

The Substitution Problem

Formal Equivalence, Punishment Transfer, and the Collapse of Atonement Proportionality

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Central claim

Penal Substitutionary Atonement does not explain retributive justice merely by saying that an innocent Christ willingly suffered for guilty people. It also needs a justified rule for moving penal liability to the substitute and a stable rule showing why his treatment matches the penalty said to be deserved. Standard appeals to imputation, corporate union, infinite worth, or divine acceptance do not yet supply both. This limits the penal explanation; it does not disprove every Christian account of the cross or every possible future version of penal substitution.

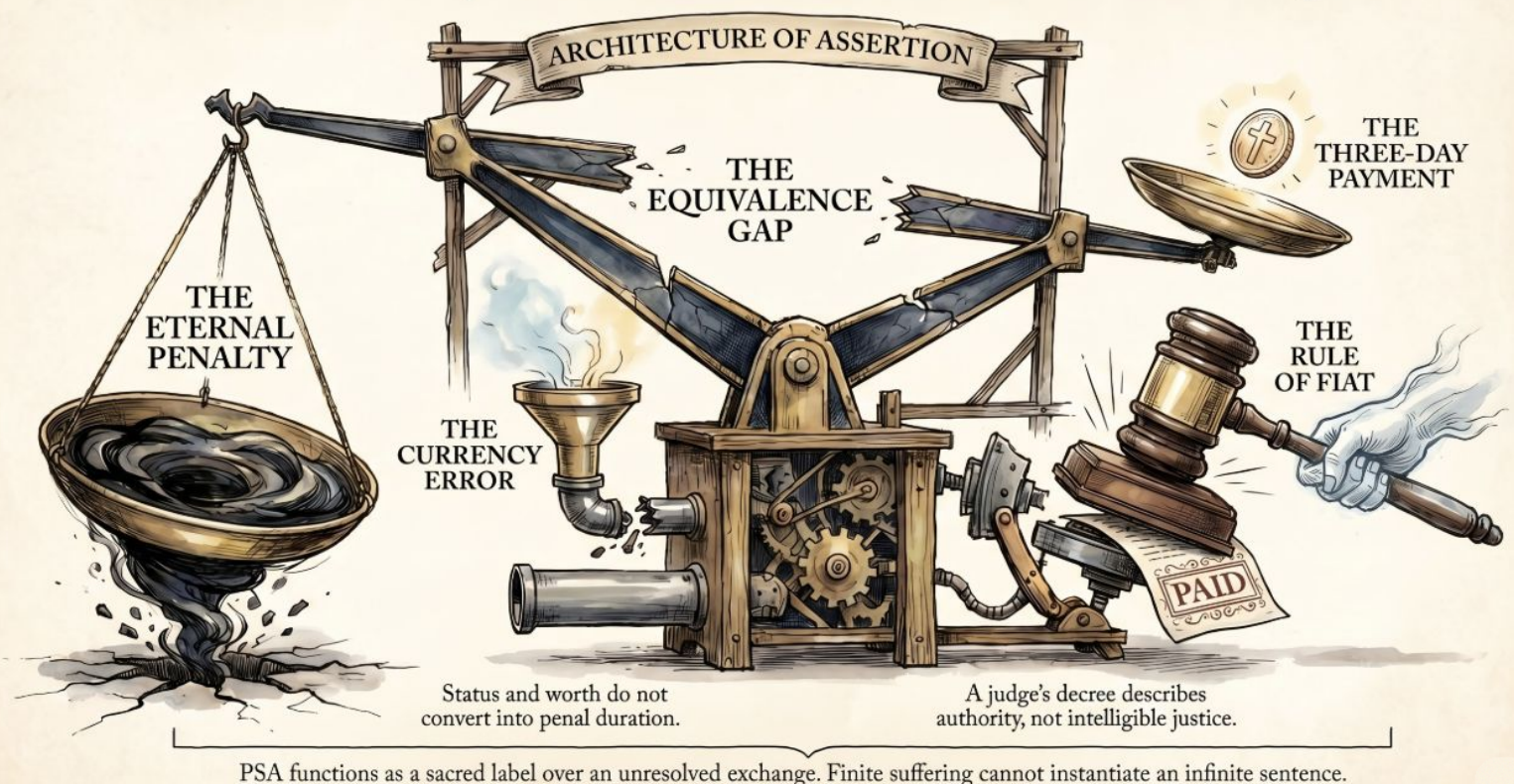
Preview: Two bridges are needed, not one

