹ The obligation is held jointly, or together, by the members of the group in a way that is not reducible to them as individuals.²⁰

The immediate worry facing such proposals is the thought that moral agency is required for one to be subject to moral obligations. If one is committed to this principle, one will probably conclude that no one is obligated to save the fish in the lake example, because none of the agents involved (the individual boat owners) have the capacity to bring this about.²¹ Scholars have attempted to address this problem in various ways, but I shall confine my focus to solutions that serve my purposes here in enabling the bestowal of obligations onto unstructured groups.²² When developing his account of shared obligations, Björnsson proposes an understanding of Moral Obligation that can assist here:

P has a moral obligation to ϕ in C (is morally required to ϕ in C) if, and only if, were P in C to have the sort of motivational sensitivity that can be reasonably morally required of P, this would ensure, in normal ways, that P ϕ in C.²³

Björnsson claims that such an understanding can be applied in cases of unstructured groups. The sensitivities required can be those possessed by the individuals involved. The three boat owners, for instance, may individually have the sensitivities needed to move them to save the fish. It is the group, however, that has the capacity to fulfil the obligation. The sensitivities of the members just help to explain why it does so. This only requires the moral agency of individual members of the group, not that of the group itself, and, as shown in the lake example, also does not require that the group act in a coordinated way. This explains how obligations can be held at the level of the group when it is not an agent.²⁴

An account of how non-agential groups can have obligations is important for our purposes here. A crucial component of CS is the idea that the human community possessed, and failed to adhere to, certain duties, and such accounts of non-agential moral responsibility provide us with a way of establishing duties, or obligations, at the group level without requiring group agency.

Using this, we can provide an outline of what a non-agential form of CS would look like. We can claim that there are obligations that God has bestowed upon the members of the human community that are shared, since individual humans are incapable of fulfilling them. They have failed to fulfil these obligations, meaning that they as a group are non-distributively responsible for this failure.²⁵ The specific obligations that the human community has failed to fulfil shall be outlined in the next section.

For this to work as a model of CS, we need a way of understanding how an innocent person can be punished for humanity's collective failing.²⁶ Let us return to the lake

example. Imagine that the three people polluting the lake do not own the lake themselves. The lake is actually private land, and the owner allows each person to keep their boat on the lake for a certain price. One can also imagine that the owner, although they also own a boat that they use on the lake, refrains from using the solvent and thus does not contribute to the pollution in the lake.²⁷

Imagine, now, that an inspection was done on the lake by an environmental agency, and the inspectors discovered that the pollution in the lake had killed a large number of the fish. One can imagine that in a scenario such as this, it would be the owner of the lake that would be punished by the agency for the death of the fish, even though they did not participate in the pollution themselves. They might say that the lake owner should have been more vigilant, or should have had strictly enforced rules about what solvents those on the lake could use on their boats. The owner would be an appropriate representative for those polluting the lake in the eyes of the environmental agency.²⁸

Now one can see how the atonement fits into this model. One can claim that Christ atones for humanity's collective failing. Just as in the boat example the death of the fish was caused by the individual acts of pollution performed by the boat owners, we can assume that humanity's collective failing is constituted by the sins of individuals, meaning that Christ atones for the sins of individuals in atoning for humanity's collective failing. Much like the lake owner in the above example, one can also say that it is morally permissible for Christ to act as representative here despite his state of innocence.

In the lake example, both the status of the fourth member as owner of the lake and their use of a boat on the lake are crucial for illustrating how this analogy helps us to understand the atonement. As noted earlier, key to CS is the idea that Christ is an appropriate representative for the human community, despite his innocence. The fourth member's use of a boat without polluting the lake reflects Christ's status as a non-culpable member of the human community, and their ownership of the lake in turn captures Christ's causal connection to the sinfulness of, and thus status as an appropriate representative for, the human community in atonement.

This non-agential variant of CS thus seems able to provide us with a defence of the idea that the human community can be morally responsible for a collective failing without the difficulties that come with arguing that it is a moral agent. One is still able to claim that the human community has failed as a group in its obligations to God, and that Christ's sacrifice on behalf of the community is appropriate. One may note, however, that we have pointed to some collective failing of humanity without properly specifying what that collective failing is. It is to this task that we now turn.

