

Rand on the Atonement

A Critique

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ABSTRACT: In March 1964, Ayn Rand sat down for an interview with *Playboy*. In it, Rand argued that Christ's atoning sacrifice—if it happened—was morally wrong. The author contends that Rand made a bad argument. Depending on how her words are interpreted, Rand's argument for the immorality of Christ's atonement was based on (a) at least one false premise or (b) a "bait-and-switch" fallacy. Either way, the argument fails and should be abandoned.

KEYWORDS: atonement theory, Ayn Rand, Objectivism, *Playboy*, sacrifice, Jesus Christ, Christianity

Hugh Hefner and Jesus Christ. Two men whose names are rarely seen together in print. And the former, throughout the history of *Playboy*, was careful to avoid criticizing the latter in the pages of his magazine. For sure, Hefner fancied himself a public intellectual. And like all self-appointed intellectuals, he fancied himself an able commentator on religion in America. And commentate he did. Through *Playboy's* articles, cartoons, essays, responses to letters to the editor, and interviews, Hefner poked fun at the American church for being too closed-minded and sexually repressed. Nevertheless, as Daniel Cube Gunn (2014) explains,

though “Hefner subtly attacked biblical myths . . . he was careful not to actually satirize Jesus, perhaps to avoid backlash” (12). *Playboy* may have thrived on fighting censorship and stirring the pot, but the magazine had its limits. And, for the most part, Jesus was one of them. Nevertheless, there were exceptions to this rule. And Ayn Rand’s 1964 interview with *Playboy*’s Alvin Toffler was one of them:

Now you want me to speak about the cross. What is correct is that I do regard the cross as the symbol of the sacrifice of the ideal to the nonideal. Isn’t that what it does mean? Christ, in terms of the Christian philosophy, is the human ideal. He personifies that which men should strive to emulate. Yet, according to the Christian mythology, he died on the cross not for his own sins but for the sins of the nonideal people. In other words, a man of perfect virtue was sacrificed for men who are vicious and who are expected or supposed to accept that sacrifice. If I were a Christian, nothing could make me more indignant than that: the notion of sacrificing the ideal to the nonideal, or virtue to vice. And it is in the name of that symbol that men are asked to sacrifice themselves for their inferiors. That is precisely how the symbolism is used. That is torture. (Rand in Toffler 1964, 39–40)

According to a 2009 biography by Anne C. Heller, Rand’s comment on the atonement in her widely read *Playboy* interview was “perhaps the purest, least rhetorical, and hardest-hitting statement of her views,” a statement that “reached two and a half million people, mostly men, and brought countless new readers to her novels and nonfiction” (Heller 2009, 324). The mere possibility that this article has left *any* residue makes a critical response well overdue.

Despite its philosophical shortsightedness, some parts of her comment are entirely unobjectionable. It is important to identify these instances lest we accidentally throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rand correctly sums up the Christian doctrine that the person of Christ is “the human ideal . . . which men should strive to emulate.” Passages such as Hebrews 4:15 emphasize that even though Jesus struggled with the same temptations as we do, he managed to remain perfectly sinless. And passages like 1 Peter 2:21 tell us that we are called to emulate Christ’s perfect example. It is also accurate to say that “he died on the cross not for his own sins but for the sins of non-ideal people.” Furthermore, Rand is not wrong in claiming that the cross is a symbol of “torture.” However, Rand clearly doesn’t mean “torture” in the literal sense of a Roman scourging and public crucifixion. She is arguing instead that the Christian virtue of self-sacrifice represented in the cross, when applied consistently, results in a contorted inner life, tantamount to torture. A controversial claim no doubt, but not one lying within the scope of this article.

