



PROJECT MUSE®

Athanasius' Initial Defense of the Term homoousios:
Rereading the De Decretis

Lewis Ayres

Journal of Early Christian Studies, Volume 12, Number 3, Fall 2004, pp.
337-359 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2004.0035>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/172618>

Athanasius' Initial Defense of the Term ὁμοούσιος: Rereading the *De Decretis*¹

LEWIS AYRES

Athanasius begins to defend Nicaea's ὁμοούσιος in the *De decretis* of ca. 353, pursuing two basic strategies. First, the term is defended as a necessary corollary of Nicaea's controversial phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς, a phrase which appears to be more fundamental to Athanasius. Second, however, he defends both ὁμοούσιος and ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς as necessary in order to preserve the sense of important scriptural terminologies that he takes to emphasize the Son's status as the Father's Wisdom and Word. Ὅμοούσιος thus functions as a cipher for phrases that are what Richard Vaggione has termed "basic dogmatic statements." In his account of Nicaea Athanasius also appears to draw on Eusebius of Caesarea's argument in his *Epistula ad Caesarienses* of 326. The skill with which he adopts and adapts Eusebius' arguments further demonstrates the subtlety with which doctrinal ciphers could be explored and deployed.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although it is now commonplace to note that Athanasius does not offer any extended reflection on the term ὁμοούσιος until the early 350s, the character of his initial extended defense of the term during that decade has received little scholarly consideration.² The status accorded Athanasius

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the 2002 annual meeting of the North American Patristics Society. I am extremely grateful for comments on the paper by Khaled Anatolios, Michel Barnes, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, Richard Vaggione, and the two anonymous readers for *J ECS*.

2. For recent treatments of ὁμοούσιος see G. Christopher Stead, "Homooousios (ὁμοούσιος)," *RAC* 16 (1992): 364–433. Stead provides an excellent bibliography at 430–33. Accordingly, I note here only three pieces that have been of particular significance in preparing this study: G. Christopher Stead, "Homooousios dans la

as defender of orthodoxy has tended to make scholars assume that the presence in his corpus of terms that became markers of that orthodoxy, perhaps especially ὁμοούσιος, must mean that they are central to his thought and that they possessed for him a detailed technical significance. The large-scale reassessment of the fourth-century trinitarian controversies over the past few decades has made many scholars wary of such assumptions, but much work remains to be done.

My focus here is on Athanasius' earliest extensive defense of ὁμοούσιος, that found in the *De decretis*, written I will assume ca. 353.³ I will argue that Athanasius' fundamental strategy is to defend ὁμοούσιος as an acceptable corollary of Nicaea's other controversial use of οὐσία terminology, the phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς.⁴ For Athanasius, this phrase, in turn, stands in the creed only to prevent misunderstanding of scripture's insistence that the Son is the "true" Son and Word of the Father, truly "proper to" and "from God"—phrases that were fundamental to Athanasius' theology from his earliest writing. Ὅμοοῦσιος in itself for Athanasius indicates some sort of equal ontological status and sharing of nature;

pensée de Saint Athanase," in *Politique et théologie chez Athanase d'Alexandrie*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974), 231–53; idem, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); and F. Dinsen, *Homoousios: Die Geschichte des Begriffs bis zum Konzil von Konstantinopel* (diss., Kiel, 1976).

3. The traditional date of 350/1, as found in E. Schwartz, *Zur Geschichte des Athanasius*, Gesammelte Schriften (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1959), 3:85, and H.-G. Opitz, et al., eds., *Athanasius Werke* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1939–), 2.1.2, has been rightly rejected as founded on insufficient evidence. Hans Christoph Brennecke, *Hilarius von Poitiers und die Bischofsopposition gegen Konstantius II: Untersuchungen zur dritten Phase des arianischen Streites (337–361)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984); and Uta Heil, *Athanasius von Alexandrien De sententia Dionysii* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 22–35, argue for a date of 357. T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 198–99, argues for 353 based on (a) an argument that the addressee of *Decr.* is Julius of Rome, (b) a critique of the idea that the work shows knowledge of the emergence of Heterousian theology, and (c) a view of the early 350s that sees Constantius and his advisors actively pushing an anti-Nicene agenda. Barnes seems correct in arguing for the absence of knowledge of Heterousian theology in *Decr.*, thus showing that the arguments of Brennecke and Heil have little force. In any case, it is important to realize that Athanasius and his correspondent could easily have interpreted the events of the early 350s as anti-Nicene in intent, just as Athanasius reads the events of 325–339 as doctrinally motivated in *C. Ar.* 1. Indeed, it seems likely that the agenda of the councils supported by Constantius in the early 350s *can* fairly be described as "anti-Nicene," when we realize that an attack on οὐσία terminology (as in the anathemas from the Sirmium Council of 351) was an attack not only on Photinus and Marcellus but also on a theological trajectory already associated with Nicaea. Thus 353 seems the most plausible date currently on offer.

4. On this phrase see Stead, *Divine Substance*, 224–33.

but he spends virtually no time exploring the term's meaning in nontheological contexts and seems intentionally to insist that ὁμοούσιος itself has a broad semantic range. Within this range Athanasius wishes the term to be governed by its *theological* context. Ὁμοούσιος can thus hardly be described as fundamental to Athanasius' theology; we can only understand its role against the background of a set of other terms, images, and phrases taken by Athanasius himself to be at the heart of Christian belief.

This investigation raises a number of theoretical questions about how we understand the emergence of creedal markers of Christian identity in the fourth century. Some years ago Richard Vaggione commented on the importance of understanding that in the fourth century, controversies over many famous creedal or quasi-creedal formulae—ὁμοούσιος or ὅμοιος κατὰ πάντα, for example—are clearly distinct from controversy over what he terms the “more basic dogmatic statements” that those other formulae are intended to protect. These latter formulae include such terms as ἀγέννητος, taken by some to be either scriptural or directly implied by scripture. Theologians may be flexible about the first set of terms, but inflexible about the second; as long as the first can be understood as adequately or usefully representing the second they are acceptable.⁵ This distinction allows a theologian room to mediate between personal or local allegiance and the search for identity-marking terms that may bring together or identify a range of theological traditions.

Understanding this distinction is also important when studying the *development* of dogmatic formulae and other verbal talismans during the fourth century. One of the harder processes to trace is that by which a term moves from being acceptable because it adequately represents one or other “basic dogmatic formula” to being understood as a basic formula in itself. The development of ὁμοούσιος is probably the most significant example of these processes. A term originally chosen for polemical purposes and without any dense, well-established theological meaning was gradually identified as a key marker of pro-Nicene orthodoxy.⁶ This process of discovery did not, however, simply involve selecting this term

5. Richard Vaggione, “Οὐκ ὡς ἐν τῶν γεννημάτων: Some Aspects of Dogmatic Formulae in the Arian Controversy,” *SP* 17 (1982): 181–87.

6. By “pro-Nicene” I designate those theologies that were able to subscribe to Nicaea's creed (and a statement concerning the Spirit's equal participation in the Godhead) in the context of an admission of the irreducibility of Father, Son, and Spirit within one divine nature, power, and activity. For a further discussion of this terminology see my *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), ch. 9.

from among a range of candidates. As has become clear over the past few decades, the emergence of ὁμοούσιος was interwoven with the emergence of the very idea that particular terms used in creedal contexts might function as universal markers of Christian orthodoxy. Studying Athanasius' own first discussion of the term in the *De decretis* is both of significance in itself and will serve to indicate a number of wider questions important for the ongoing reconsideration of fourth-century theological terminology.

II. DE DECRETIS 19–20

Athanasius' use of the term ὁμοούσιος before the 350s is easily summarized: the term is used once, at *Contra Arianos* I.9. This reference even by itself indicates that Athanasius intends some sort of reference to Nicaea, but the extent to which he sees its particular formulae as normative is not at all clear.⁷ We shall return to the language of the *Contra Arianos* and to this question later; for the moment we can note that extensive use and direct defense of the term ὁμοούσιος begins only with the text considered here: the *De decretis*. My argument will focus on the culmination of the *De decretis*, Athanasius' account of proceedings at Nicaea, and it may be helpful to locate that section of Athanasius' argument in the context of the text as a whole. We can sketch the structure of the text as follows (the sections with which I am concerned are highlighted):

1. § 1–5: “Arians” continue to ignore the clear judgment of the church; they constantly frame evasions of the clear sense of the gospel. This process may be seen in Eusebius of Caesarea; while he wrote explaining Nicaea to be the faith of the apostles, before and after writing the letter he contradicted himself.
2. § 6–15: True sense of “Word” and “Son” against standard “Arian” arguments.
3. § 16–18: Summary of same themes.
4. § 19–20: The reasons for Nicaea's use of **ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς** and **ὁμοούσιος**.
5. § 21–24: Further explanation of the same points, following same order of treatment.

