

**Reconciling Condemnation and Heteronomy in Athanasius**  
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Contemporary religious thinking contains a variety of elements that are inimical to the idea of divine judgment and the condemnation of humanity because of sin. Given this conflict, Christian apologetics must find some way to mediate between its own teachings and contemporary values. Dialectic between Christian theology and conflicting cultural values can occur in one of two manners: Either Christianity can critique the cultural ethos and offer an alternative valuation, or Christianity can attempt to show that its teachings and values, when properly understood, are not in conflict with the broader culture. The modern emphasis on autonomy as a component of moral dignity poses a strong enough challenge to Christian ideas of divine judgment to require this second method of apologetic. How can God make rules about something as arbitrary as eating from a tree and implement punishment for their trespass without this being anything but a heteronomous imposition onto individual human freedom? A sufficiently sophisticated formulation of these teachings about divine condemnation is necessary in order to show that they do not deprive humanity of the dignity proper to a legitimate autonomy. Toward this end, this paper will identify the mechanisms of condemnation present in Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* and demonstrate that his position on condemnation because of trespass of divine law need not be understood as an example of heteronomy.<sup>1</sup>

**Athanasius and the Penalty of Death**

Athanasius was, by all accounts, a dramatic and influential figure in the history of the early Church.<sup>2</sup> He wrote extensively against Arianism in works such as *History of the Arians*, his correspondence, and his greatest work of

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<sup>1</sup> Heteronomy is here understood as the imposition of a moral or ethical standard from a source other than an individual's own self.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, (Westminster: Newman Press, 1950), vol. 3: 20.

dogmatic theology: *Against the Arians*.<sup>3</sup> Not only his writings, but also his life framed the terms of the Arian controversies following the Council of Nicaea—five times he was exiled from his episcopal see in Alexandria because of his unflagging defense of Nicene Christology.<sup>4</sup> But before all these forays into controversial theology, Athanasius cut his teeth on a two-volume work of apologetics. *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation*, among the first writings of his career, are notable for containing Athanasius' most positive assessment of Greek philosophy and for lacking any reference to Arianism.<sup>5</sup>

Johannes Quasten identifies *On the Incarnation* as the “classical exposition of the doctrine of redemption and the patristic counterpart to St. Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*.”<sup>6</sup> The doctrinal formulations of *On the Incarnation* occur within the genre of an apology.<sup>7</sup> Edward Rochie Hardy notes that this dual characteristic of the work situates it as a transition point between the apologetic literature of the previous two centuries and the doctrinal interests of the councils to come.<sup>8</sup> While there exists general consensus that this is an early writing of Athanasius (i.e., pre-dating his first exile),<sup>9</sup> scholars dispute whether it was written before the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and the Arian controversy. Moreschini and Norelli favor a later dating (332-335 A.D.) based on linguistic similarities with other Athanasian works around the time of the first exile and a possible reliance on Eusebius’ *Divine Manifestations*, dated around 335.<sup>10</sup> The complete lack of any mention of the Arians or polemic against their teachings counts against such a finding, however. Hardy and Meijering both prefer pre-Nicene dates, giving ranges of 316-318 and 318-323 A.D., respectively.<sup>11</sup> An early dating seems preferable, both because of the lack of Arian references and also because of the relatively irenic,<sup>12</sup> even triumphal<sup>13</sup> tone Athanasius takes in the work. Such an attitude would be unlikely to persevere in the face of a fracture in the Church as serious as the Arian controversy.

Athanasius’ main concern in *On the Incarnation* is to show that the incarnation, with the attendant suffering and resurrection of Jesus, is uniquely

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<sup>3</sup> Claudio Moreschini and Enrico Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin literature : a literary history*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), vol. 2: 41, 36, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Quasten, *ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> Moreschini, *op. cit.*, 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> E. P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius: Synthesis or Antithesis?*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill: 1968), 107.