However, Rand's brief comment pits her philosophy directly against the central event of the Christian story (unsurprising from a woman who wanted to be known as "the greatest enemy of religion") (Rand [9 April 1934] in Harriman 1997, 68). This means that even if Rand became convinced of the truth of Christianity on her deathbed, by the guidelines of her own philosophy she would be unable to become a Christian on moral grounds. In this paper, I aim to show that Rand's attack on the atonement fails due to at least due to at least one of the following:

- A. a false premise
- B. a "bait-and-switch" fallacy

The (Re)definition of Sacrifice

In Rand's epistemology, definitions are no small thing. They are, in her words, "the guardians of rationality, the first line of defense against the chaos of mental disintegration" (Rand, 1975, 69). In plain English—and a smidge of Latin—Rand held, with Aristotle, that a definition must include the kind of thing that its object belongs to (its *genus*) and that which differentiates it from other members of its kind (its *differentia*). For example, *Atlas Shrugged* belongs to the genus "novel," and is differentiated from other novels by its particular plot, theme, and rhetorical panache.

According to the 1968 college edition of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, a dictionary used by both Rand and Leonard Peikoff on separate occasions (Rand 1975, v; Peikoff [1991] 1993, 214), the definition of "sacrifice" (as a noun and in a normative context) is, "the surrender or destruction of something of value for the sake of greater gain" (Urdang and Fletcher 1968, 1160). The genus of "sacrifice" is "the surrender or destruction of something of value," and the differentia lies in the fact that the "something of value" is being given up "for the sake of greater gain."

By contrast, Rand, in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, redefines sacrifice as, "The surrender of a greater value for the sake of a lesser one or of a non-value." Here, Rand keeps the genus the same, but replaces the differentia.¹ Peikoff similarly redefines sacrifice as, "the surrender of a value, such as money, loved ones, freedom, for the sake of a lesser value (if one acquires an equal or greater value from a transaction, then it is an even trade or a gain, not a sacrifice)" (Peikoff [1991] 1993, 232).

The important takeaway here is that Rand, Peikoff, and most Objectivists since are operating under a new definition of "sacrifice"—one foreign to most of the English-speaking world.

Objectivism and Christ's Atonement

The doctrine of the atonement: All Christians profess to believe it, but seldom do they agree on what exactly it means. But to judge whether Rand's criticism of the atonement was a good one, we must first get a vague understanding of what the atonement is.

Simply put, atonement is the means by which God makes possible the reconciliation of humanity to God so we humans may enter into harmonious relationship with him. And what *were* those means? It has something to do with Jesus dying for our sins. Jesus died, and reconciliation became possible. But, on the face of it, it's unclear what Jesus dying could do to bring this about. The task of Christian theologians, then, is to explain what kind of an impact the death of Jesus could have on making possible our salvation.

As with any important question to which the answer is not immediately obvious, several different theories have been offered throughout history to try and resolve the problem. Below are the five major theories of atonement in historical order.

The *Christus Victor* Theory

The earliest model of the atonement has come to be known as the *Christus Victor* model (*Christus* as in "Christ" and *Victor* as in "victorious"). As the name suggests, this theory asserts that Christ's death was victorious over the powers of sin and evil that hold humanity in their dominion. Christ's death, on this view, is the decisive moment of victory against the powers of evil. What exactly this means is a matter of dispute. Some have taken a very literal understanding, arguing that Christ's death was a very literal payment to Satan in exchange for his freeing humanity from his bondage. This is often portrayed as an ingenious trick on God's part. Christ's becoming human gave Satan the mistaken impression that although he was the second person of the Trinity, Christ was now as weak, frail, and powerless as all the other humans in Satan's bondage. So, Satan, when he gleefully accepted Christ's death in exchange for humanity, believed he had triumphed over God. But Christ then broke free from Hell, breaking Satan's hold on humanity forever. Another version of *Christus Victor* (sometimes called the political model of *Christus Victor*) is uncomfortable with Christ's atonement being all about Satan. Rather than holding that Christ's death was a ransom payment to Satan, these theorists hold instead that Christ was the victim of an act of violence by Satan. This act of violence was in strict violation of Christ's rights, meaning that Satan had overstepped his own. Therefore, God was fully within *his* rights in forcibly liberating humanity from Satan's clutches. In any case, theories that take a *Christus Victor* approach distinguish themselves from other theories of atonement with their claim that Christ's atonement, in one way or another, was the freeing of humanity from Satan's power.

