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Deriving the *Imago Dei* from the Incarnation

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Abstract: The doctrine of the *imago Dei* is one of the center pieces of Christian theology. It is something that all human beings possess that unites them as well as sets them apart from the rest of creation. There are, however, disputes over what the *imago Dei* entails. I propose that the doctrine of the Incarnation coupled with the doctrine of divine omniscience and theory of divine ideas can provide an explanation as to what properties constitute the divine image. Since the Incarnation is a logical possibility for the Godhead, it resides as an idea within the necessarily and *a se* omniscient divine mind. This idea represents what God (namely the Second Person) would be like (i.e. his image) if he took on corporeal form. As a result, human nature (i.e. the *Imago Dei*) is derived from the divine ontology and its potential incarnation. Thus, both material and immaterial human properties can be said to be part of the *Imago Dei*.

When it comes to Christian theology, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is one the center pieces due to its profound implications for humanity's uniqueness, relationship with God, and soteriology. There has been, however, much debate over exactly what the *imago Dei* is. To answer this question, I propose that the doctrine of the Incarnation coupled with the doctrine of divine omniscience and the theory of divine ideas can provide an explanation as to what properties constitute the divine image in human beings. God's divine idea of the Incarnation represents what God would be like if he took corporeal form and provides a foundation for God's idea of humanity and the *Imago Dei*. Instead of seeing Christ as being modeled off of humanity, one should see humanity as being modeled off of Christ.

Defining the *Imago Dei*

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* is the claim that all human beings have a special likeness to God that sets humanity apart in nature and makes them what they are.[1] The doctrine implies that humanity is a part of creation but is also placed above the plane of nature to some degree via a special connection with God. The i*mago Dei* is universal to all of humanity, and it is still present in sinful man.[2] Obviously, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* has major theological implications; however, there has been much debate of exactly what about humanity the doctrine encompasses. This question has led to three major views regarding the doctrine of the *imago De.*

The first, oldest, and most common of the views is the substantive view which locates the image in one or more qualities of human nature. This view typically equates the image with the possession of reason and the ability to think, which is something said to be unique to humanity. This view is seen in every Christian writer up to Aquinas and can also be found in the work of John Calvin.[3] A second and more contemporary view of the *imago Dei* is defined as the ability to have a relationship with God (and also with man). This relational view has several basic premises. First, how to relate is to be understood via the life of Christ, which comes by revelation. Second, the image is not a human quality but a dynamic relationship. Third, the image is universal to all humanity even sinful people. Fourth, no conclusion can or need be made regarding what quality is needed for a relationship.[4] Its emphasis on revelation downplays if not rejects the substantive view. A final view on the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is the functional view. The functional view holds that the image is neither a quality nor a relationship but is a function that human beings perform. This function is typically identified as humanity's dominion over nature which

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[1] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 518.

[2] Erickson, 519-20; David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: SCM Press, 1952), 19-21; Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 13-17, 19-20. The notion that mankind still possesses the image is also claimed in James 3 where cursing a man is said to be heinous because of the image of God.

[3] Erickson, 521; Cairns, 112-13; Hoekema, 36-37. For a fully developed expression of this view, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Blackfriars (New York: McGraw-Hilll Book Company, 1964), 1a.93.1-5, and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1928), 1.XV.2-4 and 8.

[4] Erickson, 524-27. For perspectives of this view, see Emile Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), 60-65, 98, and 105-06, and *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (London: Lutterworth, 1952), 55-57. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1958), 3.1-2.

reflects God's lordship over all things.[5] This function is exercised by all human beings whereas reason and relationship to God, it is argued, are not due to the effects of sin.

