

Science, Religion, and Human Identity: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum

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HUMANS AS INTERPRETIVE ANIMALS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF WHY HUMANS BEAR GOD'S IMAGE

by Robert Lewis 

Abstract. The opening chapter of Genesis makes a lofty claim about the human condition: that humans are created in the image of God. But why can humans image God? This article examines four different interpretations of humans as interpretive animals. Following Martin Heidegger's account of Dasein, I argue that humans are interpretive animals, and as such, are suitable creatures to bear God's image. Humans as interpretive animals function as the image of God, not because of divine fiat; instead, humans in their capacities are open to being the image. My argument is not that the image of God is identifiable as particular human features. Instead, it is the fact that humans have specific capacities that make them interpretive animals (e.g., radical openness, thrownness, malleability) and that these traits are constitutive for what it means to be human. Alongside Heidegger, I draw on the works of Charles Taylor, Claudia Welz, and Kathryn Tanner.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger; image of God (imago Dei); interpretation; phenomenology; Kathryn Tanner; Charles Taylor; theological anthropology; Claudia Welz

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be human? Like Augustine's description of time, I know what it means to be human until someone asks me. What it means to be human is context-dependent, making it difficult to pin down one definition. There are legal, medical, philosophical, and anthropological definitions of being human. Likewise, religions also have their paradigmatic understanding of what it means to be human. For many, in the Christian tradition, to be human is to be created in the image of God.

The opening chapter of Genesis makes a lofty claim regarding the nature of humanity: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27, NRSV). Not only is the claim lofty, but it is also ambiguous and underdetermined, which leads to a variety of interpretations, each with its difficulties (see Cairns [1953] 1973; Bird 1981; Middleton 2005). The purpose of this article is not to expound on the already extensive accounts of the *imago Dei*. Instead, I look at possible reasons *why* humans, and not other creatures (if that is the case), are the image of God. I examine this question from the human perspective for two reasons: (1) in Genesis (1:26–27, NRSV), it is only humans that are said to be made in the image of God; and (2) as Thomas Nagel (1974) argued, phenomenologically speaking, I am limited to the human perspective, which mediates my experience of the world. Meaning that even if it is the case other animals image God, I would not have insight into that experience. I am only interested in the human characteristics that might explain why humans are the image of God and not what that image is, nor if any other creatures are God's image. More directly, I argue, following Martin Heidegger's account of *Dasein*, that humans are interpretive animals, and as such, are suitable creatures to bear God's image. In this article, I examine four different interpretations of humans as interpretive animals, drawing on the works of Charles Taylor, Claudia Welz, and Kathryn Tanner alongside Heidegger.

I begin by acknowledging that Heidegger argues explicitly against notions of Christian anthropology that define humanity as being created in the image of God. Heidegger contends there are two concepts of what it means to be human. The first is a "living being endowed with reason"; the second, a person as defined within a context of other entities "in the world which were in each case given in advance in a definite manner" (Heidegger [1988] 1999, 17). The first definition, Heidegger states, refers to a hierarchy of entities in the world, while the second is a Christian understanding of humanity, defining humanity in its capacities as creatures of God. Christian theology, according to Heidegger, has conflated these two definitions so that God creates humans in God's image as reasoning animals. Reason or rationality has been a dominant understanding of the image of God for much of Western thought. Reason as the link

between humankind and godkind pre-dates Christianity to the teachings of Heraclitus, where human souls contain a spark of the divine (Cairn 1973, 66–67). Therefore, what it means to be human is not derived from human existence but from a pre-giveness that already defines what it means to be human (Heidegger 1999, 23). Heidegger contends that an ontological understanding of Being cannot employ any anthropology of humankind that begins with predefined terms (1999, 24). Conversely, Heidegger argues that Dasein, humankind, should be explicated out of their facticity, their everydayness.

Given Heidegger's aversion to a Christian understanding of the image of God, one might question the usefulness of Heidegger's philosophy toward this endeavor. However, one need not accept Heidegger's understanding of Christian anthropology, instead choosing to develop differing anthropologies that do not fall prey to his critique. Furthermore, Heidegger owes much of his philosophical underpinnings to his previous study of Christian theology (see Judith Wolfe's *Heidegger and Theology* (2014)). As a result, much of Heidegger's philosophical categories are amicable to Christian theology. Therefore, I believe theologians employing Heidegger should take a constructivist approach, building on his concepts and themes without strictly adhering to his philosophy. In this essay, I am not making a theological argument for the image of God. Like Heidegger, I begin with humanity as constituted, which Heidegger would call pre-Christian, to which then a theological gloss can be applied. It is best to begin with a brief sketch of Heidegger's conception of *Dasein*.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF DASEIN

Hermeneutics is an important aspect of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Hermeneutics, as he defines it, is understood in three distinctions. First, in its primitive sense—the business of interpreting. Second, through interrogating and discovering the meaning of Being, hermeneutics make all other ontological investigations possible. Finally, (2019) claims that hermeneutics, “as an interpretation of Dasein's Being,” is an “analytic of the existentiality of existence”; that is, the analysis of the constitutive components of Being in its being-there (Da-sein) (62). Hermeneutics as an analytic opens up Dasein for the questioning of Being. The last definition is the most pertinent to this proposal.

