

Human Nature in Theistic Perspective

with Celia Deane-Drummond and Paul Wason, "Becoming Human in Theistic Perspective"; John H. Walton, "Human Origins and the Bible"; Mikael Stenmark, "Is There a Human Nature?"; Alan J. Torrance, "Is There a Distinctive Human Nature? Approaching the Question from a Christian Epistemic Base"; Alistair McFadyen, "Imaging God: A Theological Answer to the Anthropological Question?"; Celia Deane-Drummond, "God's Image and Likeness in Humans and Other Animals: Performative Soul-Making and Graced Nature"; and John Schneider, "The Fall of 'Augustinian Adam': Original Fragility and Supralapsarian Purpose"

BECOMING HUMAN IN THEISTIC PERSPECTIVE

by Celia Deane-Drummond and Paul Wason

Abstract. This short paper provides the context for the six theological papers published in this issue that were part of a wider discussion with other scientists and theologians on becoming human. It raises the questions that the papers sought to address and shows how the different aspects of what it means to be human from a theological perspective are challenged by, but also serve to engage and in some cases confront, scientific debates on this matter. The particular sciences involved included neuroscience, genetics, evolutionary biology, anthropology, and paleontology. Selected scientific and other theological papers will appear in subsequent issues of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. The particular theological positions taken in this collection are distinctive and form the basis for a theological debate on what it means to be human in theistic perspective.

Keywords: science and theology; theistic evolution; theological anthropology

Perhaps one of the most controversial areas for discussion between scientists and theologians is that surrounding human evolutionary identity and becoming. There is much to be gained, therefore, from open and frank debate between theologians and evolutionary biologists. The first parameter to be decided, though, is what is permissible within the boundaries

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of reasonable science and theology. The context in which the papers represented in this collection first appeared was one where the porosity of such boundaries was explored through a science and religion colloquium on human becoming funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

Because this colloquium, *Becoming Human in Theistic Perspective*, is the context in which these papers were written, discussed, and rewritten, it is worth noting that the program was meant to raise questions like the following, which concern the difference new information from the sciences could make for the theological discussions of these topics, and so for a deeper understanding of ourselves. This is an expansive compass still, but not as broad as reviewing human nature generally. How has evolution, particularly human evolution, changed our understanding of what it is to be human, of human uniqueness, of human possibility? Does a theistic perspective on evolution, which engages such matters as the *imago Dei*, the belief that we are created “in the image of God,” affect these issues? Do our understandings of physical and cultural evolution affect, in turn, our understanding of such matters as purposive activity, moral responsibility, and altruism? Similarly, how do we reconcile hominid evolution with creation, fall, sin, soul, and other theological concepts of importance throughout much of the history of Christianity? Or are these really different categories? How might a theistic evolutionary perspective help or hinder our ability to engage Christian theology with the data and theories of paleoanthropology, evolutionary psychology, and indeed, primatology and human genetics? These, obviously, are not new questions, but the premise of the workshop is that they have not received sufficient detailed scholarly attention, especially in light of recent developments in each of the fields (from biblical studies to genetics), and in particular, that scholars from the relevant fields have not always drawn significantly on one another’s work.

It is therefore not surprising that many of the scientists who were represented at this colloquium were intent on providing evidence for the scientific basis for human evolution. Biologist Darrel Falk, for example, focused on the specific molecular evolution of the lactose gene. One of us, Celia Deane-Drummond, is personally familiar with this condition due to inherited lactose intolerance in her own family. Falk argued that human evolution has parallels with this process, but then questions how far and to what extent God could be seen as being directly involved in such processes. Evolutionary biologist David Wilcox, on the other hand, raised the issue of neutral, rather than selectable, mutations, through which scientists are able to map the closeness of human relationships with other species through historical time. He, like Falk, is deeply impressed by the patterns of genetic sequences that provide evidence in support of human evolution, and more explicitly, a common ancestor of human beings and chimpanzees, which diverged about 4 million years ago. Genetic patterning also suggests

that the phase of most intense biological evolution took place in the hominid line before 250,000 years ago. But it is here that Ian Tattersall's contribution was particularly relevant, for he argued that in order to fully understand what specifically makes us human, we also need to resolve ways in which the specific linguistic and symbolic capacities of humans evolved, and this cannot be readily discerned from raw paleontological data that show the appearance of the physical characteristics of *Homo sapiens*, for more advanced cultural and religious capabilities came about after the first appearance of *H. sapiens*. He also raises fascinating issues about the relationship between *H. sapiens* and Neanderthals (see also Tattersall 2012).

