



INCARNATIONAL HUMAN DIGNITY

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ABSTRACT: For those who believe in universal human dignity, explaining the basis of such dignity has proven challenging. In this essay, I argue that Christian theism can help. I develop a novel grounding of human dignity based on the incarnation. According to this account, every human being acquires dignity because the incarnate Son uses human nature to accomplish something profoundly good, the redemption of the cosmos. I argue this account escapes the familiar Euthyphro challenge, and therefore can figure in an argument for theism from human dignity.

KEYWORDS: dignity, human rights, theism, incarnation, Euthyphro problem

The most pleased of the lot was the other lion, who kept running about everywhere pretending to be very busy but really in order to say to everyone he met, 'Did you hear what he said? *Us lions*. That means him and me. *Us lions*.'

— C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*

Introduction

Some Christian philosophers claim that when God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, it made a difference to the axiological status of human beings. It made us matter more. It was ennobling or elevating for us. For example, here is Richard Swinburne:

If you think God walked on Earth, you are likely to have a different kind of reverence for him than if you think of him merely as a philosopher's first principle; and also a different kind of reverence for men of whom he became one. (Swinburne, 1981, p. 150)

Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests the incarnation makes possible a distinctively Christian grounding of human dignity:

Christians hold that, in Jesus, the second person of the Trinity assumed our nature. This is an extraordinary honor. To each of us the second person of the Trinity pays the honor of assuming our nature, thereby sharing our nature with us. We have no greater dignity than that. To torture a human being is to torture a creature whose nature has been assumed by the second person of the Trinity. (Wolterstorff, 2012, p. 200)

The idea here is that all human beings enjoy greater dignity because God, when incarnate, took on their nature.¹ This idea I shall call *the Incarnation Thesis*:

The Incarnation Thesis. If Jesus Christ was God incarnate in human form as Christians have understood him to be, then every single human being thereby gains significant worth or dignity sufficient to ground his basic rights.

My aim in this essay is to defend the Incarnation Thesis.

This thesis is relevant to a major project in moral philosophy, that of finding a basis for universal human dignity. Many philosophers claim that all human beings, regardless of race, gender, ability, and so on, possess a certain fundamental dignity demanding recognition and respect. This dignity, understood to be a kind of intrinsic worth or moral status, is often said to be the source of our basic rights such as the right not to be murdered or enslaved. Notoriously, however, it has proven difficult to find a basis for such dignity. This is especially challenging given the need to include those with severe cognitive impairments as equal bearers of dignity alongside the rest of us.² In light of this, if Wolterstorff is correct, and the incarnation is a source of dignity for all, this would be significant indeed. It would mean that theists – and not mere theists but *Christian* theists – have an advantage over secular naturalists in grounding human dignity. And it would mean that Christian theists have this advantage over other, non-Christian theists as well. Thus, in this essay, I aim not only to defend the Incarnation Thesis, but to draw out its relevance to this broader project of grounding universal human dignity.³

¹ Wolterstorff only gestures at this idea: His main theory of human dignity is based on God's love for us (see his 2008, Ch. 16, and 2012, Ch. 7), an idea I return to in section 6.

² Secular moral theories that struggle to include certain cognitively impaired persons as bearers of dignity or even more generally as holders of moral status include Dworkin (1993), Franklin (2022), Griffin (2009), Kateb (2014), Nussbaum (2011), Singer (2011), Theunissen (2020), and Tooley (1972), to offer just a few examples. But see Wielenberg (2021) for a secular theory of rights that explicitly seeks to include the cognitively impaired in order to compete with rival theistic theories. For a response to Wielenberg, see Ballard (unpublished ms).

³ The Incarnation Thesis is also relevant to a second area, the axiology of theism (see Ballard, 2024; or Loughheed, 2020 for a sense of the issues here). This recently burgeoning field addresses, not whether God exists, but whether His existence would be better than His non-existence. And in my view, the Incarnation Thesis, if true, entails a way in which God's existence *would* be better. The Incarnation Thesis would mean, for one, that if God exists and became incarnate as a human being, this would add value

The Doctrine of the Incarnation

In the traditional Chalcedonian formulation, the doctrine of the incarnation states that the second person of the trinity – hereafter *the Son* – became incarnate in Jesus Christ, assuming a human nature. The result is that Christ, though one person, is both fully human and fully divine.

