

THE *IMAGO DEI* AS THE INTERPERSONAL CAPACITY: BASES AND INTEGRATIONS

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This study proposes that the image of God in us is the interpersonal capacity. It does not necessarily say something new, but endeavors to assemble relevant factors, to clarify a viewpoint that best incorporates them, and to show its consonance with the Christian worldview. In method, the approach sets aside a reductionism that strives after identifying our “essence” and “risks” reification, faculty psychology, depersonalization, and individualism, which are tendencies that derive from non-revelatory origins. It opts instead for a combinationalism that accounts for all the features of nature, function, and relationship that’s special revelation pictures us as having and called to have.

For purposes here, *image* (צֶלֶם, “shadow”) and *likeness* (דְּמוּת, “shape”) in Genesis 1:26 serve as different word pictures for the same referent: that wherein we are “creatably” like God. Other texts with image/likeness terminology in the sense under consideration here are Genesis 5:1-22; 9:6 and James 3:9.¹

I. Fundamental Factors

The image must be creatable; so it deals with being (ontology) *per se*, rather than with action or relationship. Being, action, and relationship belong to any reality. The first constitutes what God made in us, because only it is creatable; the others derive on the creatable base. The image precedes any expression of it, so it has to do with capacity rather than consequence of capacity.

The image is something shared with God; so it refers to characteristics scripture associates with both God and us, though not necessarily all characteristics or in the same degree as he has them; and may or may not exclude those not present in deity (“*flesh and bones*”; Luke 24:39 + John 4:24) or in us (eternality, aseity).

The image makes us distinct from the rest of creation; at least scriptures does not speak of anything else this way in this realm—whatever may be the case with the heavenly orders of being.. The image refers to our distinctives as over against non-living matter, plants, and animals.

The image involves both singular and plural: “*Let us make man in our image*” (Genesis 1:26); “*It is not good that the man should be alone*” (Genesis 2:18). “Us” is not majestic plural since later “*the man has become one of us*” (Genesis 3:22). “Us” does not refer to angels, who are not in the context and do not come into reference till at least 3:24; cp. 16:7. Furthermore, scripture gives no indication that angels can create from nothing. It says everywhere that God created us in his own image.² It is a plurality of individuals and a social singularity.

The image must be common to all of us irrespective of variations in kind and degree among us. Genesis presents the origin of mankind itself and does so as descending from the first pair, who were to multiply and fill the earth. Elsewhere Paul says that “*God made of one every nation of people to live on all over the earth*” (Acts 17:26, monophylogeny). Consequently, the image exists irrespective of differences within the human category: sex, social or marital status, race, or other groupings of individuals (cp. Galatians 3:28). The redemptive principle applies equally to all people in those regards; so the alienation that reconciliation saves us from is not a re-creation of being by supernatural impersonal cause, but by restoration of relationship by natural interpersonal influence (cp. Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 2:11-22).

The image is not “losable,” hence, something not originated by use or destroyed by misuse. We have the image even when not using it, that is, even aside from interpersonal activity and its consequences, and aside from any distinction within those who have it.

The image (being) must be capable of fulfilling divine directives regarding responsibility and morality (action and relationship). So divine-human image and likeness requires aspects that singly or conjointly make responsibility and morality possible. That generalization introduces items in the next section.

II. Fitting Connections

The preceding observations fit with and enable several notable features of humankind, especially in contrast to other orders of being within this creation. Paramount among these features are capacities associated with personhood and concomitant interpersonal relationships. God and humankind share the image, and all individual humans share it as well; so interpersonal relationship is active and can exist both horizontally with other people and vertically with God.

From the beginning God gave mankind responsibility for at least the part of creation where he placed Adam (Genesis 1:26, 28; cp. Psalm 8 < Hebrews 2:5-18). Doing that calls for aspects of the creatable whole like reason and will. With image and likeness the Genesis text immediately connects caring for the plant and animal kingdoms. Genesis 2 particularizes that role to tending the Garden, a role more generally expressed regarding the whole world (Genesis 9:1-2) and later the natural order in general (Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2).

In scripture as confirmed by experience, the capacities associated with both God and us alone (in this creation) make possible the moral capacity, moral operation being what most prominently God calls us to, and what applies to interpersonal behavior. Shared characteristics between him and us include those abilities that are directly interpersonal and operate in the interpersonal circumstance. That observation implies creatable factors that make those behaviors possible. Morality applies only to personal interaction. Among composite social abilities, love stands pre-eminently in both and expresses itself in grace from one side of relationships and faith/trust from the other. In its biblical use, love combines rationality, knowing, affection, volition, and behavior, and serves as the source and context for virtues biblical writers enumerate (cp. 1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:22-23; and elsewhere).³ Beyond reason and will, the moral

social dimension brings in conscience, which measures behavior against values, as well as hope in one person responding to promise by another. The interpersonal capacity includes the ability to project consciousness over behind the eyes of another person.

Identifying the image as the interpersonal capacity maintains the biblical man-animal distinction. It fits with animal abilities often superior individually to mankind's in non-interpersonal matters—the senses, strength, size. It harmonizes as well with those individual capacities in “higher animals” that are lesser in degree more than other in kind—tool making more than tool using, for example. Interpersonal capacities and their derivatives exist in a degree and in the aggregate to form a kind not present in the animal kingdom sufficiently for crossing the threshold into “interpersonhood” and interpersonal behavior. Rudimentary “intelligence” and creativity are not of sufficient level to contribute to the interpersonal human endowment. Communication, group relations, and the like are based in, and enabled by, different mechanisms: biology-based instinct and chemical-based “drives.” Human behavior is much more learned (from influence and experience) than innate (transmitted biologically).

