

Made in His Image: Why It Matters That We're More Than Matter

What is a human being? Are we just the stuff of which we're made? A random collection of animals? A slightly more highly evolved primate? These are all answers we hear in our culture — but what are the implications of reducing humanity this way? By contrast, the Christian faith makes a bold and unique claim—that we are made in God's image. This talk will explore how radical that claim is—and why it's so crucial for ethics, rights, and justice.

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1. Introduction: Our Need for Meaning

- The question “What is the meaning of life?” turns up all over the place
 - Personally and existentially
 - In movies, books, films, and art

For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy. The truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged: survival for what? Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.¹ — Viktor Frankl

- To ask this question is to ask: what does it mean to be human?

2. Hope, Humanity, and Secular Naturalism

- Our atheist friends have tried to answer the question purely in material terms.

“The human species has inhabited this planet for only 250,000 years or so—roughly .0015 percent of the history of life, the last inch of the cosmic mile. The world fared perfectly well without us for all but the last moment of earthly time—and this fact makes our appearance look more like an accidental afterthought than the culmination

¹ Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978) 21.

of a prefigured plan ... We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available (so thank your lucky stars in a literal sense); because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a 'higher' answer—but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct these answers ourselves—from our own wisdom and ethical sense. There is no other way.”²
~ Stephen J. Gould

“We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes. Our genes made us. We animals exist for their preservation and are nothing more than throwaway survival machines. The world of the selfish gene is one of savage competition, ruthless exploitation, and deceit.”³ ~ Richard Dawkins

- This view ultimately cannot escape nihilism.
- The practical implications for ethics.

3. The Christian Answer: Made in God’s Image

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

- The uniqueness of this claim (nothing like it in other religious traditions, such as Islam).⁴

² Cited in James A. Haught, *2000 Years of Disbelief: Famous People With the Courage to Doubt* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996) 290.

³ Richard Dawkins, ‘Preface’, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁴ See the discussion in Andy Bannister, *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?* (IVP, 2021) chapter 5.

- The implications for ...

- Human value and dignity

- No other basis for human value
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

*Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ... All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*⁵

*In direct contradiction [to the Greek world], Christianity was to introduce the notion that humanity was fundamentally identical, that men were equal in dignity—an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance. But this notion of equality did not come from nowhere.*⁶ ~

Luc Ferry (atheist philosopher)

- Ethics

- How do we ground the idea that people should be treated with compassion

“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would strongly be tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the [OHP] circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisation—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours ... Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.” ~ C. S. Lewis⁷

⁵ ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>, accessed 28 September 2022). Quotations from the Preamble and Article 1 (emphasis mine).

⁶ Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011 [2010]) 72.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980 [1949]) 45-46.

- Case study: The Dalits

All people are equal as all pennies are equal, because the only value in any of them is that they bear the image of the King. ~ G. K. Chesterton

4. Brokenness and Hope

- The second aspect to the question “What does it mean to be human?” — why are we so broken?

- A frequent theme in art, literature, and film

*“Most of us know, now, that Rousseau was wrong: that man, when you knock his chains off, sets up the death camps. Soon we shall know everything the eighteenth century didn’t know, and nothing it did, and it will be hard to live with us.”*⁸ ~ Randall Jarrell (poet)

- Inherent in the idea of “image” is the idea of reflection; so what *do* we choose to reflect?

*“In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship ... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you ... Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.”*⁹ ~ David Foster Wallace

- Jesus, the perfect image of God, who can heal our broken image (Colossians 1).

5. Further Reading

- Andy Bannister, *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God* (IVP, 2021)
- Sharon Dirckx, *Am I Just My Brain?* (The Good Book Company, 2019)
- Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (SPCK, 2008)
- Andy Steiger, *Reclaimed: How Jesus Restores Our Humanity in a Dehumanized World* (Zondervan, 2017)

⁸ Cited in Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (London: SPCK, 2008) xvi

⁹ David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009) 100-110.