This doctrine has given rise to centuries of speculation as to how such an incarnation might be possible. However, these metaphysical difficulties are not our object here. I will just assume the incarnation is at least possible. This is a substantive assumption, to be sure, but in a short essay such as this, and one focused on human dignity, I can add nothing to the notable defenses of the possibility of the incarnation already on offer.⁴

If the incarnation turns out to be *impossible*, then the Incarnation Thesis would still be true. But it would be trivially true, because, by explosion, anything follows from an impossibility. Note, however, that a similar challenge plagues many other issues in the philosophy of religion. Consider that many hold God's existence to be a matter of necessity. Thus, given atheism, theism would be necessarily false. And then, by explosion, anything would follow from theism. So it would just be trivially true that, if God exists, there would be no evil in the world. For parallel reasons, given theism, it would just be trivially true that if God does not exist, the fine-tuning of the universe cannot be adequately explained. So this difficulty of tracing out the implications of counterpossibles turns out to be a pervasive problem in the philosophy of religion, so long as God's existence is a matter of necessity.⁵

In light of this, I think defending the Incarnation Thesis is sensible even if the incarnation turns out to be impossible. Nevertheless, it will simplify things if I just assume the incarnation is a genuine possibility. Presently, this makes dialectical sense anyway. After all, I shall argue that Christian theists have an advantage over other theists as well as over naturalists in grounding human dignity. Clearly, no such advantage would hold if the incarnation were metaphysically impossible. A metaphysically impossible idea is not going to help us explain the basis of human dignity, or anything else for that matter.

We may thus think of my conclusion in this way: I am arguing that *if the incarnation is at least possible, then our possession of universal human dignity is potentially some evidence that the incarnation is actual*. The evidence consists in this, that the incarnation allows us to explain something that is otherwise exceedingly difficult to explain, namely, our possession of universal human dignity. But that's to preview a point to which I shall return at the close of this essay.

to the world by adding value to every human being who has ever lived. And it would mean, for another, that if God exists and became incarnate as a human being, our lives would go better. That's because, plausibly, if the people we love matter more, and if we ourselves matter more, this would make our lives more meaningful. It would give us a deeper way of valuing ourselves and others. However, while these axiological implications are significant, they are not my topic here.

⁴ See, for example, Pawl (2019) and Swinburne (1994).

⁵ Cf. Kahane (2017, p. 120).

Assuming vs. Possessing a Human Nature

In the remarks quoted at the outset of this essay, Wolterstorff and Swinburne seem to rely on a principle like the following:

The Assumption Principle. If God assumes a human nature, then every other individual who has that nature thereby gains in worth or dignity.

We should contrast this principle with a related idea:

The Possession Principle. If God possesses a human nature, then every other individual who has that nature thereby gains in worth or dignity.

These principles are distinct. Strictly speaking, someone might possess a human nature without *assuming* a human nature. Nicolas Cage does not assume a human nature. He just has one. Here, I take it that assuming a human nature means, not just having a human nature, but having a nature *because one has chosen to*. Certainly, that's how Christians understand the human nature of the Son: It isn't an essential property for Him, because human nature is a contingent created thing and God might have refrained from creating anything, where His so refraining would not deprive the Son of being what He is. And so the Son, unlike Nicolas Cage, freely and contingently chooses to have a human nature.

Similarly, perhaps God could bring it about that some angel or other has a human nature. Maybe God could *assign* that angel a human nature, without the angel freely choosing one. God might thus *compel* the angel to become incarnate as a human being. Of course, one might resist this if one thinks becoming incarnate is something only God can do. But the point is just that being assigned a human nature might be another way of possessing one, and so there may a variety of ways of coming to possess a human nature. And so possessing a human nature should not be confused with assuming a human nature, which is only one way of coming to possess one.

This distinction allows us to ask: Given the Incarnation Thesis, what exactly generates dignity for us here? Is it simply that the Son *has* a human nature? Or is it that the Son *assumes* a human nature? In my view, both ideas are plausible. I would affirm both the Assumption and the Possession Principle. However, my aim here is not to defend the Possession Principle. Instead, I shall focus on the Assumption Principle.

Still, it's worth putting on record some ways of defending the Possession Principle. In particular, I think the mere fact of God possessing our nature would confer dignity upon us for two reasons. First, it would make it the case that *a significant resemblance* holds between us and God, a resemblance that would not otherwise be in place. Because of the incarnation, we gain a new way of being God-like.⁶ Second, God possessing our nature would place us in a meaningful in-group with God. In a very real sense, He would be *one of us*. This would be like being on a team with Superman, only better. So we have here two ways of defending the Possession Principle, and to my mind, both of them are promising. But again, my aim here is not to develop or

⁶ Cf. Adams (1999, pp. 28–37).

defend these suggestions. Instead, I want to focus on the Assumption Principle. I want to argue that we acquire significant worth not merely because God *has* our nature but because He *chose* it. The rest of this essay is devoted to this idea.