Communal sin

Now, we must achieve clarity on what obligation is shared, and not adhered to, by members of the human community. In a non-agential understanding, we cannot refer to the moral agency of a group to point to its capacity for collective failings. Therefore, we cannot simply thrust duties, like the duty to follow God's laws, upon the human community. We must find a collective obligation unable to be fulfilled by the members individually that the group itself failed to abide by. Then, we must consider how the group can be held responsible despite the lack of a formal structure linking its members.²⁹ This will provide us with an account of the communal sin of the human community.

The collective failings of humanity

Essential to this model is an account of the collective failing of the human community. In this subsection, I shall provide another example of a collective failing that may be

applied to humanity as a whole that will help to form the basis of this account of sin. The account shall rest on the idea that just as one can blame groups for their actions, one can also hold them responsible for states. To return to the lake example, the boat owners can be blamed for the polluted state of the lake as well as the acts they perform to cause that pollution.

If one were to scale up a case such as this by referring to the oceans instead of a lake, one can find an example of a collective failing that applies to humanity as a whole. One can argue that humanity, or a large part of it at least, is responsible for the state of the oceans. The dumping of various materials into it, fishing that is not sufficiently restricted, and other such failings are severely damaging our oceans and their inhabitants. Although previous generations can perhaps be said to be absolved of moral responsibility due to unawareness of just how big an impact their actions would have, we now have scientific data that confirms this and the communication channels required to spread awareness.

Granted, there are groups like governments and corporations that are responsible for much of this pollution, but individual humans also contribute. However, when considered at the level of humanity as a whole, this is a result of the negligence of individual groups and persons in the sense that all humans have not conspired together as a group in order to bring about this situation. Moreover, these individual groups and persons cannot address this issue alone. Humanity must act together to address the issue, showing that we can plausibly argue that humanity as a whole can be non-distributively responsible for a negative state.

This provides us with a useful example of how there can be collective failings at the level of humanity as a whole. It enables us to conceptualize how the human community could have failed in its collective duties to God, and will prove useful in developing the understanding of sin required for this model to work.

Sin as uncleanness

Now that we have an idea of what collective failings might look like at the level of humanity as a whole, we can look for an understanding of sin to help us work out what this collective failing might look like for the purposes of the atonement. One will notice that the ocean example deemed humanity responsible for a state, namely the polluted state of the oceans. Sin itself has been construed as an ontological state by some scholars in the Christian tradition.³⁰ I shall argue that humanity can be deemed responsible for its sinful state on a non-agential understanding.

Before making this argument, however, it is worth further clarifying the account of the nature of sin to be used. The understanding I shall use here is that of sin as uncleanness.³¹ This account of sin has been developed in varying ways by several scholars, including Rudolf Otto,³² Marilyn McCord Adams, and Mary Douglas. It has also been used for different purposes. For example, some scholars have used it as a way of distancing the idea of sin from moral responsibility.³³ I shall not concern myself with this topic here, but shall instead outline how this understanding of sin can assist this non-agential model of CS.

Douglas's ideas shall prove particularly useful here. Douglas discusses the notion of uncleanness and suggests that it refers to things that are disordered, and that these can be both powerful and dangerous.³⁴ Adams has adapted this idea to formulate an understanding of sin, claiming that God's laws are put in place to maintain order, and when they are not followed, creatures become out of order, and thus unclean.³⁵

Douglas also points to the idea that the holy entails wholeness and completeness, and that this is exemplified by the perfection required in certain ritual elements in Leviticus. For example, when discussing rules for priests, it is said that:

The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: “A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die, except for a close relative, such as his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother, or an unmarried sister who is dependent on him since she has no husband – for her he may make himself unclean. He must not make himself unclean for people related to him by marriage, and so defile himself.”’³⁶

This is also something extended to group contexts. For example, it was thought that the army of the Israelites could not win without blessing, and that those in the camp had to be especially holy to maintain this blessing. In Deuteronomy, it is instructed that ‘When you are encamped against your enemies, keep away from everything impure.’³⁷ To prevent defilement in the camp, anyone with bodily discharges was disqualified from entering it. Any functions or issues involving bodily discharges had to take place outside the camp.³⁸ This understanding of communal uncleanness will prove important in the model developed here.

The pollution of the human community

In the previous two subsections, we developed an example of a communal failing of humanity as a whole, namely the pollution of the oceans, and an account of sin as uncleanness. In this section, we can combine these two ideas to formulate the understanding of sin undergirding this non-agential model of CS.

