

Commentary

ACIM[®] Text (CE)

T-2.V, The Atonement as Defense

Explanation of underlining, italics and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary. See also the note there on the effects of switching from the FIP edition to the Complete and Annotated Edition.

Please note that the FIP and CE versions may differ in where paragraph breaks occur.

Overview

After examining some of the typical defense devices that we have available to us, all of which have negative as well as positive uses, the course now turns to the only defense mechanism that cannot be used destructively: the atonement.

Paragraph 1

The Atonement is the only defense which cannot be used destructively.² That is because, while everyone must eventually join it, it was not a device which was generated by humanity.³ The Atonement principle was in effect long before the Atonement itself was begun.⁴ The principle was love, and the Atonement itself was an *act* of love.¹ ⁵Acts were not necessary before the separation, because the time-space belief did not exist.

Although the Atonement was planned as a defense—a response to the separation—it was not an *attack* on separation. All other defenses are attacks as well; we have immortalized that in the saying, “The best defense is a good offense,” which simply means, “Attack them before they attack you.” The ego’s style of defense is to attack whatever external thing it perceives as the cause of its upset. The Atonement, although it is a defense, cannot be misused as a weapon of attack (destructively, 1:1). “The Atonement [is] the only defense which [is] *not* a two-edged sword” (T-2.V.2:5).

Why is that? I skipped right over the reason given for years: “because it was not a device which was generated by humanity” (1:2). What we have made is not perfect; it is subject to misuse because it is lacking (T-1.VI.1:3 (FIP), see T-1.48.19 (CE)). The

¹ In its original context, this was probably a reference to the crucifixion. (The third paragraph of this section originally began, “The Atonement actually began long before the Crucifixion.”). However, beginning in the next chapter, the Course consistently equates the Atonement with the resurrection.

Atonement is based on an eternal principle, a principle that predates the Atonement (1:3). That principle is love (1:4). The Atonement cannot be used for destruction because it is an extension of God's love. Its expression in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the act of love that demonstrated Atonement to the world, was "built into the space-time belief" (4:1), but the Atonement *principle* (love) is not native to space and time (1:3).

Paragraph 2

2 It was only after the separation that the defense of Atonement and the necessary conditions for its fulfillment were planned. 2It became increasingly apparent that all of the defenses which humanity can choose to use constructively or destructively were not enough to save it. 3It was therefore decided that you needed a defense which was so splendid that you could not misuse it, although you *could* refuse it. 4Your will could not turn it into a weapon of attack, which is the inherent characteristic of all other defenses. 5The Atonement thus became the only defense which was not a two-edged sword.

Note: The content of this paragraph can be found in FIP with somewhat altered wording at T -2.II.4:5–8.

The Atonement wasn't needed until the separation occurred (or seemed to) (2:1). It became increasingly obvious that all the defenses we reviewed in the previous section, defenses that can be used either constructively or destructively, could not save us (2:2). None of the tools in humanity's problem-solving repertoire worked. We needed a defense that could not possibly be misused (2:3), and that was the gift God gave us. We can refuse it but we cannot misuse it (2:3). All other defenses can be turned into weapons of attack, as we saw in Section IV, but not the Atonement (2:4). Our will is powerless to do that! The Atonement is "the only defense which was *not* a two-edged sword" (2:5).

The inability of our will to turn the Atonement into a weapon of attack needs some explanation. Previously it was said that our choice for the Atonement is inevitable. Maybe this "inevitable" thing sounds worrisome in itself: What happened to our free will? If I have free will, doesn't that mean I have the freedom to choose differently, to choose not to accept the Atonement? And basically, a bit earlier, in Section III.10:7, Jesus answers by saying that *when truly free*, our will "cannot miscreate." It can only miscreate while imprisoned. Since that imprisoned state denies the will's true nature, the will cannot remain there indefinitely. It must break free to find its true expression:

It still remains within you to project as God projected His Own Spirit to you. In reality, this is your only choice, because your free will was made for your own joy in creating the perfect. (T-2.II.15:3–4 (CE), (T-2.I.3:9–10 (FIP))

We are free to choose *when* we accept, but not *whether* we accept. We can put it off. We can push farther and farther into miscreation, but as we do, we encounter more and more pain. Eventually, we reach a limit; the pain becomes intolerable and we cannot go

any farther. "Eventually everyone begins to recognize, however dimly, that there must be a better way" (T-2.III.3:6 (FIP), (T-2.VI.8:3 (CE))). We'll return to this topic in the next Section.

