Animals or Not-Animals? Reflections on a Postliberal View of the Move from Particularity to Unsubstitutability

Rev Dr Stephen Milford
Extra-ordinary Researcher
North-West University
South Africa
milford.stephen@gmail.com

Abstract

'Humans are not animals!' This seemingly rudimentary claim has had catastrophic results; setting humanity in opposition to creation and to itself. It has resulted in the ruthless persecution of those who are seen to be 'sub-human' or merely 'potential humans.' Such 'not-animal'[1] methodologies attempt to identify a limited set of features as the distinctive human characteristic. In Abrahamic traditions, particularly Christianity, the descriptive phrase *imago Dei* (Image of God) has acted as the placeholder for these anthropological distinctive features. Acting with both categorical and evaluative force, this enigmatic phrase has been more of a problem than a solution. Distinction methodologies often appeal to non-physical features. Consequently, they have proved inadequate at providing a viable basis for universal human classification and unqualified value. The emphasis on human radical distinction has come under criticism, particularly from Yale Divinity School and David Kelsey's *Eccentric Existence* (2009). Such a postliberalist approach argues for a shift of emphasis away from human distinctiveness to human unsubstitutability before God. The advantages are clear; humans are one with creation and all created equal. The disadvantages are startling, most notably the loss of humanity itself and, consequently, the loss of the very notion of human value. This paper will explore these disadvantages, critique this shifting focus and offer four theological desiderata to which proposed answers to the conundrum of human distinction and value should adhere.

Keywords: Theological Anthropology, Imago Dei, Post Liberal Theology, Human Uniqueness, David Kelsey

Methodology

This research project makes use of a constructive, critical comparative dialogue between literature on the imago Dei and postliberal theology as it relates to the human distinctive question. The first step in our methodology is to engage in a critique of the literature on human uniqueness and the imago Dei as it currently stands. This critique brings into relief contemporary challenges faced by theological anthropology. In particular, the need for a non-limited, extrinsic approach to human uniqueness. The second step of our methodology is to outline a proposed response to

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[1] David Clough, "Not a Not-Animal: The Vocation to Be a Human Animal Creature," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2013): 4–17.

this challenge given by the Yale professor: David Kelsey. Kelsey – and post-liberalist generally – contend for a move away from particularity to unsubstitutability. The third phase of our research seeks to critically evaluate this proposal in terms of its positive contribution to the anthropological 'What?' question, as well as its challenges. In light of this evaluation, our fourth, and final methodological step, is to propose a way forward in the format of four theological desiderata.

I am not an Animal!

That I am not an animal seems the most rudimentary claim in theological anthropology. Indeed, anthropology generally is, by its nature concerned with a specific being that is distinct from other beings. However, to say that one species is distinct from another, is not to say very much. It is simply to say there are differences in attributes or features. Cats and dogs both have claws and teeth. To say that they are different is simply to say that cats have retractable claws and 30 teeth. Pragmatically this distinction is elementary and has no bearing on the distinctive value of the respective species.[1] Yet, when distinctive descriptions are applied in the context of identity questions (as is the case of the heading of this sub-section), one is seeking something more than simply dissimilarities; one is talking about ontological distinction. As Hille Haker argues:

> Identity can only exist when a person is capable of being distinguished from other persons or objects. With reference to a person's identity, this means that the someone is 'particular' in the sense that he is different from other persons and that this difference is significant.[2]

Haker's linking identity to 'significant' distinction is hardly unique. For millennia human beings have been debating the fundamental difference between animals and humankind. This debate in human classification is more than simply biological taxonomy. Rather, the classificatory endeavour has been powered by a desire to evaluate human beings so as to have unique value and dignity. That is to say; to claim that human beings are not animals, is to claim that human beings have a different value than animals.[3] Often this value is greater.

The basis for this distinction is open to debate. Different fields of study contend for different human characteristics. For example, in evolutionary biology one may refer to distinctive DNA, in cultural anthropology to semiotics, while philosophy may argue for distinctive rationality.[4] Within Christian theological anthropology, the descriptive phrase *imago Dei* (Image of God) has acted as the foundation upon which Christian anthropologists build their classificatory framework. That humans, not animals, are made in God's image, places them within a specific class of being. This class has unqualified, universal, inalienable value.

The exact composition of the *imago Dei* has been fiercely debated. These debates are extensive and beyond the scope of our aims here. Nevertheless, a brief – and highly limited – summary can

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[2] Hille Haker, "Narrative and Moral Identity in Paul Ricoeur," in *Creating Identity*, ed. Hermann Häring, Maureen Junker-Kenny, and Dietmar Mieth (London: SCM, 2000), 62.

[3] David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 288–91.

[4] Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox, 2007), 142.

help to demonstrate the challenges.[5] There is general agreement that proposals regarding the *imago Dei* may be grouped into two mutually exclusive opposing views: the substantive and the relational.[6] Although at first appearing distinct, both approaches utilise a common underlying structure: seeking to identify a single or limited set of features rooted within the human being that distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation. More often than not, this single or limited set of features are non-physical.