The Satisfaction Theory

This theory comes courtesy of Saint Anselm of Canterbury in his great essay *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God Became Man*) (Anselm [1098] 2008, 265–356) and is the dominant view within the Catholic Church today. Satisfaction theorists argue, appealing to God’s justice, that it would be wrong for God to allow sin to go unpunished. It seems to follow from this that Christ’s death was necessary to *satisfy* the moral demands brought about by God’s justice. Hence, the *satisfaction* theory. On this view, justice, which is grounded in God’s nature, has been violated by sin. This justice demands some sort of satisfaction or compensation. Therefore, God’s nature allows for only two possibilities: punishment or compensation by some other means. Justice, however, is not the only attribute of God at play. Just as God is perfectly just in nature, he is also perfectly merciful. Therefore, since punishment would result in humanity’s eternal damnation, God mercifully takes the second alternative: compensation. On the satisfaction theory, Christ’s death acts as a restitution for God that both satisfies God’s justice and exempts man from the certainty of eternal torment. The question then arises of why only Jesus is suited to play the role of compensator. This is answerable only once we understand that by “compensation,” satisfaction theorists mean “the voluntary payment of a debt.” This means that as a result of sin, man owes God a debt of restitution. However, since man, even in the absence of sin, already owes *everything* to God, no mere mortal can possibly pay this debt. Yet the plot thickens. For, according to Anselm, only a human can pay this debt since man is guilty of the sin that violates God’s justice. So, what we need, then, is a human who is not *merely* a human. And that’s where the question “Why God became man?” comes in. Anselm answers that since ordinary sinners cannot make restitution for their debts, and since only humans can qualify for the role of compensator, the only hope for humanity’s eternal destiny is that the debt be paid by a sinless human. Therefore, the satisfaction theorist argues, God becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ is the only way to solve the problem of compensation.

The Moral Influence Theory

This theory embodies the controversial claim that Christ’s death holds no metaphysical significance whatsoever. First advocated by twelfth-century logician Peter Abelard, it contends that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross showed the extent to which God was willing to go to reconcile humanity to himself. This demonstration, for those who sincerely and open-heartedly dwell upon it, is so moving that it will draw them to genuine repentance and contrition before God. On Abelard’s view, God does not need to be reconciled with humanity. Rather, it is only humanity, hampered by pride and hardness of heart, that needs to be

reconciled to God. This view, as enunciated by Abelard, holds that the moral influence of the atonement is the *only* reason why Christ died on the cross. Although most theologians reject the seemingly radical view that the moral influence is the central rationale for Christ's death, many wish to incorporate moral influence as a subset of their atonement theory. While the primary end of the atonement may not be moral influence, it might well play an important, secondary role in bringing people to Christ. After all, of all the historical events that have had an influence on Western culture, what has had more of an impact on art and literature than the death of Christ? While there is disagreement as to whether moral influence was the sole point of Christ's death, there is a broad consensus that moral influence is an important facet of any adequate atonement theory.

Penal Substitution

The satisfaction view laid out in *Cur Deus Homo* is seen by some as the precursor to this next theory. However, while substitution theorists agree with Anselm that Christ's death was needed to satisfy the demands of God's justice, they reject his distinction between punishment and compensation. The theory was first developed by the early Protestant reformers (Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the like) who held that Christ voluntarily suffered the suffering and died the death that was due to mankind as punishment for their sins. In so doing, God cancelled any punishment that was due to the beneficiaries of Christ's sacrifice. How? According to the reformers, Christ became "forensically" guilty in place of mankind. To better understand this idea, think of court rulings that invoke "legal fictions" (assertions that are accepted as true for legal purposes, even though they may be untrue or unverified). Obviously, it's not literally true that Christ was morally blameworthy for sins he didn't commit. Instead, what is imputed onto Christ is not the sins of other people but the legal guilt *for* the sins of other people. Christ did not actually commit the sins of the human race but he allowed God to treat him as though he did. This "legal fiction," on the penal substitutionary view, is used by God to bring about the desirable effects of the atonement. In this way, Christ, much like the lambs of Old Testament ritual sacrifice, is sacrificed in the place of the guilty humans who are deserving of that punishment. Thus, argues the substitution theorist, Christ's sacrifice on the cross was able to satisfy the demands of God's justice *and* of his mercy.