For Heidegger, only those entities who have Dasein as their Being can understand the meaning of Being. As he states, Being as an issue “is a constitutive state of Dasein's Being, and this implies that Dasein, in its Being, has a relationship toward that Being—a relationship which itself is one of Being” (Heidegger 2019, 32). Humans possess an ontical understanding of being that is ontological (Heidegger 2019, 32). The self-reflexive nature of Dasein suggests that it has access to Being in ways other entities do

not. Moreover, Heidegger argues that due to possessing the *understanding of Being* as a constitutive reality, Dasein provides “the ontico-ontological condition for the possibility of any ontologies” (2019, 34). Therefore, interrogating the “existential analytic of Dasein” gives access to the “fundamental ontology,” from which all ontologies come to be (Heidegger 2019, 34). Humans are ontologically interpretive, insofar as they transcend their existence, taking into their *concern* the existence of all other entities. In Heideggerian terms, the *world* is the interconnectedness of entities from which Dasein interprets itself (Heidegger 2019, 42). *Concern* here is the term Heidegger uses to describe humankind’s dealings with entities *in-the-world* as one temporally already *ahead-of-itself*, finding oneself in the world as constitutive of Dasein—Dasein’s everydayness. Heidegger calls this existential structure *care*. Care consists of *thrownness*, *projection*, and *fallenness*.

Thrownness

Thrownness is finding oneself in a particular time and place, meaning a particular culture and understanding of what it is to be human. Heidegger (2019) writes, “This characteristic of Dasein’s Being—this ‘that it is’—is veiled in its ‘whence’ and ‘whither’, yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the ‘*thrownness*’ of this entity into its ‘there’; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the ‘there’. The expression ‘thrownness’ is meant to suggest the facticity of its being *delivered over*” (174).

Thrownness is my contextual givenness in being, and thus my ability to make sense of the world is constrained by my particular situation (Withy 2014, 65). As Katherine Withy (2014) states, “to be human is to be both free, spontaneous, transcendent, *and* limited, constrained or finite” (61–62). My situation restricts my ability to make sense of the world I am thrust into. According to Withy (2014), “our sense-making is always limited by the particular things that are to be made sense of, and by the particular ways of making sense of them available to us” (62). For instance, prior to the Copernican Revolution, it was a reasonable and sensible thing to believe that the heavens rotated around the Earth. However, such a belief is no longer acceptable. How I make sense of the world is constantly bumping up against the limits of my context. Therefore, my ability to interpret the world is ontologically restrained by my thrownness. Thrownness is constitutive of the human person. If this is correct, then whatever is meant by the image of God is also constituted by being thrown.

Fallenness

Thrownness is more than our context; it is the fact that Dasein cannot ground their situatedness that makes them Dasein. Moreover, that

situatedness is what is known as being *fallen*. Fallenness, Heidegger states, “designates an essential relationship of man to Being within Being’s relation to the essence of man” ([1976] 1993, 235–36). Fallenness is an existential feature of Dasein’s Being-in-the-world. In their everydayness, Dasein lives in a state of *falling-into-the-world*. The *downward plunge*, this motion of falling, is a falling away from one’s self, as a self-determining being. John Caputo (1984) observes that fallenness is to drift away from a “proper self-understanding, and to interpret itself in light of the public understanding” (169). Fallenness is a movement from an *authentic* to an *inauthentic* way of being-in-the-world.

Fallenness, however, does not have the typical negative connotations associated with fallen or inauthentic. Fallen and inauthentic describes one’s usual way of being in the world; it is the average everydayness of existence. Although Heidegger’s conception of fallenness shares echoes with some theological understanding of fallenness, for Heidegger, there is no moral component to being fallen. Therefore, it is not helpful to envisage an Augustinian concept of original sin or *the fall*. Instead, fallenness is the natural state of being human; it is an absorption into the world due to *Being-with-one-another*.

Projection

To be authentic is to choose to be oneself. Heidegger (2019) writes, “Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it *can*, in its very Being, ‘choose’ itself and win itself. . . . But only in so far as it is essentially something which can be *authentic*—that is, something of its own” (68). Authentic Dasein chooses to actualize certain possible ways of being based on one’s desires and not the world’s. To the extent it is concerned with its Being, Dasein exists as a state of possibilities. However, this is not a mental state of planning and carrying forth; instead, it is a primordial condition of Dasein. As Heidegger (2019) tells it, projection is understanding; understanding insofar as it “is the existential Being of Dasein’s own potentiality-for-Being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses in itself what its Being is capable of” (184). The projecting of Dasein is the disclosing of Dasein’s possibilities. Heidegger (2019) argues that “as understanding, Dasein projects its Being upon possibilities” (188). The consequence of projection is that Dasein exists in a state of perpetual becoming, as I am, and I am not yet. Heidegger’s claim of unfulfilled possibility is oppositional to any *a priori* determinative statement about what it means to be human.

HUMANS AS MEANING MAKERS

Human persons, as Dasein, as thrown-projection, in their everydayness are constituted as *being-in-the-world*, a world in which they always interpret

their experience. Factual life is explicitly hermeneutical; it is *understanding as existence*. As Heidegger suggests, the ability to interpret oneself and other entities they encounter and the relationships between them constitute human existence.

The factual life as a hermeneutic for understanding is Dasein as disclosedness. The hermeneutical situation, which is the factual life of Dasein, is why Dasein is disclosedness. Heidegger demonstrates that Dasein, in its existence, is always interpreting itself. However, as *being-in-the-world* is constitutive of Dasein, Dasein must also interpret or disclose the world. The disclosing of the world is the hermeneutic by which the ontologies of other beings are made present. Since the *Da* of Dasein is the “there,” Heidegger (2019) contends that “As the disclosedness of the ‘there’, understanding always pertains to the whole of Being-in-the-world. In every understanding of the world, existence is understood with it, and vice versa” (194). Alternatively, “*Dasein is disclosiveness*, the locus of truth as the unconcealment of be-ing” (Kisiel [2010] 2014, 20). Truth, in Heideggerian terms, is not propositional truth, as one’s interpretation can be true or false; instead, it is the truth of an entity showing itself as meaningful presence.