Penal claim	Transfer bridge	Sanction bridge	Warranted result
The substitute's suffering satisfies the punishment deserved by offenders.	Why may another person's suffering discharge liability that tracks the offender's culpable act?	Which features make finite, victorious suffering relevantly match death, wrath, exclusion, or eternal punishment?	Until both rules are defended, the model asserts satisfaction but does not yet explain retributive justice.

Voluntary self-sacrifice may be admirable, legal imputation may be possible, and non-penal atonement models may remain coherent. The narrower question is whether the actual punishment owed by guilty agents has been shown to be justly borne and satisfied by another.

Visual preview:

The Currency of Atonement: A Formal Critique



The broken balance places the eternal penalty opposite the three-day payment and marks the missing rule that would make them equivalent. The currency-error pipe represents the attempt to convert status or worth into penal duration; the rule-of-fiat gavel represents acceptance by decree. This image isolates the proportionality burden. The paper also tests the separate question of why an innocent substitute may bear liability attached to guilty agents.

Abstract

Penal Substitutionary Atonement is often presented as the mechanism by which forgiveness and retributive justice are jointly secured: guilty people deserve punishment, an innocent Christ bears it in their place, and their liability is discharged. The conclusion does not follow from suffering plus authorization alone. A penal explanation also requires two bridge principles. The *transfer bridge* must explain why liability grounded in one agent's culpable act can be discharged by another's treatment. The *sanction bridge* must identify the features that make Christ's finite, voluntary, and victorious passion relevantly match the death, wrath, condemnation, exclusion, or everlasting punishment attributed to sinners. This paper evaluates the strongest repairs rather than only popular debt analogies. Legal imputation can relocate liability by decree, but then the justice of that relocation remains to be shown. Voluntariness can make suffering permissible without making it the offender's deserved punishment. Corporate and participatory accounts can narrow the distance between offender and substitute, but only by specifying a demanding relation of shared identity. Infinite worth names the value of the sufferer without yet supplying a penal exchange rule. Governmental theories openly replace identical punishment with a public moral equivalent, thereby offering a different account. The resulting conclusion is firm but conditional: standard penal substitution has not yet explained retributive satisfaction because its central transfer and sanction relations remain underdescribed. This does not establish that no coherent version is possible, that the cross lacks Christian significance, or that non-penal models are true. It requires defenders to state the two missing rules and accept the consequences of whichever model they choose.

Keywords: penal substitutionary atonement; punishment transfer; proportionality; retributive justice; imputation; vicarious punishment; atonement

1 The Claim Under Examination

Penal Substitutionary Atonement, or PSA, is stronger than the claim that Christ's death benefits sinners. It is stronger than the claim that the passion reveals love, defeats hostile powers, represents humanity, or enables reconciliation. In its distinctively penal form, the theory says that guilty people deserve punishment, that Christ bears punishment in their place, and that this event satisfies justice so their liability can be remitted. Contemporary defenses differ about the meaning of punishment, imputation, representation, and satisfaction, but the penal and substitutionary elements must do real work if the label is to distinguish the theory from its neighbors (Crisp 2009; Craig 2020).

That distinction matters because the word "atonement" covers a varied field. Anselm's satisfaction account concerns a failure to render what is due to divine honor; Christus Victor describes rescue from enslaving powers; participatory accounts locate salvation in union with Christ; and modern approaches can focus on reconciliation, moral transformation, guilt, shame, or restored relationship (Anselm of Canterbury 1998; Aulén 1931; Baker and Green 2011; Stump 2018). Each view has burdens. The present argument does not transfer a criticism of one model to all the others.