<sup>8</sup> *Christology of the Later Fathers*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Hardy, *op. cit.*, 44; Meijering, *op. cit.*, 109; Moreschini, *op. cit.*, 35; Quasten, *op. cit.*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Hardy, *ibid.*; Meijering, *ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> Meijering, *op. cit.*, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Hardy, *ibid*.

suited to the purpose of salvation.<sup>14</sup> Athanasius defends both the general concept of God becoming human and the specifics of the passion and resurrection against typical Greek and Jewish objections that these events would be unseemly for God. He does this by showing that salvation via the incarnation is a continuation or renewal of God's previous creative activity.<sup>15</sup> The Λόγος or Word of God created all things, leaving its mark upon them. With the entry of sin into the world, humanity lost its full participation in the Λόγος, therefore the Word had to become incarnate in order to refashion humanity in its image again.<sup>16</sup> Because the Word became human, a new degree of participation in the divine beyond that of the original creation was made possible. God no longer is just the author of humanity, but now serves as the very form and model of the new humanity established in Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Within this general schema, Athanasius formulates a problematic referred to as the "Divine Dilemma." The dilemma comes from two seemingly conflicting commitments on the part of God. On the one hand, Athanasius describes death and corruption as necessary consequences of humanity's decision to sin. Athanasius sets out this commitment in this passage:

For [God] brought them into his own Garden, and he gave them a law: so that if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care...; but that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature, no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and abide in death and in corruption.<sup>18</sup>

The other horn of the dilemma comes from God's good intention in creating the world. Creation came about because of God's generous choice, and if the freedom of humans leads this creation into death and corruption, then the will of God seems to have been thwarted. Athanasius concludes that it would have been better for God never to have created than for corruption to overcome what God did create.<sup>19</sup> For Athanasius, either of these alternatives would be "at once monstrous and unseemly."<sup>20</sup> Only the assumption of human flesh by the Word enables God to meet fruitfully both these demands.

Throughout *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius characterizes the condemnation that constitutes the first horn of the Divine Dilemma in two

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<sup>14</sup> Moreschini, op. cit., 35.

<sup>15</sup> *On the Incarnation* 1:4.

<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Schneider, "The intimate connection between Christ and Christians in Athanasius," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58:1 (2005): 6-8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> *On the Incarnation* 3:4; in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954). 58.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:7; Hardy, 61.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:2; Hardy, 60.

manners, as condemnation resulting (1 from ontological or (2 from juridical causes. The motifs of corruption (φθορά) and of death (θάνατος), respectively, roughly correspond to these two types of condemnation. Athanasius makes the distinction clearest when discussing the different types of salvation wrought by the incarnation. “And so it was that two marvels came to pass at once,” Athanasius writes, “that the death of all was accomplished in the Lord’s body, and that death and corruption were wholly done away by reason of the Word that was united with it.”<sup>21</sup> Athanasius views the incarnation as solving two distinct problems. The first condition remedied by Christ is the death owed by all, which we will see is the death owed as a result of legal trespass. The second condition remedied is that of the corruption and death<sup>22</sup> intrinsic to the mutable nature of humanity, an ontological fate that humanity had been abandoned to after its sin.

While Athanasius himself regards this ontological corruption as the more basic form of the condemnation,<sup>23</sup> the Platonic and other metaphysical commitments of his reasoning make it less useful for contemporary apologetic theology. Therefore, I will only give a brief overview here. Because humanity was created out of nothing, its being has a natural tendency toward corruption.<sup>24</sup> Only the image of God present in humanity prevented such degeneration,<sup>25</sup> and when by sin humanity turned its mind from knowledge of God, losing this image, humanity immediately became subject to the innate corruptibility of its nature.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the image of God in humanity needed to be restored through the incarnation of the Word.<sup>27</sup>

A better candidate for constructive engagement with modern culture is Athanasius’ account of how humanity is under a liability of death. This liability is sometimes discussed as a legal liability (as a penalty for breaking a law, νόμος) and in other locations referred to as a financial liability (debt, οφειλόμενον). Athanasius traces the legal liability back to Genesis’ story of an originary trespass against divine law. In the creation account of Genesis, God established a law to preserve human freedom from going astray and attached the penalty of death to the infraction of this law. When the first humans

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 20: 5; Hardy, 74.