The idea is that your will was given you by God, and it is a will to create. Now your will is imprisoned, and your will won't tolerate being imprisoned forever. Eventually, you have to realize that there must be some way out of this intolerable situation. You will then freely choose to get out, and this is synonymous with choosing to *free* your will. You will not be *forced* to accept the Atonement, but *you will choose to* because it is the only direction that makes any sense, the obvious choice, the only thing that is in accord with your nature.

An acorn "must" develop into an oak tree, and yet such development is also its freedom. Even so, our acceptance of the Atonement and fulfillment of our function of creation is the ultimate expression of our freedom. It is the choice to wholly accept our nature and to extend every fiber of our being.

Paragraph 3

3 The Atonement actually began long before the resurrection. ²Many souls offered their efforts on behalf of the separated ones. ³But they could not withstand the strength of the attack and had to be brought back. ⁴Angels came, too, but their protection was not enough, because the separated ones were not interested in peace. ⁵They had already split themselves and were bent on dividing rather than reintegrating. ⁶The levels they introduced into themselves turned against each other, and they, in turn, turned against one another. ⁷They established differences, divisions, cleavages, dispersion, and all the other concepts related to the increasing splits they produced. ⁸Not being in their right minds, they turned their defenses from protection to assault, and acted literally insanely. ⁹It was essential to introduce a split-proof device which could be used only to heal, if it was used at all.

Traditional Christianity has taught that the Atonement (forgiveness of sin) only became possible after Jesus died and rose again. Here, Jesus says it began "long before" that visual demonstration (3:1). The picture painted here offers a peek into invisible realms. "Many souls offered their efforts" (3:2). As I understand this, "many souls" refers to parts or aspects of the Sonship that did not make the mistake of choosing separation. We are aspects, or souls, that made that mistake. Many of the souls who had not made the mistake volunteered to enter into our illusion of a separated world in order to reach us. The many early spiritual teachers and prophets (most of whom are unknown to us) "could not withstand the strength of the attack and had to be brought back" (3:2–3). Angels also came to offer us their protection, but it wasn't enough because we "were not interested in peace" (3:4).

This talk of unfallen souls and angelic hosts is not essential to our understanding of the Course, which may be why the early editors decided to drop it. Gloria Wapnick, Ken's wife, had an extended vision or revelation along the same lines and once, with

Ken's help, wrote a book that included this "cosmological myth." It is called *Awaken from the Dream*. The bulk of the book presents the basic ideas of the Course, and offers "a unique approach to the Course's teaching of "not making the error real." The book is still in print. I had not realized until now that the "myth" was part of the original dictation.

What I do find significant here is the account of humanity's descent into the hell of separation. It deserves to be part of this discussion of the origins of separation. After saying that humanity wasn't interested in peace, the description continues to say that humanity preferred to continue dividing rather than reintegrating (3:5). We refused to recognize our mistake, and we doubled down on it. We were determined to prove that our way of separating was better than the integration God was offering. Attack became our preferred tool. We had divided our very selves into levels (body, mind, emotion, conscious, subconscious), and as these levels came into conflict with each other, it led us to turn against our brothers and sisters. Inner divisions led to external divisions (3:6).

We see this so often! One person's psychological disturbances and conflicts are taken out on the people around them.

The result in our world was, and still is, "differences, divisions, cleavages, dispersion, and all the other concepts related to the increasing splits they produced" (3:7). We speak of "the" separation, but it wasn't a single event. Separation began and then multiplied in form and in extent. We were no longer in our right minds. We twisted valid defense mechanisms into weapons of attack. We became *literally* insane (3:8).

This is the reason God created the Atonement. It is "a split-proof device which [can] be used *only* to heal if it [is] used at all" (3:9). This statement is related to what has been said previously: Our will can still *refuse* to accept the Atonement, but we cannot *misuse* it in any way. This concluding sentence explains why the cosmological myth presented in this paragraph makes sense and belongs here. Other methods were tried, and failed. The Atonement was *essential*.