For clarity, a *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity, including enough properties to identify the account under discussion. The target here is the Christian God-concept presupposed by PSA: a perfectly just deity who authorizes Christ's substitution and whose justice is said to be satisfied through it. The question is internal and public at once. If PSA explains why this arrangement is just, its own penal terms allow us to ask what makes the punishment transferable and proportionate.

The argument is also deliberately conditional. Some Christians use penal language as one metaphor among many without claiming a complete mechanism. Others defend a sophisticated philosophical model involving imputation, representation, legal fiction, union, or pardon. The criticism applies in proportion to the claim. The more strongly a theory says that actual retributive punishment is borne and satisfied, the more fully it must explain the justice-making relations. A symbolic or governmental

account may escape the strictest objection by making a weaker claim, but that escape should be named rather than hidden.

The burden in one sentence

To explain forgiveness through retributive substitution, PSA must show both why another's treatment can discharge the offender's liability and why that treatment counts as the relevant sanction; authority to accept an exchange is not yet an account of why the exchange is just.

2 Three Questions a Penal Explanation Must Answer

Ordinary speech often treats punishment, payment, compensation, sacrifice, and suffering as interchangeable. They are not. A parent may absorb a child's medical cost; a guarantor may pay a debtor's loan; a firefighter may accept danger for strangers; and a friend may suffer because of another's crime. These are genuine substitutions of burden. They do not automatically become substitutions of punishment.

Punishment is connected to wrongdoing through at least three questions. First, *who is liable?* A retributive account normally grounds liability in the culpable agency of the wrongdoer. Second, *what treatment answers that liability?* Proportionality concerns not only how much harm occurs but why this kind and degree of sanction fit the wrong. Third, *what discharges the liability?* Pardon, commutation, compensation, and completed punishment can all end a legal claim, but they do so for different reasons.

Table 1 separates these questions. The rows are not offered as a complete theory of punishment. They identify the minimum explanatory work created by PSA's own assertion that justice is satisfied through punishment borne by a substitute.

Table 1: Three questions hidden inside the word "satisfaction".

Question	What must be specified	Why it matters	What does not settle it
Liability	The relation between a culpable act, the offender, and exposure to punishment.	Retribution ordinarily answers the agency of the person who did the wrong.	Another person's willingness to suffer.
Transfer	A rule permitting the substitute's treatment to discharge the offender's liability.	Burdens can be shared without guilt or penal desert moving with them.	Debt analogies, representation, or imputation named without their conditions.
Sanction fit	The features that make the substitute's treatment relevantly match the deserved penalty.	A penalty is not satisfied by any costly event whatsoever.	The substitute's status, the intensity of emotion, or official acceptance alone.
Discharge	Whether liability ends by punishment, pardon, commutation, compensation, or another act.	Different routes can produce release while making different claims about justice.	The bare fact that an authority declares the case closed.

The fourth row clarifies a frequent ambiguity. A sovereign authority may have the power to pardon. If pardon is morally permissible, an offender can be released without anyone receiving the deserved punishment. That would reconcile mercy with lawful authority, but it would not show that retributive desert was satisfied through equivalent punishment. Similarly, a sentence may be commuted to a different sanction under an accepted rule. The new treatment can be legally sufficient without being identical to the original sentence. PSA must say which claim it makes.

3 Why Punishment Is Not a Fungible Cost

David Lewis presses a simple intuition: if a convicted person's innocent friend volunteers to serve the sentence, authorities do not normally regard the offender's punishment as completed. Even perfect willingness and equal suffering do not make the friend's imprisonment the offender's punishment (Lewis 1999). The point is not that no burden can ever be transferred. It is that penal liability is attached to responsible agency in a way that many financial obligations are not.

This is why debt analogies help and mislead. Money is designed to be fungible: one person's dollar can satisfy another's financial obligation because the rules identify the currency and permit third-party payment. Imprisonment, censure, loss of civic standing, and deserved condemnation are agent-directed. A benefactor can pay a fine, but the ease of that transaction does not establish that a life sentence, a declaration of blame, or culpability itself can move in the same way.