Generally speaking, substantive thinkers argue that *Homo sapiens* possess certain 'characteristics,' 'qualities,' 'capacities,' 'original excellences' or 'endowments.'[7] Since these attributes resemble corresponding qualities that one considers to be found in the Godhead, 'their possession makes humans like God.'[8] The most widely held account puts forward human rationality as the cardinal characteristic.[9] On the other hand, relational thinkers contend that the defining characteristic of God is relationality and, therefore, the distinctive feature of humanity is its propensity toward relationality, particularly relationship with God.[10] Using the metaphor of a mirror, relational thinkers consider the image of God, not as something which is static (gifted to the human being), but something which is dynamic (the vocation of the human being).[11] Such thinkers use the word 'image' as a verb, using it to indicate that which happens as the human being is orientated to God as a mirror is turned to an object.[12] Human beings are not the image of God, but they may image God if they are oriented correctly.

There are a number of limitations to both substantive and relational views.[13] For our purposes here, two key challenges must be borne in mind. The first is their failure to establish a viable universality to human distinction. Neither substantive nor relational thinkers appeal to a universally present human feature. In substantive thinking, respective characteristics – often 'qualities lauded

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[5] What follows is a limited overview of some of the core debates in the *imago Dei*. The reader should keep in mind that this discussion is highly concise and does not cover all aspects of the debate. For further justification of the main movements of this summary see Stephen R Milford, *Eccentricity in Anthropology: David H. Kelsey's Anthropological Formula as a Way Out of the Substantive-Relational Imago Dei Debate* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), chap. 1.

[6] Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 249–84; F. W. Bridger, "Humanity," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1995), 21–27; David Fergusson, "Humans Created According to the Imago Dei: An Alternative Proposal," *Zygon* 48, no. 2 (2013): 440–45.

[7] Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 89.

[8] Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 142.

[9] Grenz, 143–61; Edmund Hill, *Being Human: A Biblical Perspective* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 202–12.

[10] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, vol. III.1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 184; G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*; Hall, *Imaging God*.

[11] A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 40; Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation with Special Reference to Volume One of Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 153 & 189. Hence the inclusion of the functional within the relational see Hall, *Imaging God*, 106–7. See also Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 527–29 & 530–31. & Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 172–78.

[12] Hall, *Imaging God*, 98–108.

[13] Milford, *Eccentricity in Anthropology*, 15–21.

by the dominant culture of one's society'[14] – are not always present. For example, human rationality (defined differently by different cultures) is often scarcely present in a large portion of the population, such as, infants; the senile; or the mentally challenged. Conversely, not all human beings develop the necessary relationality explicit in relational thinkers. In this construction, more often than not, only Christian believers develop the necessary relationship with God and Jesus Christ to be classed as being found in the *imago Dei.*[15]

The second key challenge is the resultant dichotomisations of distinction methodologies, or 'not-animal methodologies' as Clough calls them.[16] We can note three: 1) between the physical and non-physical; 2) between creation and humanity; and 3) within humanity itself. These have been expounded on in-depth elsewhere.[17] For the uninitiated reader, let us expand briefly here.

1) Physical and non-physical. In distinctive methodologies, as images of God, God's distinction is the basis for human distinction. Since God surpasses creation, and God is non-physical, it goes to follow that the non-physical surpasses the physical. Thus, the non-physical is often seen as 'higher' 'nobler,' 'loftier' or 'better'[18] than the physical. The non-physical is thereby elevated at the expense of the physical. The consequences of such elevations are far reaching. It is well-known that within Christianity, the physical body has, at times, been viewed with little respect. Christianity's history is marked by the shadow of times when well-meaning Christians tortured the body in an attempt to save the soul. Many human beings suffered at the hands of this doctrine.[19]

2) Humanity and creation. The belief that the non-physical is more important than the physical, leads to belief that humans (as fundamentally spiritual/non-physical beings) are more important than the physical environment. This belief drives enactments of practices that are detrimental to the physical environment. In this way, human distinction from creation results in human dominion over creation – historically associated with the *imago Dei.*[20] It is arguable that much of our contemporary ecological crisis is rooted in our inflated sense of the importance of the non-physical at the expense of the physical.[21]

3) The dichotomised human community. The human community itself is divided into those who do, and those who do not, image God. This applies to both substantive and relational distinction methodologies. For example, in substantive thinking, infants; the elderly; the mentally challenged; or even those who are the victims of a serious accidents, may lack the distinctive human characteristic (rationality, morality, creativity, etc.). Relational thinking, on the other hand,

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[14] Hall, *Imaging God*, 91–92.
[15] Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self.*
[16] Clough, "Not a Not-Animal."
[17] Milford, *Eccentricity in Anthropology*, 7–26.
[18] Hall, *Imaging God*, 90.
[19] Sadly, history is filled with many such examples. From the early Saxons, to the Vikings and the Spanish invasion of South America. For the interested reader see: Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity 371-1386 AD* (New York: Harper, 1997).
[20] D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 250; J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 15–90; Hall, *Imaging God.*
[21] Joshua M. Moritz, "Evolution, the End of Human Uniqueness, and the Election of the Imago Dei," *Theology and Science* 9, no. 3 (2011): 308–10.

distinguishes between those who currently have the necessary relationality and are actually bearers of the image, and those who simply have the potential to develop this relationship.[22]

The consequence of failing to exhibit culturally selected characteristics (substantive or relational), is to fail to be categorised as part of a class of being that is radically distinct from the rest of creation. Consequently, one's unqualified value and dignity is questioned. In the words of Douglas Hall, speaking about the substantive approach:

> One could speculate endlessly on how much damage has been done to children, to the mentally handicapped, and to the uneducated and illiterate in Western civilization on account of this avowedly 'Christian' practice of identifying the highest and best – the truly human! – with rationality.[23]