<sup>22</sup> In various cases, Athanasius will use θάνατος in the vicinity of φθορά in a manner that is consistent with an ontological condemnation rather than a juridical one. The significance of the term, then, must be determined from the context. However, the terms may still be considered representative of the two types of condemnation both since the substitution is never reversed (e.g., φθορά serving to indicate juridical condemnation) and also because of the instances when Athanasius clearly contrasts the two words (e.g., 44:8, where Athanasius asserts that a salvific act that remedied only θάνατος would not serve as a remedy for φθορά).

<sup>23</sup> C.f. *On the Incarnation* 44, where he identifies corruption as intrinsic to the human body and more problematic for redemption than death itself.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 4:6; Hardy, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3:3; Hardy, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 7:4; Hardy, 61-62.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 13:7; Hardy, 67.

transgressed this law, the law (and God's commitment to it) demanded that they die. Athanasius writes, "For death, as I said above, gained from that time forward a legal hold over us, and it was impossible to evade the law, since it had been laid down by God because of the transgression."<sup>28</sup> For Athanasius, the necessity of the penalty derives from God's own truthfulness. Once God has made such a commitment, it cannot be abrogated without making God a liar—a sheer impossibility for Athanasius. This is the basis of the first horn of the divine dilemma.<sup>29</sup> The incarnation serves to diffuse this penalty by offering Christ's own death on our behalf, thereby acting to "put an end to the law which was against us...."<sup>30</sup>

Within the image of financial liability, death is understood as the payment required by the debt that has been incurred. The language of debt communicates for Athanasius both the necessity of the payment<sup>31</sup> (which reinforces the necessity observed previously in the legal liability) and the possibility of Christ making such a payment vicariously.<sup>32</sup> Athanasius identifies both these in the following passage:

But since it was necessary also that the debt [οφειλόμενον] owing from all should be paid again, for, as I have already said, it was owing [οφείλετο] that all should die ... to this intent ... he next offered up his sacrifice also on behalf of all....<sup>33</sup>

Death is a price that has been incurred in a non-negotiable manner, and as a price, it may be paid by anyone with the currency, most exemplarily God.

Athanasius' use of the image of debt remains underdeveloped, however. Unlike with both the ontological necessity of corruption (all created beings tend toward nothingness) and with the legal liability of death (the trespass of God's law requires the juridical administration of the penalty attached to the law), Athanasius gives no account of how the debt was incurred. Without this component, any assertion that a debt is owed would be unjust, for a debt is just precisely when it is reimbursement for a previously incurred cost on the part of the lender.

In the end, the image of financial liability must be considered parasitic upon the more developed image of the legal liability. Because of free trespass, a penalty was incurred, and this penalty Athanasius at times labels debt. Aside from rhetorical variety, the only advantage of this different image is that it offers a more intuitive account of why the Word can vicariously suffer the penalty. Financial liability can be defrayed by a third party without raising eyebrows, but

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 6: 2; Hardy, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 6: 3; Hardy, 61.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10, 5; Hardy, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 20:5; Hardy, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9:2; Hardy, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 20:2; Hardy, 74.

administering legal punishment to someone who did not commit a crime requires a commitment to a substantial (and, to the contemporary mind, unpalatable) account of retributive justice that would justify such an action. While in some locations Athanasius seems to rely on just such an account,<sup>34</sup> other times he brings in the image of financial debt because it allows for vicarious satisfaction with less theoretical commitments and therefore fewer occasions for objection.