7. C. Ar. 1.9 (Metzler/Savvidis, *Werke*, 1.2:117): . . . οὐτε ποίημα, ἀλλ' ἴδιον τῆς τοῦ Πατρὸς οὐσίας γέννημα. Διὸ Θεός ἐστιν ἀληθινός, ἀληθινοῦ Πατρὸς ὁμοούσιος ὑπάρχων.

6. § 25–27: Authorities in support of Nicaea: Theognostus, the two Dionysii, Origen.

7. § 28–32: The error of elevating the term ἀγενήτος.

(The remaining sections contain the dossier of texts attached by Athanasius, beginning with Eusebius of Caesarea's *Epistula ad Caesarienses*.)

I will be concerned, then, with two stages in Athanasius' argument. First, sections 19–20 offer an account of proceedings at Nicaea in order to show the function and the necessity of the creed's use of ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς and ὁμοούσιος. It is important to note at the outset that Athanasius considers these two in this order, both following the order of their appearance in the creed's text and assuming that ὁμοούσιος reinforces what he takes to be the consequences of describing the Son as ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς.⁸ Second, sections 21–24 then offer a further extended interpretation of these pieces of technical terminology designed to counter some persistent objections. In what follows I will follow these two stages in the argument closely, sections 19–20 in this part of the paper, sections 21–24 in the next.

In Athanasius' initial account of debate at Nicaea the argument revolved around an attempt to find terms that would secure an appropriate view of what it means for the Son to come from God. At *De decretis* 19 Athanasius tells us that the bishops began by wishing to hold to the “acknowledged words of the scriptures” (τὰς δὲ τῶν γραφῶν ὁμολογουμένας φωνὰς) that the Son is “from God,” is “Word,” and is “Wisdom.”⁹ Because Eusebius and his supporters understood “from God” as also descriptive (in some sense) of part of the created order, the creed's framers introduced ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς to indicate the unique sense in which “from God” was here being used.¹⁰ Used as a formula we will find

8. It is clear that Athanasius sees ὁμοούσιος as reinforcing ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας from his description of the deliberations at *Decr.* 20, text quoted below (n. 26).

9. *Decr.* 19 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:15–16): Τῆς συνόδου βουλομένης τὰς μὲν τῶν Ἀρειανῶν τῆς ἀσεβείας λέξεις ἀνελεῖν, τὰς δὲ τῶν γραφῶν ὁμολογουμένας φωνὰς γράψαι, ὅτι τε υἱὸς ἐστὶν οὐκ ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων, ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ λόγος ἐστὶ καὶ σοφία, ἀλλ' οὐ κτίσμα οὐδὲ ποίημα, ἴδιον δὲ ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς γέννημα, οἱ περὶ Εὐσέβιον ὑπὸ τῆς πολυχρονίου κακοδοξίας ἐαντῶν ἐλκόμενοι ἐβούλοντο τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ κοινὸν εἶναι πρὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ λόγον μηδὲν τε ἐν τούτῳ διαφέρειν ἡμῶν αὐτὸν διὰ τὸ γεγράφθαι· εἰς θεὸς ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα. . . . My translations of Athanasius are adapted from those in NPNE, second series, vol. 4.

10. *Decr.* 19 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:16): ἀλλ' οἱ πατέρες θεωρήσαντες ἐκείνων τὴν πανουργίαν καὶ τὴν τῆς ἀσεβείας κακοτεχνίαν ἠναγκάσθησαν λοιπὸν λευκότερον εἰπεῖν τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ γράψαι ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ θεοῦ εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ κοινὸν καὶ ἴσον τοῦ τε υἱοῦ καὶ τῶν γεννητῶν νομίζεσθαι. . . .

repeated elsewhere, the phrase should be taken to indicate both that only the Word is truly from the Father and that the Word is distinct from all created things.¹¹ Whatever the veracity of this report of Nicaea, Athanasius' rhetorical strategy is clear: those who dispute the phrase "from the essence" are actually disputing what he presents as the "obvious" sense of the scriptural terms Wisdom, Word, and Son.¹²

At this point it is important for us to pause for a moment to consider Athanasius' arguments here in the context of his development prior to the 350s. Doing so will make clearer both the complexity of allegiance to Nicaea in the period from 325–350 and Athanasius' developing understanding of the significance of Nicaea's οὐσία terminology. While discussion of ὁμοούσιος is absent from his earlier work, it is noticeable that ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς and phrases that allude to this formula make a number of appearances in the first two of the *Orationes contra Arianos* (the phrase is noticeably absent from the third *Oratio*).¹³ In these passages ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας is almost always associated with the statement that the Son is ἴδιος to the Father: the Son is either "proper" to the Father's substance or from the Father's "own proper" substance. The language of the Son or Word being ἴδιος to the Father is an important theme in Athanasius' account of God (although this statement requires the nuances explored in the following paragraphs). As Andrew Louth indicates, ἴδιος is frequently used with the contrasting term ἕξωθεν, designating what is "outside" God.¹⁴ The link Athanasius sees between ἴδιος and references to the Son being from the Father's οὐσία is particularly clear at *C. Ar.* 1.15 where ἕξωθεν is itself contrasted with ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας: καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ, Πατέρα ἴδιον

11. *Decr.* 19 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:16): διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ ἡ ἀγία σύνοδος λευκότερον εἶρηκεν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας αὐτὸν εἶναι τοῦ πατρὸς, ἵνα καὶ ἄλλος παρὰ τὴν τῶν γενητῶν φύσιν ὁ λόγος εἶναι πιστευθῇ μόνος ὢν ἀληθῶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ μηκέτι πρόφασις πρὸς ἀπάτην ὑπολείπεται τοῖς ἀσεβοῦσι.

12. Note that again in the last sentence of section 19 (quoted in the previous note) this phrase prevents the πρόφασις, the "pretense" of those who subscribe to the fundamental biblical terms but understand those terms in a manner very different from Athanasius.

13. *C. Ar.* 1.15, 16, 36; 2.2, 32, 34, 41, 51, 57, 70. The nearest thing to an allusion in *C. Ar.* 3 is at 3.3 (Metzler/Savvidis, *Werke* 1.2:309): ἐπειδὴ σύμπαν τὸ εἶναι τοῦ Υἱοῦ, τοῦτο τῆς τοῦ Πατρὸς οὐσίας ἰδιόν ἐστιν. . . . Here of course we need not necessarily see an allusion, but even in this very different construction the linkage of Πατρὸς and οὐσίας reflects – as I am arguing – a certain engagement with Nicaea, and can plausibly be seen as an allusion to the phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς.

14. Andrew Louth, "The Use of the Term ἴδιος in Alexandrian Theology from Alexander to Cyril," *SP* 19 (1989): 198–202. Louth begins by noting Alexander's citation of Rom 8.32: it is puzzling that Athanasius never quotes this text in support of his own use of the terminology, the verse appearing only at *vit. Ant.* 14.

εἶναι τὸν Θεόν· δηλόν, ὅτι οὐκ ἔξωθεν, ἀλλ' ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς ἐστὶ τὸ μετεχόμενον.¹⁵

Exploring a little further the links between Athanasius' use of ἴδιος and οὐσία language will provide an important window onto Athanasius' developing commitment to Nicaea. We can proceed by noting two stages in Athanasius' use of ἴδιος language prior to the 350s. First, in his earliest works ἴδιος is not a particularly prominent term for describing the relationship between Father and Son. In the *Contra Gentes* Athanasius never directly speaks of God's οὐσία and only twice speaks of the Son as ἴδιος to the Father.¹⁶ Athanasius uses a variety of terminologies to emphasize the Son or Word's status as "belonging" to the Father, most prominent being the basic description of the Word as the Λόγος τοῦ Πατρὸς.¹⁷ *Contra Gentes* 46 is a particularly important example of his early theological style and indicates a fundamental line of argument that he will follow in the decades to come. In this section of the text Athanasius emphasises the closeness of Word to Father by stringing together a variety of intensifying adjectives indicating that the Λόγος is the Father's own and is in himself the attributes scripture accords him.¹⁸

In the *De incarnatione* Athanasius only twice describes the Son as being ἴδιος to the Father.¹⁹ In the latter half of the text, however, Athanasius deploys ἴδιος language much more frequently to describe various qualities and activities as "proper" to human nature and thus possessed by the Incarnate Word: the term emphasizes that such qualities are intrinsic to and the natural possession of human nature.²⁰ Thus while, in the first

15. Metzler/Savvidis, *Werke* 2.1:125. Cf. *C. Ar.* 2.2 (Metzler/Savvidis, *Werke*, 2.1:179): Τὸ μὲν γὰρ Υἱὸς ἴδιον καὶ ἀληθῶς ἐκ τῆς μακαρίας ἐκείνης καὶ αἰὲ οὔσης οὐσίας ἐστί· τὰ δὲ ἐκ βουλήσεως αὐτῆς ἔξωθεν συνιστάμενα γίνεται, καὶ δημιουργεῖται διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου καὶ ἐς αὐτῆς γεννήματος.