The Deuteronomy passage in particular can assist us here. In it, we have the instruction to remain free of defilement placed upon an army, which is a group. Although an army might be something one would deem a group agent, this could also be understood in a non-agential way.³⁹ One can claim that the obligation to keep the camp pure is a collective obligation. For it to be fulfilled, each member must adhere to the rules imposed to prevent defilement. Keeping the camp pure is not an obligation that individual members on their own can ensure the fulfilment of, as it is possible for them to follow the rules while others do not. One can thus understand this as a collective obligation that applies to the group.

From these ideas, one can pinpoint the collective failing needed for an understanding of CS. We can claim that, just as in the case of the army, God has imposed upon humans the obligation to maintain order within humanity itself to prevent it from being made unclean by sins. However, individual humans have sinned and continue to sin, meaning that we have brought humanity into a state of uncleanness. Just as humans pollute the ocean by dumping rubbish in it, they pollute the human community by sinning.

One can deem the human community responsible for its unclean, sinful state, a state that all humans have a shared obligation to avoid.⁴⁰ This state is constituted by the individual sins of humans, and it is one for which the human community as a whole is non-distributively responsible. No individual human can ensure that the obligation to avoid this state is upheld.⁴¹ To stop this, each person must refrain from sinning. Clearly, this is not an obligation that any one individual is capable of fulfilling, meaning that humanity as a whole is non-distributively responsible for its polluted state.

This grants us with the account of sin and collective failing needed for a non-agential understanding of CS. We can say that Christ atones for the polluted state of the human community, something for which all humans are non-distributively responsible.⁴² In doing so, Christ also atones for the sins of individuals as they are ultimately what caused and preserve humanity’s unclean state. This completes our outline of the non-agential version of CS.

Objections and replies

Now that we have outlined the non-agential account of CS, we can consider some objections. I shall outline and respond to numerous objections, some concerning tensions that may be pointed to within the model itself, others concerning the scope of Christ's atoning work here, and some that query the attractiveness of this model in comparison to rivals. In cases where I do not defeat the objection, I shall at least point to promising avenues for resolving the issue.

Original sin

One might object to the account of communal sin undergirding this model by pointing to the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine entails that as a result of the first sin, whether performed by Adam and Eve or a primal human community, all later humans are corrupted in such a way that they are unable to will the good, and sin themselves as a result of this. One could point to this corruption and claim that whoever committed the first sin is responsible for the sinful state of the human community. This would entail that this state is not a collective failing but is ultimately the responsibility of a member, or part, of this community.

If one were to adhere to this line of reasoning, this would render our non-agential account of CS implausible. It would entail that the sinful, unclean state of the human community is not something for which the community is non-distributively responsible, meaning that Christ cannot atone for the sins of all humans collectively by atoning for this state. This objection thus causes problems for our model of CS.

However, this problem can be avoided. Although the corruption of later humans is something that prompts them to sin, they still contribute towards the unclean state of the human community through the actual sins that they perform themselves. Therefore, we can claim that while the first sin caused the corruption of humanity, its continuing unclean state is upheld by the sins of the other members of the human community. This entails that it is not just the individual, or individuals, who performed the first sin that are responsible for the human community's polluted state. It is the human community itself, because the other members uphold its polluted state by committing actual sins.⁴³

I have leaned heavily on the work of Björnsson in this article, and the implications of original sin may be an element of this model he too has quarrel with. As pointed out earlier, when developing his account of shared obligations, he proposes an understanding of Moral Obligation that rests on the idea that the group has the capacity to, and thus can, fulfil the obligation.⁴⁴ However, to establish the need for atonement it is often claimed that the fall of individual humans into a state of sin through the performance of actual sins is an inevitable result of original sin. If it is inevitable that humans perform actual sins, and thus pollute the human community, can the human community really be said to have the capacity to avoid becoming unclean? If not, the shared obligation that is crucial for this model does not apply to the human community.

When considering this concern, it is important to note that this is a general issue that we must face when explaining moral responsibility in light of original sin. The claim that, as a result of one's corrupted state, it is inevitable that one will fall into a state of sin by performing actual sins itself faces difficulties with moral responsibility.⁴⁵ Moreover, scholars working in this area often adopt theories of moral responsibility that assume people are capable of preventing states of affairs for which they are morally responsible,⁴⁶ which is in line with Björnsson's claim that one's ability to perform an act is required for one to be morally obligated to do so. The challenge in the literature on original sin is reconciling these two notions.

