

Redemption Mechanics

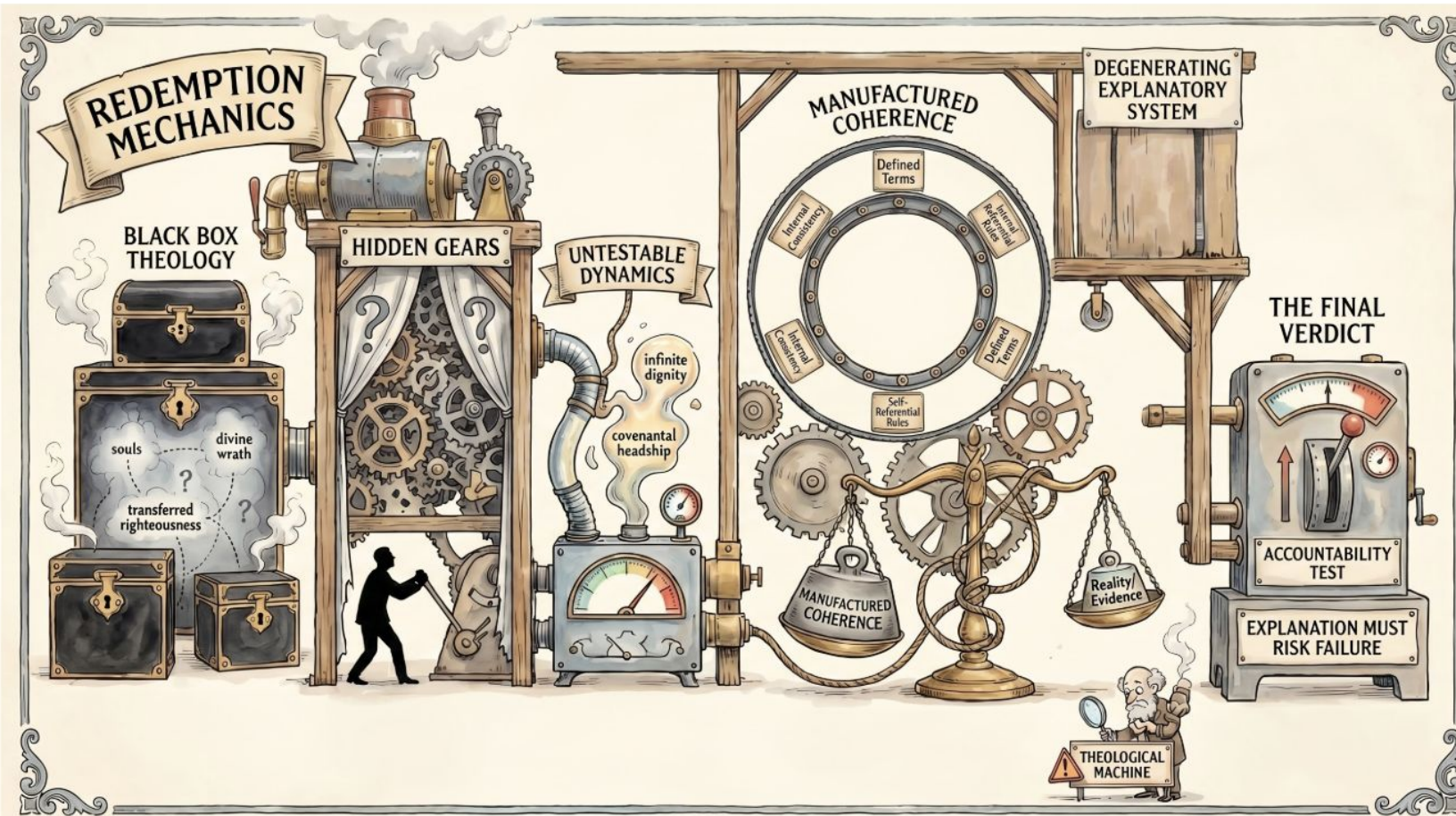
Untestable Theological Dynamics and the Manufacture of
Atonement Coherence

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A visual preview:



Abstract

This paper treats Christian atonement not primarily as a biblical doctrine, but as a family of proposed mechanisms. The Free of Faith essay "Invented Dynamics of Redemption" argues that once spiritual entities and relations are insulated from testing, apologists can add whatever dynamics are needed to preserve internal coherence: infinite dignity, representative substitution, divine fiat, eternal fuel for hell, qualitative satisfaction, or foreign justice ([Stilwell, 2025c](#)). I develop that criticism through the philosophy of explanation.