Of the three, it is the substantive view that appears primary to understanding the *Imago Dei*. The divine image is universal to the human race and has not been (nor can be) lost. Further, the divine image is not present to a greater degree in some persons nor some variable that may or may not be actualized like a relationship or exemplifying dominion. The *imago Dei* precedes any variable making it primarily substantive in nature. The other views focus on the consequences of bearing the image rather than getting to its root. Consequently, the image must be (primarily if not exclusively) a quality or set of qualities that allow for relationship and function to take place.[6] Human beings were created to function in relationship, worship, and love of God but cannot do so without certain structural properties.[7] Thus, the substantive view must be the primary theory regarding the location of the *imago Dei* in human beings. This view, however, is complicated by the fact that a rational, thinking mind is also possessed by angelic beings rendering such a quality questionable as the locus of the *imago Dei*.[8] The question then becomes what property or properties human beings possess in connection to God that sets them apart from the angelic host.

Omniscience and Forms

If the *imago Dei* is a property or set of properties, then the question to consider is what properties make up this image? For an answer, one needs to first turn to the doctrine of omniscience. In brief, an omniscient being justifiably believes the things he knows if and only if those things are true. God must have not only a justification for what he knows but also right reasons for knowing it.[9] Omniscience also requires the knowledge of any truth

[5] See G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 70; Leonard Verduin, *Somewhat Less Than God: the Biblical View of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 27; Norman Snaith, "The Image of God," *Expository Times* 86(1) (1974): 24.

[6] Erickson, 532-33.

[7] Hoekema, 69-70.

[8] This argument can also be applied to the relational and functional theories as well. Angelic beings have a relationship with God and exercise dominion over the created order as well.

[9] Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 33, 35-36. For an explanation of how a person can hold a justified belief on non-justified grounds, see Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-23. Since God is omniscient, he would always be aware of the proper justification for his knowledge.

along with the awareness and disavowal of any falsehood. As a result, God is an infallible knower.[10] Lastly, a being with greater cognitive powers than God is impossible since God is the highest, most perfect being. A being that knows all truths directly and immediately without the need for an intermediary is greater than a being that is informed of all truths by an intermediary.[11]

While this is the traditional understanding of the doctrine, I wish to focus on a more ancient formulation of the doctrine: the theory of divine ideas (also known as divine conceptualism). Greek philosophy had a major impact on the early church particularly Plato's theory of the Forms. In the *Timaeus*, Plato states that reality is divided into two realms. There is the eternal realm of the unchanging, abstract Forms that are only known by reason and act as blueprints for all possible objects giving them shape and function as well as providing a basic structure to reality. Then, there is the realm of the physical. The physical realm must have a cause since it is a changeable and finite thing. Consequently, there is a divine craftsman of the universe who uses the Forms as his pattern in order to create the world and bring order to it.[12] As a result, the universe has structure, and the Forms are the source of that structure.

It is not difficult to see how Plato's religious explanation of reality would have interested the early church. In fact, Augustine states that Plato's philosophy is the closest philosophy to the true understanding and worship of God.[13] Plato's theory, however is incompatible with the doctrine of divine aseity and it needed to be reworked.[14] Out of this reworking was born the

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[10] Edward Wierenga, "Omniscience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 130-32.

[11] Charles Taliaferro, "Divine Cognitive Power," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 18 (1985): 133-36, and "Unknowable Truths and Omniscience: A Reply to Kvanvig," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 (1993): 554-56; Jonathan Kvanvig, "Unknowable Truths and the Doctrine of Omniscience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (1989): 490, 496.

[12] Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 27d-30b, p. 40-43. See also Plato's *Phaedo*, trans. David Gallop (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78b-80b, p. 28-32; 72e-77a, p. 21-27; 100b-105c, p. 56-64; M. R. Wright, *Introducing Greek Philosophy* (Los Angles: University of California Press, 2010), 63-64; Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 32.

[13] Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodd (New York: Random House, 2000), VIII.5-6, p. 248-51.