We Are Dignified by the Son Assuming Our Nature

Three aspects of the Son's choice to assume our nature jointly give credit to the Assumption Principle. The first is the contrastive element. Rather than assuming some other created nature, the Son assumes ours. Now, this is most relevant if we take it that the Son could have assumed other created natures; that He could have become incarnate as a dolphin or an elephant or perhaps an angel or some extraterrestrial who is much like us but not strictly human (a Klingon, say). Instead, the Son becomes incarnate as one of us. That need not imply that God has no reason for choosing to assume human nature, as if His decision here came down to a sort of coin toss. Maybe there is something about humanity that makes our nature especially fit for incarnation, given God's redemptive aims.⁷ Even so, choosing us as opposed to these alternatives is plausibly an honor for us.

The second aspect of God's decision that seems relevant here is that God loves us and that this love is at least one reason for His becoming incarnate in the first place. This is important, because if God were to become incarnate, say, in spite of His *contempt* for us, it would be questionable whether this decision would honor us. This is for the same reason that our presence merely being tolerated by some person we admire might reasonably be experienced as a humiliation rather than an honor. But that is precisely *not* how Christians understand God's decision to assume our nature. Instead, Christians think that behind the incarnation lies first and foremost God's redemptive love.

Third, as suggested already, the mission of the incarnation is wholly good. Its aim is for the restoration not only of human beings but the entire cosmos.⁸ This matters because, were God to become incarnate for some *trivial* reason, His assuming our nature would seem to be less of an honor for us. But for the Christian, God's reasons for becoming incarnate are hardly trivial. They are nothing less than the deliverance of the entire world from the powers of evil. And so the Christian has available to her the thought that God is saving the world *through us*. And His assuming our nature for that purpose seems especially dignifying for us.

Given these three aspects of God's decision to assume our nature, this decision does seem to be an honor for us. To see this, consider a parallel case. Imagine that, as Lincoln goes to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, he finds his pen is broken. But you, who are present among his trusted advisors, are quick to produce yours from your waistcoat. He takes it, signs the papers, and returns your pen.

It is worth letting the momentousness of this sink in. From now until forever, it will be *your* pen the president used to free the slaves and put this wicked thing to rest. And

⁷ See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Part IV, Ch. 55, section 5.

⁸ Col. 1:15–20. But that's not to deny that God might have become incarnate even if humanity had never sinned (see Hunter, 2020).

so the question is: Are you honored by this? Does this give you something to take pride in, something to brag about or write down in your journal to remember as long as you live? Is this a story to tell your children and your children's children? It seems to me the answer is clearly Yes. Of all the pens he might have used, the president took yours. And now it shall be for all time that this little possession of yours was the instrument by which such a staggering evil was driven from the world.

To help us get our imaginations around this, I offer another story. Let us suppose that, after storming Normandy, the allied advance comes to a small town in Holland, where an old farmer lives on a bountiful acreage. A certain captain, already a great hero in this war, wants to use the old farmer's lands as a temporary respite for his company, who have just endured weeks of bloody battle. The captain knocks on the farmer's door and explains their need. The farmer gladly accommodates.

Now, you might think this is already a great honor for the farmer. His home gets to be of use to the war effort, to the project of toppling Hitler's empire, and not only that: His home shall be a respite for soldiers who are particularly worthy of respect, including the celebrated captain. It is easy to imagine the old farmer telling this story with pride for years to come.

But this becomes even more of an honor for the old farmer when we add, first, that the captain chose the old farmer's land over several other alternatives, and second, that the captain was aware of the honor he was paying the old farmer, and that it pleased him to honor the farmer thus. The captain was happy to give the old farmer a way of getting back at the Nazis who had taken so much from him and his loved ones. And in light of these further elements, the captain's choice of the old farmer's land would be even more of an honor for him.

In this example, we are like the old farmer, and the celebrated captain is like God. And just as the captain uses the farmer's lands to defeat the great evil of their age, so God uses our nature to defeat all evil for all ages. And if the old farmer is honored by the captain's choice, we are honored by God's choice to an incomparably greater degree. In light of this analogy, then, the Assumption Principle seems correct.

Questioning the Analogy

I've offered an argument by analogy here. So we need to address two points of *disanalogy* between the farmer case and the incarnation.

The first is that the old farmer is the sole owner of his lands. But no one human being is the sole owner of the human nature the Son assumes. It belongs equally to everyone.