### The Penalty of Death and Heteronomy

Heteronomy, the imposition of a moral or ethical standard from a source other than an individual's own self, has a significant negative value in contemporary social life. Heteronomy is contrasted with autonomy, the ability for one's self to act as the source of moral obligation. The distinctly modern idea of autonomy reaches its strongest formulation in the thought of Immanuel Kant, who describes it as follows: "Autonomy of the will is the property that the will has of being a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition)."<sup>35</sup> For Kant, the moral law is provided by the structure of the will itself, regardless of which "objects of volition" are present. No other content besides that of the will itself can validly influence the establishment or content of morality.<sup>36</sup> Kant points out, "If the will seeks the law that is to determine it anywhere but in the fitness of its maxims for its own legislation of universal laws, and if it thus goes outside of itself and seeks this law in the character of any of its objects, then heteronomy always results."<sup>37</sup> Such heteronomy is to be avoided.

Kant himself views heteronomy as deleterious because it threatens the universally binding nature of the moral law; however, heteronomy's impact on human dignity is far more important for apologetic outreach to contemporary culture. Kant argues that autonomy is the basis for human dignity.<sup>38</sup> This means that any heteronomous impingement of human autonomy would simultaneously impinge on the dignity of the human beings involved. Contemporary intuitions about moral justice and the nature of oppression agree with this analysis. Situations in which one social group determines the laws according to which another group lives are broadly viewed as oppressive. This

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<sup>34</sup> C.f. 10:5, where he regards the sacrifice of Jesus' body as bringing the legal liability to an end.

<sup>35</sup> *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1993), §440, 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, §439, 44.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, §441, 45.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, §436, 41. While Kant's equation of human dignity with human autonomy is far too reductive, the author agrees that a significant portion of that dignity derives from the ability of the individual human being to know and internalize the moral law. Granting this, any instance of heteronomy would still entail a curtailment of human dignity, even if not in the absolute fashion Kant describes.

is true even when the directly negative effects of such a rule are largely mitigated, as in the case of the caring slave owner or an imperial power that takes seriously the “white man’s burden” of improving the lives of those colonized. The mere fact of living according to the rule of another denies an adult human being her full dignity, no matter how benevolent that rule may be.

*Prima facie*, this analysis poses a significant threat to Athanasius’ account of human condemnation deriving from trespass of a divine law. As presented above, Athanasius believed that death had a legal hold over all of humanity because of the infraction of divine law in the Garden of Eden. Yet the law that had been broken derived from a source external to the first parents of the human race. Athanasius informs us that *God* “gave them a law.”<sup>39</sup> If the binding nature of the law derives from the simple fact that it came from God, this is an example of heteronomy. Humanity, despite its inherent dignity, would be being ruled by an authority other than its own. It may be objected that, given the absolutely good nature of God, the rule of God would be good as well, even the most perfect of governances. This objection misses the significance of autonomy, however. Autonomous, free beings cannot be viewed simply as instruments to another, greater good, no matter how perfect that good may be. Free beings must have an intrinsic connection to the good, acknowledging the good and themselves accepting that good as the law by which they will live. If God were to act by fiat in the life of humanity, this would do violence to humanity’s freedom, and hence its dignity, regardless of how high minded that fiat might be. It appears that God’s legislation of the moral law, as described by Genesis and affirmed by Athanasius, violates legitimate human autonomy.

