

DISTINGUISHING THE *IMAGO DEI* FROM THE SOUL

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This article contends that the ‘structural’ view of the *imago Dei*, which identifies the image of God *with* (or as being a property *of*) the human soul, requires revision in light of exegesis of Genesis 1, and that philosophical reflection following *after* such exegesis reveals that the *imago Dei* needs to be *distinguished* conceptually from the soul. In dialogue with, and (grateful) response to, Joshua Farris - the most recent proponent of the (or ‘a’) structural view, the article counters the position, arguing that instead of the image of God being (a property of) *the human soul* (entailing a human having a body contingently), the emphasis of Scripture is that the image of God *is* a human *in their entirety* (a view entailing their having an immaterial soul).

In an amusing interaction between two churches in Missouri, a ‘battle of the signs’ arose after a Catholic church put up a caption on their church signboard reading:

‘All dogs go to heaven’

In response, the Presbyterian church over the road put up a sign of their own saying:

‘Only humans go to heaven, read the Bible’

The Catholics responded by putting up a new sign commenting:

‘God loves all his creations, dogs included’

The Presbyterians responded with a new sign of their own replying:

‘Dogs don’t have souls, this is not open for debate’

The debate continued

R.C.s: ‘Catholic dogs go to heaven, Presbyterian dogs can talk to their pastor’

P.s: ‘Converting to Catholicism does not magically grant your dog a soul’

R.C.s: ‘Free dog souls with conversion’

P.s ‘Dogs are animals. There aren’t any rocks in heaven either’

This humorous exchange was ultimately shown to be an internet hoax, likely concocted by two witty students, but is particularly clever and amusing because of its believability, owing to its understanding of certain inter-denominational discussions historically, but more nuancedly, the questions and assumptions that many Christians have philosophically and theologically. Regarding the latter, it of course raises the proverbial question asked in multiple Sunday schools of ‘does my pet go to heaven?’ The associated ‘do animals have souls?’ is also clearly prevalent. But on a more nuanced level, it also highlights the assumption many Christians have that what makes humans unique is their possessing a soul (in this instance articulated through the Presbyterian signs). This assumption has become particularly common since the time of Descartes, who viewed animals as merely physical automata in contrast to human beings who he viewed as those uniquely endowed with an immaterial soul. However, also regularly built into the common assumption is the idea that when Scripture speaks of human uniqueness as their being made in the image of God, this is the same thing as their possessing a soul.¹

This latter idea is a view that has been held throughout Church history in varying forms, and (whilst the more careful versions of it still allow for animals to have souls, and see the image of God as a *property of* the human soul) in more recent times, has come to be known as the structural view of the *imago Dei*. For proponents of this view, a human is made in the image of God, which means they are (essentially) an immaterial substance with certain (higher) capacities (such as mind [with higher mental faculties] and free will). Whilst wanting to advocate a holistic view of a person (recognising the importance and integrated functioning of the soul with its body), according to this view, it is *essentially* the human soul that bears, or is, the image of God, and which continues on into the immediate state after (bodily) death, awaiting its re-uniting with a body for the resurrection age to come. On this view, the *imago Dei* essentially is, or is a property of, the human soul.

As stated, this view has been prominent through Church history, and is commonly held today around the world, leading advocates being thinkers such as Millard Erickson,² J.P. Moreland,³ and Joshua Farris.⁴ Such thinkers make a careful and philosophical case for the *imago Dei* being, or being a property of, the human soul. However, is this the best biblical (as well as philosophical) understanding of theological anthropology? In what follows, I argue that whilst having much of insight to say about human nature, and giving very helpful light to other areas of anthropology, such a view could be improved biblically, and that in actuality, the *imago Dei* needs to be *distinguished* conceptually from the soul. I do this in dialogue with, and (grateful) response to, Farris, one of the most recent proponents of such a view, opting for engagement with him because of his particularly clear, representative, yet refined articulation of the (or ‘a’) structural view, and because of the benefit his work more widely brings to anthropology in general.

Farris’ contemporary work on theological anthropology is insightful and stimulating, and his joint editing of the collection of essays for the compendium *Theological Anthropology* has brought much wealth to Christian thinking in this area, whilst bringing some of his own work to international scholarly attention.⁵ And in his recent article for Heythrop journal, ‘An Immaterial Substance View: *Imago Dei* in creation and redemption’,⁶ part of his work is developed by way of his contributing a clear and engaging exposition of the structural view of the *imago Dei* to the discussion – offering a representative articulation, but one with his own unique refinement of the position.