Paragraph 4

4 The Atonement was built into the space-time belief in order to set a limit on the need for the belief, and ultimately to make learning complete. ²The Atonement is the final lesson. ³Learning itself, like the classrooms in which it occurs, is temporary. ⁴(Let all those who overestimate human intelligence remember this.) ⁵The ability to learn has no value when change of understanding is no longer necessary. ⁶The eternally creative have nothing to learn. ⁷Only after the separation was it necessary to direct the creative force to learning, because changed behavior had become mandatory.

Atonement doesn't exist in Heaven. It isn't needed there. But God built it into "the space-time belief" so that that very belief would be limited (4:1). Good news! This mess won't last forever! Meanwhile, we engage in a learning process, using the split-proof device of Atonement. Eventually our learning will be complete. That is God's guarantee.

There is only one lesson to learn, and that is the Atonement. It *is* the final lesson (4:2). Once we learn this, there is nothing further to be learned. The world, our classroom, and the learning itself are temporary (4:3).

Lesson 74 says, “There is no will be God’s I cannot be in conflict.” It adds, “I am at peace...My will is God’s.” Accepting that there is no will but God’s, and His will is my will, is part of the Atonement. If I have a separate will it inherently breeds conflict. The only way to find peace is to end any belief in separate wills. Learn this, and learning is over! Atonement means one will. More than one is separation.

The warning in sentence 4:4 about overestimating human intelligence is intriguing. I’ve been reading a book about quantum computers, *Quantum Supremacy*, by Michio Kaku, a professor of theoretical physics at City University of New York. This is a new kind of computer. Unlike digital computers, based on memories consisting of billions of “bits” that have two states, zero or one, off or on, quantum computers use subatomic particles called *quata* that have thousands of states, almost an infinite number. Each state can represent a different bit of information. They can solve a problem in one hour that would take human beings 10,000 *years* to solve!

The quantum computers run at near absolute zero in order to achieve this. They exist now, and the author predicts that by the end of this decade they will begin to do things like solve global warming and eliminate all incurable diseases.

Still, quantum computers are just extensions of human intelligence. Can they bring world peace? Probably not, because humans are so broken into different levels within themselves they will likely use these super computers to attack one another. We should not overestimate human intelligence!

Accept the Atonement and the ability to learn, however rapidly, no longer has value (4:5). “The eternally creative have nothing to learn” (4:6). The only reason learning became necessary was the separation (4:7). It became mandatory to change our behavior. Atonement is a temporary diversion of creative energy, and once the one essential lesson is learned, that creative power can once again be directed to its original creative purpose.

Paragraph 5

5 Human beings can learn to improve their behavior, and can also learn to become better and better learners. ²This increase serves to bring them into closer and closer accord with the Sonship. ³But the Sonship itself is a perfect creation, and perfection is not a matter of degree. ⁴Only while there are different degrees is learning meaningful.

The purpose of the Atonement is to change our *behavior* (4:7). That is the purpose of learning, and we can learn to improve our behavior (5:1). What are we learning? Back in T-2.IV.13:4–6, we read this:

⁴The real question still remains, *What* do you treasure and *how much* do you treasure it? Once you learn to consider these two points and bring them into all your actions as the true criteria for behavior, I will have little

difficulty in clarifying the means. ⁶You have not learned to be consistent about this as yet. (T-2.IV.13:1–6 (CE))

So, we are learning to be consistent about what we truly treasure and how much. Being consistent means being “better learners” (5:1). This will allow Jesus to clarify the means we can use to improve our behavior (the means, as we shall see shortly, is the miracle, an expression of love (T-2.VI.1:2). Learning to align our will with God’s, recognizing their unity, allows Jesus to perform miracles through our hands, as he promised at the start of the Text. It seems that this is what Atonement does for us. It involves learning our true will and desiring that will above all else, transforming our behavior and bringing us “into closer and closer accord with the Sonship” (5:2), which is another way of saying we gradually end our separation from one another.

Jesus declares that the Sonship is a perfect creation with no degrees (5:3). That speaks of its eternal state, but while we believe in degrees, we need learning to *undo* that belief (5:4).

Paragraph 6

6 The evolution of humankind is merely a process by which you proceed from one degree to the next. ²You correct your previous missteps by stepping forward. ³This represents a process which is actually incomprehensible in temporal terms, because you return as you go forward. ⁴The Atonement is the device by which you can free yourself from the past as you go ahead. ⁵It undoes your past errors, thus making it unnecessary for you to keep retracing your steps without advancing toward your return.