Conversely, within relational thinking, the image of God is a 'privilege of believers.'[24] Individuals who fail to develop the necessary relationship with God fail to image God and, as a result, are dehumanised. Such individuals (and indeed entire communities) have, in the past, been referred to within relational literature as 'subhuman,' 'inhuman,' 'de-human' and, in the case of Calvin, 'double beasts.'[25]

It is, therefore, no wonder that Ian McFarland is able to demonstrate that the drive to establish human dignity and value based on commonly shared attributes which distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation has resulted – paradoxically – in the most horrendous acts of human cruelty.[26]

Recently some have attempted to re-orientate anthropology so as to consider the human being simply as another creature. Consequently, within Christian theology, there are those who have begun to disparage the drive to view human beings in opposition to the rest of creation. Aku Visala, for example, is forceful in his affirmation of human creaturehood while defending a modified substantive view. He argues against seeking definitive distinctive characteristics within the human being. His argument, based on post-Darwinian biology, is that there is no single or limited set of features that are necessary and sufficient to classify an individual as a member of a class or species. Rather characteristics of a species are 'typical rather than universal.'[27] Therefore, 'to be a member of a species is to belong to a historical population with similar phylogeny.'[28]

Although one applauds his attempt to affirm the creaturely character of humanity, one is not convinced by his argument. Visala cannot fully avoid the consequences of ascribing the answer

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[22] Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, pt. 2; Ian A. McFarland, *Difference & Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 56–57. Cf. David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: SCM, 1953), 78. Hoekema argues that this effectively the position of Aquinas (ST1.93.4), that sinners have only part of the image: Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 33–36.

[23] Hall, *Imaging God*, 108–9.

[24] Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 106; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 530.

[25] T.F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 73–81.

[26] McFarland, *Difference & Identity*, 2–10.

[27] Aku Visala, "Imago Dei, Dualism, and Evolution: A Philosophical Defense of the Structural Image of God," *Zygon* 49, no. 1 (2014): 114.

[28] Visala, 114.

to the human distinction question to a limited set of features. He argues for property dualism rather than pure substantive dualism and consequently appeals to a non-physical attribute as the root of the image of God. He attempts to establish the physical as important to the non-physical, but appeals solely to the non-physical as the *imago Dei.* This, even if only unconsciously or slightly, diminish the physical and, as a result, establishes the dichotomisations we noted above.

David Clough, on the other hand, goes even further and urges us to avoid 'not-animal' methodologies. He contends that such approaches 'exhibit poor theological methodology, are based on inaccurate descriptions of both human and other animals, and results in problematic construal's of what it means to be human.'[29] Instead, Clough argues that we take as our starting point the 'creaturely context of human existence'[30] and that the human being is wholly creaturely. One sympathises with Clough, and yet one is not convinced that – in his drive to equalise creation – he is able to establish human value. If all creation is elementarily different, yet fundamentally the same, can we really speak about unqualified, inalienable, absolute human value? If not, why treat humans any differently than animals?

Both Visala and Clough are examples of anthropologies designed to be hospitable to the Modern Secular Interpretation of Humanity (MSIH).[31] Yet the consequences of the MSIH are startling. Two examples stand out as being particularly striking. Consider for example the Nobel Prize–winning scientist Francis Crick's 'astonishing hypothesis' that human beings are 'in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.'[32] In a similar vein, Richard Dawkins' work in evolutionary biology has led him to understand the human being as an illusion created by the phenotypical effects of the optimon – the smallest replicable unit in biology, i.e. a single gene. The human body is nothing more than a vehicle, present only to transport replicator genes which use the human body as a tool for their own survival and reproduction. In the latter chapters of his book *The Extended Phenotype* (1982), Dawkins expounds on some of the implications of his theory. Extending the phenotypical effect of the replicator gene beyond the human body, he argues for a 'skinless' organism. Not only do genes affect the body in which they are transported, but the gene's phenotype reaches 'unimpeded through individual body walls as though those walls were transparent, interacting with the world and with each other without regard to organismal boundaries.'[33] Effectively both Crick and Dawkins undermine humanity. In their constructions, human beings are illusions, nothing more than the effects of more fundamental physical building blocks.

It is against this backdrop that the work of the Yale postliberal theologian David Kelsey is to be read. His theological anthropology, *Eccentric Existence* (2009), has been met with critical acclaim. It is now the 'benchmark'[34] of Christian theological anthropology and considered '*the* [sic] standard

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[29] Clough, "Not a Not-Animal," 4.

[30] Clough, 4.

[31] See Wesley J. Wildman, "A Theological Challenge: Coordinating Biological, Social, and Religious Visions of Humanity," *Zygon* 33, no. 4 (1998): 571–97.

[32] Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 3.

[33] Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Gene as the Unit of Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 250.

[34] David F. Ford, "The What, How and Who of Humanity Before God: Theological Anthropology and the Bible in the Twenty-First Century," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 1 (2011): 41.

primary text'[35] in this field. In this work, one can interpret Kelsey as beginning to question the notion of human particularity. It is here argued that Kelsey begins to shift the focus away from human radical, ontological distinction toward human unsubstitutability. In Kelsey's construction, the human creature is 'utterly ordinary,'[36] and as far as God's relating in creative blessing is concerned, 'on a par with all other creatures.'[37] At the same time, the human being – both as a community and as individuals – is unsubstitutable.