16. *C. gen.* 2, 40.

17. *C. gen.* 27, 40, 42, 44, 47.

18. *C. gen.* 46 (ed. and trans. Robert W. Thomson, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971], 130): καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ δὲ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα γεγονέναι οἱ ἱεροὶ τούτου διδάσκουσι μαθηταί, καὶ ὅτι ἀγαθὸν ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ γέννημα καὶ ἀληθινὸς Υἱὸς ὑπάρχων, δύναμις ἐστὶ τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ σοφία καὶ Λόγος, οὐ κατὰ μετοχὴν ταῦτα ὄν, οὐδὲ ἔξωθεν ἐπιγενομένων τούτων αὐτῷ κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοῦ μετέχοντας καὶ σοφισζομένους δι' αὐτοῦ, καὶ δυνατοὺς καὶ λογικοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ γινομένους, ἀλλ' αὐτοσοφία, αὐτολόγος, αὐτοδύναμις ἰδία τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐστίν, αὐτοφῶς, αὐτοαλήθεια, αὐτοδικαιοσύνη, αὐτοαρετή, καὶ μὴν καὶ χαρακτήρ καὶ ἀπαύγασμα καὶ εἰκὼν. καὶ συνελόντι φράσαι, καρπὸς παντέλειος τοῦ Πατρὸς ὑπάρχει, καὶ μόνος ἐστὶν Υἱός, εἰκὼν ἀπαραλλακτος τοῦ Πατρὸς. Thomson's notes on p. 130 offer some indication of the range of possible sources for Athanasius' terminology in this important passage.

19. *De incar.* 3, 32.

20. *De incar.* 21, 22, 32.

stage of his use of ἴδιος, Athanasius does not use the term prominently in discussing the relationship of Father and Son, he already recognizes in a christological context its usefulness for indicating that something is intrinsic to a person or a nature. It is also important to note that, at this first stage, οὐσία terminology does not play any role in his account of the Son's closeness to the Father.

We see the second stage in his use of ἴδιος and οὐσία language in the first two *Orationes contra Arianos*.²¹ Here Athanasius' concern is to emphasize the intrinsic place of the Word in and with the Father, the status of the Word as intrinsic to the Father's perfection. We see, on the one hand, increased use of ἴδιος language. On the other hand, we also see a turn to οὐσία language. Athanasius uses οὐσία language and especially the phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας to intensify and focus our attention on precisely the same themes he also highlights through increased deployment of ἴδιος language. It seems at least likely that his increased use of ἴδιος language is the result of his having realized its usefulness for indicating the intrinsic status of something to another reality in the latter stages of the *De incarnatione*. The process of intensification he follows mirrors that found in *Contra Gentes* 46, but he now makes prominent use of οὐσία and ἴδιος terminology towards this goal.

The interwoven use of ἴδιος and οὐσία language also helps us to outline what Nicaea meant for him at this point in his career. While it is commonplace to note that his one use of ὁμοούσιος in the first oration indicates some sort of commitment to Nicaea, it is extremely difficult to define this commitment further on the basis of this one citation. It is, for instance, clear enough that at this stage Athanasius is still willing to deploy a variety of ὁμοιος language to describe the Son's relationship to the Father²² and that he does not appeal to Nicaea's terminology as an agreed and universal marker of orthodoxy—even as he strongly endorses the council's condemnation of Arius.²³ None of this should surprise us; there was as yet no context within which creedal terminology might serve such a function.²⁴ Nevertheless, in the *Orationes* Athanasius has decided to argue that there is an intrinsic link between the Son's status as the Father's

21. See the texts cited in n. 13 above.

22. *C. Ar.* 1.20, 40; 3.11, 26.

23. For instance, in *C. Ar.* Athanasius never openly acknowledges that ὁμοούσιος or ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας are Nicaea's phrases and he never appeals directly to Nicaea as a warrant for their use.

24. There is still much to be learned from the first chapter of H. J. Sieben's *Die Konzilsidee der Alten Kirche* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1979). For my own account of the "original" theology of Nicaea, see my *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, ch. 4.

“own” and his being from the Father’s οὐσία: the Son is ἴδιος to the Father’s οὐσία. At the same time Athanasius demonstrates considerable interest in the phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας. Taken together, these new patterns of language use do indicate a commitment to Nicaea and an active engagement with what he takes to have been its theological intent. In particular, Athanasius takes Nicaea’s theology to be embodied in the phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς and in the possibility of using οὐσία terminology to reinforce the Son’s unique status as “proper” to the Father.

We can now return to the *De decretis*. Although we have so far only discussed Athanasius’ account of Nicaea’s choosing ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς, we can already see a development from the *Orationes contra Arianos*: Athanasius now defends the precise wording of Nicaea’s οὐσία terminology in relation to more traditional and scriptural terminology. We must, however, be cautious how we interpret the gradual change in the importance of creedal terminology that we are witnessing here. Prominent ecclesiastical figures must have felt the tension over creedal wording that had grown during the 340s, following the fiasco of the Serdican council in 343 and the failed embassy that brought west the Macrosthich in 345. This tension will have grown further following the appearance of what could easily be taken as actively anti-Nicene formulations consequent upon the declarations of Sirmium 351.²⁵ The faithfulness to Nicaea’s judgments, if not to its terminology, apparent in (at least) some western bishops and in Athanasius’ works from the 340s had always been suspect to some for its seeming materialism and modalism; now that suspicion had taken the form of creedal attacks on its language.

In this context a clearer defense of Nicaea’s terminology was necessary. Defending the terminology itself, however, as necessary for securing the sense of traditional patterns of exegesis plays a key role in promoting the idea that that terminology may have universal significance beyond its original purpose of opposing Arius; Nicaea’s terminology gradually comes to be equated with Nicaea’s judgments. It is important to note that this process has only begun here and continues for many decades. Similarly, we need also to beware of thinking that the *De decretis* shows that this terminology has now become a fundamental point of departure for Athanasius’ theology; the “basic dogmatic statements” of his faith are still those that we find in the *Orationes contra Arianos*. It is fair to say, however, that gradually Athanasius comes to use Nicaea’s terminology

25. The relevant anathemas of Sirmium 351 (nos. 6, 7, 25, 26) can be found at Athanasius, *Synod.* 27.

itself more prominently; as we see at the end of the 350s in his letters to Serapion for instance.

At *De decretis* 20 Athanasius turns to the council's decision to include ὁμοούσιος in the creed. He tells us that a number of phrases were proposed to characterize the Son's status as the one generated from God. "True power," "image," "unvaryingly alike in all things," the phrases which seemed to come with traditional or scriptural warrant, all could be understood by Eusebians as predicating in a high degree things of the Son also true of us.²⁶ Thus, in order to secure a true presentation of what it means for the Son to be truly from God, and gathering together or summing up the sense of the scriptures (συναγαγεῖν ἐκ τῶν γραφῶν τὴν διάνοιαν), the bishops declared the Son to be ὁμοούσιος with the Father.²⁷ At this stage it is not clear how Athanasius understands the word in itself outside this theological context; it is only clear what function it serves for those bishops wanting to use it against the Eusebians. Summing up what we have seen so far, we can say that both of Nicaea's controversial technical terminologies are described here as securing an appropriate understanding of "from God" and that Athanasius so far describes ὁμοούσιος only as the necessary supplement to ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς. In both cases Athanasius has avoided reflecting directly on the significance or dangers of οὐσία terminology, preferring to argue that Nicaea's controversial terminology stands as a cipher for and protection of the "scriptural" sense of "from God."