The distinctive contribution is methodological. A companion paper taxonomizes escape routes within Penal Substitutionary Atonement. This paper asks a broader question: when does a theological mechanism become an ad hoc manufacture rather than an explanation? A mechanism should constrain expectation, expose itself to possible failure, and reduce mystery rather than relocate it. Redemption mechanics often do the opposite. They generate flexible auxiliary claims that absorb objections while leaving no public test of whether the proposed spiritual transaction occurred.

Using resources from Popper, Lakatos, Hempel, van Fraassen, and Quine, I argue that internal coherence is not enough. A model can be coherent because it has been protected from contact with reality. The more a theology answers pressure by inventing untestable dynamics, the more it resembles a degenerating explanatory system. The issue is not that atonement is mysterious at the edges, but that its central mechanisms are routinely placed beyond assessment.

Introduction

Religious systems often contain entities that cannot be observed directly: souls, spiritual debts, divine wrath, original guilt, covenantal headship, demonic claims, heavenly books, transferred righteousness, and eternal destinies. Such entities are not automatically incoherent. The philosophical issue is how their proposed dynamics are constrained.

The source essay "Invented Dynamics of Redemption" argues that untestable spiritual entities give theologians enormous constructive freedom ([Stilwell, 2025c](#)). If a soul is said to be eternal fuel for hell, no observation can show that the fuel relation is false. If Christ's worth is said to satisfy infinite penalty, no public metric confirms the satisfaction. If God declares a substitution adequate, no independent audit is allowed. The system can be made internally coherent because its moving parts are insulated.

This paper does not repeat the full proportionality critique of Penal Substitutionary Atonement. That critique belongs to neighboring work ([Stilwell, 2026a](#)). Nor does it merely list PSA circumventions. The present concern is broader: redemption theories often function like speculative mechanics. They posit invisible relations to explain how a cross, death, resurrection, decree, victory, ransom, moral example, or scapegoating event changes humanity's status before God.

Mechanisms are supposed to explain. They tell us how one state produces another. In science and ordinary reasoning, mechanisms are constrained by observation, intervention, failure, comparison, and predictive risk. A theological mechanism may not operate like a laboratory mechanism, but if it is offered as an explanation, it still owes some account of its constraints.

The question is therefore methodological: when a doctrine introduces spiritual mechanics, how do we distinguish explanation from invention? The answer cannot be "it fits the system," because fictional worlds also fit themselves. The question is what the fit is worth.

From Slogan to Mechanism

The phrase "Christ redeems" is a slogan until a mechanism is supplied. It may express worship, gratitude, identity, or hope. But once the theologian says how redemption occurs, a mechanism has entered the discussion. Christ pays a debt, bears wrath, defeats powers, satisfies honor, reveals love, exposes scapegoating, recapitulates humanity, or represents a new covenant people.

Each model carries different mechanics. Ransom theories require a captor or debt-holder. Satisfaction theories require offended honor and compensatory restoration. Penal theories require guilt, penalty, transfer, and satisfaction. Christus Victor requires hostile powers and liberating victory. Moral influence requires transformative perception. Scapegoat theory requires social exposure of sacred violence ([Aulen, 1931](#); [Green and Baker, 2000](#); [Rutledge, 2015](#)).

The problem is not plurality by itself. Complex traditions can use multiple metaphors. The problem appears when each metaphor is treated as literal enough to secure doctrine but elastic enough to evade criticism. If ransom language is pressed, it becomes metaphor. If penal language is pressed, it becomes mystery. If victory language is pressed, it becomes cosmic symbolism. The mechanism expands and contracts on demand.

This elasticity creates explanatory ambiguity. What exactly changes when redemption occurs? Does God's attitude change, humanity's legal status, the power

of sin, the believer's psychology, the cosmic order, or the social imagination? If the answer is "all of the above," the model must still explain relations among them.

A mechanism should discipline language. In much atonement discourse, language disciplines the critic instead. The critic is told which question is out of bounds after the question exposes a pressure point.

Untestable Dynamics and Auxiliary Repair

Philosophy of science offers useful analogies, though theology is not science. Popper emphasized the importance of risky claims ([Popper, 1959](#)). Lakatos distinguished progressive from degenerating research programmes partly by how they handle anomalies ([Lakatos, 1970](#)). Hempel examined the relation between explanation and systematic support ([Hempel, 1965](#)). These tools help ask whether a proposed model is constrained or merely protected.