In sum, Heidegger offers a picture of the human person as one turned over to their world, limited by their situatedness, but nonetheless, they make meaning out of the world. Moreover, Heidegger insists that humans, as interpretive animals, are the locus of meaning in the world. If Heidegger is correct, then image-bearing is tied to the interpretive nature of human beings. To be clear, I am not saying that the image of God is human’s interpretive constitution; instead, I suggest that humankind’s interpretive nature makes it possible for them to image God.

Heidegger’s care structure of thrownness, fallenness, and projection intimate an ontological openness that would allow humans to image God. If it is the case that humans are open, then openness is an essential part of being the image of God. As Tanner argues below, openness is why humans can be conformed to the image of Christ, the true image of God, as Paul exhorts (Romans 8:29, NRSV). Moreover, disclosedness, alongside openness, allows humans to bring a concern for creation into their everydayness. It is why humans can care about animal welfare or the environment. They have an openness to their nature that makes this possible.

In this next section, I turn to philosophers and theologians who also understand humans to be interpretive. I begin with Charles Taylor, building on Heidegger’s philosophy, who argues that humans are self-interpretive, and he looks explicitly at how emotions are constitutive of human existence. I then turn to Claudia Welz and Kathryn Tanner, whose works demonstrate that the ability to interpret oneself, and the world, opens up the possibility for humans to image God.

HUMANS AS SELF-INTERPRETING ANIMALS

Language and Self-Referential Emotions

The philosopher Charles Taylor also argues that humans are interpretive animals, and here, Taylor defends a specific instance of interpretation, which is self-interpretation. In Heideggerian terms, Taylor explores the idea of Dasein as the type of entity for which Being is a concern.

Taylor ([1985] 1999) maintains that the hermeneutics of humankind, as ontologically self-interpretive animals, appears to contravene the modern “paradigm of clarity and objectivity” (45). How could one arrive at something objective, that is, ontological, by examining one’s experience of the world? At face value, one’s experience appears to be subjective. Nevertheless, like Heidegger, Taylor (1999) claims that one’s self-interpretation and experiences are constitutive of the human person; and are not merely subjective nor epiphenomenal (47).

The Argument

Taylor presents a five-part constructive argument, in which interpretation is an ontological feature of human existence. As his point of departure, Taylor (1999) takes the thread of contemporary philosophy that runs through Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, and others of this ilk, who, in one fashion or another, argue that humans are self-interpreting animals (45). The synopsis of Taylor’s (1999) argument is as follows: (1) some emotions have meaning attributed to them; (2) these imports are self-referential; (3) one’s subject-referring emotions provide epistemic insight into the human constitution; (4) the constitution of one’s emotions is determined by how one articulates their emotions; and (5) that articulation, or in other words interpretation, requires language (75–76). Taylor’s argument demonstrates that interpretation is ontological, thus not a contingent feature of humankind.

Import-Bearing Emotions

Starting with the first claim, Taylor (1999) argues that emotions are import-bearing experiences of a given situation (49). Imports ground the subject’s emotion or feeling. An import is anything that gives importance or relevance to a subject’s desires, purposes, or feelings; they are difference-making properties (Taylor 1999, 49). For example, adjectives such as shameful or wonderful. Moreover, saying I feel a certain way regarding a given situation is to say that the emotion discloses the situation as it is (Taylor 1999, 49). It is one thing to be ashamed of an action; it is another to say that the situation is shameful. That is, my feeling of shame reveals the situation as one that *is* shameful as I experience it (Taylor 1999, 49).

Heidegger on Moods

Experiencing something like shame, from a phenomenological perspective, is to acknowledge one's emotion or feeling as "an essential feature of it *tout court*" (Taylor 1999, 48). Here, Taylor closely aligns with Heidegger's understanding of moods. Moods are the everyday ontic expression of Dasein's state-of-mind, which is ontological (Heidegger 2019, 172). The term state-of-mind refers to an openness to the possibility of moods, the state of being affected. Having a state-of-mind or the ability to be affected is an existential attribute of Dasein (Heidegger 2019, 174). Affectedness is an essential aspect of becoming the image of God, which I discuss below regarding Kathryn Tanner's (2010) conception of the human person and the image.

According to Heidegger (2019), moods are a product of Being-in-the-world. Moods are context-dependent; they assail us (176). In this sense, they are neither subjective nor objective; they just are. More importantly, moods are disclosive; they are an apocalypse of Being, delivering Dasein over to the fact "that-it-is," as being-there in its world (Heidegger 2019, 173). Heidegger (2019) writes, "The mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something" (176). For Heidegger, mood discloses Dasein so that Dasein finds itself, is brought before itself.

Heidegger's conception of mood is not the same as emotion, though they are closely linked. His discussion on fear, in §30 of *Being and Time* (Heidegger 2019, 179–82), suggests that emotions are an expression of a mood. However, Taylor shares with Heidegger the idea that emotions, or in Heidegger's case, moods, disclose a fundamental aspect of nature and reveal something about oneself. Taylor's second argument refers to the emotions as being subject-referring.