III. *DE DECRETIS* 21–24

When Athanasius has finished with his narration of events at Nicaea he focuses the next section of his text (21–24) on the ways in which these

26. *Decr.* 20 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:16): Τῶν δὲ ἐπισκόπων πάλιν λεγόντων δεῖν γραφῆναι δύναμιν ἀληθινὴν καὶ εἰκόνα τοῦ πατρὸς τὸν λόγον ὁμοίον τε καὶ ἀπαράλλακτον αὐτὸν κατὰ πάντα τῷ πατρὶ καὶ ἄτρεπτον καὶ ἀεὶ καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ εἶναι ἀδιαιρέτως . . . οἱ περὶ Εὐσέβιον ἠνείχοντο μὲν μὴ τολμῶντες ἀντιλέγειν διὰ τὴν αἰσχύνην, ἣν εἶχον ἐφ' οἷς ἠλέγχθησαν, κατελήφθησαν δὲ πάλιν πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς τονθορύζοντες καὶ διανεύοντες τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς, ὅτι καὶ τὸ ὅμοιον καὶ τὸ ἀεὶ καὶ τὸ τῆς δυνάμεως ὄνομα καὶ τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ κοινὰ πάλιν ἐστὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ τὸν υἱόν, καὶ οὐδὲν λυπεῖ τοῦτοις ἡμᾶς συνθέσθαι.

27. *Decr.* 20 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:17): ἀλλ' οἱ ἐπίσκοποι καὶ ἐν τούτῳ θεωρήσαντες τὴν ὑπόκρισιν ἐκείνων καὶ ὅτι κατὰ τὸ γεγραμμένον ἐν καρδίαις τῶν ἀσεβῶν δόλος ἐστὶ τεκταινομένων κακά, ἠναγκάστησαν καὶ αὐτοὶ αὐθις συναγαγεῖν ἐκ τῶν γραφῶν τὴν διάνοιαν καί, ἄπερ πρότερον ἔλεγον, ταῦτα πάλιν λευκότερον εἰπεῖν καὶ γράψαι, ὁμοούσιον εἶναι τῷ πατρὶ τὸν υἱόν, ἵνα μὴ μόνον ὅμοιον τὸν υἱόν, ἀλλὰ ταῦτόν τῃ ὁμοιωσεῖ ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς εἶναι σημαίνωσι. . . . προσλαμβάνομεν.

two phrases contain the sense or true meaning (διάνοια) of the scriptures. Once again he deals with the two phrases in the same order. Athanasius begins by offering a catena of scriptural texts to indicate that the Word is truly from the Father and that Father and Son are consequently one.²⁸ His next step, at the beginning of section 22, is to indicate that because God is simple and incomposite, terms such as “God” and “Father” necessarily name God’s essence as opposed to accidental qualities (because there can be none). Therefore when we say that the Son is “from God” we necessarily imply that the Son is “from the essence of God.”²⁹

The argument is *prima facie* a dangerous one and might seem to imply that anything scripture describes as being “from God” must have the same status as the Son. Athanasius’ answer is that only the Son is truly from God, while the created order is imperfectly so; Father and Son language serves to emphasize the uniqueness of this relationship. The Son is a “genuine” Son “by nature” from the Father (υἱὸς φύσει γνήσιος ἐκ πατρὸς) and hence from his Father’s essence. This appeal to what Athanasius takes to be the obvious implications of the New Testament’s Father and Son language is mirrored in the following section, *De decretis* 23. Here Athanasius turns to the relationship between light and its radiance. Athanasius argues that the “saints” consciously deployed this analogy instead of light and the sun because in the latter case light stands as a subordinate product. By the use of the term “radiance” Athanasius argues that previous writers intended to indicate that the Son was a “proper” and “indivisible” offspring from the Father’s essence.³⁰

28. *Decr.* 21. Here we find (in order) Ps 45.1 & 3; John 8.42; John 6.46, John 10.30; John 14.10; and John 1.18.

29. *Decr.* 22 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:18): εἰ δὲ ἀπλοῦν τί ἐστιν ὁ θεός, ὥσπερ οὖν καὶ ἔστι, δηλονότι λέγοντες τὸν θεὸν καὶ ὀνομάζοντες τὸν πατέρα οὐδὲν τι ὡς περὶ αὐτὸν ὀνομάζομεν, ἀλλ’ αὐτὴν τὴν οὐσίαν. αὐτοῦ σημαίνομεν. κἂν γὰρ καταλαβεῖν ὅ, τί ποτέ ἐστιν ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐσία, μὴ ἢ δυνατόν, ἀλλὰ μόνον νοοῦντες εἶναι τὸν θεὸν καὶ τῆς γραφῆς ἐν τούτοις αὐτὸν σημαίνουσης οὐκ ἄλλον τινὰ καὶ ἡμεῖς ἢ αὐτὸν σημᾶναι θέλοντες λέγομεν θεὸν καὶ πατέρα καὶ κύριον. ὅταν γοῦν λέγῃ· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν, καὶ τὸ ἐγὼ εἰμι κύριος ὁ θεός, καὶ ὅπου ποτέ λέγει ἡ γραφή ὁ θεός, ἡμεῖς ἀναγινώσκοντες οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἢ αὐτὴν τὴν ἀκατάληπτον αὐτοῦ οὐσίαν σημαίνουμένην νοοῦμεν καὶ ὅτι ἔστιν ὄνπερ λέγουσιν. οὐκοῦν μὴ ξενίζέσθω τις ἀκούων ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ θεοῦ εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ καὶ μάλλον ἀποδεχέσθω τοὺς πατέρας διακαθάραντας τὸν νοῦν καὶ λευκότερον καὶ ὡς ἐκ παραλλήλου τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γράψαντας τὸ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας. ταῦτόν γὰρ ἠγήσαντο τὸ λέγειν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὸ λέγειν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ θεοῦ εἶναι τὸν λόγον, ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ θεός, καθὰ προεῖπον, οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἢ τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ τοῦ ὄντος σημαίνει.

30. *Decr.* 23 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:19): ἀλλὰ ἀπαύγασμα αὐτὸν εὐηγγελίσαντο πάντες, ἵνα τὸ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας ἴδιον καὶ ἀδιαίρετον καὶ τὴν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἐνότητα δηλώσωσι. καὶ γὰρ οὕτω καὶ τὸ ἄτρεπτον καὶ ἀναλλοίωτον αὐτὸν ἀληθῶς εἶναι σωθήσεται· πῶς γὰρ ἂν ἄλλως εἴη τοιοῦτος, εἰ μὴ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας ἰδίον ἐστι γέννημα; ἀνάγκη γὰρ καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τὴν ταυτότητα πρὸς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ πατέρα σώζειν.

Halfway through section 23 Athanasius turns directly to ὁμοούσιος. Two arguments follow that present the term as securing necessary consequences of ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς. First, Athanasius argues that the term must be admitted if we are not to run the risk of failing to preserve the divine truth and eternity. If we said that the Son was truly from the essence and is indivisibly in that essence, then the Son's generation cannot have involved any combination in God of foreign elements with the divine nature; the adjective ὁμοούσιος secures this point. Second, in a dense (and not particularly clear) argument Athanasius argues that ὁμοούσιος prevents us from thinking that the Son only *represents* the divine essence and is thus other than God in some respects. This cannot be so, largely because of consequences that would follow and work against the "obvious" intent of some scriptural terminology. In such a situation the Son would no longer be ἴδιος to the Father, just as brass and gold may look alike but are distinct "in nature and power" (τῇ φύσει καὶ τῇ δυνάμει). Similarly, the pigeon cannot be born from the dove despite outward appearance; and, by this analogy, if the Son is not ὁμοούσιος, he must be one of the creatures. Athanasius brings his argument to a close, in section 24, by reminding us that no corporeal sense should be given to this terminology. Just as we know that the terms Offspring and Son are not to be understood materially, so too ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς and ὁμοούσιος are not to be understood by reference to notions of material division in the Godhead. When properly understood they secure what Athanasius takes to be at the heart of Christian belief: the Son's "true" and "proper" sonship.³¹

Having followed this argument in some detail, we can make the following observations about the place of ὁμοούσιος. It is very clear that Athanasius is most concerned to defend Nicaea's terms as securing a particular notion of what it means for the Son to be truly a Son. Athanasius attempts to move his opponents away from considering the appropriateness of the Nicene terms in themselves and toward his favorite texts concerning the relationship between Father and Son. Athanasius presents

31. *Decr.* 24 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:19–20): Ἐξηρήσθω δὲ πάλιν ἐν τούτοις πᾶς λογισμὸς σωματικός, φαντασίαν τε πάσης αἰσθήσεως ὑπερβάντες καθαρῶς τῇ νοήσει καὶ μόνῳ τῷ νῷ νοῶμεν υἱοῦ πρὸς πατέρα τὸ γνήσιον καὶ λόγου τὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ιδιότητα καὶ τὴν ἀπαράλλακτον ὁμοιότητα τοῦ ἀπαυγάσματος πρὸς τὸ φῶς. ὥς γὰρ τὸ γέννημα καὶ τὸ υἱὸς οὐκ ἀνθρώπινον, ἀλλ' ὥς θεῷ πρέπον ἐστίν, εἴρηταί τε καὶ ἔστι, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον τὴν λέξιν τοῦ ὁμοουσίου ἀκούοντες μὴ εἰς τὰς ἀνθρωπίνους αἰσθήσεις πίπτοντες μερισμοὺς καὶ διαιρέσεις τῆς θεότητος λογίζωμεθα· ἀλλ' ὥς ἐπὶ ἀσωμάτων διανοούμενοι τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς φύσεως καὶ τὴν ταυτότητα τοῦ φωτὸς μὴ διαιρῶμεν. τοῦτο γὰρ ἴδιον υἱοῦ πρὸς πατέρα καὶ τοῦτο δείκνυσι τὸν θεὸν ἀληθῶς ὄντα πατέρα τοῦ λόγου.