[14] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, vol. 1, trans. Anton Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 1.16.1-7, 1.51.4-6; William Lane Craig, *God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 12-43; Brian Leftow, "Is God and Abstract Object?" *Nous* 24(4) (1990): 581-98) and *God and Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 234-35; Michael Bergmann and Jeffery Brower, "A

theory of divine ideas, which is most famously tied to Augustine but flourishes in the hands of Thomas Aquinas.[15] As divine ideas, the Forms are a part of the divine essence just as the divine properties are, and they exist *a se* within the divine essence rather than being separate from the divine being. As a result, Augustine calls them eternal, uncreated reasons.[16] Like Plato's Forms, these ideas are also considered to be exemplars for all aspects of reality and are the formal causes by which God creates.[17] Contemporary philosopher Alvin Plantinga supports the theory of divine ideas by stating that philosophers tend to abandon Platonism in favor of antirealism because they cannot conceive how truths can be independent of the mind as Platonism claims. Plantinga agrees that truths are based in noetic activity, but not human noetic activity. Truths are based in divine noetic activity since the divine ideas are metaphysical forms that define reality. A proposition is true if and only if it is believed by God, and he assents to it. Propositions are not true because God believes them. Rather, God believes these propositions because they are true. As a result, God possesses the property of necessarily thinking the ideas he thinks since the things that he thinks are the ground for truth and reality.[18] Thus, God

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Theistic Argument Against Platonism (and in Support of Truthmakers and Divine Simplicity) in *The Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, ed. Dean Zimmerman, vol. 2 (New York: University of Oxford Press, 2006), 357-86; Matthew Davidson, "A Demonstration Against Theistic Activism," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): 277-90; Scott Davison, "Could Abstract Objects Depend Upon God?" *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 485-497.

[15] See Augustine, *Eighty-Three Questions, The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 70, trans. David Mosher (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 79-81; see also Augustine's *De Trinitate,* in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 18, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 9.6.9-11, 12.14.22-3, 12.15.24, and *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 2.8, 2.13; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Blackfriars (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 1a.15.1-2; 1a.16.1-2; 1a.16.5; 1a.16.7-8; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.60-62; Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 1.2; 1.4; 1.7-8; 3.1-2.

[16] Augustine, *Eighty-Three Questions,* 79-81; Joseph Koterski, *An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 67. Augustine notes that *formae* is the Latin translation of the Greek *ideis*. Plato's Forms are literally ideas that properly exist within a mind according to Augustine.

[17] Koterski, 74. See also Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, trans. C. E. Holt (New York: Macmillan Company, 1940), 5.1-10: 131-43, and Anthony Kenny, *God of the Philosophers* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1979), 15-16.

[18] Alvin Plantinga, "How to be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56 (1) 1982: 68-70, and Plantinga, "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *The Monist* 75 (3) (1992): 291-320. See also Greg Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism: the Case for Interpreting Abstract Objects as Divine Ideas," D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 2006, "Truth as Divine Ideas: A Theistic Theory of the Property

is the ultimate source of all reality since his omniscient mind contains all possible truths prior to their actualization, and these truths serve as the blueprints that define and shape all reality both possible and actual.[19]

The Incarnation and the Imago Dei

The theory of divine ideas presents a unique way of looking at the nature of the *imago Dei* when considered in tandem with the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Incarnation as defined in the Nicene and Chalcedon creeds maintains that the Second Person of the Trinity became a human being. He retained all attributes necessary for being divine while gaining all attributes necessary to be human. The Second Person is identical with the person of Jesus Christ such that there is one person with two natures.[20] Thus, Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine lacking nothing in regard to these two natures just as Paul emphasizes in Philippians 2:6-8.

'Truth'," *Southwestern Journal of Theolo*gy 47(1) (2004): 55-69, and "Theistic Conceptual Realism," in *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Entities*, ed. Paul Gould (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 81-96.