Emotions as Disclosive

Coming back to shame, shame is subject-referring because it shapes the subject and can only be born out of experience. Properties that are subject-referring exist within a subject's experience (Taylor 1999, 54). As a result, subject-referring properties, like moods, are neither subjective nor objective (Taylor 1999, 55). Shame, Taylor (1999) argues, is an import ascription and not merely subjective. Instead, ascribing an import to an experience "is to make a judgment about the way things are" and not reducible to a feeling (55).

Often these subject-referring properties place on the subject an obligation. According to Taylor (1999), Subject-referring properties obligate me to action, such as caring for the environment or another person (57–58). To show concern for or care of another is also subject-referring. I am obligated to act for a subject other than myself (Taylor 1999, 58). More

relevant to my thesis is Taylor's claim that humans bear the weight of obligation *because* of the type of creature they are. Taylor (1999) writes: "But in this case, the import is that we are *called upon* to act. And we are called upon in virtue of being a certain kind of creature" (58). Unlike other animals or inanimate objects (e.g., rocks), humans are obligated to the world around them (58). As a result of being human, self-referring import properties place an obligation on oneself to act. Not only in support of fellow humans but in all situations that obligate us toward another (i.e., care for the environment or nonhuman animals). It is arguable that being an image-bearer, assuming that the image of God is more than a synonym for humans, would place on human persons an obligation, one that they could recognize and respond to appropriately. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to say that animals and inanimate objects do not have obligations to act. Humans feel compelled to act, to make a difference in the world (e.g., action on climate change, humanitarian aid). The call to act, placed on humankind, brings Taylor to his third point, that subject-referring emotions reveal a sense of what it means to be human (60).

The Reflexive Self

Self-reflexivity, Taylor (1999) argues, is a core trait for being human. Reflexivity allows human persons to identify matters of importance to them (60). He understands self-reflexivity to ground the traditional view that humans are rational animals (Taylor 1999, 60). For me to feel shame, or more optimistically, dignity is for those *feelings* to serve an epistemic purpose. It is a judgment about what I know to be so (Taylor, 60). Taylor writes, "If I were quite impervious to any such feeling, these norms and ideals would carry no weight with me; I would not even be tempted to subscribe to them, and I would not describe myself as 'knowing' that they were true/valid" (60–61). Underlying these emotions is a claim of what I *know* to be true of reality. Of course, that does not make it so.

Nevertheless, my feelings demonstrate a situational awareness by which I ascribe a sense of truth to my import-bearing emotions. It is clear to Taylor that for feelings to be import-bearing, they must refer to a self-aware subject. As such, one cannot reductively come to understand a situation as having import by itself. I could not describe an act or context as fearful, shameful, or dignified if I did not have the import-bearing emotions. Therefore, Taylor (1999) argues that reasoning is "reasoning out of insight embedded in feeling" (61–62). Moreover, subject-referring emotions disclose the openness of being human and to the possibility of the good. A good, Taylor contends, results from the good's alignment with one's feelings (63). With that last statement, the objectivist's hackles are

certainly raised. How can Taylor justify *the good* as being that which aligns with one's feelings?

Temporarily setting that objection aside, if I, as an image-bearer, have obligations that necessitate actions, I must be able to append some semblance of right or wrong to those actions. In other words, I must be able to discern the world's goods and behave toward them accordingly, especially if the world results from a creator God's divine will. For Taylor, to think reflexively about one's emotional response to a given situation provides a context for discerning the good or the appropriate action to take.

To recap Taylor's first three arguments: certain emotions are import-bearing, and as such, they reveal something about how the world *is*. Subsequently, for emotions to be revelatory, they must be subject-referring. That is, they must reveal situations or things to be necessary to a subject. Thus, self-referencing and import-bearing emotions provide epistemic insight into reality and an intuitive sense of the good. As self-reflexive subjects, humans discriminate about what goods are higher than others and which goods are a good at all.

Articulation and Language

For Taylor, this is the point where he can begin to speak as humans as the self-interpreting animal. Thinking reflexively about my import-bearing emotions assign a moral predicament to any situation, where I make hierarchical claims about goods and label other goods as not being a good at all (Taylor 1999, 63). Taylor's (1999) fourth point is that my self-referring, import-bearing emotions are dependent on my articulation of them (64), and language (his fifth claim) constitutes subject-referring emotions (71). Taylor (1999) argues that in stacking articulation on top of the first three claims, he can now assert that humans are therefore self-interpreting—"For the joint result of the first three claims is that our subject-referring emotions open us to the domain of what it is to be human. And now we see them as giving articulation to this domain" (64). Articulation reveals the domain of being human, and language is an essential feature of articulation.

The discriminating process is an articulation of one's moral reasoning. In saying I find X to be a good, I am saying that this is important and valuable. Therefore, by affirming certain emotions as being import-bearing, I am explicitly stating that these are central to being human. Discerning some goods to be of higher value than others articulates my moral predicament (Taylor 1999, 63). Articulations, Taylor (1999) writes, "are like interpretations in that they are attempts to make clearer the imports things have for us" (65).