An auxiliary hypothesis is not automatically bad. All serious theories use auxiliaries. The issue is whether auxiliaries increase explanatory power or merely shield the core from defeat. In redemption mechanics, the shield pattern is common. If finite suffering does not match eternal penalty, add infinite worth. If infinite worth lacks a metric, add mystery. If mystery seems evasive, add category error. If category error threatens public intelligibility, retreat to scripture.

This sequence can preserve coherence indefinitely. But preservation is not explanation. A model that can absorb every objection by adding invisible relations has become too flexible. It no longer tells us what should be expected if it is true rather than false.

Quine's holism reminds us that beliefs face pressure as networks, not isolated sentences ([Quine, 1951](#)). Theological networks may therefore redistribute pressure.

But redistribution does not eliminate the need for accountability. If every pressure point is redirected to an untestable auxiliary, the network becomes insulated from learning.

The source essay's Solara analogy captures the problem vividly ([Stilwell, 2025c](#)). A judge invents a penalty, appoints his son, declares the son's short confinement sufficient, and dismisses requests for an audit. The story is internally coherent because the judge controls the rules. That is precisely why it fails as an explanation of justice.

Internal Coherence Is Not Enough

Internal coherence is often overvalued in apologetics. A system can be coherent because its terms have been defined to support one another. Wonderland can have rules. A fantasy economy can have currencies. A fictional court can have procedures. Coherence shows that propositions can be arranged without immediate contradiction. It does not show that the arrangement maps reality.

This point is especially important for spiritual mechanics. If souls, penalties, divine wrath, representative transfer, and satisfaction are all defined within the system, the system may appear tidy. But the tidiness may be a product of insulation. No external measurement, failed prediction, or independent comparison threatens it.

Van Fraassen's constructive empiricism is useful here because it distinguishes acceptance of a model for empirical adequacy from belief in its unobservable furniture ([van Fraassen, 1980](#)). Theology often lacks even empirical adequacy in this sense. Its unobservable furniture is accepted because it completes the story, not because it explains publicly observable patterns better than rivals.

The defender may answer that theology concerns revelation, not empirical modeling. But atonement mechanisms are still explanatory claims. They explain why

forgiveness requires blood, why death changes legal status, why wrath is satisfied, why a representative can bear another's liability, and why eternal consequences can be altered. These are not merely expressive statements.

The question is therefore not whether theology may use mystery. The question is whether mystery is doing central explanatory work. If it is, coherence has been purchased by opacity.

The Atonement Models as Flexible Machines

The variety of atonement models illustrates the manufacture problem. Moral influence avoids some penal difficulties by treating the cross as transformative revelation. But it can struggle to explain why such a revelation was necessary or what objective status changes. Ransom theory dramatizes liberation but raises questions about payment, recipient, and divine sovereignty. Christus Victor offers cosmic victory but can leave legal guilt underexplained.

Satisfaction theory organizes sin around offended divine honor, but it must explain why honor requires compensatory death. Penal substitution offers legal clarity, but it inherits problems of penalty equivalence, innocent punishment, and transfer. Governmental theory softens exact substitution but risks making the cross a public symbol rather than penalty-bearing satisfaction. Scapegoat theory powerfully critiques sacred violence but may no longer supply traditional reconciliation mechanics.

This plurality can be read charitably as richness. It can also be read diagnostically as instability. When no model can bear the full explanatory load, defenders may stack metaphors. The cross is payment, victory, example, revelation, substitution, satisfaction, and exposure all at once. But a stack of partial metaphors is not automatically a mechanism.

The source essay presses this point by asking what parallel in reality supports the proposed dynamics (Stilwell, 2025c). We know what it is for someone to pay money for another. We know what it is for someone to inspire moral change. We know what it is for a captive to be freed. We do not know what it is for infinite moral worth to convert finite suffering into eternal penalty satisfaction.

When the analogy breaks, theology often declares the divine case unique. Uniqueness may be true, but it also removes the model from ordinary checks. The more unique the mechanism becomes, the less explanatory help the analogy provides.

A Formal Degeneration Test

The methodological worry can be formalized. Let T be a theological theory, O an objection, A an auxiliary claim, and R a risky expectation. A progressive repair adds A such that $T + A$ explains O while producing some new constraint or expectation R . A degenerating repair adds A only to neutralize O , while producing no new constraint.