I agree this is a disanalogy, but I do not think it hurts the argument. Suppose the entire village, not the old farmer, collectively owns the lands where the company seeks its respite. It seems just as plausible that this would be an honor for all the villagers together. The mayor and the milkmaid alike can take pride in this, can tell their children about the time when the great captain used their fields to camp on the way to Berlin.

The second point of disanalogy is that owning a pen or a piece of land is not exactly the same relation we stand in to our human nature. Even if we possess it collectively, it is not owned as *private property* is owned.

Again, I grant the disanalogy, but I do not think it hurts the argument. If we do not literally possess our human nature, it seems we stand in a relation sufficiently like possession. Certainly, we speak of *having* or *possessing* a human nature, and Christians speak of the Son *taking on* a human nature. So what should we say instead? We might say that we *exemplify* or *instantiate* human nature. For my part, I doubt this language is any clearer, though it may give the illusion of being clearer, as abstract Latinate words so often do. But anyway, we do not merely exemplify human nature, as if it were just one thing about us on par with the length of our foreheads. Our human nature is for us an essential feature, and one that accounts for what and who we are. So, given the incarnation, it would remain that the Son makes use of an exceedingly important aspect of what we are in order to save the world. And this seems to be an honor for us. So the point need not rely too heavily on talk of our *possessing* human nature like a piece of private property.

Dignity for All? The Problem of the Nietzschean Rebel

As I have narrated the case, the old farmer *consents* to what the captain asks of him. But God does not ask us to use our nature, and many of us do not or would not consent to this. Some of us don't even believe in God, and others, a certain kind of Nietzschean rebel, might prefer God not to assume our nature. They might experience the Son's incarnation as something of an enemy occupation. They want to be free of God, and here He is, assuming our very nature, as if God's omniscience and omnipresence weren't invasive enough.⁹

In general, it seems wrong that God would need to ask us first before assuming our nature. If God exists at all, He has legitimate authority to assume our nature as He pleases. But even if God were within His rights in doing this, the question remains, Would the Son's incarnation be an honor for the Nietzschean rebel who *resents* this? Isn't that more like the celebrated captain *forcing* the old farmer to open his lands? One might think such compulsion would not be an honor for the farmer. It would rather be degrading. And if that's right, then neither would God's assuming a human nature be an honor for the Nietzschean rebel. Perhaps it would even be degrading for him.

So the worry here is that for some people – namely, those with certain negative or hostile attitudes toward God – His having assumed our nature is not an honor. And if that's the case, then the incarnation cannot serve as the basis of a dignity had by all.

In response to this worry, I want to argue that the incarnation is indeed an honor for all of us, even for the Nietzschean rebel.

For starters, note that it is not automatically degrading for someone simply to have his will thwarted. When I do not give my toddler the second bowl of ice-cream she insists on having, this is not degrading for her. Likewise, American slave-owners who resisted emancipation had their wills thwarted. Was this degrading for them? That

⁹ This kind of aversion to God's existence is articulated in Kahane (2018).

doesn't seem quite right. If anything is degrading for them, it's their own wrongful desire to keep another person in bondage.

Still, a related concern needs to be addressed. It arises from the thought that, in general, to award someone an honor even after they have resolutely declined it seems, in a word, disrespectful. To illustrate, imagine some composer is contacted by the Grammys. The committee wants to nominate him for an award. He declines. He doesn't believe in the Grammys. "Hogwash!" he says. In spite of his wishes, though, they nominate him anyway, and he wins the award. Our composer might reasonably take offense at this. To pin a medal on someone or hand him the keys to the city is disrespectful if he has expressed a clear and unrelenting preference against receiving such would-be honors. And notice that this is so, even when the recipient's preference is unjustifiable. Even if our composer's grudge against the Grammys is entirely baseless, still, it's disrespectful to insist on giving him the award.

In the same way, one might argue that for the Son to honor the Nietzschean rebel by taking on his humanity might be seen as disrespectful. After all, an omniscient God would know that our hypothetical rebel staunchly prefers *not* to receive this would-be honor. And yet, God assumes human nature anyway. Maybe God is within His rights in doing so. But this wouldn't be an honor for our rebel because God has flouted his wishes.