My moral intuition emerges out of feelings, and emotions are initial attempts to articulate my interpretation of a situation. However, and here

Taylor (1999) hopes to assuage the fears of the objectivist, while articulations are born out of one's feelings, they are not left to my interpretation alone (64). If I feel guilty, I intuit an action as right or wrong; this implies a pre-given understanding of right or wrongness. If not, how else could I assign a sense of guilt to my feeling? There is a context out of which I am interpreting my feelings. As Taylor (1999) states, "the interpretation is constitutive of the feeling" (63). If my interpretation is to bring clarity, it must be attempting to understand a situation in its givenness as something real and independent of myself. For an articulation to be of use, it must "be faithful to what it is that moves us" (Taylor 1999, 64–65). If I have faithfully articulated a feeling of shame, then the context must be one that *is* shameful. According to Taylor, there is a getting something right or wrong about one's interpretation. It is not simply a subjective mooring. Interpretation is not a contingent feature of being human; it is an essential aspect of human existence (65).

Emotions are an initial articulation of the givenness of a situation. However, emotions suggest a need for a more thorough articulation. Accordingly, Taylor argues that these initial articulations give way to further articulations, as each interpretation must also be interpreted. It is a lifetime process of self-interpretation striving toward self-understanding (Taylor 1999, 65). Language, Taylor argues, provides a means for fuller articulation. Language clarifies an emotion and defines it. To say that I am angry provides the context for understanding my emotive response as one of anger. Therefore, no matter how I might feel, I understand that feeling in the language that defines it. Language is constitutive of one's feelings. Taylor (1999) states, "Language articulates our feelings, makes them clearer and more defined; and in this way transforms our sense of the imports involved; and hence transforms the feeling" (71). I cannot understand my emotion as anger or fear without having a concept of anger or fear, which language provides.

Moreover, language, for everyone, is ontological; it is constitutive for being human. Although language is certainly a contingent feature of reality, it is nonetheless ontological. Language forms me; it is how I come to understand myself, and it mediates my experience of the world. Language is something I receive, something given to me. Taylor (1999) argues that "language is constitutive of our emotions," not because one can articulate them, but because they are "the medium in which all our emotions, articulate and inarticulate, are experienced" (74). My ability to clearly express my emotions is predicated by my ability to use language (language is, of course, more than the spoken word). Therefore, I can only articulate my emotions in the terms set forth in the language I am given.

To summarize Taylor's argument: some emotions are import-bearing—they have meaning. These imports are self-referential, and subject-referring emotions give access to what it means to be human. Emotive responses

are articulations, interpretive responses to one's situation. Finally, language clarifies one's emotions, and as the medium of articulation, they also shape what one's feelings mean and thus shape the person.

Heidegger on Language

Taylor's argument intends to demonstrate that humans are self-interpreting animals, and he concludes that emotions and language are constitutive of what it means to be human. Heidegger, whom Taylor (1999) draws upon, argues that language is an existential characteristic of Dasein. For Heidegger, humans are interpretive animals *tout court*. Not only are they self-interpreting, they interpret the world around them. Heidegger (2019) writes: "But in significance itself, with which Dasein is always familiar, there lurks the ontological condition which makes it possible for Dasein, as something which understands and interprets, to disclose such things as 'significations'; upon these, in turn, is founded the Being of words and of language" (121). Heidegger acknowledges both the contingent and ontological nature of language, recognizing that Dasein as Being-in-the-world is always a part of the totality of relations, *significance*. Humans are a part of the set of relations that makes language possible, and thus, Dasein's understanding and interpretation of the world. Dasein discloses the signification of beings, that is, their meaningful presence. Not only are human persons self-interpretive, but they also interpret their world and other entities in it. A world with God as its author; therefore, the ability to reveal meaning in the world is arguably a necessary trait of the *imago Dei*.

Heidegger (2019) argues that "all interpretation is grounded on understanding" (195). Understanding is not knowledge; it is one's comportment to the world, that is, the set of relations. Furthermore, Heidegger (2019) states, "That which has been articulated as such in interpretation and sketched out beforehand in the understanding in general as something articulable, is the meaning" (195). In my fore-conception of the world, due to my comporting to a set of relations, I already conceive of them belonging together. My interpretation, expressing something *as* something, is the meaning. However, note that Dasein discloses the meaning and does not bestow it. The totality of relations already possesses the possibility of being articulated as such.

In Heidegger's view, language is not an instrument of human will. Language, as Heidegger (2019) argues, is the "existential constitution of Dasein's disclosedness" (203). Language is self-revelatory. Heidegger ([1976] 1993), in "Building Dwelling Thinking," writes, "Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man" (348). Moreover, Heidegger (2019) argues that discourse, speech, is "the existential-ontological foundation of language" (203). The

ability to discourse makes possible intelligibility, which is meaningfulness. Language is how I give shape to meaning *in-the-world*. Talking is always talking about something (2019, 204). Discourse expresses meaningfulness (2019, 204). According to Heidegger, “It is language that tells us about the essence of a thing” (1993, 348). Language shapes me, and I use language to shape my word. As such, I interpret not only myself, but also the world around me.

Both Taylor and Heidegger argue that humans are interpretive animals. While Taylor considered the self-interpretive nature of human persons, Heidegger claims humans to be interpretive animals, full stop. Through gestures, actions, art, and language, humans can articulate meaning and understanding. Communication is arguable a necessary characteristic of the *imago Dei*. As image-bearers, it seems that making God known, not only to oneself but to all creation, is an intrinsic feature of the image.

THE INTERPRETIVE ANIMAL AS THE *IMAGO DEI*

In this last section, through the works of Claudia Welz and Kathryn Tanner, I demonstrate how humans as interpretive animals are why they image God. Starting with the factual existence of human persons rather than a divine decree, I avoid the determinative anthropology Heidegger opposed. Instead, I contend these theologians show that the image of God follows from humans *as* humans.