In the article, he lays out his position on the soul and the *imago Dei* contending that:

...minimally, an immaterial substance underlies the scripture’s narration on human beings, and maximally...the image has something to do with either a substance or an essential structural property that comprehensively describes the kind-human.⁷

He further clarifies his maximal contention asserting that, ‘I ground a biblical view of humans as images in the soul.’⁸

His minimal claim contains a lot of truth. Given that a person is able to survive into the intermediate state after the death of the body (cf. 2 Cor 5:1-10; Phil 1:21-24; Heb 12:22-24), the notion that a human person philosophically is *essentially* (though not fully⁹) an immaterial soul, appears accurate, and indeed has been held to as the predominant anthropological view through Church history. Farris expounds this view of personhood more fully, defining persons as ‘simple, independent, and enduring...souls...capable of change’¹⁰ – a helpful answer to the philosophical question of what an essential person is. Further, he defines the human soul as bearing a rich property,¹¹ viewing it as an immaterial substance containing (all) the capacities distinctive to humans, which brings further philosophical insight to human ontology, allowing for the place of rationality, morality, self-consciousness, free will, within that rich property. These thoughts are helpfully drawn from the heritage of the Christian tradition, and his own advancement is indeed a refining of such previous understandings of a person, to include *all of* those distinctive capacities (rather than majoring on just one) under the description ‘rich property’. His minimal contention then is helpful because an ontological dualism underlies the biblical narrative, and his philosophical work draws attention to the nature of the essential immaterial soul.

However, his maximal claim is less insightful, because he takes his philosophical anthropology and reads it *into* the texts of Scripture, asserting that this is what Scripture means when it speaks of the image of God. The fuller quoting of his sentence above reads:

I approach the broad contours of the scripture’s narration on human persons and offer a substantial view of *imago Dei* wherein persons are characterized as simple, independent, and enduring, and furthermore, souls are capable of change – motivated by the Augustinian tradition.¹²

This understanding flows from his method, about which he comments:

By addressing the basic categories of the Christian meta-story (e.g. creation, fall, redemption and glory), one can assess what models of anthropology coherently account for or capture the movements of the scripture’s meta-narrative.¹³

This approach is somewhat similar to that of Philo, and many of the Church Fathers, who, for example, read their view of human nature *into* texts such as Genesis 2:7 (‘Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being’ [NIV]) assuming that it teaches a dualist ontology, rather than starting with the text, and seeking to understand what it means on its own terms. In effect, the approach is philosophical *eisegesis* as opposed to Scriptural *exegesis*. Of course, Farris’ analytic theological approach is a helpful one for philosophising on the intricacies of doctrine once the exegetical understanding has been identified, but to do the latter before the former is to put the cart before the horse.

So in order to understand what the *imago Dei* is, and then the relationship of that to the human soul, one needs to *begin* with *exegesis*, and then the philosophising on that follows *after*. So in what follows below, I lay out the exegetical context of Genesis 1, to bring light to the exegetical focus of the *imago Dei* texts in v.26-28 (followed by later verses of Scripture which also speak of the image), and only after that, consider philosophically the relationship of the *imago Dei* to the human soul.

EXEGETING GENESIS 1 (TO 2:4A)

In wanting to focus on the key *imago Dei* text of Genesis 1:26-28, more specific exegesis will later be given of those verses, however the general themes and emphases of Genesis chapter 1 as a whole give context to, and illumine those specific verses, so will be given broad brush strokes in this section for then illumining those latter key verses.¹⁴

Much has been written about the worldview of the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) nations surrounding Israel at the time of the writing of Genesis 1, and what the author of the chapter is responding to. But what is clear is that the chapter *is* a response to those ideologies, and a re-telling of the origin stories, by injecting the standard depictions of the cosmos, current at the time, with the specific and corrective theology of Old Testament Israel. In effect, Genesis 1 is an apologetic against the origin stories of Israel's neighbours.

The polytheistic worldviews of those surrounding nations (advocating worship of sea gods, land gods, sky, sun, moon, air gods etc.) commonly denoted the act of creation as an event in which a(ny) god, attempting to order / create the world, had to overcome the chaos of the darkness and the sea – and the sea monster representative of that chaos, to then allow for their ordering and creating of the world. Once having achieved this victory, the ensuing account of creation then depicted the sea monster (commonly called 'leviathan', 'rahab' or 'the serpent'¹⁵) as having been cut in two, and its upper half being used to form the watery skies and its lower half the watery seas, by whichever god had carried out this victory. After this event, the populating of the world with whatever the victorious god(s) decided followed, and as part of that, humans are depicted as having been created to work for and provide food for the god(s), the role being a menial one, that of a slave.