Since this is a general issue with the doctrine of original sin, however, it will also impact accounts incorporating group agency as well as those that place no weight on communities at all. I thus take it that this issue does not reduce the credibility of this model in comparison to these alternatives.

Moreover, solutions to this issue that have been produced elsewhere may be applied to this model. W. Paul Franks has recently argued that one can establish the need for atonement while denying that it is inevitable that humans will perform actual sins. Franks uses an example to illustrate this, claiming that a victim of racist abuse from a particular family would be justified in feeling repulsed at a toddler who is a member of the racist family even if this toddler did not participate in the abuse. Franks applies this example to humanity and suggests that even those who have performed no moral wrongdoing would still be repulsive in the eyes of God due to their membership in humanity, and are in need of atonement as a result of this.⁴⁷

We can adopt this strategy in this model. We can claim that the moral responsibility of the human community is all that is required to establish the need for atonement for all its members. Those who have not contributed to the pollution of the human community are still unclean and in need of atonement in the eyes of God due to their membership in this community. Here, we only need enough humans to perform actual sins to maintain the unclean state of the human community, and, if we assume that actual sins are very likely due to the influence of this fallen world, such a claim is plausible.⁴⁸ Furthermore, since this solution does not require that actual sins are an inevitable result of original sin, it is consistent with the idea that the human community had the capacity to fulfil its obligation to avoid uncleanness.

I do not intend to imply that this is an entirely satisfactory way of addressing the tension between shared obligations and original sin. Indeed, it is typically thought that the inevitability of actual sins is a crucial component of original sin, and those in agreement with this will be dissatisfied with this solution.⁴⁹

This discussion, however, is intended to be preliminary in nature, and I am open as to whether the model is defended using the solution proposed or through the production of another solution.⁵⁰ What we have illustrated is that, first, the clash between the inevitability of actual sins and moral responsibility is a general issue faced within scholarship of original sin, and second, that solutions proposed in this area of scholarship may be applied to this communal model. There are thus prospects for solving this problem.

Morally innocent humans

Another query one might raise is whether morally innocent humans, such as babies or the severely mentally disabled, would be sufficient for atonement on this view. After all, they have not contributed to the pollution of the human community through the performance of immoral acts. Could their deaths be sufficient for atonement, instead of Christ's, and if so, would the atonement not be redundant due to the number of such humans to have sadly passed away throughout history?⁵¹

Such a conclusion does not follow from this model. Christ, through his creation and maintenance of the human community as God incarnate, is causally connected to its sinfulness, making him an appropriate representative for the human community in atonement. Other morally innocent humans are not causally connected to the sinfulness of the human community in this way, and thus would not bear the causal connections required for them to be considered appropriate representatives. Therefore, they would not be able to bring about the atonement themselves.

However, one might point to another issue that morally innocent humans raise for this model. If they are not capable of performing morally bad acts, one may question whether

they have contributed to the pollution of the human community, and thus whether they are included within the scope of Christ's atoning work. In this model, individual sins are atoned for as a result of Christ's atoning for the pollution of the human community because their individual acts contribute to this pollution. If morally innocent humans do not contribute to this pollution, it might be thought that they are not included within the scope of Christ's atoning work, which is problematic.

This objection only carries weight if we assume that the only way individuals are atoned for is through the atonement of their actual sins, and we need not deem this to be the case. As suggested in the discussion of original sin, we can claim that those who have not performed actual sins are still unclean and in need of atonement as a result of their membership in the human community. Since the pollution of the human community is ultimately the source of the uncleanness of these members, Christ, in atoning for this pollution, also atones for their state of uncleanness, providing us with an understanding of how they can be included within the scope of Christ's atoning work.

The forward-looking element of sin

One might also question whether this account fully addresses all of the issues the atonement is meant to deal with. It seemingly deals with the backward-looking element of sin, namely the sins performed by humans and their guilt for these, in addressing the pollution of the human community caused by such sins. However, it is not clear that it deals with the forward-looking element, namely human proneness to sin.⁵²

A response to such issues has recently been proposed by Oliver Crisp. Crisp claims that one can consider the atonement efficacious for all of one's sins across time. It cleanses one of one's sins prior to justification, and does the same for all of one's sins after that as well. We will not be without sin until we reach the eschaton, so the atonement deals with all of one's sins prior to that period.⁵³

There is no reason why we cannot adopt such a solution here. We can claim that since all sins, regardless of when they are committed, contribute to the uncleanness of the human community, the atonement is capable of addressing them all, including those committed by humans that are already justified.