The Self-Interpreting Image

Philosopher and theologian Claudia Welz, in *Humanity in God's Image*, argues that the image of God is a semiotic referent point to God. However, humans are not mere signs; instead, they are the only sign capable of self-interpretation (Welz 2016, 46). According to Welz (2016), my self-understanding, my self-image, is an admixture of “feelings, thoughts, decisions, and dreams” (51). It is out of this self-image, Welz argues, that humans are the image of God. They interpret themselves out of their self-image, making visible the image of God. There is a co-present image of God “in our acts of self-presentation” (Welz 2016, 47).

Human self-reflection is the conscious plumbing of one's own depths. By turning inward, Welz, like Taylor, argues that humans learn to express themselves as they wish to be seen. If I am to bear the image of the invisible God, then I must understand myself to *be the imago Dei*. As Welz (2016) states, “our self-understanding must reflect that we are more than just the images of ourselves” (470). Therefore, emerging alongside my self-knowledge, yet remaining distinct, is the knowledge of God (Welz 2016, 47). Welz is not saying that self-interpretation is equal to interpreting God. Instead, as an image-bearer, I can only bear that image out of my human capacities, and I can only articulate God through my self-image.

Seeing and Being Seen. Therefore, the image of God is something invisible in the mind of the individual, conditioned by one's self-image, and made visible through human expression. Welz argues, following fifteenth-century theologian Nicholas of Cusa, that if I turn to God wrathfully, I understand God to be wrathful. Conversely, I could love God and see God as loving toward me (Welz 2016, 61). How I see myself and how I envision God is a synergistic seeing in which I form my self-image and the image of God. Welz (2016) writes, "Whether or not the human being indeed resembles God can be decided only if there is a mutuality of seeing and being seen" (2016, 63). Important to note that self-reflexivity is essential for bearing God's image. The capacity to turn inward allows humankind to turn outward to God and creation. Self-reflection gives rise to the possibility of meaningful relationships.

Welz (2016) proposes that the image cannot be captured and remains outside the person (65). The image "is constituted in an encounter of the visible with the invisible, and the vitality and event-structure of this encounter explode any picture we might make of it.... In representation, presence itself has passed away. Living co-presence cannot be preserved after the event. It lives only in the present" (Welz 2016, 65). Important for Welz is the idea of the *imago Dei* as present in creative expression. Here, Welz (2016), akin to Heidegger and Taylor, understands language to be an imperfect means for expressing God's image (67). The limits of language are the limits of finitude laid bare at the divine infinite. Human speech cannot express what it cannot conceive.

Welz on Language. The writer, Welz (2016) admonishes, must remember that "speaking about this image means speaking about an image-producing image, and that the divine One whose image is mirrored in us can be represented neither by a coherent picture nor by a whole book" (67). Therefore, I can only reflect a fractured and fragmentary image back to God by myself. Welz (2016) posits the possibility for a "multiplicity of individuals" combining their work to compose God's image (67). An incomplete, undetermined image is in each of us, reflecting a piece of God's image awaiting completion in the eschaton (Welz 2016, 68). Whatever it is, God's image is expressed through a shared lived experience.

The Image as Participatory. For Welz (2016), humans image God actively, by participating in each other, "by becoming the places for each other where His presence is revealed or concealed—depending on how they live" (73). Like Heidegger's notion of thrown-projection, Welz (2016) argues that humans "as subjects of seeing" participate in shaping not only who they are, but what they might become, through the interpretation of themselves and others (73). As Welz (2016) writes, "Ways of being and becoming are linked to ways of life—ways that are opened by movements

in one or another direction. We might also be moved in moving” (73). The image is not a passive one; it is one of doing and moving *in-the-world*. The way humans act in the everydayness of human life contributes to the image, albeit an imperfect one (Welz 2016, 74). However, Welz (2016) argues that only God’s self-revelations makes possible human imaging (75). If God does not reveal Godself, how could humans bear God’s image? God’s self-revelation *as* a human is how humans come to understand in what way their capacities bear God’s image in the world.

Christ the Key

Kathryn Tanner (2010), in *Christ the Key*, unlike Taylor and Welz, does not take a phenomenological approach to Christology and instead, quite explicitly works with Christian strands of Neoplatonism (viii–ix). However, Tanner shares, with Heidegger, similar insights into the human person, which I will explore here, that makes possible human images of God. Moreover, like Welz, Tanner envisions Christ as the key to understanding God’s image. However, I focus on the human traits Tanner identifies as to why humans can bear the image of God.

Tanner (2010) argues for the human person’s lack of a given definition, malleability, unbounded character, and general openness to radical transformation as theologically interesting characteristics that make God’s imaging possible (1). In contrast to theologies that equate the image of God to human attributes (e.g., human rationality, free will, the ability to rule), Tanner argues for a Christ-centered understanding of the image of God, which she brings to bear on the human person. Nonetheless, while reticent of specific human attributes traditionally held to be the reason for declaring humans as God’s image, Tanner embraces ontological aspects of human nature to account for human’s ability to image God.

Christ the Divine Image. For Tanner (2010), the image of God found in humans is a secondary image of another image—in particular, the second person of the Trinity (4–5). According to Tanner, to be a perfect image, the imager must be divine as well. She argues that the “image must be the equal of its archetype, reproducing it from top to bottom, in every dimension inclusive of its very nature” (Tanner 2010, 6). As humans do not have a divine nature, they cannot be the *perfect* image of God. The perfect image of God is Jesus, as the incarnate second person of the Trinity. Being the second person of the Trinity, the *Logos* is “itself the image of the first person of the trinity” and thus “the perfect manifestation of all that the first person is” (Tanner 2010, 6). Therefore, Tanner (2010) concludes that the image of God does not, first and foremost, refer to human persons but to the “imaging relationship within the trinity itself” (6).