The Governmental Theory

The fifth and final major atonement theory is usually attributed to the esteemed Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who argued in favor of a modified version

of penal substitution. Like substitution theorists, Grotius held that Christ was in fact punished by God and that that punishment was due to the retributive demands of God's justice. However, unlike the defenders of penal substitution, Grotius held not only that Christ was personally innocent, but that he was also legally innocent as well. Furthermore, on this view, God has the ability to remit sins even without punishment. So why did God punish Christ if he could have remitted our sins in the first place, for free? Grotius holds that although God could have done this, he had good reasons not to do so. The atonement, while not strictly necessary, was fitting given the circumstances. God punishing Christ instead of us is seen by Grotius as a relaxation of the punishment that humanity deserved. God saw it as fitting to relax the punishment due to humanity by punishing Christ in its place because not doing so would result, ultimately, in the condemnation of humanity. At this point, an objector might wonder why God, if he was able to relax his punishment for humanity, did not then relax his punishment for Christ and not punish anyone at all. Governmental theorists respond by arguing that by punishing Christ in the way that he did, God was putting on public display the righteous justice of God and the severity of sin. Surmises one commentator, on Grotius's view, "God, by accepting Christ's death, preserves the visible moral order of the world, of which he is governor" (Hare 2005, 554).

The Argument

Despite their differences, all theories hold that Christ's death either influenced or made possible the salvation of human persons. While theologians may disagree on whether God is able to forgive sins even if his justice is unsatisfied, or on whether these theories ought to be mixed together, forming new, more robust accounts, all agree on one key point: the atonement does not involve "the surrender of a greater value for the sake of a lesser one or of a non-value." In all atonement theories, Christ voluntarily takes on a vast amount of suffering (his worldly comfort being the lesser value that is sacrificed) so that many of his created humans will be able to spend eternity in his company. The Bible declares that "God is love" (1 John 4:8; 1 John 4:16) and makes clear that much of this love is directed toward humanity (see Isaiah 54:10). According to Rand, "to love is to value" (Rand 1964, 35). From this, it seems perfectly plausible to imagine that Christ valued the reconciliation of man to God over the suffering caused by the physical torture and temporary separation from God that he would endure as a result of his sacrifice.

Therefore, it seems, Rand's argument against Christianity relies on a simple "bait-and-switch"—a logical fallacy in which an audience is "baited" by the definition of a word, a word that is then redefined ("switched") to draw a faulty conclusion. This is not the first time Rand has been accused of a "bait-and-switch."

In a 2006 paper for *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, Robert H. Bass accuses Rand of committing a “bait-and-switch” on the definition of “altruism” (Bass 2006). I, on the other hand, accuse Rand of playing bait-and-switch with “sacrifice.” To see the fallacy in action, let’s put Rand’s argument into syllogistic form:

1. All instances of sacrifice are immoral.
2. Christ’s atonement was an instance of sacrifice.
3. Therefore, Christ’s atonement was immoral.

This argument may be structurally valid, but it involves equivocating on the only word that is common to both (1) and (2). If Rand is using her newfangled definition of sacrifice in (1) but the traditional definition in (2), then she is guilty of a bait-and-switch. If she is using the traditional definition in (1) but the newfangled definition in (2), then she is guilty of the same crime.

If, however, she is using the same definition in (1) and (2), then she is guilty of at least one false premise. Suppose, for example, that Rand is using the traditional definition in both (1) and (2). If so, then (1) seems manifestly implausible. Why should there be anything wrong with giving up a lesser value for the sake of a greater one? Indeed, Nathaniel Branden writes in *The Virtue of Selfishness* that “if one gives up that which one does not value in order to obtain that which one does value—or if one gives up a lesser value in order to obtain a greater one—this is not a sacrifice, but a *gain*” (“Mental Health versus Mysticism and Self-Sacrifice” in Rand 1964, 45; emphasis original).