So here is where I would resist this argument: I would reject the principle that giving someone an honor she has resolutely refused is always disrespectful. In particular, it is not disrespectful if the giver of the honor has some reason for giving it that justifies flouting the recipient's wishes. To see this, let's vary our earlier example. Let's say the committee at the Grammys wants to nominate, not an individual composer, but an entire ensemble. Everyone in the band is thrilled about this except the fiddler. It is he alone who thinks the Grammys is hogwash. So the question is: Would it be disrespectful to the fiddler if in spite of his protests the committee at the Grammys nominates and then selects the ensemble for the award? That seems wrong. It seems as though the fiddler should recognize that his preference should not prevent the rest of the ensemble from getting the award. And there is no way for the Grammys to grant the award to everyone in the ensemble *except* the fiddler. That's just not how it works. Thus, the Grammys granting the award to the entire ensemble, fiddler included, should not be seen as disrespectful to the fiddler. And that is precisely God's position with respect to human beings when it comes to honoring us by assuming our nature. To honor any one of us by assuming *her* human nature is thereby to assume *everyone's* human nature and thus to honor all of us. There's no way for God to make an exception for the Nietzschean rebel, who is stuck with his humanity as we are with ours. So perhaps God honoring the Nietzschean rebel by assuming his nature would be disrespectful if God just didn't care what our rebel wanted. But we needn't understand God's decision in that way. Instead, God honoring the Nietzschean against his will can be seen as an unavoidable byproduct of honoring the rest of us.

And of course, honoring us is not typically understood to be the main reason God becomes incarnate anyway. Instead, God becomes incarnate to save us by his atoning work. But this only strengthens my point. Were God to refrain from becoming incarnate in order to respect the Nietzschean's wishes, He would thereby refrain from

saving those who are open to being saved. And given our need to be saved in this way, it would seem unjustifiable for the Nietzschean to take offense at God assuming our nature despite the Nietzschean's preference to the contrary.

So God assuming our nature would not be degrading for the Nietzschean. But I need to claim something stronger. I need to claim *that it would positively be an honor*. Indeed, that's just what I intend to claim.

Whether an act counts as an honor for us does not depend on whether we consent to the act being performed. If the king at banquet raises his goblet in honor of a certain duke, this may well be an honor for the duke even if he despises the king. The question is whether the king *deserves* to be despised. Granted, if the king were an evil tyrant, or an incompetent buffoon, or a negligent sluggard, then praise from the king would not be much of an honor. But on the other hand, if the king were good and just, if his leadership had brought security and prosperity to all, then public praise from the king does not cease to be an honor simply because the recipient holds a baseless antipathy toward him. And so the question is not whether the Nietzschean despises or resents God, but whether these attitudes toward God are fitting.

If God exists, would such negative attitudes be fitting? They would not. For one, God would be the greatest possible being and the creator of the universe. On that account alone, He would be worthy of respect and admiration. But in addition to this, for many theists, God would be the source and giver of all that is good in our lives. Moreover, for the Christian, God would be Someone who loves us deeply and generously, and who, being incarnate, has suffered to save us and those we love. Seen in this light, an honor from God would be distinctly unlike a toast from some contemptible king.

This leaves us with the result that the incarnation is an honor for all human beings, including our Nietzschean rebel. The incarnation being an honor for us does not depend on our prior attitude toward God. And so we have here a basis for human dignity that applies to all.

The Euthyphro Problem

Any theistic grounding of morality has to contend with the Euthyphro problem. That includes theistic groundings of human dignity.

For instance, the Euthyphro problem has recently been advanced against a theistic grounding of human rights due to Wolterstorff. Wolterstorff claims that our dignity comes from God having chosen us for friendship.¹⁰ But, as Jordan Wessling has pointed out, this raises the question: Are we valuable because God chooses us for friendship, or does God choose us for friendship because we are already valuable? If the former, then God's choosing us for friendship would seem arbitrary. But if the latter, then it seems we already possess value sufficient to ground our dignity, and so appealing to God here would be superfluous.¹¹

¹⁰ See Wolterstorff (2012, Ch. 7).

¹¹ Cf. Wessling (2014).

In this essay, I have defended a different theory of human dignity, one based on the incarnation (and one that Wolterstorff also endorses in the brief remark quoted earlier). On this view, we possess dignity because God assumed our human nature. Does this account escape the Euthyphro problem?

In the present context, the relevant question would be: Are we valuable because God became incarnate, or did God become incarnate because we are already valuable? In other words, in becoming incarnate, is God bestowing value upon us, or is He responding to value we already possess? If the latter, then appealing to the incarnation to ground human dignity seems superfluous. We could just appeal to the value we already have that motivates God's decision to become incarnate in the first place. But if the former, then God's decision to become incarnate as a human being would seem arbitrary. Why become incarnate as a human being rather than, say, a rabbit or a tumbleweed?