[19] See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.14.8-11; *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.50.3 and 6; *Truth*, 2.3-5 and 8. A modern sister theory to the divine ideas is Theistic Activism which argues that Platonic Forms are necessary creations of God that exist separate from the divine being. God, however, is an Aristotelian substance whose properties are *a se* and not dependent on these Forms for their existence. Thus, Theistic Activism can do all that the theory of divine ideas can do while also avoiding the problem with divine aseity. See Paul Gould and Richard Davis. See Paul Gould, "The Problem of God and Abstract Objects," *Philosophia Christi* 13(2) (2011): 255-274, "Theistic Activism: A New Problem and a New Solution," *Philosophia Christi* 13(1) (2011): 127-39, "Can God Create Abstract Objects? A Reply to Van Inwagen." *Sophia* 53(1) (2014): 99-112, and "Theistic Activism and the Doctrine of Creation." *Philosophia Christi* 16(2) (2014): 283-96; Richard Davis, "God and the Platonic Horde: A Defense of Limited Conceptualism," *Philosophia Christi* 13(2) (2011): 289-303; Richard Davis, *The Metaphysics of Theism and Modality*. NY: Peter Land, 2001; Paul Gould and Richard Davis, "Modified Theistic Activism." In *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul Gould, p. 51-64. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014; Paul Gould and Richard Davis, "Where the Bootstrapping Problem Really Lies: A Neo-Aristotelian Reply to Panchuk," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57(4) (2017): 415-28.

[20] Richard Cross, "The Incarnation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 452-53. The Third Council of Constantinople added the claim that the second person of the Trinity possesses two minds and two wills as part of his dual nature. For more on the dual mind theory of the Incarnation, see Thomas Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1986) and Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 192-215.

While much more could be said on the doctrine of the Incarnation, what I wish to note here is that the Incarnation is logically possible ontological state of reality for the Second Person of the Trinity. While it is not necessary that the Second Person be incarnated, it is something that can be (and has been) actualized. Since the divine being is the ultimate source of all reality both potential and actual, the Incarnation is a divine idea (i.e. Form) residing within the mind of God. Further, that idea is grounded in a reality about the ontology of the divine nature. It is the blueprint of what God would be like should he take on corporeal form; therefore, the divine idea of the Incarnation, particularly the human aspect of the idea, acts as an image of God. This notion is reflected in Heb. 1:1-3 where the author refers to the incarnate Christ as the reflection (i.e. image) of God's glory and being. This image, consequently, would involve human nature in both its material and immaterial aspects.

As a result, the divine idea of the Incarnation not only contains the idea of the *Imago Dei*, which is intricately connected to the divine nature as a reflection of God, but also is the source of the *Imago Dei*: human nature itself. What I argue here is that the idea of the Incarnation serves as the blueprint for what human beings are to be like rather than human beings serving as the blueprint for what God Incarnate is to be like. When the Godhead says in Gen 1:26, "Let us make man in our image," the Godhead is referring to the human aspect of the Incarnation. It is humanity that has been modeled off the human form of the Second Person of the Trinity rather than the human form of the Second Person of the Trinity being modeled off humanity. Though Christ takes on a human nature, it is not as if he is borrowing something from humanity. God did not look at humanity and decide that it was a fitting (but not the only) way to become incarnate. God can only be incarnated in a human form for that is what the divine idea of the Incarnation logically entails about the divine ontology. Thus, God's idea of human nature is derived directly from a property that describers something about the divine being (that it can be incarnated) rather than simply a piece of knowledge in his mind (like an automobile). Humanity, consequently, is made in the image of the (potentially) incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, and a human nature is a part of the divine ontology that humanity alone possesses making humanity truly special and unique in all of creation.[21]

In conclusion, the *imago Dei* is more than just humanity's rational mind, its special relation with God, or its dominion over nature. It is human nature itself extending to both its material and immaterial properties. Human

[21] This idea follows closely John 1:3 where the apostle says that all things were created through the Second Person (i.e. the Word or Logos). Human nature is no different as the Second Person is the source of that nature and its exemplification in reality.

nature is derived from a description of the divine being, and it is something that specially links humanity to God and truly sets it apart. Such a theory has major implications on how humanity is viewed not only theologically but also philosophically and scientifically. Anthropology takes on a whole new light when viewed through the lens of the Incarnation.

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