Is it possible that this shift in focus, a shift away from particularity toward unsubstitutability, may provide hope for the conundrum of the classificatory and evaluative concerns in theological anthropology? In order to consider this hope, let us delve deeper into Kelsey's construction.

From Particular to Unsubstitutable: Kelsey's Shifting Focus

Kelsey's discussion on human unsubstitutability takes place in the context of human identity. Kelsey notes four types of identity questions which one may ask (the third and fourth are very similar). The first is a question of simply distinguishing one individual from another. For example: Of all the people here, who is he? The second is a question of mathematical or logical identity. For example: Is she the president of the USA? The third and fourth are questions about the psychological phenomenon (third type) or the metaphysical principle (fourth type) behind someone's identity. For example: Who is he really?[38] While these questions have value in addressing their particular concerns, Kelsey argues that they do not address his particular anthropological concern: Why can we not substitute one human being for another?

He contends that it is not possible to argue that one human being cannot substitute for another simply because they are different. One cannot, for example, simply attribute a list of properties to a subject with a proper name and then compare this list with others attributed to other subjects, thereby argue that since the list is different the subjects in question cannot be interchanged.[39] Kelsey gives an example to illustrate the point. One cannot describe the unsubstitutable individuality of Maria by the successive predication of her attributes as 'female,' 'five feet three inches tall,' '120 pounds,' etc. and then claim that Maria is unsubstitutable for John who is male, six foot, 150 pounds. Although this approach may help to identify Maria in terms of picking her out of a crowd, it fails to convey her unsubstitutability.[40]

There are three reasons for this failure. First, such a list is potentially exceptionally long, resulting in the near impossibility of producing an adequate list to which the sum total could sufficiently describe a person's unsubstitutability. Second, such an approach assumes that the subject in question (the unsubstitutable identity of Maria) is 'an otherwise featureless subsistent individual entity that somehow exists behind or below the properties ascribed to it.'[41] Such a conception

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[35] Tom Greggs, "David Kelsey, Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 4 (2012): 449.
[36] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 246.
[37] Kelsey, 255.
[38] Kelsey, 234–37.
[39] Kelsey, 690, 1022–23.
[40] Kelsey, 691.
[41] Kelsey, 691.

perceives of the 'real' human being as a 'ghost in the machine.'[42] In this construction the fundamental nature of a human being is a featureless and obscure reality without true form or content. One could argue that past Christian understandings of the human soul refer to just such a 'ghost in the machine'.[43] There has been much criticism written about the dangers of this conception.[44]

Third, such a list would describe human individuality in terms of contingent predication, abstracted from commonly shared characteristics. While such an approach demonstrates uniqueness in terms of a unique collection of attributes, it ultimately diminishes unsubstitutability. The attributes present on the list, such as height; weight; age; gender etc., exist independently of the concrete human individual. Individuality would thus be established by comparing and contrasting one instance of *homo sapiens* with another, abstracting attributes common to humanity in general. Such an approach predicates human individuality on an ontologically more primary list of attributes shared by other instances of *Homo sapiens,* and has been widely criticised for elevating commonly shared attributes and demoting concrete individual identities.[45]

To be precise, it is possible to substitute one human being for another in a certain sense. For example, in the roles they perform. One teacher can, and often does, substitute for another teacher. The same can be said for a doctor, pastor, president etc. Even in fundamental roles, such as parental roles, a human being can substitute for another. We think, for example, of foster parents. Therefore, in some sense human beings are inter-changeable.[46]

Of course, there are some exceptions to this. For example, it is possible to conceive of a surgical procedure that is so complex that only a single living surgeon has the required skills, expertise and experience to perform it. In this case one could claim that no other human being could substitute for them.[47] However, such unsubstitutability would be contingent unsubstitutability. It is contingent on the knowledge, skill and experience of the surgeon in question. These features are fragile, temporal and transient. For example, where the surgeon was born, what schools they went to, who their professors were, their socio-economic background, their experiences, their IQ etc. Any one of these aspects could have been different. The surgeon may have been born into a poor family which could not afford their education, or the surgeon may have been presented with different professors who may have presented them with different learning experiences. The surgeon may have suffered a debilitating accident during their lifetime, preventing them from further studies or experiences. Furthermore, it is very conceivable that at some point their skill will diminish through age. As such their unsubstitutability will come to an end. Thus, their unsubstitutability in the role they perform is based on accidental features to the concrete human being in question. It is contingent on a whole host of quotidian aspects which are ultimately temporal and transient. It, therefore, cannot be the basis of their fundamental unsubstitutability.

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[42] Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 99 [quoting Ryle].

[43] Hill, *Being Human*, 31–36.

[44] Russell Aldwinckle, *Death in the Secular City: A Study of the Notion of Life After Death in Contemporary Theology and Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1972), 71; Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 98–100, 139, 142.

[45] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 95.

[46] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 387.

[47] Kelsey, 387; Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 105–14.