Tanner (2010) contends that being the image of God is an act of humanity participating in what they are not—God. It is through the reception of the divine, but as it resides in something other than God, it does not exist in the same fashion—perfect, unchangeable, and unsusceptible to loss (Tanner 2010, 8). Considering creation’s patterning after the second person of the Trinity, Tanner (2010) suggests that all creation, in a weak sense, images God; “Creatures themselves—their own existence, characteristics and capacities—become the focus here; what they are themselves forms an image of the second person of the trinity” (10). In Tanner’s view, to be a creature is to participate in God, that is, to receive from God what it does not have for itself—its existence. For Tanner (2010), “something images God because it comes from God” (10). Therefore, ontologically, all created objects reflect the image in this weak sense by being creatures. However, Tanner contends that creatures do not reflect the image necessarily the same way. Each creature is the image according to its attributes or characteristics.

Tanner (2010) understands creation to embody the image in either a weak or strong sense. The weak sense of the image is “a general form of imaging shared with everything that exists” (Tanner 2010, 11). Conversely, for creatures to image God in a strong sense, they must attach themselves to something they are not, which is divinity itself (Tanner 2010, 12). The weak image found in creatures is quantitatively and qualitatively homogeneous. The idea that humans *as* humans, or as Tanner (2010) states, “in virtue of what they are,” are creatures that know the “divine idea” for not only themselves but for all creatures (10). Humans as the locus of meaningful presence.

However, humanity does not merely reflect the divine; humans can be transformed into the image, in a strong sense, through their attachment to God’s image. This distinction sets humanity apart from other creatures and means humans image God in a manner other creatures do not (Tanner 2010, 16). Humans, as the interpretive animals Heidegger has shown them to be, by their nature, can incorporate in its being, themselves and others, and project back onto the world, therefore manipulating the world around them. The rest of creation lacks, as Tanner points out, this openness with which to make itself in light of various ways of being. A beaver can be nothing other than a beaver—a furry, woodland builder of dams. Humans are mobile and adaptable, making meaning *in-the-world* in ways other creatures cannot (Tanner 2010, 16).

The Nature of Image-Bearers

Tanner (2010) provides several key traits that distinguish human beings from other created beings—radical openness, plasticity, and the ability to form themselves. All of which closely align with Heidegger’s *Dasein* and

the *existential* care structure. According to Tanner, these distinct traits allow humankind to attach itself to the divine through attachment to Christ, allowing humans to image God in the strong sense.

Radical Openness. For Tanner and Heidegger alike, one of the determinative features of human persons is their openness or being-possible. According to Tanner (2010), often, theologians problematically attempt to define human nature around distinct characteristics that make them *like* God and definitively different from other creatures, such as *reason* and *will*. Conversely, Tanner (2010) argues that “an expansive openness must characterize human nature” (37), an openness predicated on “the open-ended nature of human reason and will” (48). Though Tanner identifies reason and will as essential aspects of being human, it is not *reason* and *will* per se. Instead, she identifies the ontological openness that constitutes *reason* and *will*. Human beings are not determined to be, by their nature, any particular thing; while a beaver will always be a creature that swims, fells trees, and builds dams, humans are not as thoroughly defined (Tanner 2010, 2). More importantly, Tanner (2010) argues that the ability to choose itself out of a variety of possibilities by determining, for them, what is good in various situations shapes human character, meaning “the identity they come to exhibit in their acts” (48). Human nature simply is one’s actions in their everyday life; as Tanner states—“*that* is just their nature” (48). Comparatively, Heidegger (2019) argues that Dasein “always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself” (33).

Furthermore, Heidegger (2019) states that “Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting” (33). Heidegger’s (2019) phenomenological maxim—“higher than actuality stands *possibility*,” is true of Dasein, who in each case “*is* its possibility” (68). However, possibility in Heideggerian terms does not refer to *mere* possibility—the possibility to be this or that. Instead, it is an existential, an ontological category of Dasein (Heidegger 2019, 183). Human persons possess a set of definite possibilities, which Heidegger (2019) describes as being “delivered over to itself—*thrown-possibility*” (183).

Plasticity. Being thrown or *thrownness* is the being there, being-in-the-world, of Dasein. As thrown, one cannot choose or not choose their initial existence. A person comes into existence within a particular set of circumstances—a world. The context to which they are born is constitutive and incorporated as an unexamined way of being. As being thrown into the world, Heidegger (2019) portrays the human person as losing “itself in the ‘world’ in its factual submission,” its coming-into-existence (400). Tanner expresses this in terms of human plasticity, the ability to be formed by things external to them. According to Tanner, creatures in

their process of becoming must take into themselves things that are external to them. She writes, “all living things, in other words, are dependent upon their environments in requiring external inputs for the achievement of their proper functioning” (Tanner 2010, 41). Humans, as created, are not the ground of their being. Instead, they are reliant on their particular circumstances for their continued existence.