Evolution of humankind has been a slow, steady movement from separate individuals to global oneness, broken up with backsliding as each new level arises, provokes negative reaction from those stuck at a lower level, but eventually winning the day and prevailing in human consciousness. *Spiral Dynamics* has studied this process, showing how we as a species have moved from little more than instinctual animals to growing in stages:

- * Tribal, magic/animistic, major goal of safety
- * Egoic, impulsive, feudal & exploitive empires, goal=status, power, glory
- * Rule/role self, nation states, authoritarian religions, goal=ultimate peace
- * Achiever Self, capitalistic democracies, play game to win, goal=material pleasure
- * Sensitive self, social democracies, seek inner peace & caring community, goal=affectionate relations
- * Integral self, world-centric, goal=integral synthesis (still emerging)
- * Holistic self, collective individualism, goal=peace in an incomprehensible world

The spiral growth occurs in individuals as well as in humankind as a whole. As we move up the spiral we evolve from fierce, survivalist individualism toward a realization that we, with all other people and indeed every living thing, are part of a single whole. As Jesus says here, “You correct your previous missteps by stepping forward” (6:2). In ordinary thinking our “progress” is incomprehensible, because we are really going

backward, returning to our original created state (6:3). The Atonement allows us to free ourselves from our past errors as we move into the future (6:4). It undoes our past errors. We don't have to go back to clean up the past because the past is gone. Really, we cannot go back to the past! All we can do is choose differently in the present. We reinterpret what we thought were our sins and perceive them now as mistakes needing correction, not punishment.

Paragraph 7

7 In this sense, the Atonement saves time, but like the miracle which serves the Atonement, does not abolish it.² ²As long as there is need for Atonement, there is need for time. ³But the Atonement as a completed plan does have a unique relationship to time. ⁴Until the Atonement is finished, its various phases will proceed *in* time, but the whole Atonement stands at its end. ⁵At this point, the bridge of the return has been built.

The Atonement saves time but does not abolish time. This is similar to a miracle, which serves the Atonement (7:1). Miracles are the means by which we receive the Atonement. Both save time but act within the context of time. Although time is an illusion, it is necessary to provide us with opportunities to correct our past mistakes.

The relationship of time to the Atonement as a completed plan is unique. In a sense, the Atonement is perfectly complete. Although within time it appears to proceed through various phases, it stands whole and complete at the end of time (7:2–4). At that point, “the bridge of return has been built” (7:5). One way to understand this is that the Atonement is eternally complete, but we need time to unravel our minds and accept its completion.

Paragraph 8

8 If you find discussion of the Atonement upsetting, it is because the Atonement is a total commitment. ²You still think this is associated with loss. ³This is the same mistake all the separated ones make in one way or another. ⁴They cannot believe that a defense which cannot attack is the best defense. ⁵Except for this misperception, the angels *could* have helped them. ⁶What do you think “the meek shall inherit the earth” means?³ ⁷They will literally take it over, because of their strength.⁴ ⁸A two-way defense is inherently weak; precisely because it has two edges it can turn against the self very unexpectedly.

² Pronoun clarification: “but like the miracle which serves it [the Atonement], does not abolish it [time].”

³ Matthew 5:5 (RSV): “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

⁴ The Greek word *praotes* (meekness, gentleness) does not refer to weakness, but rather means “gentle but strong.”

The first thing that pops into my mind is, “Why would we find discussing the Atonement *upsetting*?” Jesus immediately offers what is probably the number one reason: We think Atonement is associated with loss (8:2). Think back just a few paragraphs to the discussion about how accepting the Atonement requires us to realize that there is no will but God’s; to accept that I have no choice but to share God’s will. I am not separate. I am not independent. Being upset by that line of thought is, I think, very understandable.

Another reason for upset is the notion that Atonement cannot attack (8:4). We think that without some sort of attack, we are defenseless and in danger. In one form or another, *everyone* makes this mistake (8:3). It’s at the root of most objections that people raise to the very idea of forgiveness. “What? I just let them get away with it?” “How could I ever love someone who did *that*?” “Don’t tell me I can never shut anyone out of my heart!”