More importantly, as Kelsey notes: 'concretely speaking, a human being, simple *as* 'human being,' does not fill any role.'[48] Here a distinction must be made between the way God fulfils a role/title and the way a human being does. God inhabits the roles he fills in a unique manner. He not only creates these roles and defines them, but fulfils them singularly: in a manner no one else can fulfil. For example, within Christian theology, to say that God is saviour is not to say that God is like other saviours, or that He performs the same function other saviours perform. It is to say that God is the salvation of humanity in a fundamental, unrepeatable way. Only God can be called saviour in the sense understood by the Christian phrase 'God is saviour.'[49]

Human beings, on the other hand, fulfil roles that are externally defined for them. They can step into and out of these roles so that one may begin and cease being a teacher, may fulfil part of a role (shared teaching), or all of a role temporarily (substitute teacher). Therefore, it is not possible to equate the role human beings fulfil with the concrete human being in question. The same may be said of any other attributes or aspects of human particularity which are externally defined and transient in nature. This includes age, height, weight, gender, culture, etc. All these features can be commonly shared with or by other human beings and often radically changed. Even one's name, gender and culture is fluid; he may have been born Bruce but she is now Caitlyn.

If human unsubstitutability is to provide significant contribution to the anthropological question, it cannot rest on contingent, elementary features. It must be established on fundamental characteristics of human being. Kelsey offers us some options.

The Three Basis for Human Unsubstitutability

To achieve a construction of human unsubstitutability that is both non-contingent and fundamental, Kelsey refers to three bases upon which to claim the 'limited' and 'restricted sense'[50] in which human beings are 'absolutely unsubstitutable.'[51]

First, he argues that human beings are unsubstitutable in their 'quotidian identity.'[52] Here Kelsey contends that human singularity, that is, the concrete identity of a human being that arises from the physical, non-physical and transcendental context,[53] is both unique and inalienable to the human in question. According to Kelsey, this singularity cannot be substituted for another singular, concrete identity. Simply put; all human beings are particular and therefore unsubstitutable.[54]

I find this first basis of human unsubstitutability problematic on two accounts. A) It is not immediately clear why particularity equates to unsubstitutability. After all, every grain of sand on a beach is unique and yet it is hard to image a situation in which one would be unsubstitutable for another. B) Recall our discussions directly above where we noted Kelsey's own objection to contingent unsubstitutability. Is human concrete singularity, based on the quotidian identity which arises from the quotidian context, not contingently unsubstitutable? It refers to one's physical and

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[48] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 38 [original italics].
[49] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 2–4, 105–14; Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 388–89.
[50] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 272.
[51] Kelsey, 391–401.
[52] Kelsey, 381–83.
[53] Kelsey, 251–53.
[54] Kelsey, 389.

non-physical properties: to one's gender, culture, socio-economic background etc. The quotidian identity is predicated on pre-existing, ontologically more primary features (physical, non-physical and transcendental). It cannot be the basis for a non-contingent fundamental feature of individual human beings. All this leads to deep questions about Kelsey's use of the quotidian identity as the basis of human unsubstitutability.

Second, Kelsey argues that human beings are unsubstitutable in regard to their responsibility for the acts, interactions, interpretations of what befalls them and their responses to these events:

> No other personal identity can substitute in regard to that responsibility… It is in their inalienable quotidian personal identities that human living personal bodies are terminal and absolutely unsubstitutable for any other in the order of responsibilities.[55]

Setting aside the fact that this response is conducted by the 'inalienable quotidian personal identity' whose ability to account for unsubstitutability we have just questioned, there are further challenges to this second basis of human unsubstitutability. Although acknowledging that, as a general rule, human beings should be held accountable for their own actions/responses, there are a large number of exceptions to this rule. Large portions of the human population cannot appropriately act or respond to what befalls them. Therefore, they cannot be held accountable. In these cases, the law often acknowledges diminished responsibility which, in some cases, may lead to no accountability. This is particularly relevant to marginalised members of society, such as those with disabilities, the elderly, senile or very young. Kelsey does acknowledge these limitations. Nevertheless, he contends that all individual human beings are accountable 'for whatever response each is capable of making.'[56] This does not, however, address the problem of those who are unable to make any response whatsoever. For example, those with serious mental deficiencies or infants. These individuals may be entirely unable to respond and as a result one questions how they can be held responsible at all. Do these individuals retain their unsubstitutability in the face of no responsibility?

Furthermore, in Christian theology, soteriology is often based on Christological substitution. That is to say; within Christianity, a common approach to soteriology is to consider Jesus Christ as the sacrificial lamb who takes on the consequences of human sin. In penal substitution models one human being (Jesus Christ) substitutes for other human beings. It must be stated that Kelsey develops a concept of Christological soteriology that relies on participation in the narrative of Jesus Christ 'at some distance'[57] and in this way he is able to avoid penal substitution. Nevertheless, unless one accepts Kelsey's specific Christology, the fact that humans may be substituted in their responsibilities seriously questions Kelsey's second basis for human unsubstitutability.

Third, Kelsey argues that human beings are unsubstitutable with regard to certain ways they are valued and loved. He argues that who we love is in the first instance contingent on a host of accidental features: whom we meet, when we meet them, the context of our acquaintance, their particular quotidian identity etc. As such, it is conceivable that anyone's beloved may have been

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[55] Kelsey, 391, cf. 274–75.
[56] Kelsey, 274.
[57] Kelsey, 390.

someone else's beloved. Yet, 'once the beloved has become the beloved… her or his personal identity is unsubstitutable by any other human creature in respect of being the beloved.'[58]

The concept is intriguing. Consider that I have fallen in love with my wife. It may be argued that this was purely accidental; I just happened to meet her at a particular time, place and context whereby circumstances (including who we were and our particular personal circumstances) were fortuitous for us to become beloved. Now, consider that if we were able to clone my wife down to every atom in her body, would I know the difference? At first it is possible that I would not. The clone would, for all tense and purposes, be the exact same identical person as my wife. The clone would be entirely substitutable for my wife and, therefore, of equal value to me. However, upon discovering that one is the clone and the other the original (my wife), the clone could never substitute for the original. In this way, my wife's unsubstitutability does not lie in her accidental features; her quotidian concrete unique identity, or her responsibility and accountability – all of which change over time. It lies simply in the way she is loved by me. She is not just any wife, she is my beloved wife.