Against this background, Genesis 1 is structured by way of the following to respond to the above worldview(s).

v.1-2 Introduces the Sovereign creator God, and his relationship to creation

v.3-31 Recounts His sovereign structuring (days 1-3) and life-giving filling (days 4-6) of the world (so creating habitats [1-3] and inhabitants [4-6])

Day 1: Separating of day from night

Day 4: Assigning sun to rule over day, moon over night

Day 2: Separating sky from seas

Day 5: Assigning birds for sky, and sea creatures for sea

Day 3: Separating land from seas
land (+ plants made for food)

Day 6: Assigning animals and humans to rule over
(+ animals and humans provided for by the food)

2:1-4a: Depicts God sovereignly resting from his creating work

Expounding this further, and in response to the creation myths of Israel's surrounding nations, v.1 refutes the polytheism of ANE worldviews by introducing God as the *one* God who creates all. Contrary to the other accounts that describe the battle between various gods against the chaotic forces of darkness and the waters in order to subdue them, v.2 then indicates no battle, rather, the sovereign God is transcendent (whilst pregnant with life) over these forces, as his Spirit hovers over the waters.

Verses 3-13, these supposed forces of disorder – darkness and the waters, are depicted as being thoroughly subdued and under the control of the sovereign God as he, first, tames / separates the darkness (bringing light) on day 1, then tames / separates the waters (bringing sky and sea) on day 2, and further tames the waters (bringing about land) on day 3. Verses 14-31,

God fills these (now) ordered contexts with content, filling his ordered habitats with life and habitants. Whilst describing these fillings on days 4-6, the supposed 'gods' of these surrounding nations are further undermined as being just created beings, i.e. the supposed sun and moon gods are just termed 'lights', and are created by God to rule over the day and night; and the supposed sea-monster gods are just depicted as creatures God made to fill and live in the sea. In response to the idea that humans were made as slaves to produce food for the gods, the chapter portrays humans created with great dignity, to rule over the creatures, and are *provided for* by God, who creates a habitat full of life and food for them to live in.

The account ends with God resting from his work, namely sovereignly ruling over what he has made, giving stability, order and peace to his world.¹⁶

Regular repetitions occur throughout the chapter, 'God said X', 'there was X', 'God saw that X was good'. These underline God's power and sovereignty as He just speaks and things become ordered, as well as emphasise creation's being 'fit for purpose' (the meaning of the Hebrew, *tōb* [good]).¹⁷ And these, plus the flow and intention of the chapter(s) as a whole indicate that the first creation account in Genesis responds to the origins stories of the nations around Israel and focusses on the questions 'who is in charge?' of the world, and 'how does it function?'

FOCUS ON GENESIS 1:26-28 AND THE *IMAGO DEI*

In the midst of this 'flow' of Genesis 1, day 6 focusses in on the pinnacle of creation, and who is created to rule over it – humans. This context helps identify a better understanding of the *imago Dei* than Farris and those supporting the 'structural' position advocate, as the themes of the whole chapter continue into the key verses.

As the metre of the repetition is slowed, drawing attention to the significance of the creation of humanity, this significance is further highlighted in the regal declaration of God 'Let *us* make humans in our own 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.' Leaving aside temporarily the plural pronouns, humanity is established to rule over creation on God's behalf as his vice-regents. As Farris helpfully identifies, the term 'image' (*tselem*) denotes 'representation' and the term 'likeness' (*d'mût*), 'sonship, originating from', but both functioning as an example of Hebrew parallelism,¹⁸ to refer to the same thing with different nuances.¹⁹ Indeed, this parallelism is further supported by the archaeological finding of a statue discovered in Assyria 800 BC on which both *tselem* and *d'mût* were used synonymously in reference to it – the statue having been established to represent the Assyrian king to the people of the nation. This implies that the terms as used in Genesis 1 are *functional* – namely, to be made in the image of God is to *represent* God and rule over creation on his behalf. But in order to do this properly, the role assumes *relationship* with the God humans represent.²⁰ This entailment of the role is further supported not just by the nuances in the term 'likeness', but also by the plural pronouns of v.26 and how this is further expounded in v.27.