The issue of complexity

Advocates of group agency may also have reservations about this account. Just as the complexities that came with providing an understanding of the human community as a group agent were pointed to earlier in the article, they may point to elements of this non-agential understanding of CS that also seem complex.

When arguing that there are duties or obligations bestowed upon the human community that have been unfulfilled, an essential part of any understanding of CS, advocates of models incorporating group agency can simply say that the human community is a moral agent capable of bearing such duties itself. In our non-agential understanding, we were unable to claim this, and had to develop a specific understanding of sin in order to show that there were failings for which members of the human community are non-distributively responsible. Thus, endorsing group agency seems to be the simpler route as far as this element of CS is concerned.

I acknowledge this, but in response would point to the areas where a non-agential model of CS has an advantage. Establishing the idea that members of the human community could be non-distributively responsible for certain actions was a rather simple argument to make, as the understanding of shared obligations used here does not require groups that are well-integrated and structured. The extension of the reasoning found in

the literature on group non-agential moral responsibility to the human community did not come with any significant obstacles.

It is precisely this element with which those endorsing group agency struggle. Humanity is not a well-structured, coordinated group, which means that the insights raised in the literature on group agency are not readily transferable to it. Therefore, as seen in Rutledge's model, imposing such a structure on humanity is going to take a great deal of complex and speculative reasoning. The non-agential model simply comes with a different cost, that of formulating a model of sin enabling humanity to be non-distributively responsible for a collective failing of some sort. Since we have been able to address this cost in this article, I would argue that the non-agential understanding of CS remains a viable alternative.

Summary

This concludes our assessment of the non-agential form of CS. It was able to evade the first worry caused by original sin as humans contribute to the polluted state of the human community by performing actual sins. Prospects for dealing with the second worry, namely the tension between the inevitability of actual sins and shared obligations, were also outlined. Morally innocent humans are unable to bring about the atonement because they are not appropriate representatives for the human community, and their membership in the human community enables such humans to be included within the scope of Christ's atoning work. We can account for the forward-looking element of sin in deeming the atonement efficacious for all of one's sins across time. Finally, although the account of sin and collective failing offered in this non-agential understanding is more complex than that offered in accounts incorporating group agency, the non-agential model remains a viable alternative.

Conclusion

In this article, it has been shown that, using a non-agential form of CS, we can defend the idea that the human community is morally responsible without commitment to the idea that it is an agent. In agential forms, one is committed to the controversial and counter-intuitive premise that the human community is a moral agent, and even though one might be able to argue for this, the model developed will inevitably be complex and speculative. Non-agential models, on the other hand, do not have these problems and, when supplemented with a particular understanding of sin, are plausible. They thus provide viable alternatives.

I started this article by outlining Thurow's account of CS, and highlighted some challenges for the group agency route. I then outlined a non-agential model of CS and the account of sin undergirding it using the understanding of sin as uncleanness. I then responded to some potential objections. Although this is by no means a conclusive argument for a non-agential understanding of CS, I hope that this article has shown that it can act as a way forward should the difficulties with providing an account including group agency prove insurmountable.

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Competing interest None.