In this third basis, a sense of contingency remains. Becoming beloved is contingent on who one meets, when they meet, what they are like etc. However, once someone has become beloved, all sense of contingent unsubstitutability disappears. Their unsubstitutability (and their value) is not contingent on their possessing certain characteristics, skills, experiences etc. It is not founded on their peripheral concrete uniqueness. Rather, as beloved, no other entity can substitute for them.

Kelsey contends that this concept applies not only to human relations, but to divine-human relations as well. God loves individual human beings, and as such they are the beloved of God. As the beloved of God, they are unsubstitutable for any other being. It does not matter if they are old or young, infants or senile, have certain substantive features, or display a certain relationality. Individually one cannot be substituted for another and, therefore, every individual human being has value and dignity.

More than this, God has freely chosen to love all human beings both individually and corporately (John 3:16), as such, the entire human race is the beloved of God. Humanity is unsubstitutable for any other species. Consequently, the notion of *human being(s)* and *God's beloved* are inextricably linked in Kelsey's construction. One cannot have one without the other. To be human is to be God's beloved and as such to be unsubstitutable. In this way, human unsubstitutability is an ontological primary concept that is non-contingent and universal. It does not matter the specific, unique, concrete quotidian identity of the individual, they are the beloved of God. Nor does it matter that the human community processes, or fails to process, certain features, characteristics or attributes. They are the beloved of God. This ontological, non-contingent universality offers something important to the debate surrounding human value and dignity.

Advantages and Challenges of Beloved Unsubstitutability

Kelsey's shift from particularity to unsubstitutability presents us with both advantages and challenges. There are two advantages to note. The first deals with the relationship between his construction and the MSIH. Not only is the MSIH widely held, it is supported by an immense quantity of empirical evidence. It is, therefore, of great value that the theological answer to the

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[58] Kelsey, 391.

anthropological 'What?' question is hospitable to the MSIH. There are many, such as Crick and Dawkins, who argue that the core hypothesis of the MSIH is material reductionism. Within the MSIH, all reality may be distilled to its smallest physical part. All 'higher level' attributes are predicated on basic physical realities. Therefore, the idea that the distinctive human feature is non-physical, or at least not rooted heavily in the physical, is simply alien to the MSIH.[59]

In contradistinction, theology has not always answered the anthropological 'What?' question in ways that are open to the MSIH. We noted that many prevailing theological constructs base human particularity on non-physical attributes rooted within humanity that distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation. These constructions elevate the non-physical at the expense of the physical, with the resulting dichotomisations between human beings and creation; human beings themselves; and the human community.

It is arguable that Kelsey's shifting focus from particularity to unsubstitutability is hospitable to the MSIH. Indeed, Kelsey goes to great lengths to establish this exact point.[60] In his construction, human particularity is based on a particular understanding of the quotidian identity, an identity that arises from the quotidian context which is highly physical – although not entirely. Thus, what distinguishes human beings from other species, their particularity, is entirely based on accidental attributes that are heavily rooted in the physical.

Kelsey is able to retain human value, in the face of accidental distinction, on the grounds that he does not root human unqualified dignity in human distinction but in human unsubstitutability, i.e. the unique manner in which God relates to human beings. There are many consequences of God's unique relating. One consequence is that this relation establishes human beings as God's believed and, therefore, unsubstitutable for any other being. Being unsubstitutable, they have unqualified, universal, dignity and value.[61] In this way, Kelsey's construction enables us to retain a construction of human particularity which is hospitable to the MSIH while basing human value on God's unique relating. Human beings are valuable and unsubstitutable, not because they are particular – although that they are – but because they are personally related to by God and as such are the beloved of God.

Second, Kelsey's construction is able to establish the desired universality that is lacking in both substantive and relational constructions. As we have noted above, although both substantive and relational thinkers desire to establish a commonality to humanity – that is to say, a universally present distinctive feature – neither is able to fully achieve this desire. Basing their constructions on a limited set of features within the human being that distinguishes the human being from the

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[59] We acknoweldge are other approaches, such as the emergent theory, but these are not as widely held with the MSIH.

[60] David H. Kelsey, "Wisdom Theological Anthropology and Modern Secular Interpretation of Humanity," in *God's Life in Trinity*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 44, 51; David H. Kelsey, "The Human Creature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Ian Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 128; David H. Kelsey, "Spiritual Machines, Personal Bodies, Theological Education and Anthropology," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2002): 7.

[61] To be accurate, Kelsey argues that God's unique relating is a personalising relation and it is as personal beings that human beings have dignity and value. His construction is, however, utterly congruent with how we have phrased it above. That only personal beings can be the beloved of God and therefore unsubstitutable. For more, see Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 286–97.

rest of creation, results – paradoxically – in a dichotomised humanity. Those that are able to exhibit the required features (substantive or relational) are considered part of humanity. Those that do not, have their humanity questioned along with their dignity and value.