As regards the relational aspect of representing God to the world, whilst recognising that the 'Let us make...' in the earlier part of the verse might conceivably refer to the heavenly court, Barth drew attention to the fact that this understanding of the plural pronouns appears inadequate as the verse continues '(Let us make) mankind in *our* own image' but then verse 27 specifically affirms that humans are made in the image of *God* (not God *and angels*) so the plurality must be something to do with God's nature specifically.²¹ For him, and those who have held to a relational view of the image, it implies hints of relationality in the Godhead,²² in

whose image humans are made. This theme of relationality is further drawn attention to in verse 27 in a human and physical sense, as the narrative proceeds ‘So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them’ expounding the *communal* nature of the image – that men and women together are to represent God to the world, as relational beings.²³ Indeed, the focus given to humanity as being male and female further underlines the *physicality* of the image, namely men and women with bodies, who (in what Grenz describes as a broadened use of the word ‘sexuality’²⁴) are drawn to each other relationally, as they are to the relational God who made them. This physicality and relationality is overlooked by Farris and by those advocating the purely structural view, yet is an essential aspect of humans representing God as they rule over the world as his bodily, communal, vice-regents. And indeed, this relational-function they have is clarified as the narrative continues into v.28 as God blesses and addresses them saying ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’ – a role that continues the work God has been doing throughout Genesis 1 of ruling and filling the world.²⁵ So in continuation of the themes of the ‘who’ and ‘function’ of creation of Genesis 1, humans are created as relational beings, to rule over the world as God’s representatives.

Whilst missing the emphasis on physicality and embodiment of the *imago Dei*, Farris helpfully draws attention to the fact that on relational and functional views, they *presume* an ontological understanding of personhood – humans can only be in relation and rule over creation if they have certain metaphysical faculties such as desires, morality, free will.²⁶ This is a helpful insight, and one many biblical scholars overlook.²⁷ However, whilst recognising this as an important aspect of what it is to be human in an ontological sense, as seen from the context and flow of the whole chapter, substance ontology is not the interest of Genesis 1, rather the ‘who’ and the ‘functioning’ of creation is its emphasis, and as regards the textual exegesis of the image, human beings are depicted as created physical beings made to rule over, and represent God to, creation, in relationship with Him, each other, and of course, the physical world they are ruling.

As regards the latter texts which speak of the image in Scripture, the relational-representation exegesis advanced here brings insight to them, illuminating Christ’s identity as the image of God (Col 1:15), what it means for Christians to be renewed in knowledge of the image of God, as well as the other passages that speak of being such (Gen 5:1; 9:6; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 11:7).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE *IMAGO DEI* AND THE SOUL

Drawing together the two strands, the philosophical and the exegetical, Farris’ philosophical work on human nature has much of value and benefit in it, and is a rich resource for Christian philosophers considering personhood. Indeed, with the limited exegetical comments he makes in ‘An Immaterial Substance View’, he shows potential for a lot of depth and contribution to study of the *imago Dei*. But because he addresses the former before the latter, he (and others who arrive at the structural view of the *imago Dei*) has had his view shaped by inadvertent eisegesis rather than exegesis. A better way is to reverse the approach, and exegete, then philosophise and systematise our understanding (one might call this approach ‘analytic biblical studies’).

Doing so, one can exegetically understand humanity corporately and individually as embodied, relational beings, called to rule over and represent God to his world as his vice regents. This is what it is to be made in the image of God. However, whilst referring to the human being as

a whole, the recognition of the persistence of (essential) personhood through the intermediate state to the new creation (and reasons from the philosophy of mind that suggest an essential person is ontologically distinct from their body) implies that humans have an immaterial aspect to their nature – what we might term a soul. Recognising this, human beings could not be the image of God without having this ontological immaterial aspect (integrally functioning with their physicality), but the two need to be conceptually distinguished. Whilst ontologically affirming body and soul (in the biblical, not Platonist or Classic Cartesian sense), the biblical texts refer to human beings entirely as the image of God. In contrast to Farris and the structural view that the image of God is a property of the immaterial soul (entailing the human having a contingent body), the emphasis of Scripture is that the *imago Dei* is humans in their entirety (entailing their having a soul).