The six papers in this first raft of original work to be published in *Zygon* represent the reactions of biblical scholars, philosophers, and theologians to such debates. Additional papers that take up the scientific discussion of evolutionary biology, as well as questions about the specific evolution of morality and the mind, will be published next year. This focused theological discussion therefore needs to be seen in this context. John Walton's opening gambit that the Bible offers no direct scientific evidence for the origin of humans— or other creatures, for that matter— therefore rebuts any claim to the contrary. His fascinating discussion of the actual historical background that framed the composition of the book of Genesis makes it clear that the best textual evidence points to a rather different purpose for the book in the minds of the authors. He argues that the text implies not so much an account of the material origin of humans, but the particular functions of humanity and the ordering of sacred space. Adam and Eve in this scenario serve as representatives of the human species where creation serves as a cosmic temple. As archetypes there is no need to conclude that Adam and Eve are in direct historical relationship with all living human beings. But in terms of human nature, what specifically might be important about claiming humans are made in the image of God?

Mikael Stenmark probes this question by asking how much our understanding of the meaning of that nature will depend on a number of presuppositions that are in need of careful analysis. Yet the idea of some sort of universal human nature is not only the province of theologians, for it creeps unannounced into the discussion of evolutionary psychologists as well. Stenmark teases out this discussion and asks us to distinguish more carefully between type, kind, and individual nature when considering what it means to be human. He also raises the important question of whether it is philosophically valid to even talk about human nature, as it seems to raise the ugly specter of essentialist presuppositions that miss those lacking such characteristics, a position that he labels "exceptionalist." However, he concludes that such objections cannot be sustained. He argues, further, that a Christian account of human nature gives a richer account of its meaning than one limited by atheist assumptions.

Next, Alan Torrance addresses the naturalist philosophical underpinning of scientific discourse about human nature by arguing for a more explicitly theological approach to human nature that begins with very different metaphysical assumptions. He argues that some interpretations of theistic evolution have been tempted to reduce the full weight and significance of belief in God in their discussions of human nature and have been tempted to water down theological content in order to make such discussions more palatable with scientific accounts. In order to address this tendency, Torrance offers a Christological paradigm grounded in belief in a Creator God as the best means through which to think through what human nature is really all about from a theological perspective. For him the critical aspect theologically is that human beings are capable of being transformed through relationship with God in a mode of eschatological becoming that is distinct from evolutionary becoming. Such a position puts him at a distance from those modes of evolutionary psychology that attempt to explain altruism, for example, in purely scientific terms.

Alistair McFadyen, on the other hand, takes up the theological challenge of human being in an evolved world by developing a more explicit notion of “image bearing” in relational categories and, like Torrance, rejecting more static models of human nature or those that search for universal characteristics of the human—be they naturalistic or based on transcendence. McFadyen develops his theological anthropology through reference to Psalm 8, which he argues is rather more productive of the alternative that he proposes in considering what it means to be in the image of God. More explicitly, he argues that the mindfulness of God is important in the way human identity is conceived theologically. Further, and crucially, even the human praise of God that is invited in the psalm is one that is given by God; our human response seems delineated and elicited by God’s desire for relationship. Here we have a portrait of humanity in awe of the divine holiness of God. We arrive at a view of humanity interpreted through liturgical performance.

Celia Deane-Drummond’s articulation of what it means to be human also ends up by arguing in favor of more dynamic, performative versions of human image-bearing, but also seeks to shed light on what that image-bearing means by reference to other creaturely kinds. This places her account more readily in conversation with scientific accounts of other animals and the evolution of hominids, without weakening the specific force of what human nature might look like from a theological perspective. She also argues for a recovery of aspects of the Thomistic tradition that stresses that the distinctive mark of the human is through an interpretation of the meaning of the action of grace in the human life, rather than reason. While Torrance and McFadyen assume this point, Deane-Drummond explores this route more fully by filling out the extent to which being human suggests a creaturely nature that is open to engagement with the

divine. However, such distinctions should not be taken to imply a rejection of creaturely existence or a negative attitude toward other creatures who are also arguably after God's likeness.

Finally, John Schneider's essay revisits the Augustinian meta-narrative of Creation-Fall-Redemption and his interpretation of Adam in light of the specific challenge of scientific evolutionary accounts of the human. He argues that an Augustinian framework is no longer convincing theologically, and so theistic evolution is better served by revisiting alternative classic theological models of human becoming. He argues in favor of the development of a Supralapsarian model of human personhood, drawing on a theology inspired by Irenaeus. He argues that such a position not only makes more sense theologically but also is more consistent with current evolutionary biology. Significantly, he rejects the idea of an original goodness of creation interpreted in terms of origins; rather, its goodness is related to its end and eschatological *destiny*. He therefore argues that a consistent theodicy is better served through this alternative approach, which allows for peaceful rather than conflictual relationships with Darwinian science.

Overall, this collection of essays expresses in a nutshell what theologians are struggling to articulate in the context of a world where evolutionary biology is beginning to dominate public discussion about what it means to be human. The questions raised are not likely to be resolved overnight, but they show an attempt to search out what is arguably one of the most fascinating topics for this generation. Further aspects of this debate will be developed in additional articles that will be published in the two issues that follow this initial set of papers.

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REFERENCE

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