However, I doubt this Euthyphro-style objection has any force against the Incarnation Thesis. To think about this, we have to consider God's primary mission in becoming incarnate: the redemption of humankind along with the rest of the cosmos. In a nutshell, God becomes incarnate in order to save us. But in order for His saving us to be rational, it need not be the case that we are already exceedingly worthy. It is plainly false that saving something makes sense only if that thing is already valuable. Saving something can make sense simply because, by saving it, *it will become* valuable. If I see a battered old desk on the side of the road, I might pick it up, not because it is beautiful right now, but because I can make it beautiful with a bit of sanding and a fresh finish.

This is much closer to the Biblical picture anyway, which has it that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. God didn't look on humankind and say, "How great it would be for me if I were like them." Instead, he looked upon the crooked timber of humanity and sought to make it straight.

But in that case, why does God become incarnate as a human being rather than as a rabbit? To answer this, we might appeal to any theory of the atonement according to which Christ's atoning work for human beings depends on Him living a sinless human life. Sure, the rest of creation is included in God's redemptive mission. But only human beings need salvation *from their sin*. To save the rabbits, God needn't live a sinless rabbit life because rabbits themselves are not guilty of sin. Clearly, then, the Son has a special reason to assume a human nature. It's not just an arbitrary choice.

I find that response persuasive, but notice it is not even necessary here. Suppose God might have just as well redeemed the world by assuming rabbit nature rather than human nature. Suppose His decision to assume a *human* nature had no special reason behind it. To accomplish His saving mission, He just had to assume *some* created nature or other, and it didn't matter which. In that case, God picking a nature at random would not be irrational. And crucially, it would still be an honor for us. Recall the case of Lincoln using your pen. Suppose several other people in the room offered their pens, and Lincoln just picked yours for no special reason. This would still be an honor for you: Your pen would still be the instrument by which the president freed the slaves. Accordingly, while I think the Son does have a special reason for

assuming human nature rather than rabbit nature, the Incarnation Thesis remains credible even if the Son assumes a human nature for no special reason.

In sum, God's decision to save us by way of the incarnation is entirely fitting simply on account of the valuable thing we will become once redeemed. This decision does not presuppose that we are already valuable, that is, that we already fully possess the dignity I am here seeking to explain. Instead, the incarnation only requires that human beings have *potential* value, potential that can be realized as a result of the atoning work made possible by the incarnation.

Objection: Isn't Potential Value Already Valuable?

We've seen how I want to address the Euthyphro problem, by appealing to our potential value as God's reason for becoming incarnate. But one might object here that potential value is itself intrinsically valuable. For example, we might be in awe of our friend who has great potential as a concert pianist, quite apart from whether she has yet realized that potential. To be someone over whom such a future hovers is already to be worthy of respect in some way. And one might argue the same for the possibility of redemption through Christ's atonement. The idea here would be that simply being someone with the *potential* to be redeemed and glorified by Christ's atoning work is already a sufficient basis for human dignity. The potential which motivates the incarnation is already valuable for us.

Is this line of thought compelling? In my experience, philosophers divide over this question. Some think potential for value is already intrinsically valuable. Others insist that potential value is just that: potential.¹² Here I wish to claim that, either way, the Incarnation Thesis remains plausible and gives the Christian theist an advantage over secular moral theorists.

If potential value is not itself valuable, then my claim is easy to see. In that case, there would be nothing superfluous about the value we acquire by the Son's incarnation. But crucially, this is true as well even if potential value is itself valuable. Our potential value would consist in our potential to be glorified by Christ's atoning work. On the present proposal, this potential is already a source of worth for us. This worth is only amplified when the Son becomes incarnate, but it was there already.

On this picture, then, we have two sources of worth. And I want to ask, Why is that a problem? It may well be that, if Christian theism is true, our dignity is overdetermined. Overdetermination is a problem if the picture we have is needlessly complicated, a sort of inelegant monstrosity. But that's not the case here. For, the incarnation is itself based on our potential for glorification through atonement. So these two elements hang together in a fully cohesive and unified picture.

Of course, it would be a problem for my project here if our potential for glorification made appealing to *theism* superfluous. If so, then this would show that the Christian theist actually has no advantage here over the secularist. Her incarnation-based account of human dignity would presuppose a source of dignity of which the

¹² There exists a related debate – often connected with the ethics of abortion – over the moral and axiological significance of being a *potential* person. See, for example, Harman (2009) or Steinbock (2011).

secularist can just as well avail himself. However, this is not the case. Our potential for glorification in Christian theology finds no analog in a purely secular worldview.

