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What is a Human Being?

Abstract

"Our religious relationship to God is nothing other than the entirety of the life we live, and our life is nothing other than a spiritual or religious act, from start to finish."

Posting about the "God-human-creation" relationship from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/what-is-a-human-being/>

Keywords

In All Things, image of God, love, creation, relationship

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

What is a Human Being?

 [inallthings.org/what-is-a-human-being/](https://allthings.org/what-is-a-human-being/)

Neal DeRoo

| *“What is a human being?”*

This is the kind of question that we explore at length in my discipline of philosophy. But it’s also a question that almost every discipline deals with, in one way or the other. In fact, some answer to this question is operative in everything all people do all the time. Since we are humans, and our actions always say something about us, we are always saying something about what we think a human being is.

But we aren’t always consistent. Every day we act as if human beings are various different kinds of things: rights-holders, reasonable creatures, moral agents, sexual objects, and so on. Sometimes it depends on the venue: in the doctor’s office, for example, a human being is largely thought of in physical terms (we are here because something is wrong with our bodies, and we want to be made well), whereas at work, a human being is largely thought of in economic terms (is this person selling something I want to buy? Do they have money I’d like to have? Are they a co-worker with skills to help me get something accomplished?).

Is this lack of consistency in what a human being is a bad thing? Is it the sign of a shallow and unreflective culture — or merely the reflection of genuine creational differences? Is treating people differently in different situations a sign of hypocrisy (putting on a mask or putting on a show), or of true humility and faith (trying to “be all things to all people”)?

As Christians, we struggle with this question, maybe more so than most. But maybe there’s nothing to worry about. As image-bearers, we tend to think that our task is to be like God: God shows us something, and we have to try to mirror that or reflect that to other people.

But I don’t think ‘reflection’ is the best way for us to think of our relationship to God. After all, reflection leaves the reflecting surface unaffected: in reflection, light merely bounces off the surface, it doesn’t penetrate it at all.

I think a better metaphor might be refraction. Think of it like a beam of light shining through a prism. Perhaps you’ve done this in some high school science class and are familiar with what happens. Maybe you’re more familiar with it from the cover of Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon* album. Either way, here’s the image:

On one side, you have a solid beam of white light. On the other side of the prism, that one solid beam of light is 'refracted' into all the different colors of the rainbow. But the rainbow is not something different than the beam of white light: it's just what the light looks like on the other side of the prism. On one side it looks unified, on the other it looks like a bunch of different things — but ultimately, both sides are light. The prism has changed it, but not into something different. Rather, the prism changes not what the light is, but how it looks to a third party.

I think this is a good analogy for what it is like to be a human being. As image-bearers, humans were made to be the prism: some spirit (initially the spirit of God, though after the Fall that's somewhat more complicated now) would flow through our hearts, and that spirit would then manifest itself in every single thing we do. We are called to be the 'prism' through which the rest of creation would see God.

As an image-bearer, then, I am created to express God to the rest of creation. There are always two parts to this movement: what we express (God or some other spirit), and what we express it to. That means that the religious relationship is not just between me and God, but is always opened on to the rest of creation as well. Our religious relationship to God is nothing other than the entirety of the life we live, and our life is nothing other than a spiritual or religious act, from start to finish.

As Christians, we spend a lot of time focused on the first part of that relationship, trying to figure out whether our hearts are full of God or something else, and whether our lives *reflect* that. We strive to follow God wholeheartedly. That is wonderful — but it's only part of what it means to be image-bearers of God.

It neglects the fact that expressing God isn't just about showing what's in our hearts — it's about showing what's in our hearts to *something* or *someone else*. Knowing the recipient is as important as knowing the source, if we want to express God properly to the rest of creation. As image-bearers, we are not just responsible for what we do, but also for how that appears to others.

If we fail to acknowledge this third part to our religious relationship (God-me-creation), we risk having the best of intentions go awry. It's like if I want to do something nice for my wife, to show her how much I love her: while I might *intend* to communicate my love to her by bringing her to Buffalo Wild Wings for 6 hours of beer, football, and chicken wings (after all, I would certainly love that!), what I actually communicate to her is that I *don't* care about her, because I never bothered to figure out what she likes and prefers, and how that is different from what I like. My actions do not communicate what I intend, not because I don't love my wife, but because I do not know what love would look like to *her*, assuming instead it must look to her what it looks like to me. The problem is not what's in my heart or a lack of desire to express that, but a lack of ability to express that well, because I spent too much time focusing on *my love* (for my wife), and not enough time understanding *my wife*.

Similarly, then, with our love for God: it ought to focus on *God*, and not merely on *our love for God*. And the Bible seems clear that, to love God, we have to love God's creation. When Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment, he gives a two-fold response. The one greatest commandment has two sides to it: Love God with everything we are ("with all your heart, soul, mind and strength") through how we love everything we meet ("for the second *is like it*: Love your neighbor as yourself").

That two-fold movement is what we are as human image-bearers of God. To take that seriously we need to

ask ourselves not just “am I showing God in this situation?”, but also, perhaps more importantly, “is the other person *seeing* God in this situation?”

To be human, then, is to be the middle pole in the God-human-creation relationship. God has asked us not merely to reflect God’s love back to God, but to be the part of creation through which God’s love can be refracted into all of the different parts of creation. And because humans can be both the ‘prism’ of refraction as well as part of the creation to which God is being ‘refracted,’ the issue becomes even more complicated. But maybe, just maybe, it is necessary that, for humanity (as part of creation) to receive God’s love, we, as humans, will have to refract that love differently to different people in different ways.