On the other hand, if Rand is using her newfangled definition of “sacrifice” in both (1) and (2) then she is guilty of another false premise; that being the claim that Christ’s atonement involved the surrender of a higher value in favor of a lower value or of a non-value. Clearly, in every mainstream understanding of the atonement illustrated above, Christ only ever gives up lesser values for the sake of higher ones.²

But suppose this is the argument that Rand was attempting to make. Suppose that Rand is using her newfangled definition in both premises of the argument. Suppose that Rand truly believes that Christ’s sacrifice involved the surrender of a higher value for the sake of a lesser one. What could she say in defense of this view? Well, in her essay “The Ethics of Emergencies,” Rand writes:

To illustrate this on the altruists’ favorite example: the issue of saving a drowning person. If the person to be saved is a stranger, it is morally proper to save him only when the danger to one’s own life is minimal; when the danger is great, it would be immoral to attempt it: only a lack of self-esteem could permit one to value one’s life no higher than that of any random stranger. . . . If the person to be saved is not a stranger,

then the risk one should be willing to take is greater in proportion to the greatness of that person's value to oneself. If it is the man or woman one loves, then one can be willing to give one's own life to save him or her—for the selfish reason that life without the loved person would be unbearable. (in Rand 1964, 52)

Rand is saying that it's wrong to risk one's life for a stranger, though not necessarily wrong to do so for a loved one, without whom life would be "unbearable." Leaving aside whether this is actually true, there are a few things to be said about how her view relates to the atonement. Given that the God of Christianity is omniscient (minimally possessing knowledge of all true propositions), it is impossible that any human being is a stranger to God. Therefore, Rand's argument against sacrificing oneself for the sake of a total stranger simply fails to apply to God. The God of the Bible intimately knows and loves all persons (past, present, and future). On the other hand, it would be questionable to claim that life for God without loving relationships with human beings would be "unbearable." The biblical God is one being made up of three persons, each of whom loves the other two. The idea of life being "unbearable" for a maximally great being who is deficient in nothing borders on absurdity.

The solution to the problem seems to lie in emphasizing God's immortality. The assumption underlying Rand's view on whether giving up one's life is morally improper is that all life ends at the grave. Rand, an atheist, held that no person is endowed with an immortal soul. However, if she is smuggling her atheistic worldview into her moral assessment of a Christian narrative, then she has failed to engage properly with the Christian claim. Remember, Rand begins her statement with the conditional, "if I were a Christian" (by which she means, "if I believed Christianity were true"). If Rand were a Christian, then she certainly would not believe that a person dies when their physical body dies. By entertaining the counterfactual "if I were a Christian," and simultaneously making atheistic assumptions about life, death, and immortality, Rand would be taking on a disingenuous position. Christ, in the Christian narrative, only dies a physical death on the cross. Therefore, the sacrificial death of Christ is in no way analogous to the person in Rand's scenario for whom physical death marks the end of their existence. As William Lane Craig (2019) writes:

Christ does not cease to exist when he dies on the cross. Rand is assuming a naturalistic point of view and assuming that death marks the end of human existence. The end of a good man's life is therefore the end of all the value he has. But on a Christian view Christ exists following the death of his mortal body and, moreover, he rises from the dead to eternal life. So the good of his life is not lost but preserved.³

In conclusion, therefore, Rand's only argument attacking a specifically Christian doctrine that is universally accepted across denominations involves fallacious reasoning and/or a false premise. It is plausible that Christ's atonement, however it is construed, does not involve the surrender of a higher value for the sake of a lesser value or of a non-value. There is no reason to think that Christ was immoral for valuing his future relationship with humanity in heaven above the continuation of his human life on Earth.

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NOTES

1. An anonymous reviewer has pointed out that Rand's notion of "sacrifice" was correlative to her notion of "altruism"—a notion that grew out of protest against the moral philosophy of August Comte. For a deeper dive into the Comte/Rand connection, see Campbell 2006.
2. The same, general point has been made, in passing, by Onar Åm, in a book review for this very journal (Åm 2020, 413).
3. I am grateful to Dr. Craig for this insight.

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