From the standpoint of terminology, that understanding of the creatable image paves the way for using “create” and “image” in an ethical sense in the New Testament (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 2:10 [3]; Colossians 3:10), “dead” being an image for insensitivity to (influence) and separation from (“dead to me”). The image, created by divine authority or power through Christ in the beginning (John 1:3, 10), is analogous to divine initiative in bringing about the ethical image by influence through Christ in the gospel.⁴

Relative sovereignty under God is preserved in this view of the image; because in being like God as to kind, we are not like God as to degree in authority, power, reason, or knowledge, and their derivatives. Thus are preserved both our dignity and humility (proper station) conjointly—dignity by doing like God and humility by doing under him, being less than him, and being led by him. So, there can be healthy self-esteem without pride because of being in God's image, fellowshiping with him, and receiving back love first shown to others, after having received it first from him (1 John 4:19).

The image as the interpersonal capacity finds significant verification in the essence of the Christian message: the eternal redemptive programmatic understood as reconciliation from alienation caused by personal sin as behavior (2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Ephesians 2:11-22).

The interpersonal capacity shared by God and us provides the crossover area between natural and supernatural; the two realms are not absolutely different. The divine is not wholly other from the human despite God's not having the limitations in kind and degree that he built into the human order.

The *imago dei* becomes the avenue for incarnation without perversion or loss for deity or humanity. The *kenosis* (Philippians 2:7) can then be understood as an “emptying” of the free exercise of rights, privileges, and capacities of deity rather than a loss of deity *per se*.

The creatable image in the material realm preserves the goodness of matter, including the body and its drives and needs. It likewise establishes the spirit-matter relationship by putting the spiritual above the material to curb its use as the instrument of expression and accomplishment.

Spirit is not opposed to matter (gnostic dualism) or superior to matter (Platonism), but different from matter. Spirit and matter serve different purposes, and good and bad are always measured relative to purpose. The spiritual capacities—however God has related them to the creatable aspect of humanity (mind-brain, *e.g.*)—enable transcendence over time, space, and self; and allow for self-awareness, the projection of consciousness to another person’s viewpoint (Golden Rule), penetrating a future or distant situation by thought, undergird creativity in thought and expression, and issue in abstract thought, language communication, humor, intentionality and motive, sense of fulfillment, self-image, attitude, affection, and so on.

This understanding of image preserves relative sovereignty under God, because in being like God as to kind, we are not like God as to degree in authority, power, reason, or knowledge, and their derivatives. In that way are preserved both our dignity and humility conjointly—dignity by being like him and humility by being under him. So there can be healthy self-esteem without pride because of being in God’s image, fellowshiping with him, and receiving love back from love first shown.

The image as the interpersonal capacity finds significant verification in the essence of the Christian message: the eternal redemptive program understood as reconciliation from alienation caused by sin (2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Ephesians 2:11-22).

Finally, the *imago dei* as the interpersonal capacity, participates appropriately in interpersonalism as the Christian worldview. That worldview derives from considering what is most original (trinity), what is most ultimate, what is most eternal (love), what is most comprehensive, what constitutes the greatest commandments, what characterizes the prominent Christian vocabulary, and so on.

Summary

So, the image as the interpersonal capacity resides in us as a capacity vs. a usage, in the individual and expresses itself most particularly in behaviors present in interpersonal relationships vertical and horizontal.⁵

Endnotes

¹In 1 Corinthians 11:7 Paul’s concern is apparently with man-women ordering (responsibility levels reinforced by authority granted). If he meant creatable image, he would put himself at odds with Genesis 1:26-27; that text affirms the image for both man and woman individually and conjointly. On the basis of the God-Christ-man-woman authority flow in 11:3, the inference is that Paul is not talking about “creatable image” (ontic being), but “decreed image” about man-woman relative rank (appropriate relationship) and consequent behavioral demeanor and decorum in church. His basis for doing so evidently stems from the direct manner of Adam’s creation by God and the subsequent indirect manner of Eve’s creation from Adam.

The presentation parallels Paul's comments in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, where he appeals to the sequence of their creation and their fall as at least illustrative of proper man-woman complementariness.

For a third use of *image*, see comments in footnote 4 regarding Romans 8:29.

²God could have been saying to angels, who were there to "shout for joy" (Job 38:7), "Let's do this," even though he was the only one doing it. That take would remove trinitarian implications, but not interpersonal ones.

³Without "freedom of the will," an entity cannot be held responsible or counted guilty. Positive determinism eliminates both mission (responsibility) and the moral matrix (morality). There is restrictive determinism (from maximum down) via weakness in distinction from positive determinism from zero up via necessity. To put it differently, freedom takes place within determinism. It is freedom within a framework; hence, it is not absolute for us (or God, for that matter). Personal freedom overrides environmental temptation and coercion by choosing to operate by transcendent values rather than being subject to internal drives and stimulus-response operation.

⁴Romans 8:29 refers not to the "ethical image," but to the pattern of passing through suffering before glory, the pattern/"image" Christ experienced.

⁵One tweak to the image as the interpersonal capacity would be integrating into this conceptualization those human offspring that are not yet, perhaps never can be, or no longer are, actually interpersonal. Helpful expressions might be "potential," or latent interpersonalism for (1) those at conception to incipient socialization, even psychological interpersonalism (regarded as human by others) for (2) severely handicapped, vegetative, non-verbal, immobile/non-ambulatory individuals. The same "sub-interpersonal" issue arises with (3) dementia patients and comatose persons. We regard them as human because of what they have been (#3), what they will become (#2), or on the basis of origin (#1), even though they cannot function as humans characteristically function.