THE BATTLE OF THE SIGNS

As regards the fictitious battle of the signs, those wanting to align with the assumed logic of the Presbyterians, below, would be mistaken:

1. Dogs cannot go to heaven because they do not have souls

For

2. Souls are unique to humans and what makes them special to God

The thinking is erroneous because humans do have souls, but it is not this per se that makes them special, rather it is their identity as being made in the image of God that makes them so. Whilst animals do not have the higher (mental) capacities for ruling over the world, as theology through the last 2000 years (excluding followers of Descartes) has believed, and contemporary philosophy of mind attests, sentient animals do have souls, even if of a lesser richness than those of humans. Whether one could align with the fictitious Catholics' thinking, though, is contestable; if one were to take the Classic Thomistic view of animals souls (or 'forms'), then it would lead to the inevitable conclusion that such souls pass out of existence when the animal dies. But if one were to take the modified versions of that, from the medieval period, or a version of a Contemporary Cartesian view, it might be possible to argue that such souls could survive. However, in not wanting to put the cart before the horse, the place to begin such a quest(ion) would be with Scripture and Ecclesiastes 3:21, which says 'Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?'...

Notes

1 Or more precisely, one (essentially) *is* a soul (with a body).

2 M.J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) pp. 520-33 (particularly 32-33).

3 J.P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM Press, 2009) pp. 4-5.

4 J.R. Farris, 'An Immaterial Substance View: *Imago Dei* in creation and redemption', *Heythrop Journal* 58 (2017): pp. 108-23.

5 Having attended that book launch and associated conference at Heythrop College, I had the privilege of meeting Farris, appreciating his warmth, analytic mind, and what he is bringing to the arena of philosophical theology.

6 *Heythrop Journal* 58 (2017): pp. 108-123.

7 Farris, p. 110.

8 Farris, p. 110.

9 Wanting to recognise the natural condition of the soul as being embodied.

10 Farris, p. 108.

11 Following Morris' (in reference to Mann's) understanding of a rich property as being 'a conjunctive property having as its conjunct all and only properties which hold true of a particular individual' (T. Morris 'On God and Mann' in *Anselmian Explorations* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011] cited in Farris fn. 5)

12 Farris, pp. 108-09. He underlines the structural nature of his view a little later affirming 'the *imago Dei*...is essentialist in nature and is grounded in an immaterial (i.e. non-material) human soul as substance (i.e. a property-bearer). (p. 109).

13 Farris, p. 108. In a footnote following (fn. 3), he furthers 'It is important to note that I am not explicitly interested in biblical exegesis in the present article. I am interested in constructive theology through a particular theological reading of scripture. That said, I will make some relevant textual and exegetical comments that buttress the argument made.'

14 The exegesis to follow is a general overview of Genesis 1, arrived at through reflection on the text and interaction with the leading commentators (see below). On occasion where points are specifically attributable to one thinker in particular, such are highlighted in the footnotes, but generally, this section as a whole is a synopsis, one drawn from exegesis in dialogue with the consensus of leading biblical scholars on the chapter: B.T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); J. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2009); J.R. Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005); D.W. Cotter, *Genesis* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003); B.K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2001); J.E. Hartley, *New International Commentary: Genesis* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000); V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis chapter 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans M.E. Biddle (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997); G.J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. J.J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984); W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982); B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977); D.J.A. Clines, 'The Image of God in Man' *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): pp. 75-80; D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1967); G. Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. J.H. Marks (London: SCM, 1965); J. Morgenstern, *The Book of Genesis: A Jewish Interpretation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

15 I am indebted to the work of Dr. C. Elmer Chen for illuminating the usage of these terms, particularly in the Old Testament. Cf. his PhD dissertation 'A Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism: A Theodramatic Model with Special Reference to the Concept of the Imago Dei' University of Birmingham 2017 (pp. 179-80) available: <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/7682> (accessed 13th April 2018).

16 J. Walton, "Reading Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology", in J.D. Charles (ed.) *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2013) p. 158.

17 G.J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) p. 18.

18 Farris, 'An Immaterial Substance view', 114, citing Calvin, *Institutes: Book I* trans. J.T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948) pp. 187-89.

19 Farris, p. 114.

20 Again, I am indebted to Chen for drawing my attention to, and elucidating this key point. Cf. Chen, 'A Pentecostal Doctrine', p. 137.

21 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (eds.) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-81) p. 192.

22 Though recognising that reading a full understanding of the Trinity into the verse would be illegitimate.

23 Whilst the image of God refers to humanity corporately in Genesis 1, the phrase is also used in Scripture to refer to humans individually (cf. Col 1:15; 1 Cor 11:7).

24 S. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) pp. 301-2.

25 C.E. Chen, 'A Pentecostal Doctrine', p. 158.

26 Farris, pp. 111-12.

27 A number have instead sought to redefine a person as something like a 'being-in-relation'. But this redefining of a person seems unclear (many non-persons are in relation) and further, appears to blur the distinction between 'what is a person?' and 'who is a person?'