Communicative theories make the agent relation especially visible. Duff treats punishment as a public practice that calls an offender to answer for a wrong, communicates censure, and seeks repentance and reconciliation (Duff 2001). Mark Murphy uses the link between punishment and condemnation to argue that the innocent Christ cannot literally be punished in the offender's place, although Christ might undergo vicarious harsh treatment for redemptive purposes (Murphy 2009). On this view, removing condemnation changes the description from penal substitution to vicarious suffering.

William Lane Craig answers that punishment need not express condemnation of the person who undergoes the harsh treatment. Condemnation may remain directed at sinners while their legal liability is imputed to Christ; legal systems also use fictions, representation, and vicarious liability (Craig 2018; Craig 2020). This is a serious reply because it denies that the recipient of harsh treatment must be the object of blame.

The reply does not end the inquiry. It relocates it. If liability is legally imputed while guilt and condemnation remain with the offender, the theory needs a rule explaining why it is just to impose the liability's harsh treatment on an innocent person and why doing so discharges the offender's desert. Calling the move a legal fiction describes a device. It does not by itself justify the device. Human law sometimes uses fictions for administration, standing, or attribution, but its willingness to do so does not establish that any fiction is morally valid or that retributive desert can be replicated without remainder.

Voluntariness helps at a different point. It can make another person's costly rescue admirable and can remove the wrong of forcing an unwilling innocent person to suffer. It does not automatically turn the chosen harm into punishment for someone else's act. Consent answers "May this person accept the burden?"; transfer answers "Why does accepting it discharge that offender's penal liability?" A defense needs both.

4 Proportionality Without Crude Arithmetic

The familiar challenge asks how a finite passion followed by resurrection can equal eternal punishment. Stated crudely, the question invites an easy reply: penal equivalence need not mean the same number of minutes, the same psychology, or identical physical events. Legal systems permit commutation, scaled fines, suspended sentences, representative acts, and sanctions chosen for their meaning as well as their duration. A stronger critique therefore asks for *relevant sanction fit*, not duplicate experience.

The difficulty is that PSA defenses describe the deserved penalty in several ways: death, curse, wrath, condemnation, exclusion, forsakenness, or everlasting punishment. These are not interchangeable units. Death concerns loss of life; condemnation concerns a normative judgment; exclusion concerns relationship or status; pain concerns experience; and everlasting punishment adds duration or finality. A theory cannot establish fit until it states which features make the sanction the sanction.

The resurrection sharpens rather than settles this issue. Christ's death can be real even if it is temporary, and the certainty of victory does not make the suffering unreal. Yet if the penalty attributed to the unredeemed includes irreversibility, final exclusion, or unending duration, a finite death followed by vindication does not possess those features. The defender may say that some other feature does the equivalence work. That is permitted. The point is that the feature and its rule must be stated.

The appeal to infinite worth identifies a property of the sufferer. It does not yet identify a relation between that property and the sanction. A dignitary's higher status may make an insult more politically consequential, but it does not turn one hour of imprisonment into another person's life sentence. If divine status multiplies, compresses, or otherwise transforms penal severity, PSA needs to say what is transformed and why. Without that rule, "infinite worth" is an honorific attached to the conclusion.

This is not a demand that theology reduce suffering to arithmetic. Qualitative equivalence is possible, but it still needs a criterion. Obbie Tyler Todd's study of American moral governmental theory is valuable precisely because it identifies a different criterion. On that view, Christ does not endure the identical legal punishment. His public suffering countervails the moral effects of sin, displays opposition to wrongdoing, and upholds moral government (Todd 2019). The model replaces commutative payment with expressive or governmental adequacy. It may or may not succeed, but it states what kind of equivalence it seeks. In doing so, it also concedes that actual distributive punishment has not simply been transferred and served.

5 The Strongest Repair Strategies

The most useful question is not whether defenders have replies. They do. It is which burden each reply addresses and what conception of atonement remains after the repair.

