

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN? *Theological responses to contemporary biology*
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There is little argument that humans should be treated as persons—the fact of human rights etc is universally agreed and protected. But the **basis for such personhood** in the adult, and when it begins in the human embryo, is frequently answered in different ways, both explicitly or implicitly. **Genetic Anthropology** is, biologically at least, the most fundamental way. Our genetic constitution (now laid bare by the Human Genome Program) defines us in terms of our genes. These are not magical life entities, but basic chemical (DNA) compounds that virtually control every aspect of our life from conception to death. To reduce our personhood to genetic differences provides however only a partial anthropology. **Neurophysiological anthropology** brings further insights but also potential conflicts with some Christian presuppositions. Mind, the property of self consciousness, characterises humanity in contrast to lower animals. But mind (soul, spirit) can be subjected to neurophysiological investigation and is now seen to be integrally related to the brain and expressed through it. Information is emerging that confirm the close link between the brain and the intellectual, emotional and volitional aspects of humanity. Even spiritual and creative artistic experience can be related to measurable changes in brain activity. **Physical Anthropology** emphasises humanity as a product of human evolution having a unity with lower animals, but evolving both in a genetic sense and in a cultural sense. Evolution however includes not just physical human characteristics, but also religious capacity, language capability and the generation of self-consciousness and freewill, aspects that might readily be expressed theologically in terms of the “image of God” and of the “fall”. This picture of humanity may be threatening for some Christians. However it needs to be emphasised that physical anthropology does not give a complete picture of humanity any more than does genetics or neuroscience. Anthropology does not presume that humanity is not created by God, but rather concludes that an explanation of origins, including higher (unique) aspects of humanity may be expressed in scientific terms by genetic and cultural evolution.

There are other biological pictures, physiological, psychological, social etc. These give different but complementary views of humanity. It is perhaps helpful to understand these different views as expressing different levels of **progressive emergence** of the whole person, firstly from the standpoint of a living organism, through to that of a thinking self conscious person made in the “image of God”. The most basic level is that of the physical and chemical, progressing to the level of the biological organism and finally to the cultural, spiritual level. Each level is appropriately studied by its own particular approach and methodology and gives its own level of information. The properties of each progressively higher level express aspects that are not reduced to the lower level. The whole is greater, as it were, than the sum of the parts. As we move in our approach to humanity from the most basic (genetic) picture to pictures of more complex systems (social and religious) we see new and emergent properties appearing that cannot be described by or reduced to brain responses, to physiological systems, or to physics and chemistry, although they may be expressed through all of these levels.

Biological pictures do not conflict however with or **exclude a theological anthropology**, informed by Scripture, which forms the real basis for our concept of human worth and dictates our ethical restraints with regard to the “manipulation” of humanity. Nor can a complete definition of personhood be reduced to purely scientific parameters as some scientists triumphantly proclaim. On the other hand we do need to consider our theological model of humanity in the light of the understanding developed by modern science. Many Christians consider immortality to be intrinsic, an expression of the presence of an independent “spiritual”

substance (a soul) infused at conception and capable of separation from the body. It needs to be asked whether this is consistent with biblical theology or just an overhang from Platonist metaphysics. Such a preconception certainly presents a conflict with the modern scientific understanding of mind (soul).

Biblical Anthropology as seen in Scripture views humanity from a different perspective (a different level) than does biology. It is concerned with **purpose** not description or mechanism and thus **complements** not conflicts with the various biological pictures of humanity. The first creation account (Gen 1:1–2:4a) outlines the basic theological aspects of Creation. It is set in a framework of six days of activity, followed by a sabbath rest. This creation "hymn" culminates on the sixth day, which occupies considerably more space in the account than any other day, with the creation of humanity, male and female in relationship with each other, with the rest of creation, and with God. It is important to recognise however, that God's creative activity with respect to humanity need not be envisaged as a special and separate creative act, inserting a soul as it were. God is able to create sequentially, through scientifically describable processes, with respect to humanity as with other aspects of creation. The stress is on the artist's freedom and power—a picture of God's sovereignty in creation. Humanity is described as being created in the "image of God" (Gen. 1:26–28). The term is used sparingly in Scripture. It appears again in Gen. 5:3, where Seth is born with a transmitted "image" and again in Gen. 9:6 referring to humanity created in the "image of God" and therefore having certain human rights in contrast to other animals. It is a term used also of Christ (Col. 4:15). He is the perfect image of God to which we in redemption will be conformed. It has variously been considered to relate both to the rational and moral characteristics of humanity, but **two aspects are considered paramount, those of relationship and dominion**. As God is relational (Trinitarian), so humanity is relational, both with regard to other humans (male and female in equality) and to the rest of creation, but in particular to God. Humanity is created capable of fellowship with God and charged with acting as God's steward. This does not imply however that humanity has a distinct and separate origin in the evolutionary process, nor that these relational characteristics may not be observed by rational and scientific study. The latter may therefore have some comment on the nature and origin of the "image" and of an interpretation of aspects of Scriptural revelation that relate to it. One also cannot imply from the text that the "image of God" is concerned with a part of humanity divorced from the body, or that it can be equated with a separate spiritual entity or soul. Although this view has been widely held, it has repeatedly been rejected by exegetes and theologians. Humanity in totality in relation to God is described as the image of God. The manifestations of humanity made in the image of God as a spiritual being, capable of relationship to God, may thus be observed scientifically both by the investigation of contemporary religious experience and in the cultural anthropological record.

It may well be asked "Is there any basis for the soul?"

In both the Old and New Testaments humanity is presented in a holistic way, with body and soul expressed as a unity not as is often suggested in any dipartite or tripartite way. In the second creation story (Gen 2:4b–3) humanity is described as God breathed dust. (Gen 2:7 "God breathed... became a living being"—*nephesh*). Humanity is of the earth—at one with nature but is given life by God to become a **living being**. The picture is of a unity—given life by God, one whole person made in the image of God. "Soulness" represents the person the "me" the essential nature of humanity.

The New Testament concept of humanity does not differ from the Hebrew whole person view of humanity. However it needs to be realised that the NT terminology often reflected Greek culture, which was Platonist, giving rise to a dipartite or tripartite model of humanity. Humanity was envisaged in Platonism as having both a spiritual and a somatic component. The spiritual

component was eternal and survived, while the somatic was downplayed and evil. Body (*soma*), Soul (*psyche*), Spirit (*pneuma*), are often used singly or together in the NT to express the whole person. They can be considered as different **aspects** of one person, but not as different parts or substances. It is of interest to point out that in the NT the word *psyche* is most frequently translated 'life' (37 times) with a number of other translations, such as 'heart', 'man', 'being', compared to 'soul' (25 times), and the latter term when used is frequently equated with the whole person. Christian Immortality and hope does not reside in any intrinsic immortal soul, but in the resurrection of the whole person by a sovereign act of God (1 Cor. 15). Paul's interpretation of immortality is always as resurrection of the whole person as a spiritual body not of a spirit or soul. This is of course the clear statement of the Creeds.

What then can we conclude? Biblical aspects of humanity, "theological humanity", are important in considering the uniqueness of humanity in creation. They may be expressed through biological humanity and are consistent with contemporary biological models of humanity. There may however be a need to **reassess the presuppositions** held by many Christians and non-Christians about what constitutes a Christian view of humanity.

Some Relevant Reading

BROWN, W., S., MURPHY, N. and MALONEY, H., N., *Whatever Happened to the Soul*, (Fortress, Minneapolis, 1998)

JEEVES, M.A., *Human Nature at the Millennium*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1996)