Fortunately, a closer examination reveals that Athanasius has resources to answer such a challenge. He himself recognizes the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic condemnation. This may be observed when he investigates whether God had the option of saving humanity by a simple command rather than through the incarnation. Addressing this question, Athanasius distinguishes between the death that could hypothetically been forestalled by an extrinsic command and the corruption that would have remained intrinsic to human nature.<sup>40</sup> He writes, “...[I]f death [θάνατος] had been kept from the body by a mere command on his part, it would none the less have been mortal and corruptible [φθαρτῆν], according to the nature of bodies [κατα τον των σωμάτων λόγον]...”<sup>41</sup> Athanasius clearly regards ontological corruption as endemic to the being of humanity, and not as an external imposition, and this leads him to conclude that salvation must occur according to that being as well.<sup>42</sup>

Contemporary readers of Athanasius do not need to be satisfied with just a defense of the intrinsic nature of ontological corruption, however. As noted previously, ontological analysis has limited apologetic utility in modern

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<sup>39</sup> *On the Incarnation*, 3:4; Hardy, 58.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 44:5; Hardy, 99.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 44:8; Hardy, 99.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 44:2; Hardy, 98.

culture. Yet Athanasius never explicitly indicates that a similar intrinsic (and thus non-heteronomous) necessity applies to the legal liability of death. Indeed, if he genuinely believed that death could be defeated by a simple command of God, this would imply that the penalty of death had only an extrinsic and imposed necessity. But even if Athanasius himself never developed this line of reasoning, this author believes that he does provide adequate theological resources for a contemporary apologist to develop just such an argument. A non-heteronomous account of humanity's condemnation on legal grounds would then offer a simple and elegant basis upon which to enter into dialogue with contemporary values. To build such an account, I will follow the example Athanasius set by identifying the conditions for human condemnation within human nature itself.

While Athanasius relied upon the ontological composition of humanity to serve as the intrinsic basis of corruption, the legal liability of humanity must have a different but similarly intrinsic origin: the *rationality* of the human being. When Athanasius describes the creation of humanity, he remarks that humans were made “λογικοι”—rational.<sup>43</sup> The reason present in humanity not only comes *from* God, however; it is *of* God as well. Athanasius asserts that God made humanity after the divine image, “giving them a portion even of the power of his own Word.”<sup>44</sup> The same capacity to reason is present in humanity and in God, although humanity receives it as an image, while in God the Λόγος (capable of being translated both as “reason” or as “word”<sup>45</sup>) is present as an uncreated and personal reality.

If the same reason is present in humanity as is in God, this may serve as the basis of an understanding of the divinely imposed moral law that protects legitimate human autonomy. After all, given God's perfection, any moral law established by God would have to derive from God's reason and be intelligible to that reason. Insofar as God's reason has been shared with humanity, then, the moral law must also in an analogous sense derive from and be intelligible to humanity. Of course, just as a real difference exists between humanity's manner of possessing reason and God's, so would a difference exist in the manner in which humanity and God could appreciate the moral law and will its establishment. God remains the source of the moral law (and therefore of condemnation according to it) in a more basic and complete manner than humanity does, but humanity's bestowed participation in divine reason is sufficiently robust to deny that any law established by God could be foreign to humanity's own nature. Humanity's own rational nature is so patterned that the very law that derives from its nature is the same law established in a more originary sense by God.

This means that the condemnation of humanity because of sin is not heteronomous, either. In fact, it may appropriately be described as self-

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 3:3; Hardy, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> *A Greek English Lexicon*, ed. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 1058-1059.

condemnation. So long as the pattern of the divine Word exists within humanity, that pattern will will the moral good and desire justice for those who trespass against it, even if that transgressor is humanity itself. The divinity in humanity willingly accuses the sin in humanity, ensuring that the condemnation incurred will not be heteronomous. Intriguingly, this self-accusation is an analogue to contemporary psychological accounts of sin as self-alienation from God, others, and the self. It is on the basis of continuing internal recognition of the good that a sinner intuits the presence of that good in God, others, and the self. The sinner implicitly recognizes that she does not live up to this standard and flees from God, others, and the self in order to insulate herself from that pain, and thus self-imposing the penalty of absolute isolation and alienation. If Christianity is to make sense of condemnation for sin to contemporary culture, it will have to continue to find expressions of that idea that respect legitimate human autonomy. As shown from the writings of Athanasius, this does not preclude developing more traditional models of condemnation like that of a legal penalty.