5.1 Legal imputation and divine pardon

Craig's model draws on legal imputation, legal fiction, punishment, and pardon. Liability can be assigned to Christ even though sinners remain the objects of condemnation; after the atoning event, a divine pardon can be appropriated by beneficiaries (Craig 2018; Craig 2020). This is stronger than a vague debt analogy because it distinguishes guilt, liability, harsh treatment, and pardon.

Its central cost is dependence on the justice of the assigning rule. If perfect justice is defined partly by whatever the divine legislator authorizes, the account risks moving from moral explanation to positive law: the rule is valid because the supreme authority enacted it. That can explain why the transaction is legally effective inside the system. It does not yet answer why replicating or imputing an offender's liability to an innocent person is retributively fitting. The model needs a moral defense of the legal fiction, not only its availability.

5.2 Voluntary substitution and restoration

Jada Twedt Strabbing develops a permissibility defense. On her account, penal substitution can be permissible when the offender cannot bear the deserved punishment, the substitute can and willingly does bear it, no viable alternative exists, and the substitution restores the offender to the status that would have existed without the wrongdoing (Strabbing 2016). This directly answers the objection that every voluntary substitution is necessarily wrongful.

Permissibility is not identical to retributive explanation. The conditions show when accepting a substitute's suffering may be allowed and restoratively valuable. A further step is needed to show that the treatment is the offender's deserved punishment rather than a permissible rescue that allows punishment to be remitted. The difference matters because PSA is often praised not merely as a permitted act of mercy but as the actual satisfaction of justice.

5.3 Corporate identity and participation

Representation becomes more promising when the substitute and beneficiaries are not treated as wholly unrelated individuals. Crisp develops a version of PSA using an Augustinian structure associated with the transmission of sin, while participatory proposals explore how believers may be related to Christ strongly enough for his death to count as theirs (Crisp 2009; Hill 2018). These views address Lewis's stranger-substitute example by denying that Christ is merely a detached friend entering someone else's case.

The repair succeeds only to the extent that the underlying relation is clear. Ordinary membership in a group permits representatives to act, promise, negotiate, or incur some joint costs. It does not automatically make each member the same responsible agent or allow punishment to track across the group. A metaphysical participation relation strong enough to share death or liability may be coherent, but it cannot remain a loose metaphor. The theory must say what is shared, when the union arises, whether it also transmits culpability, and why the same principle does not erase individual responsibility elsewhere.

5.4 Satisfaction, government, and non-penal alternatives

Another repair is to weaken the penal claim. A satisfaction model may focus on restoring an order, honor, or relationship rather than serving the offender's sentence. A governmental model may treat the passion as a public demonstration that upholds law without inflicting the law's literal penalty. A participatory or Marian model may focus on transformation, union, guilt, and shame (Anselm of Canterbury 1998; Todd 2019; Stump 2018). Christus Victor shifts attention to liberation from hostile powers, while plural approaches resist forcing every New Testament image into a single penal mechanism (Aulén 1931; Baker and Green 2011).

These models are not automatically true. Each creates its own explanatory burdens. Their relevance is diagnostic: Christian atonement does not stand or fall with retributive substitution. A defender may coherently choose a different grammar, but should not claim to have preserved the full penal mechanism after replacing punishment with symbol, moral display, participation, or pardon.

6 What Each Repair Secures and Surrenders

Table 2 makes the tradeoffs visible. It is deliberately charitable. A route can solve one problem without solving every problem, and a theory may combine routes if their assumptions are compatible.

Table 2: Repair strategies and their remaining burdens.

Repair	What it can secure	What remains to explain	Likely model shift
Legal imputation	A clear formal assignment of liability and a route to pardon.	Why assigning an innocent person the liability is retributively just.	Toward positive law or authorized legal fiction.
Voluntary substitution	Permission to accept severe cost and a strong expression of love.	Why consent changes whose deserved punishment is served.	Toward rescue, sacrifice, or restoration.
Corporate union	A non-accidental relation between Christ and beneficiaries.	What identity is shared and why culpability or liability tracks through it.	Toward participation or representation.
Infinite worth	A reason to treat Christ's act as uniquely significant.	How personal worth maps onto the kind and measure of penalty.	Toward honor satisfaction or value symbolism.
Governmental equivalence	A public display that vindicates law or expresses opposition to sin.	Why display is required and whether it is punishment at all.	Toward penal example or moral government.
Mystery or fiat	A stopping rule inside a confessional system.	Why the accepted exchange is just rather than merely authorized.	Toward assertion without a public mechanism.