ὁμοούσιος as only a necessary consequence of ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς, and thus as introducing nothing that should not be obvious to one who understands that phrase correctly; ὁμοούσιος is only necessary to secure that which should be obvious to one who understands key scriptural terms in the light of scripture's διάνοια. But, as I remarked at the beginning of this paragraph, it is a very “particular notion” of the Son’s sonship that Athanasius wishes to promote. Thus we see him appealing to ὁμοούσιος as upholding what it means for the Son to be “from God” and, at the same time, offering his own theological understanding as the most appropriate context for that latter phrase.

It is also clear that Athanasius does not see ὁμοούσιος as offering *in itself* the basis for a particular picture of the relationship between the divine “persons.” While we can identify the basic sense in which Athanasius understands the term ὁμοούσιος in itself, it is clear that he has both little interest in defining the term precisely and every interest in ensuring that *any* sense we might attribute to the term is understood to be governed by a very specific theological context. Thus he gives no hint, for example, that there is any contemporary debate about whether the term can appropriately be applied to both material and immaterial realities, nor does he work by dividing up different commonly accepted uses of the term and then insisting on the theological application of only one.³² From the two texts in which he offers any comment on the term’s intrinsic sense Athanasius most basically understands ὁμοούσιος as implying that two realities share a common nature or are members of a common species.³³ Only a few years later, at *De synodis* 53, Athanasius is indeed concerned to argue that the term can be used of genetic relationships—such as that between fathers and sons—but this argument does not so much attempt to give the term further precision as to show that the term should be understood extremely loosely so that it may be applicable to the relationship between Father and Son.

32. The former debate seems to be revealed at Socrates *Hist. eccl.* 3.18. An example of the latter is Apollinarius’ isolation of a “genetic” sense in his reply to Basil of Caesarea: see Basil, *ep.* 362 (thus we should be wary of simply attributing this “genetic” sense to Athanasius).

33. *Serap.* 2.3 (PG 26:612): ὧν ἔσμεν ὅμοιοι, καὶ τὴν ταυτότητα ἔχομεν τούτων, καὶ ὁμοουσιοὶ ἔσμεν· ἄνθρωποι γοῦν ὅμοιοι καὶ ταυτότητα ἔχοντες, ὁμοουσιοὶ ἔσμεν ἀλλήλων. Τὸ αὐτὸ γὰρ πᾶσι, τὸ θνητὸν, τὸ φθαρτὸν, τὸ τρεπτὸν, τὸ ἐκ μὴ ὄντων. *Synod.* 53 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.7:276): οἶδατε γὰρ καὶ ὑμεῖς καὶ οὐδ’ ἂν τις ἀμφιβάλλοι ὅτι τὸ ὅμοιον οὐκ ἐπὶ τῶν οὐσιῶν, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ σχημάτων καὶ ποιότητων λέγεται ὅμοιον· ἐπὶ γὰρ τῶν οὐσιῶν οὐχ ὁμοιότης, ἀλλὰ ταυτότης ἂν λεχθεῖη. ἄνθρωπος γοῦν ἀνθρώπῳ ὅμοιος λέγεται οὐ κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ σχῆμα καὶ τὸν χαρακτήρα· τῇ γὰρ οὐσίᾳ ὁμοφυεῖς εἰσι. καὶ πάλιν ἄνθρωπος κυνὶ οὐκ ἀνόμοιος λέγεται, ἀλλ’ ἑτεροφυῆς· οὐκοῦν τὸ μὲν ὁμοφυεῖς καὶ ὁμοούσιον, τὸ δὲ ἑτεροφυεῖς καὶ ἑτεροούσιον.

Athanasius' strategy is to assert that ὁμοούσιος has a broad sense in nontheological contexts, against those whose attacks depend on a narrowing of that sense, and then to argue that any meaning we attribute to the term when used of the relationship between Father and Son must be governed by a range of *theological* assumptions and considerations. Those who are concerned about the implications of the term can then be presented both as overly narrowing the sense of the term and as missing the theological context within which the term functions. Thus, we must be careful when we find ourselves trying to summarize what Athanasius "means" by ὁμοούσιος; we should follow a standard post-Wittgensteinian move and speak of how Athanasius *uses* the term within the context of a set of established theological themes and terminologies that are far more basic to his thought.³⁴

IV. ATHANASIUS AND EUSEBIUS

Athanasius' attempt to defend Nicaea's controversial terminology raises for us many important questions about how markers of "orthodoxy" begin (and continue to function) as ciphers for themes more fundamental in a given theologian. The full complexity of these questions will only be seen when we consider the possible sources for Athanasius' account. I suggest that we possess only one text prior to Athanasius' *De decretis* in which a similar defense of Nicaea's terminology is made and that it is likely that Athanasius' arguments draw directly on the arguments of that text.³⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea's *Epistula ad Caesarienses* is directly discussed in the *De decretis*, and Athanasius appended the letter in its entirety as the first item in the dossier that accompanied the text.³⁶ Athanasius' claim that the "Arian madmen" cannot complain at his arguments because similar arguments were deployed by Eusebius at Nicaea

34. Thus I mostly agree with Stead, "*Homoousios*' dans la pensée de saint Athanase," 231–53, that Athanasius' use of ὁμοούσιος is intended to indicate "the full unbroken continuity of being" between Father and Son (following Archibald Robertson's phrasing). I also agree that this is a far better description than rather vague talk of "numerical identity of substance." I do, however, want to argue that we miss the complexity and peculiarity of Athanasius' account if we take it that he presents the term in itself as "meaning" this: rather he uses the term as a cipher for this idea, taken to be embodied in other terminologies and scriptural texts.

35. Cf. Richard Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 58 n. 145. Vaggione notes the parallel and claims both as following an "official" interpretation of the creed dating from Nicaea itself and promulgated by Constantine. I discuss this possibility below.

36. *Decr.* 3; the letter is appended at *Decr.* 33.

has usually seemed only a clever rhetorical ploy belying fundamental differences that mark their accounts. I suggest there is actually more to be said.

Eusebius' defense of Nicaea's terminology in his letter can be summarized in four points. First, when Eusebius comes to give an account of ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς, after he has recited the creed of Nicaea, he argues that the phrase means nothing other than "from God" without being a "part" of God.³⁷ Second, when he comes to discuss ὁμοούσιος directly, Eusebius assumes that the term serves to qualify the Son's status given that he has been generated from God. It is, third, on this basis that he makes the statement, already attributed earlier to Constantine himself, that the term should not be taken to imply that the Son's generation involved any materialistic division of the divine existence nor any change in God.³⁸ Fourth and finally, Eusebius argues that the term is acceptable because, on the one hand, it implies that the Son has no likeness to the originated creatures—only to the Father—and, on the other hand, because it demonstrates that the Son is from the Father not from any other substance.³⁹

In what ways is this defense parallel to or distinct from that offered by

37. Eusebius, *ep. Caes.* 9–10 (Urkunde 22, Opitz, *Werke*, 3.2:45): Καὶ δὴ ταύτης τῆς γραφῆς ὑπ' αὐτῶν ὑπαγορευθείσης, ὅπως εἴρηται αὐτοῖς τὸ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τὸ τῷ πατρὶ ὁμοούσιον, οὐκ ἀνεξέταστον αὐτοῖς κατελιμπάνομεν. . . . καὶ δὴ τὸ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας ὁμολογεῖτο πρὸς αὐτῶν δηλωτικὸν εἶναι τοῦ ἐκ μὲν τοῦ πατρὸς εἶναι, οὐ μὴν ὡς μέρος ὑπάρχειν τοῦ πατρὸς. ταύτῃ δὲ καὶ ἡμῖν ἐδόκει καλῶς ἔχειν συγκατατίθεσθαι τῇ διανοίᾳ τῆς εὐσεβοῦς διδασκαλίας ὑπαγορευούσης ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς εἶναι τὸν υἱόν, οὐ μὴν μέρος αὐτοῦ τῆς οὐσίας τυγχάνειν.