We have potential for glorification only because there is a God who seeks our glorification. According to the Christian concept of glorification, for someone to be glorified entails, at a minimum, becoming a morally excellent version of himself, no longer capable of doing or even desiring evil. It means having well-ordered thoughts and emotions. And it means being healed of whatever maladies prevent one from living a fully human life. Beyond this, glorification might even mean partaking in the divine nature in some way, perhaps undergoing a radical enhancement of the powers we now regard as ordinary.¹³

If there is no God, how many of us have the potential to reach such a state? Certainly, if there is no God, we will not be sharing in the divine nature. But how many will even reach moral and spiritual greatness? The most optimistic answer we could give is: *very few*. If naturalism is true, most of the perhaps 117 billion human beings who have existed on earth have led short frustrated lives in which they realize little of their potential for greatness and for moral and spiritual development. Beyond this, it must be admitted that even the best of us will remain morally fragile, will battle with base thoughts, will be dependent for our achievements on circumstances largely beyond our control, and will get sick and weary and ultimately die. Indeed, the best of us are precisely those who have squarely faced these facts. And anyway, we're just talking here about the limits of the fully able. Certainly (and tragically), those who suffer from permanent cognitive impairments will not realize the full potential of their humanity.

In contrast, on at least some mainstream Christian theologies, our potential for glorification is universal.¹⁴ Every human being has the potential to be glorified as the result of Christ's atoning work. If we cooperate with God's grace – and that is up to us – by the power of God, we will become that version of ourselves we were meant to be. And as for the cognitively impaired, they will at least have the chance to realize their human potential, for in the afterlife God will reverse any impairments that would prevent someone from facing Him on the day of judgment or from meaningfully participating in the life of heaven.¹⁵

Thus, our potential for glorification, which motivates the Son becoming incarnate in the first place, has no analogue for the secularist. So even if our potential given Christian theism is already itself intrinsically valuable, that potential will depend on Christian theism. This would render human dignity overdetermined for Christian theists, in light of the Incarnation Thesis. But, as argued, this overdetermination is not a problem, since the parts interlock without a hitch.

¹³ This is a big idea in the Christian tradition. For a cross-denominational sampling, see Cooper (2014), Jacobs (2009), Litwa (2012), Lossky (1997), and Mosser (2002).

¹⁴ The major exception here will be the theology of Calvinism, which claims that Christ's atoning work only aims at saving a select few (e.g., see Helm, 1985).

¹⁵ That's not to deny there might be *some* disabilities in heaven. For instance, a blind person can still worship God and enjoy the fellowship of other saints. An anencephalic child cannot.

Excursus: Whither the Image of God?

As a final point, it's worth addressing the familiar theistic notion that human beings are created in the image of God. Appealing to this teaching is perhaps the most common way for theists to account for human dignity. It is thus worth locating the present account, based on the incarnation as it is, with respect to this more familiar appeal to the image of God. Now admittedly, the image of God is a vast topic in theology. But it seems to me worth saying at least something about it here. Specifically, one might wonder whether my incarnation account is meant to *replace* this appeal to the image of God.¹⁶

To consider this, we will first need to explain what it means to be made in the image of God. Traditionally, many theologians have held the so-called *structural* account.¹⁷ On this view, having the image of God means being like God in terms of some capacity, such as reason. But of course, as a basis for human dignity, this will end up excluding the cognitively impaired. Indeed, it seems no matter what capacity we settle on as the one that defines the image of God, we can find some human being in whom that capacity is ruined.

Fortunately, many theologians and Biblical scholars today would reject a simple version of the structural account. They think the image of God must at least have something to do with our being given a certain office, the office of dominion. Such accounts are often referred to as *functionalist*.¹⁸ And crucially, a human being can hold this God-given office of dominion, even if she lacks the capacity to perform the duties associated with it. So it looks like a functionalist account can at least include the cognitively impaired as having the image of God.

Plausibly, holding such a God-given office would be a source of dignity for us. After all, to be appointed by God as a lord of creation is no small honor. Thus, in my view, appealing to the image of God in this way is exceedingly promising as basis for human dignity. And though surprisingly little philosophical work has been done trying to hammer this out into a mature account, to my mind that would be an eminently worthwhile project. And so I do not understand my appeal to the incarnation to suggest otherwise. As I have already emphasized, human dignity may be overdetermined for theists, but this need not be a problem as long as all the pieces hang together. Indeed, if theism is true – particularly if *Christian* theism is true – I expect there are numerous defensible accounts of human dignity available to us. They need not compete with each other. Instead, I expect they fit together elegantly, like so many lights in a chandelier. To illustrate, consider how my incarnation account relates to the idea of the image of God: Through the atoning work of the incarnate Son, we can become persons able and worthy of the office of dominion to which God has appointed us. Indeed, His so appointing us would only give Him all the more reason to offer us atonement as a means of realizing the role for which God Himself created us in the first place.¹⁹ And it gives Him all the more reason to become incarnate as a

¹⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this question.