The table exposes a two-horn choice. On the first horn, PSA retains a strong retributive claim: the punishment deserved by offenders is borne and satisfied by Christ. It must then defend both the transfer rule and the sanction-fit rule. On the second horn, the theory uses pardon, representation, public display, participation, or symbolic satisfaction. It may become more coherent, but it no longer demonstrates mercy's compatibility with retribution by showing that the offender's actual deserved punishment was served by another.

The choice is not a verbal trap. A theory can openly accept the second horn and argue that retributive satisfaction was never the point. The problem arises when a defense moves between horns: literal punishment establishes moral seriousness, then metaphor or mystery appears when equivalence is challenged, and literal satisfaction returns in the conclusion. Stable terms prevent that movement.

7 A Better Standard for Defending the Model

A successful penal-substitution account should state six things in ordinary language.

1. **The wrong and the liable agent.** What act, condition, or inherited status grounds liability, and whose agency makes punishment deserved?
2. **The penalty.** Is it death, pain, condemnation, exclusion, loss of relationship, everlasting punishment, or a compound sanction?
3. **The transfer rule.** What relation permits Christ's treatment to discharge another agent's liability, and why is that rule just?
4. **The fit rule.** Which features of Christ's treatment correspond to the penalty, and why are differences in duration, finality, desert, and vindication irrelevant or compensated?
5. **The mode of discharge.** Is the case closed because punishment was served, because a different sanction was accepted, because the offender was pardoned, or because another goal was achieved?
6. **The failure condition.** What would make a proposed substitution inadequate? A rule that accepts every duration, subject, and kind of suffering cannot explain why the chosen event was necessary or sufficient.

These requests do not assume that human courts govern the divine case. They ask the theory to supply its own intelligible standards. A unique divine transaction may operate under unique rules, but uniqueness increases rather than removes the need to say what those rules are. Otherwise nothing distinguishes a justice-making relation from a decree that the relation exists.

The standard also protects defenders from an unfair demand. They need not prove that Christ's experience was phenomenologically identical to every sinner's punishment or place suffering on a numerical scale. They need only explain the respects in which the treatment is equivalent, why those respects matter to the relevant conception of justice, and why the differences do not defeat satisfaction. That is a demanding burden because PSA makes a demanding claim.

8 Conclusion

Penal Substitutionary Atonement promises an explanation: justice is not ignored when sinners are forgiven because their punishment is borne by Christ. That promise creates two burdens. A transfer rule must show why treatment of an innocent substitute can discharge liability grounded in guilty agency. A sanction-fit rule must show why Christ's finite, voluntary, and victorious passion counts as the death, wrath, condemnation, exclusion, or everlasting punishment the theory assigns to sinners.

The strongest replies illuminate parts of the problem without jointly resolving it. Legal imputation can assign liability, but its moral justice still needs defense. Voluntariness can make sacrifice permissible, but it does not make suffering the offender's punishment. Corporate union can reduce the distance between parties, but only through a defined relation strong enough to carry liability. Infinite worth magnifies significance without supplying a penal conversion rule. Governmental equivalence offers a public moral substitute precisely by giving up identical punishment.

The conclusion is therefore narrower than a disproof of Christianity and stronger than a request for more detail. Standard PSA has not yet earned its claim to explain retributive satisfaction. Defenders should identify both bridge principles and keep their model stable under criticism. If they instead choose pardon, participation, moral government, satisfaction, or victory, they should say so plainly. The intellectual change required is simple: stop letting the word "substitution" hide the two relations on which the justice claim depends.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The formal argument below does not try to calculate suffering or disprove every imaginable atonement theory. It makes the paper's burden-of-explanation claim explicit.