38. Eusebius, *ep. Caes.* 12–13 (Urkunde 22, Opitz, *Werke*, 3.2:45): Οὕτω δὲ καὶ τὸ ὁμοούσιον εἶναι τοῦ πατρὸς τὸν υἱὸν ἐξεταζόμενος ὁ λόγος συνίστησιν, οὐ κατὰ τὸν τῶν σωμάτων τρόπον οὐδὲ τοῖς θνητοῖς ζώοις παραπλησίως, οὔτε γὰρ κατὰ διαίρεσιν τῆς οὐσίας οὔτε κατὰ ἀποτομήν, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ κατὰ τι πάθος ἢ τροπὴν ἢ ἀλλοίωσιν τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας τε καὶ δυνάμεως. Τούτων γὰρ πάντων ἀλλοτρίαν εἶναι τὴν ἀγέννητον τοῦ πατρὸς φύσιν. For Eusebius' account of Constantine's speech see *ep. Caes.* 7 (Urkunde 22, Opitz, *Werke*, 3.2:44): τοῦ ὁμοουσίου, ὃ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐρμήνευε λέγων· ὅτι μὴ κατὰ τῶν σωμάτων πάθῃ λέγοιτο ὁμοούσιος ὁ υἱός, οὐτ' οὖν κατὰ διαίρεσιν οὔτε κατὰ τινα ἀποτομήν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑποστῆναι· μηδὲ γὰρ δύνασθαι τὴν αἷλον καὶ νοεράν καὶ ἀσώματον φύσιν σωματικόν τι πάθος ὑφίστασθαι, θείοις δὲ καὶ ἀπορρήτοις λόγοις προσήκειν τὰ τοιαῦτα νοεῖν. καὶ ὁ μὲν σοφώτατος ἡμῶν καὶ εὐσεβέστατος βασιλεὺς τοιάδε ἐφιλοσόφει. οἱ δὲ προφάσει τῆς τοῦ ὁμοουσίου προσθήκης τήνδε τὴν γραφὴν πεποιήκασιν·

39. Eusebius, *ep. Caes.* 13 (Urkunde 22, Opitz, *Werke*, 3.2:45–46) (this passage immediately follows the first passage quoted in the previous note): παραστατικὸν δὲ εἶναι τὸ ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ τοῦ μηδεμίαν ἐμφέρειαν πρὸς τὰ γενητὰ κτίσματα τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φέρειν, μόνῳ δὲ τῷ πατρὶ τῷ γεγεννηκότῃ κατὰ πάντα τρόπον ἀφομοιωσθαι καὶ μὴ εἶναι ἐξ ἐτέρας τινὸς ὑποστάσεώς τε καὶ οὐσίας, ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς.

Athanasius? The assumption that ὁμοούσιος primarily identifies the consequences of the Son's being generated from the Father's essence is highly plausible given the structure of Nicaea's creed. It is also worth noting that even if we are suitably skeptical about the details of the council given by Eusebius and Athanasius, both were present and both assume a course of debate in which ὁμοούσιος is included to qualify ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς. This particular parallel, then, tells us little. Similarly, both Athanasius and Eusebius share the emphasis that the term is acceptable because it can be understood without material qualification. Again, this tells us little except that both make a qualifying statement essential for any early fourth-century theologian to find the term acceptable. The fact that Eusebius presents this important qualification as coming publicly from the mouth of Constantine at Nicaea may also show that it was part of an "official" interpretation of how the term should be read. I discuss this possibility below.

This leaves us with two aspects of Eusebius' account remaining from the four I identified. Both Eusebius and Athanasius follow very similar rhetorical strategies in attempting to argue that the term's sense is always governed by a more fundamental understanding of what it means to be "from God." Similarly, both authors attribute a dual function to the term: distinguishing the Son from the creatures and demonstrating that the Son is from the Father. Eusebius makes this statement directly; Athanasius not only assumes this principle throughout the *De decretis* but also states it directly at *Decr.* 19 and a few years later in a parallel context at *De synodis* 45.⁴⁰ There is no conclusive case here, but these parallels suggest the likelihood that Athanasius paid close attention to Eusebius' letter as he formulated his own defense of Nicaea's terms.

Pursuing this question a little further, we should note that when Athanasius tells us that he appended Eusebius' letter to demonstrate the lack of respect shown by Acacius to his own predecessors, he offers little criticism of the letter itself.⁴¹ He does not, as would easily be possible,

40. For the *Decr.* 19 text, see n. 11 above. Cf. *Synod.* 45 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.7:271): τοῦτου χάριν οἱ ἐν Νικαίᾳ συνελθόντες θεωρήσαντες τὴν πανουργίαν τῶν οὕτω φρονούντων καὶ συναγαγόντες ἐκ τῶν γραφῶν τὴν διάνοιαν λευκότερον γράφοντες εἰρήκασιν τὸ ὁμοούσιον, ἵνα καὶ τὸ γνήσιον ἀληθῶς ἐκ τοῦτου γνωσθῇ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ μηδὲν κοινὸν ἔχῃ πρὸς τοῦτον τὰ γενητά. ἡ γὰρ τῆς λέξεως ταύτης ἀκρίβεια τὴν τε ὑπόκρισιν αὐτῶν ἐὰν λέγωσι τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ῥητόν, διελέγχει καὶ πάσας αὐτῶν τὰς πιθανότητας, ἐν αἷς ὑφαρπάζουσι τοὺς ἀκεραίους, ἐκβάλλει. Eusebius' wording is quoted in the previous note; there is nothing to suggest direct quotation of Eusebius on the part of Athanasius in either of his direct statements.

41. *Decr.* 3.

portray the letter as a defense intended to deceive or intended to offer an interpretation of Nicaea's terms distinct from the intentions of Nicaea's framers. Indeed, Athanasius goes so far as to describe Eusebius' decision to agree to Nicaea's terms as τό παράδοξον, in the light of his earlier and later rejection of Nicaea.⁴² Athanasius sees the letter as having a defensive and apologetic tone and yet still as clearly and openly anti-"Arian" in its argument.⁴³ Eusebius himself may be a backslider, but the argument of his letter stands. Thus it seems likely that Athanasius saw no problem in treating Eusebius' letter as a resource in shaping his own defense of Nicaea. We can perhaps even imagine him intentionally intending that readers of Eusebius' letter at the end of the text would be struck by its similarity to Athanasius' own arguments. In so doing he would both be attacking the perfidy and backsliding of Acacius and making a subtle rhetorical play that his own arguments be understood as resting on foundations similar to those found in a figure so central to the "Arians."

One important possibility remains for discussion here. Richard Vaggione suggests that both Eusebius and Athanasius actually hold to what may be counted an "official" sense given to ὁμοούσιος:

As explained by the emperor, that sense was that all thoughts of passion, division, or separation were to be excluded and *homoousios* was to be used to express three things and three things only: that the Son is not similar to any created being; that he is similar to the Father in every particular; and that he derives his existence, not from any alien substance or essence, but from the Father alone.⁴⁴

Vaggione takes as evidence for this statement Eusebius' account of Constantine's speech at *Ep. Caes.* 7, Eusebius' own account of the mind of the council at *Ep. Caes.* 12–13, and Constantine's comments in his *Epistula ad Nicomediensis* of 326. Vaggione's suggestion is an intriguing one, but a more minimalist construal of the evidence is, I suggest, more plausible.

42. *Decr.* 3 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:3): καὶ τό γε παράδοξον, Εὐσέβιος ὁ ἀπὸ Καισαρείας τῆς Παλαιστίνης, καίτοι πρὸ μιᾶς ἀρνούμενος, ὅμως ὕστερον ὑπογράφας ἐπέστειλε τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐαυτοῦ, λέγων ταύτην εἶναι τῆς ἐκκλησίας τὴν πίστιν καὶ τῶν πατέρων τὴν παράδοσιν, πᾶσί τε φανερώς ἔδειξεν, ὅτι πρότερον ἐσφάλλοντο καὶ μάτην ἐφιλονεῖκουσιν πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν.

43. *Decr.* 3 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.1:3): εἰ γὰρ καὶ ἡσχύνθη τότε ταύταις ταῖς λέξεσι γράψαι καὶ ὡς ἠθέλησεν αὐτὸς ἀπελογήσατο τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, ἀλλὰ γε διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς τὸ ὁμοούσιον καὶ τὸ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας μὴ ἀρνησάμενος φανερώς τοῦτο σημᾶναι βούλεται. καὶ πέπονθέ τι δεινόν· ὡς γὰρ ἀπολογούμενος κατηγορήσε λοιπὸν τῶν Ἀρειανῶν, ὅτι γράψαντες 'οὐκ ἦν ὁ υἱὸς πρὶν γεννηθῆναι' οὐκ ᾔθελον αὐτὸν εἶναι οὐδὲ πρὸ τῆς κατὰ σάρκα γεννήσεως, καὶ τοῦτο οἶδε καὶ Ἀκάκιος, ἂν μὴ καὶ αὐτὸς φοβηθεῖς νῦν διὰ τὸν καιρὸν ὑποκρίνηται καὶ ἀρνήσεται τὴν ἀλήθειαν.