If we didn’t have this misperception of Atonement, “the angels *could* have helped” us (8:5). But we wouldn’t let go of that fear of the Atonement, and more dramatic measures became necessary.

Jesus asks us, “What do you think ‘the meek shall inherit the earth’ means?” (8:6). He goes on to say the meek will take over the earth “because of their strength” (8:7). “Meek” here means “defenseless,” in the sense of having no so-called defense that attacks anyone. Lesson 153 says, “In my defenselessness my safety lies.” (If you have not read this lesson recently, now would be a good time.) Remember, the Atonement cannot be a two-edged sword that can turn against you unexpectedly, as every other defense can. The reason the meek can take over the earth, and will, is because they don’t have any two-edged defenses (8:8).

Paragraph 9

9 This tendency cannot be controlled except by miracles. ²The miracle turns the defense of Atonement to the protection of the inner self, which, as it becomes more and more secure, assumes its natural talent of protecting others. ³The inner self knows itself as both a brother *and* a Son.⁵

“This tendency” refers to the tendency to associate the Atonement with loss. The *only* way to control it is with miracles (9:1). You can’t think your way out of it or reason your way out of it. Not even reading my comments above will do it! Miracles apply the Atonement to the protection of your inner self. As you become more and more secure, your inner self “assumes its natural talent of protecting others” (9:2). As you find inner peace, you share peace outwardly.

Here is what I wrote back in 2010 about these last two paragraphs:

The kind of self-defense the Course advocates seems to be quite similar to non-resistance or non-violence. The Atonement cannot attack (3); it does not do violence to anyone. Those who practice this kind of defense—true denial that any expression of lack of love can bring harm, and refusal to attribute blame and to judge—are harmless. We might tend to think they are helpless as well, and at the mercy of whoever attacks them,

⁵ See Cameo 12: “Defenses Are Now Being Used Much Better.”

but that would be to believe that the so-called attack can bring about true harm. We have to admit, though—it is very hard to give up attack as a means of defense entirely. It seems a great loss. It seems to turn us into dishrags, doormats, or cowards.

Yet, “The Atonement is a total commitment” (1). If we do not give up attack entirely, we have not given it up at all. That sort of half-hearted effort is just the sort of practice of the Atonement that won’t work. If you hold on to attack in any way, it can be turned against you (6). If you hold onto attack in any way, it will be turned against you. The defense that was supposed to protect your peace of mind will end up attacking your peace of mind. How? Your attack will make you feel guilty and make you fear the punishment you now think you deserve.

To take the Atonement as our defense is to be meek. The meek are those who defend their peace through the Atonement and through true denial rather than by attacking the people outside them who seem to cause the upset. Our usual picture of a meek person is a timid weakling. The Greek word for “meek” used in the New Testament, *proates*, does not denote a weakling. It means “gentle yet strong” (according to Marcus Borg in *The Lost Gospel Q: The Original Sayings of Jesus*, Ulysses Press, Berkeley, California, 1996). The meek are strong because they defend their peace with a one-edged sword that cannot turn and attack them. If they defended their peace by attacking others, they would be weak and could not take over the earth.

The meek offer miracles. They return blessing for cursing (W-pI.137.13.1; see also Luke 6:28). As they offer miracles, declining to “protect” their false identity as bodies and egos, their true Identity is uncovered. They become more and more secure in that Identity, and as they do, they assume their real function of protecting the minds of others from fear and doubt. They become saviors to their brothers, and true Sons to God.

There were significant changes made in the CE, although for the most part there was no alteration in the meaning of the text, and the *Manual for Teachers* had far fewer changes. There are some changes in section and paragraph breaks and sentence structure that result in different numbering in references to the same text in the two editions. When there is a major difference I will indicate it with a footnote.

I have attempted for all references to add a separate FIP reference if it differs from the CE reference, but I may have missed some. If so, I apologize. Please let me know of any referencing problems you find.

I have also tried to edit my commentary so as to reflect any wording changes in the CE. For instance, the CE Text restored the plural use of “you” where the FIP had substituted the phrase “you and your brother.” One such instance will illustrate the kind of change, significant in actual words but nearly identical in overall meaning:

FIP: Thus you and your brother but shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point you both agreed to keep intact.

CE: You shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point which you had both agreed to keep intact.