Many redemption mechanics follow the degenerating pattern. Objection: finite suffering does not equal eternal penalty. Auxiliary: Christ has infinite worth. New constraint? Often none. Objection: infinite worth lacks a conversion rule. Auxiliary: divine justice is mysterious. New constraint? None. Objection: mystery blocks public intelligibility. Auxiliary: outsiders are imposing foreign categories. New constraint? None.

The sequence can be written schematically: T faces O_1 ; add A_1 . A_1 faces O_2 ; add A_2 . A_2 faces O_3 ; add A_3 . If no A_i increases constraint, the system becomes more protected but not more explanatory.

This test does not require theology to make laboratory predictions. It requires the

model to state what its repairs rule out. A doctrine can be philosophically accountable if it narrows possibilities, clarifies mechanisms, and admits failure conditions. It becomes manufacture when each repair expands flexibility.

The test also protects against cheap skepticism. Not every invisible claim is ad hoc. A claim becomes suspect when it is introduced precisely where pressure appears and when it carries no independent support or constraining consequence.

The Human Cost of Manufactured Mechanics

The issue is not merely academic. Redemption mechanics shape how believers understand guilt, forgiveness, punishment, self-worth, enemies, outsiders, and authority. If the mechanics are arbitrary, they can train people to treat arbitrary authority as justice.

For example, if God can define any penalty as deserved because divine dignity is infinite, proportionality becomes fragile. If God can transfer guilt or punishment through representation, agency becomes negotiable. If divine fiat can make finite suffering satisfy eternal punishment, declared authority can masquerade as moral explanation. These patterns matter even for those who reject moral realism, because they affect human practices.

A pro-social audit asks what a doctrine does to human concerns: Does it increase compassion, reduce cruelty, improve responsibility, make forgiveness more intelligible, or clarify repair? Some atonement models may do better than others on this audit. Moral influence and scapegoat readings, for example, may be less dependent on opaque transfer mechanics, though they face other theological questions.

The point is not that a doctrine must be comforting to be true. The point is that doctrines with opaque justice mechanics can normalize opacity in moral and legal

imagination. If believers are taught that the deepest justice is beyond intelligibility, they may become less sensitive to demands for transparent accountability.

The skeptical challenge is therefore humane as well as logical. Do not ask people to admire a mechanism that cannot be explained, cannot be checked, and would look arbitrary if attributed to any finite ruler.

Toward Fewer Mechanics and Cleaner Claims

A cleaner theology would distinguish symbol, story, practice, and mechanism. If the cross is a symbol of divine solidarity, say that. If it is a story that forms a community, say that. If it is a ritual center for repentance and forgiveness, say that. If it is a literal mechanism satisfying penalty, then provide the mechanism.

This distinction would reduce unnecessary overclaiming. Not every religiously powerful image needs to become a metaphysical transaction. A community may find the cross transformative without claiming that an invisible ledger was balanced by infinite worth. The more modest claim may be less orthodox in some traditions, but it is also less mechanically extravagant.

Theology can also admit plural metaphor without pretending that metaphor solves mechanism. Payment, victory, cleansing, sacrifice, reconciliation, and adoption may all illuminate aspects of Christian experience. But their coexistence should not be treated as cumulative explanation unless their relations are specified.

Finally, theology can accept that some doctrines are confessional rather than public explanations. If a believer says, "This is the story through which I understand forgiveness," the conversation differs from, "This proves that divine justice has been satisfied." The latter claim bears a burden the former may not.

Reducing invented dynamics would not end disagreement. It would make dis-

agreement more honest. It would prevent devotional language from being promoted to mechanism and then protected as mystery when questioned.

Conclusion

Redemption mechanics become suspect when they solve pressure by inventing untestable relations that add flexibility without constraint. Infinite worth, divine fiat, representative transfer, eternal fuel, qualitative satisfaction, and foreign justice may preserve a story's internal coherence. They do not automatically explain how redemption works.

The broader lesson is methodological. A model is not good because it can be saved from every objection. It is good when its repairs clarify, constrain, and illuminate. When each repair merely relocates mystery, the model degenerates into manufacture.

Theology may keep its symbols, stories, and confessions. But if it offers mechanisms, it owes mechanism-level accountability. Otherwise, redemption becomes a set of invisible dynamics adjusted to preserve a conclusion already loved.

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