Kelsey's construction, however, does not appeal to a limited set of features. On the contrary, his appeal is external; rooting human beings ex-centrically in the manner God relates to them as part of creation. In his construction, it does not matter if the individual human being has a particular bodily form, rationality or relationality. What matters is simply that God relates to the human being as beloved. Thus, since God has freely chosen to relate to all human beings with a particular form of love, all human beings are the beloved of God. Therefore, Kelsey's construction enables us to claim that all human beings, everywhere, are unsubstitutable, and, consequently, have unqualified dignity and value.

Although these two aspects are of immense value to the discussion of human dignity, this is not to say that Kelsey's construction does not pose serious challenges that need to be overcome before it is fully accepted. The most serious of which may in fact lead to the destruction of humanity itself. Let us explain further.

To claim that the human community is God's beloved community, is not to claim that God has no other beloved community. Indeed, Kelsey notes the possibility for his anthropological claims to apply to other entities, such as: extra-terrestrial life; angels; or artificial intelligence.[62] His argument is that it is possible for God to relate to these other beings in very similar ways to how God relates to humans. As such, these other beings would also be the beloved of God. This, in itself, is not a serious problem. A father, for example, can have many beloved children, yet it is possible to conceive of him loving all of them, giving them all unqualified dignity and respect.

The problem arises when we consider that Kelsey's general understanding of humanity, and specifically his understanding of human unsubstitutability, is open to the charge of utilising a 'radical eccentricity.'[63] This is to say: all that the human being is – and what makes it unsubstitutable (thereby valuable) – is entirely externally rooted. Hence the title of his work: *Eccentric Existence.* Keep in mind that while human beings may be unique (corporately and individually), this is of no consequence as far as their unsubstitutability is concerned.

This begs the question: if a being's uniqueness is of no fundamental importance, and its value the sole result of the manner in which it is related to, is there anything substantive about the being itself? Surely, in this construction, there is no important; fundamental; inalienable; intrinsic; aspect or substance to humanity that is responsible for their value. Consequently, and more importantly: what prevents human beings from being substituted? Since their concrete unique identity is peripheral in regard to their belovedness, are they not at the whim of external relations (divine and human).

These external relations assign value seemingly arbitrarily. The relating entities do not respond to what they encounter (concrete identities). If they did, a clone with the same concrete identity

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[62] Kelsey, 252–59; David H. Kelsey, "Personal Bodies: A Theological Anthropological Proposal," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 155.

[63] Catherine Pickstock, "The One Story: A Critique of David Kelsey's Theological Robotics," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 1 (2011): 31.

would be beloved to the same extent as the original. Rather, an external entity creates unsubstitutability by choosing, for whatever reason, to make a being its beloved being. Kelsey himself admits that one's beloved could have easily been someone else's beloved.[64] In this construction, concrete human beings – as externally rooted, unsubstitutable beings – are the passive product of external relations. Their value is ephemeral, hanging on the mercy of an external source that may choose to relate or not relate to them in a specific manner.

Not only is this problematic for establishing the evaluative notion of what a human being is, but it is problematic from the point of view of other beings' dignity and value. If we can establish that other creatures are unsubstitutable, we can establish that they are of intrinsic, unqualified worth. While this appears unobjectionable in the context of certain beings, such as aliens, artificial intelligence, extra-terrestrials or angels, on closer inspection it might lead to some troubling consequences.

For example, when human beings relate to certain creatures so that they become their beloved creatures; say a beloved pet. Are these creatures to be given the same status as other beloved beings? Recall the biblical parable in 2 Samuel 12:1-4 of the poor man's pet lamb that was slaughtered by the rich man. Here, the king (David) acknowledges the immense worth of the pet lamb. So much so, that the king degrees the rich man (a human being) must die because he took the lamb's life. In this story, the lamb's value is relationally established in its unsubstitutability. That it is; although it is a lamb – and concretely speaking no different to the millions of lambs slaughtered annually – this does not stop it from having the same value as a beloved daughter to the poor man (2 Samuel 12:3). Here the lamb's concrete identity is not the basis of its value.

Indeed, many refer to their pets as their children. It is immaterial that they have none of the qualities of human children, nor those traditionally associated with beings of a certain class; say persons, *imago Dei* or sentient beings. It is simply the manner in which they are related to which establishes their unsubstitutability. Their concrete nature (doggishness, cattishness, lambishness), is immaterial as far as establishing their value and dignity. If lambs, dogs and cats, why not birds, fish, reptiles etc? We certainly keep these as pets. If animals, why not plants or innate objects? Some people have pet rocks. In this construction their respective nature, attributes, characteristics, or individual features becomes immaterial to their value.

Herein lies the problem. There are advantages to shifting the focus away from particularity toward unsubstitutability. However, there are challenges, the most serious being the denigration of the concrete unique beings themselves. Consequently, how do we avoid the claim that all entities may be beloved entities. Any proposed solutions to these challenges will be complex and beyond the scope of this project. Indeed, it is likely that multiple solutions are needed. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline four theological desiderata to which proposed answers should adhere. Let us turn to this now.