A.1 Plain-language reconstruction

- P1.** If an account claims to explain retributive satisfaction through a substitute, it must justify both a transfer rule and a sanction-fit rule.
- P2.** Standard PSA claims to explain retributive satisfaction through Christ as substitute.
- P3.** Standard PSA's familiar repairs do not jointly justify both rules: each either leaves one rule underdescribed or changes the account away from actual retributive punishment.
- C.** Therefore, standard PSA does not yet explain retributive satisfaction through substitution.

The inference is deductively valid: if P1, P2, and P3 are true, the conclusion follows. P1 is a conceptual requirement created by the meanings of "retributive", "substitution", and "satisfaction". P2 identifies the target. P3 is the disputed interpretive premise supported by the analyses of imputation, consent, participation, worth, and governmental equivalence. A defender can challenge the conclusion

by producing a version that clearly justifies both rules, not merely by repeating that the transaction was accepted.

A.2 Symbols

Symbol meanings in ordinary language

x : any proposed atonement account.

p : the standard form of PSA evaluated in this paper.

$E(x)$: account x explains retributive satisfaction rather than merely asserting it.

$R(x)$: account x claims that a substitute satisfies retributive punishment.

$T(x)$: account x justifies a rule transferring or discharging the offender's penal liability through the substitute.

$Q(x)$: account x justifies a rule showing relevant fit between the substitute's treatment and the deserved sanction.

$\forall$: "For every account under discussion."

$\wedge$: "And"; both joined statements must hold.

$\rightarrow$: "If the left side is true, then the right side must be true."

$\neg$: "It is not the case that."

A.3 Symbolic form

Every defined symbol appears in the inference that follows:

$$\forall x [(E(x) \wedge R(x)) \rightarrow (T(x) \wedge Q(x))] \quad (1)$$

$$R(p) \quad (2)$$

$$\neg(T(p) \wedge Q(p)) \quad (3)$$

$$\therefore \neg E(p). \quad (4)$$

Line 1, read aloud. For every atonement account, if it both explains retributive satisfaction and claims that a substitute satisfies punishment, then it supplies a justified liability-transfer rule and a justified sanction-fit rule. This line states the minimum bridge requirement. It does not assume that the two rules must copy a modern courtroom; it allows the defender to state different rules and defend them.

Line 2, read aloud. The standard PSA account p claims that a substitute satisfies retributive punishment. This places the account within the scope of line 1. A theory that treats the cross only as moral influence, victory, participation, or symbol would not satisfy $R(p)$ in this strong sense and would not be the target of this inference.

Line 3, read aloud. It is not the case that standard PSA has jointly justified both the transfer rule and the sanction-fit rule. The parentheses matter: the paper need not show that every repair says nothing useful. It argues that the full pair is still missing. Imputation may offer a transfer device while leaving its justice contested; infinite worth may speak to significance while leaving sanction fit unspecified; a governmental model may define a different fit while declining literal punishment transfer.

Line 4, read aloud. Therefore, standard PSA does not yet explain retributive satisfaction. The word "yet" belongs to the interpretation of $\neg E(p)$: the conclusion concerns the account as presently specified. It does not mean that PSA is formally contradictory, that no future defender could supply both rules, that Christ's death has no religious meaning, or that a rival atonement model is true.

Why the inference is valid. Suppose, for the sake of checking the logic, that $E(p)$ were true. Line 2 gives $R(p)$, so together we would have $E(p) \wedge R(p)$. Line 1 would then require $T(p) \wedge Q(p)$. Line 3

denies that conjunction. The assumption $E(p)$ therefore produces a contradiction, so $\neg E(p)$ follows. The logical movement is valid even though the truth of line 3 remains open to philosophical challenge.

What would overturn the argument. A successful reply would specify a morally justified relation $T(p)$ that connects offenders to Christ's burden and a stable criterion $Q(p)$ that connects his treatment to the deserved sanction. It would then show why those principles remain retributive rather than quietly becoming pardon, representation, satisfaction, or moral display. Providing that pair would directly defeat line 3 and answer the paper on its strongest ground.

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