44. Vaggione, *Eunomius*, 58.

In fact Eusebius directly ascribes to Constantine *only* an emphasis on understanding ὁμοούσιος without reference to material division or the sorts of change associated with corporeal existence.⁴⁵ Moreover, when we look at the letter to the Nicomedians we find Constantine again insisting on the distinction between corporeal generation and that of the Son from the Father through the notions that the Son was always in the Father and that the Son is the will of the Father.⁴⁶ Beyond this, we find only further evidence—beyond that offered by Eusebius towards the end of his letter—for Constantine’s own understanding of the Logos, evidence that does not bear on the three principles Vaggione outlines. Thus, the evidence for these three principles comes entirely from Eusebius’ account of the council’s decisions. It seems, then, more likely that there was an “official interpretation” of Nicaea’s terms only in the sense that Constantine interceded on behalf of those unhappy with ὁμοούσιος, insisting on the importance of understanding the term without material connotation. The rest he left, and may have wished to leave, vaguely defined. Eusebius thus offers an extended account of the council’s controversial language in line with Constantine’s comment, but distinctly his own. It is this account on which Athanasius then draws twenty-five or thirty years later. Finally, it is worth noting that Athanasius nowhere speaks of Constantine’s role at Nicaea and nowhere hints at an “official” imperially sanctioned understanding of Nicaea’s term. If there were such, it seems strange that he would forego the opportunity to point this out to his enemies (and to Constantius!).

Of course, Athanasius’ adoption of Eusebius’ argument also involves a major adaptation. Most significantly, while both authors exploit the ambiguity of the phrase “from God,” and while both argue that this phrase guards or sums up the fundamental intent of traditionally or scripturally warranted terms, the two authors assume very different sets of traditionally or scripturally warranted terms as the defining context for the phrase “from God.” In this way the same phrase deployed within the same formal structure of argument is used as a cipher for clearly distinct theologies. At the same time, we must be careful about exploring this phenomenon by means of a dualistic terminology that distinguishes too sharply between the cipher and the theology indicated by the cipher. Ὁμοούσιος is able to function as a cipher *because* we have been led to understand the term in the context of a series of conditioning arguments that both remove the force of objections that the term in itself is unaccept-

45. See the second text quoted in n. 30 above.

46. Constantine, *ep. Nic.* 1–2 (Urkunde 27, Opitz, *Werke*, 3.2:58).

able and that enable a hearing of the term as pointing beyond itself to other terms and arguments. Understanding the way in which ὁμοούσιος functions as cipher will depend on our grasping the structure of the web of arguments that condition and support its use. Thus while Athanasius and Eusebius share some arguments, they differ in shaping different webs of reference for the terms they seek to defend as ciphers.

V. *DE SYNODIS* 39–45

The arguments I have offered so far affect both how we view Athanasius' understanding and use of ὁμοούσιος itself and Athanasius' account of the significance of the term at Nicaea. Investigation of whether Athanasius' later use of ὁμοούσιος—in such texts as the *Letters to Serapion*—represents significant development must wait for future consideration. There is, however, one more text in which Athanasius gives an account of the emergence of ὁμοούσιος at Nicaea, the *De synodis* of 359–361. This text is notable because here Athanasius' account of Nicaea is used not only to attack his enemies but also in an attempt to seduce into alliance emerging Homoiousian theologians, including Basil of Ancyra. A brief consideration of his arguments in this text—by and large adaptations and transpositions of the arguments found in the *De decretis*—will help to show further the subtlety with which Athanasius adapts his account toward different ends.

In the relevant section of the *De synodis* Athanasius offers two distinct discussions of Nicaea's terminology, the first a polemic against Acacius and against the Homoian activity at the twin councils of Arimnium and Seleucia in 359, the second an irenic argument intended to win over Basil of Ancyra and the emerging Homoiousians. The first discussion need not detain us long. Because terms such as “Father” and “God” name the essence of God, the “Arian” phrase “from God” must be logically identical to saying ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς. Only three quarters of the way through his examination does Athanasius turn in passing to ὁμοούσιος, a phrase which follows naturally once one confesses the true sonship of the Son, his status as “proper offspring.”⁴⁷

47. *Synod.* 39 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.7:265–66): . . . ὅτι δι' οὐδὲν ἕτερον μάχονται πρὸς τὴν σύνοδον ἐκείνην τὴν μεγάλην ἢ ὅτι τὴν ἀρειανὴν αἵρεσιν κατέκρινε. διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ τὴν τοῦ ὁμοουσίου λέξιν διαβάλλουσι κακῶς αὐτοὶ φρονούντες καὶ περὶ αὐτῆς. εἰ γὰρ ἐπίστευον ὀρθῶς καὶ τὸν μὲν πατέρα πατέρα ἀληθῶς ὁμολόγουν, τὸν δὲ υἱὸν γνήσιον υἱὸν καὶ φύσει ἀληθινὸν λόγον καὶ σοφίαν ἐπίστευον εἶναι τοῦ πατρὸς τό τε 'ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ' λέγειν τὸν υἱόν, εἰ μὴ, ὥσπερ λέγεται περὶ τῶν κτισμάτων, οὕτως ἔλεγον καὶ περὶ αὐτοῦ, ἀλλὰ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς ἴδιον αὐτὸν ἐνόουν εἶναι γέννημα ὡς ἔστι τὸ ἀπαύγασμα ἐκ τοῦ φωτός, οὐκ ἂν ἕκαστος αὐτῶν κατηγορεῖ τῶν πατέρων.

In Athanasius' second argument ὁμοούσιος comes more directly to the fore. Athanasius argues that the Homoiousian position is largely identical to his own because they accept the phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς.⁴⁸ We see the subtlety of Athanasius' argument when we note that nowhere in the surviving texts of Basil of Ancyra do we actually find the phrase ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς. Athanasius seems to interpret Basil's willingness to speak of the Son as Wisdom from Wisdom, as essence from essence, and his use of the imagery of the Son as radiance of the eternal light to mean that they implicitly supplement the term ὁμοιούσιος with a commitment to the sense of the phrase "from the Father's essence."⁴⁹ It is on the basis of this assertion that Athanasius then pursues his attempt to convince them that the term ὁμοούσιος is acceptable.

Athanasius' argument concerning ὁμοούσιος focuses, as before, on the necessity of removing material connotations. Just as, he argues, we do not think of the phrase "true offspring" as implying a human, material generation of the Son, so too we must think of the term ὁμοούσιος beyond

48. *Synod.* 41 (Opitz, *Werke*, 2.7:266–67): αἱ γὰρ ὁμολογοῦντες ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς εἶναι καὶ μὴ ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως τὸν υἱὸν κτίσμα τε μὴ εἶναι μηδὲ ποίημα αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ γνήσιον καὶ φύσει γέννημα ἀιδίως τε αὐτὸν συνεῖναι τῷ πατρὶ λόγον ὄντα καὶ σοφίαν οὐ μακρὰν εἰσιν ἀποδέξασθαι καὶ τὴν τοῦ ὁμοουσίου λέξιν. τοιοῦτος δέ ἐστι Βασίλειος ὁ ἀπὸ Ἀγκύρας γράψας περὶ πίστεως. τὸ μὲν γὰρ ὅμοιον μόνον λέγειν 'κατ' οὐσίαν' οὐ πάντως σημαίνει καὶ τὸ 'ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας', ἐξ οὗ μᾶλλον, ὥς καὶ αὐτοὶ εἰρήκασι, σημαίνεται τὸ γνήσιον τοῦ υἱοῦ πρὸς τὸν πατέρα. καὶ γὰρ καὶ κασσίτερος ὁμοίος ἐστὶ μόνος τῷ ἄρ—γύρω καὶ λύκος τῷ κυνὶ καὶ χαλκὸς χρυσίῳ τῷ ἀληθινῷ χρυσῷ, οὐτε δὲ κασσίτερος ἐκ τοῦ ἀργύρου τυγχάνει οὔτε λύκος ὡς υἱὸς τοῦ κυνὸς ἀν νομισθεῖν. ἐπειδὴ δὲ καὶ 'ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας' καὶ ὁμοιούσιον αὐτὸν εἰρήκασι, τί ἕτερον σημαίνουν ἐκ τούτων ἢ τὸ ὁμοούσιον; καὶ γὰρ ὥσπερ ὁ λέγων μόνον ὁμοιούσιον οὐ πάντως καὶ τὸ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας γνωρίζει οὕτως ὁ λέγων ὁμοούσιον ἀμφοτέρων τοῦ τε ὁμοουσίου καὶ τοῦ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας σημαίνει τὴν διάνοιαν.

49. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.6.7 (GCS 37:276): τῶν γὰρ ἀτόπων ἐστὶν ἐκ σοφοῦ θεοῦ σοφίαν ὑφίσταμένην ἀκούοντα, ὡς σοφῶς οἶδε τῆς ἐξ ἐαυτοῦ γεννηθείσης σοφίας γενέσθαι πατὴρ, πάθος ἐννοεῖν πατρὶ ἐν τῷ τὴν σοφίαν ὑφίστασθαι, εἰ μέλλοι ἐξ αὐτοῦ κατ' οὐσίαν ὁμοία τῷ σοφῷ ἢ σοφία ὑφίστασθαι. εἰ γὰρ μήτε ὁ σοφὸς θεὸς μεθέξει σοφίας συνθέτως σοφὸς ἡμῖν νοεῖται, ἀλλ' ἀσυνθέτως αὐτός ἐστι σοφός, οὐσία ἐστὶ, μήτε ἡ σοφία ἐστὶν ὁ υἱός, ἐξ ἧς νοεῖται, ἀλλὰ ἡ σοφία οὐσία ἐστὶν ἀπὸ σοφοῦ οὐσίας, ὅ ἐστι σοφία, οὐσία ὁ υἱὸς ὑποστὰς ὁμοία ἔσται [καὶ] κατ' οὐσίαν τοῦ σοφοῦ πατρὸς, ἅψ' οὐπὲρ ὑπέσθη σοφία ὁ υἱός. *Panarion* 73.7.6 (GCS 37:277): καὶ ὡς ἡ σοφία τοῦ σοφοῦ υἱός, οὐσία οὐσίας, οὕτως ἡ εἰκὼν οὐσίας ὁμοία ἐστὶ. Not only does Basil qualify "essence from essence" with likeness language but he also seems consciously to avoid ἐκ when he talks of οὐσία here. If this is so, we see further the extent to which Athanasius' appeal involves an attempt to interpret Basil with a great deal of charity. Note, however, that Basil, like Athanasius, assumes that οὐσία language in theological contexts can serve as a cipher for indicating the Son's status apart from any connotations that might seem to apply when it is used to describe generation in material contexts.

material connotations. Our understanding of ὁμοούσιος must be governed by our talk of the Son as radiance from light and life from the fountain of the Father. As in the *De decretis*, Athanasius highlights those accounts of divine immateriality and indivisibility that enable ὁμοούσιος to function as a cipher; but it is noticeable that here he focuses his account of that for which ὁμοούσιος is a cipher on the elements of his theology most acceptable to the Homoiousians. It is the unique status of the Son as Son that is his focus; description of the Son being ἴδιος to the Father's οὐσία—language that might, to Homoiousian ears, seem to downplay the distinction between Father and Son—is interestingly absent. At the end of his attempt to persuade the Homoiousians Athanasius appends a discussion of possible pre-Nicene uses of ὁμοούσιος. As a summary he notes, in Eusebian fashion, that the fathers of Nicaea made use of ὁμοούσιος, “that both the true genuineness of the Son might be known, and that to things originate might be ascribed nothing in common with him.”⁵⁰

Athanasius thus attempts to entice the Homoiousians into alliance by offering his Eusebian evacuation of ὁμοούσιος's problematic connotations while simultaneously insisting that they already accept the central thematics for which he takes ὁμοούσιος to be a cipher, the Son's true sonship. The beauty of the argument lies in the way that Athanasius uses ὁμοούσιος as a cipher for the fundamental themes of his own theology while, as part of the rhetoric of persuasion, he allows some of those themes to hide in the background. Athanasius seems consciously to exploit the complex relationships between the cipher and the web of arguments used to establish its status as cipher and function within his theology. No doubt we see here a microcosm of the ways in which the emergence of shared pro-Nicene terminologies shaped complex negotiations between different theological traditions gradually moving towards mutual acceptance and recognition.⁵¹

50. *Synod.* 45. The text is quoted in n. 47 above.

51. Some provisos are necessary here. First, we should not, of course, assume that Basil of Ancyra's theology or that of other Homoiousians led inevitably to their joining the pro-Nicene camp during the 360s. While some did, many did not. Second, we are unable to trace with certainty the influence of Athanasius' arguments. But even if we assume that they were not directly influential on the Homoiousians, similar arguments and shifts appear in a variety of contexts and gradually do seem to have had considerable effect. Third, isolating these theological shifts in presentations of Nicaea's terms should not be taken to marginalize the importance of social and political changes following 360. In particular, the promulgation of the Homoian creed in the 359–360 series of councils and then the shape of imperial policy through Julian's reign had much impact on the gradual realignments of the 360s. For my account of these changes see *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, ch. 7.

VI. CONCLUSION

Christopher Stead has placed much emphasis on the fundamentally conservative nature of Athanasius' account of ὁμοούσιος. He points out that Athanasius uses the term almost exclusively of the relationship of Son to Father, never of the Trinity in general and never of the Father's relationship to the Son. My argument here both reinforces Stead's and pushes it further. Athanasius' defense of the term depends on his defense of Nicaea's description of the Son as ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς, a dependence that nicely explains Stead's observations. The conservatism of Athanasius' defense of ὁμοούσιος in the *De decretis* can be seen in the skill with which he defends the term by arguing that it stands as a cipher not simply for ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς but for the "obvious" sense of a variety of his favorite themes.

I have argued that the most likely source for Athanasius' defense of Nicaea's terms in the *De decretis* lies in Eusebius' *Epistula ad Caesarienses*. Some compelling circumstantial evidence points toward this conclusion, even while direct textual parallel is absent. Athanasius seems to copy Eusebius' argument that ὁμοούσιος is a term intended to secure only the Son's being from God and distinct from the creatures. At the same time Athanasius adapts: in his thought the term stands as a cipher for a very different set of fundamental themes and concerns. In carrying out this adaptation Athanasius shows himself also to be developing his own earlier understanding of the ways in which οὐσία language as used at Nicaea may serve to emphasize the Son's "true" sonship.

Paying such detailed attention to Athanasius' developing account of ὁμοούσιος provides an important point of departure for considering the development of one of the key identity markers of late fourth-century orthodoxy. Athanasius presents us with a perfect example of the process by which subscription to such identity markers involves a complex negotiation between existing themes (and existing trajectories of development) in an author or local tradition and markers of identity whose very form is increasingly seen as fixed and translocal.

If there is one aspect of this process that I have tried to highlight as the paper progressed, it is the importance of reading such "doctrinal ciphers" as ὁμοούσιος within the context of the network of arguments that make them what they are. Indeed, we may end by noting directly that these arguments have been misread if it is assumed that because I present ὁμοούσιος as a cipher I assume the term itself is of no significance in the debates. In the first place, the negotiations and agreed provisos that render possible the acceptance of such a cipher themselves focus debate

on particular themes as essential in speaking of the doctrinal area at issue. Thus, for example, the three principles that ὁμοούσιος is to be understood (a) as not implying material division within God, (b) as not implying that there are two ultimate principles, and (c) as primarily pointing to the Son's incomprehensible uniqueness gradually emerged as necessary provisos for appropriate use of ὁμοούσιος and then became central to pro-Nicene accounts of the Son's generation.

In the second place, the "internal" resources of the cipher—the resources of its generally agreed uses, connotations, and semantic field—may come in and out of play for different purposes. The fact that the term is allowed to possess a loose intrinsic sense (one whose looseness is in fact perpetuated as a tactic to demonstrate the failure of all arguments against its theological usage coming from observation of its "necessary" non-theological sense) enables it to be drawn on in support for a variety of theological and philosophical projects at different points in time. It is the fluidity of the term in the context of a complex web of arguments that enables it to be used as a marker of common identity between theological traditions. Its "meaning" is found and negotiated within complex patterns of use. Beyond specific consideration of Athanasius and ὁμοούσιος, our investigation of the evolution and deployment of the key terminologies of pro-Nicene orthodoxy can better proceed the more we are attentive to such terms in their contexts.⁵²

Lewis Ayres is Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at the Candler School of Theology and in the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University

52. In the interests of length I have avoided discussion of which literary and cultural theoretical resources might best serve the investigation of the development of doctrinal "ciphers" during the fourth century. This is a topic I hope to take up at a future date.