Notes

1. See Cockayne (2019) and Cockayne (2022) for its relevance to ecclesiology, Cockayne (2018) and Cockayne (2021) for its relevance to worship and liturgy, and Leidenhag (2020) for a model of charismatic gifts utilizing group agency.
2. See Thurow (2015), 53–54. The justice worry clearly impacts the penal substitution variant, and some scholars have raised it against satisfaction models (see, for instance, Stump (2018), 24–25). However, Oliver Crisp has recently objected to such suggestions, claiming that they do not impact satisfaction accounts because the atonement is not achieved through the punishment of Christ (Crisp (2022), 112–113). Even if this worry does not apply to satisfaction accounts, the fact that it impacts penal substitution accounts still makes this discussion relevant.
3. See Thurow (2015), 52–62, for the outline of CS.
4. See Thurow (2015), 51, for this argument. I shall not contest Thurow’s reasoning, but note the importance of this point in establishing a satisfactory understanding of CS. If members of the group are not required in the atonement process, when applied to the case of Christ it raises questions about whether the incarnation was necessary for atonement. Moreover, if one can question the status of Christ as an appropriate representative for the group, how this model addresses the justice worry becomes unclear, as it no longer seems morally permissible for Christ to stand in for the guilty members in atonement. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising these objections.
5. Thurow (2015), 55. One might also suggest that Christ bears constitutive responsibility, which you acquire from being a part of something like the human community. This is even the case if you are a superfluous part of that thing. See Goodin (2018), for more on this.
6. McFarland (2014), 86.
7. Thurow (2015), 57–58.
8. See Thurow (2015), 62–63.
9. For a useful outline of the group agency literature, see Tollefsen (2015). To be clear, some see talk of group agents as metaphorical. This view is eliminativism about group agents, in which only individual agents exist and they do not form a new agent when they form a group. Eliminativism is argued for in Quinton (1975), 17. Moen (2019) challenges the idea that ascribing agency to groups helps us predict and explain their behaviour, and this can be used to argue for eliminativism. There is a difference between redundant and non-redundant group-agent realism. On the redundant realist view, group agency talk is not misconceived, but is readily reducible to individual-level talk. On the other hand, non-redundant realism holds that group agency talk is not misconceived and is not readily reducible to individual-level talk. This distinction is outlined in List and Pettit (2011), 6. It is the non-redundant view that is of interest here.
10. Crisp seems to share this sentiment, in claiming that fallen humanity (his equivalent of the human community) is not an agent and does not act like one. See Crisp (2022), 193. This is stronger than the claim I am making here, but it helps to illustrate that the idea that the human community is a group agent is at least counter-intuitive. Despite this, Crisp makes good use of the social ontology literature when developing his model of the atonement in part 3 of Crisp (2022).
11. Thurow also proposes narrowing the scope of the atonement to Israel, a collective entity and perhaps a group agent, as an alternative way out of this problem (Thurow (2015), 63). Maintaining a view in which Jesus atones for the entire human community enables one to be more flexible with one’s view of eschatology, however, as it accommodates views like universalism, in which the entire human community is saved. There are thus advantages to accommodating the entire human community.
12. Hindriks (2018), 4. For some influential rationalist accounts of group agency, see List and Pettit (2011), French (1979), Collins (2019), Rovane (2014), Rovane (2004), and Rovane (1998). Questions have been raised about whether rationalism is a satisfactory understanding of moral agency. For example, there is the problem of amoral agency. An agent can be prudentially rational without being moral. Psychopaths, for instance, are often said to be rational and amoral (Hindriks (2018), 3). The rationalist assumption that rational agents are moral agents is thus problematic.
13. Hindriks (2018), 12–13. For some influential sentimentalist accounts of group agency, see Collins (2018), Gilbert (2002), Gilbert (2006), and Björnsson and Hess (2017). Much as with rationalism, there are seeming issues with sentimentalism as an understanding of moral agency. It has been objected that there are people with severe emotional disorders who would be exempt from moral responsibility in such accounts, including some of the evillest people to have existed (Hitler and Ted Bundy, for example). See Tollefsen (2015), 132–133.
14. See Rutledge (2022), ch. 6.
15. Rutledge confirmed this in private correspondence.
16. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for their help with framing here.
17. This example is developed and used in Björnsson (2014). I note that there are potential disanalogies between this case and Christ’s relationship to humanity’s sinfulness. However, this case is merely intended to help

illustrate how the model works, and I am not relying directly on it. I thank an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to clarify this.

18. Here, I am drawing on Björnsson (2014) and Björnsson (2020).

19. Björnsson (2014), 104. Such an account is further developed, along with an account of collective blame-worthiness that applies in cases where collectives are not agents, in Björnsson (2020).

20. An alternative route, taken in Wringer (2010), is to deny that only moral agents can have obligations by claiming that one can have moral obligations if one has the capacity for the sorts of properties associated with moral agency. This is critiqued in Björnsson (2020), 131.

21. Such a worry is also raised in Björnsson (2014), 111, and Björnsson (2020), 130–131. Despite the solution offered, I note that proponents of group agency may still insist that no one is responsible here, which would be a problem for this account. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to address this matter.

22. There are alternative models that are unsuitable for our purposes. For instance, Anne Schwenkenbecher has outlined an understanding of joint duties, which are ‘duties which the individual members of the unstructured group hold together’ (Schwenkenbecher (2013), 315). However, Schwenkenbecher’s account rests on the idea that such groups would be capable of performing joint actions, which require them to form, and contribute towards, a joint goal. This would be difficult to establish in the case of humanity. See the remainder of Schwenkenbecher (2013) for an outline of this model. James Dempsey has also produced an argument for the idea that groups can have non-agential moral responsibility that is unsuitable here. Such groups must have a system that takes set types of input and generates certain outputs from these using a rule-based structure that can be understood mechanistically. The system must also be complex enough to give rise to group-level responsibility. See Dempsey (2013). The human community lacks a system of this type, making this understanding of group non-agential responsibility unsuitable for an understanding of CS.