¹⁷ E.g., Visala (2018).

¹⁸ E.g., Harris (2018) and Middleton (2005).

¹⁹ Cf. Athanasius (2011, pp. 63–64).

human being, that He might show us what a proper lord of creation is like – willing to lay down his life for those in his charge.

Conclusion: An Argument for Theism?

Let us take stock. We have seen that the Incarnation Thesis is plausible. If the Son assumed our nature to redeem us along with the cosmos, then the Son would thereby bestow an immense honor upon us, and this honor would be a significant source of worth or dignity for us. Accordingly, it looks promising that an account of human dignity can be based on the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Crucially, this account avoids the Euthyphro objection, which is a serious issue for other theistic accounts of morality. And furthermore, this account also satisfies three criteria at the same time that have proven elusive for secular moral theories.

First, the Incarnation Thesis attributes dignity to all human beings, including the severely impaired and the underdeveloped. An infant in the delivery room, an elder with severe dementia, a Jane Doe stuck in permanent coma, these human beings have profound worth in spite of their limitations, and their worth makes a serious claim on how we treat them. My appeal to the incarnation respects this datum. Though Jesus Christ was not himself impaired, in him the Son assumed the human nature of the impaired and the able alike, and did so for the sake of the world's salvation. Thus, the Incarnation Thesis has no problem including the cognitively impaired as bearers of dignity. In contrast, secular theories of rights that appeal to our fancy abilities, such as our ability to reason or govern our lives, are notorious for excluding such individuals (as are the structural theories of the image of God mentioned earlier).

Second, the Incarnation Thesis does not over-generate dignity, say, by attributing a human-level of worth to slugs and radishes. It walks the fine line of including the cognitively impaired without also including plants and animals that do not seem to be equal bearers of dignity alongside human beings. The Incarnation Thesis achieves this because, of course, the Son only assumes human nature, not slug or radish nature.

Third, the Incarnation Thesis does not appeal to a normatively trivial property, such as our belonging to the species *homo sapiens*. Instead, it locates what appears to be a powerful source of value for us, an honor bestowed upon us by God himself, who chose to use our very nature to redeem the world.

In satisfying these criteria, the Incarnation Thesis does better than many secular theories of rights and dignity currently on offer. What would be interesting is if the Incarnation Thesis does better than *all* secular theories. Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this essay to defend such a claim. But if it could be defended, then something like the following argument would have to be taken seriously:

1. Our possession of universal human dignity calls for explanation.
2. No secular explanations succeed.
3. At least some theistic explanations succeed (such as the Incarnation Thesis).

4. So, theism offers the best explanation of universal human dignity.

5. So, universal human dignity is at least some evidence for theism.

Of course, premise 1 will be disputed by some,²⁰ and again, premise 2 calls for sustained defense. In this essay, all I have achieved is a case for premise 3. But I understand this case to be of interest, in part, because of the prospects of a dignitarian argument for theism such as this one.

Since the incarnation is a distinctively *Christian* teaching, one might get ambitious here and try to work this out into an argument for *Christian* theism. This might go as follows:

6. Our possession of universal human dignity calls for explanation.

7. No secular explanations succeed.

8. At least some *Christian* theistic explanations succeed (such as the Incarnation Thesis).

9. *No non-Christian theistic explanations succeed.*

10. So, Christian theism offers the best explanation of universal human dignity.

11. So, universal human dignity is at least some evidence for Christian theism.

The new premise in need of defense here would be premise 9. And this premise would indeed require much discussion. In candor, I am not at all confident premise 9 is correct (I have already expressed my optimism for the appeal to the image of God, which at least some non-Christians can accept). But the specter of this argument should at least goad non-Christian theists into providing their own accounts of universal human dignity. In doing so, these theists should pay special attention to whether their account (a) includes the cognitively impaired as bearers of dignity, and (b) survives the Euthyphro objection, as I have argued the Incarnation Thesis does. If alternative theistic accounts of dignity fail to satisfy (a) and (b), then the appeal to the incarnation I have defended here will retain its advantage, and the above argument for Christian theism will have significant force.

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²⁰ E.g., Raz (2010), Rorty (2010), and Sangiovanni (2017).

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How To Cite This Article

Ballard, Brian Scott. (2024). "Incarnational Human Dignity," *AGATHEOS: European Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 98–114.

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