Four Theological Desiderata

First, our analysis has shown that any basis upon which to establish human value must not rest on a limited set of features that are distinct and intrinsic to human beings. We have shown that there are no set of features that are ontologically fundamental and universally present throughout

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[64] David H. Kelsey, "Eccentric Existence," January 14, 2013, 387–91.

a species. This is a direct consequence of evolution. Evolution speaks to the theory that all species are evolving, i.e. changing. This implies that even within a single species there are differences. Indeed, even if every current member of a species displays the same set of features, the theory of evolution dictates that their ancestors and their descendants did/will not. Therefore, within post-Darwinian biology, all species-specific features are considered typical rather than universal. Contemporary species identification refers to genealogical history rather than pure genetics.[65]

Thus, one cannot claim that human beings are valuable because they have distinctive features (substantive or relational). While acknowledging the distinction of humanity (individual and corporate), one must also acknowledge the wide diversity within the human species, as well as the 'fuzziness'[66] of the boundaries between the human species and other species. It goes to follow, that an evaluative answer to the anthropological 'What?' question cannot rest on distinctiveness: individual or corporate; substantive or relational.

Secondly, as a consequence of the first desideratum, if humanity is to have value, it must be established as a result of their unsubstitutability rather than their distinctiveness. Since, as we have shown in our discussions, unsubstitutability is a relational concept, it further goes to follow that human value and dignity must be established extrinsically. In short, human dignity and value is a result of humanity's extrinsic unsubstitutability, rather than their intrinsic distinctiveness. Any answer to the question anthropological 'What?' question must reference an external, objective reality that makes an ontological claim on humanity. To avoid the incoherent circular arguments of positing relations upon relations in a never-ending regress, it is hard to see any external candidate that is not divine.[67] It is for this reason that human unsubstitutability must also be considered a theological claim. Although, it may not necessarily be considered a Christian theological claim.

Third, while acknowledging that the basis of human value and dignity is in human extrinsic unsubstitutability, any proposal must not entirely destroy the notion of human particularity. As noted above, to argue that human beings are simply the entity that is related to in a specific way by God, is to argue that there is nothing innate about the human being. It is an argument that robs humanity of any important particularity. Just because an ape is the beloved of God does not make it human. It remains an ape and as such is the beloved ape of God. Therefore, any proposed answer must take seriously the claim that what God relates to is not a formless 'ghost in the machine' that somehow sits behind or beyond the concrete entity in question. It is concrete human beings, with their diverse particularities, that are the beloved of God. Human particularity should be affirmed, albeit not as absolute particularity, nor as the basis for human unqualified, universal dignity and value.

Fourth, any answers proposed must be framed in such a way as to avoid taking for granted the beloved status of every created entity. By this we mean; while acknowledging the possibility of all entities becoming the beloved of God, the burden of proof is to actively demonstrate that each creature is God's beloved, and consequently has unqualified dignity and value. This desideratum

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[65] Moritz, "Evolution, the End of Human Uniqueness, and the Election of the Imago Dei," 315–16.
[66] Moritz, 313; Joshua M. Moritz, "Human Uniqueness, The Other Hominids, and 'Anthropocentrism of the Gaps' in Religion and Science Dialogue," *Zygon* 47, no. 1 (2012): 93 n.3.
[67] Kelsey, "The Human Creature," 137.

is founded on a natural consideration of creation which entails predation and entropy. In this reading, it can be taken for granted that – unless demonstrated to the contrary – quotidian creation, while loved by God, is not the beloved of God and does not have unqualified dignity and value. This is not to say that creation has no value, or that it can be disrespected. On the contrary, creation is understood within theology (specifically Christian theology) to be inherently good. Genesis 1 states clearly that God declares creation such. However, this goodness, value and respect is qualified and limited. For example, the grass, deer and lion are intrinsically valuable and good. Yet the deer will eat the grass, the lion will eat the deer, and lions are known for killing rival lions. In these ways, the deer and lion treat grass and other lions as a means to an end rather than ends in themselves. This is contrary to Kant's notion of unqualified dignity and respect.[68] It follows, therefore, that neither grass, deer nor lions have unqualified value.

The same is true for human beings. Proposed answers to the challenges of classificatory and evaluative concerns should not take for granted that human beings are the beloved of God and, therefore, have unqualified value. On the contrary any proposed answer would need to demonstrate this. In Christian theology this may be demonstrated by reference to the manner in which God relates to human beings. This is most aptly demonstrated in the incarnation. It is here that God has joined with humankind in a very intimate manner so that humankind becomes the beloved of God in such a way that other creatures cannot substitute for it. The reason why God chooses to love humans in this way is immaterial. It may indeed be the result of accidental features (such as their rationality or relationality), or it may simply be chance that God relates to humans in this way and not apes. Nevertheless, in freely choosing to relate to human beings in this intimate way, human beings are the beloved of God and as such have unqualified dignity and value.

Conclusion

It is conceivable that God can relate in a similar manner to other creatures. For example, it may be that God has been incarnated as a blade of grass, a deer or a lion. Or that God has related to other entities in unique but equality intimate ways. Nevertheless, it cannot simply be taken for granted that this is the case. It must be actively demonstrated to be so before one is morally compelled to treat other parts of creation as God's beloved in the same way as one is compelled to treat human beings as God's beloved.

These four desiderata are guiding principles rather than commands. They are intended to set the boundaries within which suitable answers to the questions surrounding human distinction and value may be given. These answers may be multiple, dynamic and varied. Nevertheless, in order to avoid past solutions that have been shown to be inadequate, it is desirable that any proposed answers adhere to these desiderata. Doing so will enable us to establish human beings as both animals and not animals at the same time.

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[68] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 276.

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