In contrast to other creatures, Tanner argues that humans take the shape of external features that form them due to their radical openness. For instance, Tanner claims, a plant is always in the state of becoming a bigger version of itself and not something else. The plant takes in (provided they are available) those things necessary for its growth (Tanner 2010, 42). Conversely, she contends, “most of the innate and therefore fixed traits and dispositions of human nature underdetermine the character of actual human behaviours” (Tanner 2010, 43). The ability to be affected by one’s environment and external inputs to such an extent that it changes one’s nature (one’s actions in her daily existence) is what Tanner (2010) means by plasticity (41). Human persons are malleable due to their openness, which allows them to be shaped by their thrown environment, so much so it would not have been the case if they had been thrown otherwise. For example, Tanner (2010) argues that “human life takes culturally variable forms; and having a particular form in one time and place need not rule out another in changed circumstance” (39). Quoting Tanner (2010), “capacities, needs, and inclinations that make up human nature are designed to be culturally and environmentally sensitive in operation so as to take on a specific form only as shaped by environment inputs” (i.e., a particular language, French and not Spanish) (42).

Self-Formation. Making oneself, or as Tanner describes it, the self’s formation is what Heidegger means by projection. Given the openness of human persons (i.e., their range of possibilities), the outcome of self-formation is expansive, though limited by their thrownness. In their openness and freedom, humans can define themselves. According to Tanner, humans differentiate themselves from their world by turning their attention to specific ways of being. She writes—that humans focus on “specific items of special interest within that environment and engag[e] in a more concentrated way with them” (Tanner 2010, 45).

Projecting is a means of self-formation, an apocalypse of possibility, albeit thrown-possibility. Recall that in projecting, Heidegger argues, *Dasein* is always ahead of itself. Human persons are always living into their thrown possibilities. *Dasein*, as understanding, “projects its Being upon its possibilities” (Heidegger 2019, 188). In living out its possibilities, human persons constantly reveal their inherent potentiality. Heidegger (2019) calls this “development of understanding” *interpretation* (188). Human persons, *as* understanding, are ontologically interpretive—they are

interpretive animals. As Taylor and Welz have argued, how one comes to interpret themselves is significant. Tanner (2010) argues that self-formation occurs amidst a “host of outside influences” (the world) “and what is formed is their whole lives” (51).

Moreover, as a consequence of human plasticity and openness, human choices can take on various forms, depending on what they choose to form their lives after, what is important to them—“fancy cars, the respect of their peers, wisdom, and so on” (Tanner 2010, 46). These become what Tanner (2010) calls “variable organizing principles” (46). As Tanner (2010) contends, human persons make an object of themselves that they continuously fashion, a constant state of becoming concerning their desires and the world (46). Humans, she argues, shape their human nature, or in Heideggerian terms, “the working-out of possibilities” (Heidegger 2019, 189).

In their everydayness, Dasein, as Being-with-one another, is fallen, captivated by the world, owed to their thrownness. Fallenness is allowing certain *variable organizing principles*, such as the desire for fancy cars or admiration, things external to them, to shape them. For Heidegger (2019), fallenness is Being-in-the-world in such a way as to be “fascinated by the ‘world’” (220). As mentioned prior, fallenness is a movement from an *authentic* to an *inauthentic* way of being-in-the-world. Fallenness, being the everydayness of Dasein, means that humans are always fallen, and inauthenticity is a natural state of human existence. Authentic existence is taking hold of one’s ownness. Projection is the movement from inauthentic to authentic, living into one’s possibility; or, to use Tanner’s terminology, the “variable organizing principles” are internal rather than external.

For Heidegger, *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* function as modes of being, but not wrong ways of being. Conversely, Tanner (2010) argues that humans, as self-reflexive creatures, can re-shape even their most fundamental needs, such as their need for food, shelter, dignity, and companionship (47). However, due to their openness and self-formative capacities, she writes, “what one makes of these desires is something else” (Tanner 2010, 47). As a result, Tanner argues that humans can choose to attend to their natural capacities “as instruments of either virtue or vice” (47). In contrast to Heidegger, Tanner (2010) believes there is a moral component to human existence, which she takes up in her discussion on *sin* and *grace*. However, while relevant features of Christian theology, they need not be addressed here. For Tanner (2010), Christ discloses what it means to be human and live authentically.

To close, while not explicitly following Heidegger, Tanner identifies the same key tenants of being human—existence and possibility as constitutive of human persons (Dasein). These traits afford humanity the possibility of being the image of God in the strong sense. Tanner contends that being the image of God is an act of humanity participating in what

they are not—God. For Tanner, “God is incomprehensible,” and human language and thought cannot adequately encapsulate what it means to be God. Likewise, humans, by virtue of their radical openness, plasticity, and self-reflexive capacity to shape themselves (alongside external factors), imitate God’s incomprehensibility (Tanner 2010, 53).

CONCLUSION

In Christian anthropology, being the image of God is the ontological underpinning for what it means to be human. However, I contend that humankind being an interpretive animal is the reason why humans can image God. I have intentionally chosen not to define the image of God; nonetheless, whatever the image is, it is expressed through action. Therefore, if action is the primary means of bearing the image, then it is debatable whether other creatures can image God.

Humans as interpretive animals function as the image of God, not because of divine fiat; instead, humans in their capacities are open to being the image. My argument is not that the image of God is identifiable as particular human features. Instead, it is the fact that humans have specific capacities that make them interpretive animals (e.g., radical openness, thrownness, malleability) and that these traits are constitutive for what it means to be human. In doing so, I avoid Heidegger’s objections to Christian anthropology predetermining what it means to be human. Rather, the facticity of human existence opens them up to the possibility of imaging the divine. Moreover, humans interpret not only themselves, but also the world around them. Therefore, if this is the case, humans make God known by making meaning in the world and by attachment to the divine through Christ.

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