23. Björnsson (2014), 116.

24. Björnsson (2014), 117–118.

25. The term ‘non-distributively responsible’ is taken from Arruda (2017), 251, and it is responsibility that attaches to the group as such and not to any individual member.

26. I note that the term ‘collective’ has been used in association with groups that have ‘a rationally operated group-level decision-making procedure that can attend to moral considerations’, namely, groups that are moral agents in the rationalist sense (see Collins (2019), 11). When talking about collective failings and obligations, I am using the term in a looser sense that does not imply the moral agency of the group being discussed. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this.

27. I am indebted to David Worsley and an anonymous reviewer for helping me to refine my use of this example.

28. To be clear, one need not see Christ as negligent in the way that the lake owner is here. This element of the example is intended to emphasize the status of the lake owner as an appropriate representative for the polluters, a status obtained by Christ in the case of the human community in virtue of his creation and maintenance of humanity.

29. See Everhart (2023) for a discussion of communal sin and atonement in relation to the issue of systemic sin.

30. See Timpe (2021), sec. 4. For more on the nature of sin, see McCall (2019), ch. 5.

31. This understanding of sin is outlined in Adams (1991). See Couenhoven (2009) for further discussion.

32. For Otto, this uncleanness or profaneness is experienced in contrast to the holiness and illustriousness of God. See Otto (1923), 52–61.

33. For instance, Mitchell (1984) deems sin a breach in man’s relationship with God, and acknowledges the importance of morality while accommodating for the areas that are not accounted for in that category. A more radical separation between sin and moral wrongdoing is argued for in Ashfeld (2021).

34. See Douglas (1966), particularly chapter 3 for the theological discussion.

35. Adams (1991), 10–11.

36. Leviticus 21:1–4 (New International Version).

37. Deuteronomy 23:9 (New International Version).

38. Douglas (1966), 52–54. These laws are outlined in Deuteronomy 23:9–14 (New International Version).

39. As pointed out by Caroline Arruda, there may be instances in which a group does not act as an agent and is non-distributively responsible for the action, but can be considered an agent across time. See Arruda (2017).

40. Obligations that apply at the level of humanity are argued for in Wringer (2010) and Wringer (2020).

41. For an argument against the idea that non-agential groups can be responsible for an outcome for which none of the members themselves bear a correlative responsibility, see Hindriks (2019).

42. It might be thought that the collective is blameworthy because of their failure to act in the manner of a group agent, as suggested in Held (1970). I acknowledge the possibility of this, but do not think we have to be so rigid when thinking about the pollution of the human community. I am open as to whether this is addressed in a coordinated manner or by humans individually addressing their own acts of sin. Both are

consistent with this model, as placing obligations on group members to act in a coordinated way is still a case of group non-agential responsibility when that group does not have the structure required for group agency.

43. This model is also compatible with understandings of sin that deny the need for a historical fall, such as the biocultural account found in De Cruz and De Smedt (2023).

44. See Björnsson (2014), 114–116.

45. See the discussions in Franks (2012) and Vainio (2021).

46. See, for instance, the principle of possible prevention, or MR, outlined in Rea (2007).

47. See Franks (2012), 368–370.

48. Franks (2012), 370. Swinburne similarly claims that actual sins are very likely, but not inevitable. See Swinburne (1989), 137–140.

49. A discussion of this feature of the doctrine and the solutions proposed to its apparent clash with moral responsibility can be found in Timpe (2023).

50. One alternative could be a defence of the doctrine of original guilt, the idea that all humans (except Christ) are guilty from birth of the first sin and the resulting corruption, as here all humans would be guilty for the corruption that results in the pollution of the human community. I note that reconciling this doctrine with moral responsibility is also an extremely difficult task, however (see the discussions in Rea (2007) and Hudson (2014), ch. 4).

51. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

52. This discussion is based on a critique raised in Stump (2018), 25–26. I am grateful to Jonathan Rutledge for pointing me to this issue.

53. Crisp (2022), 113–114.

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