

1 The *Imago Dei* as the Basis of Christian Anthropology

The purpose of a Christian anthropology is twofold: by pointing the believer to his original creation in the image of God to produce gratitude, and by pointing him to his present miserable condition to produce humility.

T. F. Torrance (2001, 13)¹

This Element is dedicated to achieving the first purpose, while remaining mindful of the second, through constructive exploration of a holistic interpretation of the *imago Dei*. With the advancement of science and technology, both gratitude and humility often fade away from discourses on the meaning of being human. Biomedical technology is expected by some trans/post-humanists to enhance current human conditions such that humans can be liberated from biological limitations. Digital technology is commended as a means to recast human existence in the virtual world. Humans are keen on sketching their own image but, on many occasions, fail to reflect on the underlying question of the human being *in se*. This explains variegated caricatures of humanity and drives us to dig into how Christian theology can contribute to contemporary narratives of the human being. The purpose of this Element is to spell out how a holistic interpretation of the *imago Dei* can pave a way to account for the meaning of being human with gratitude as well as humility while responding to questions posed by atheism and technoscience.

The image (*şelem*) of God or *imago Dei* is a sparsely used term in the Bible. There are only two direct references to the *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:27; 9:6) in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 5:1, humans are described as created in the likeness (*demût*) of God; in Genesis 5:3, *şelem* refers to the image of Adam rather than the *imago Dei*. Some theologians like John Calvin (2011, 1.15.3) argue that the two Hebrew words *şelem* and *demût* are interchangeable without material conceptual distinction. By contrast, others like Thomas Aquinas register that ‘image’ should be distinguished from ‘likeness’ in a nuanced way, defining likeness as ‘[the] perfection of the image’ (Aquinas 2012, I, q.93, art.9, resp). Despite the divergence between the construals of likeness, most attention has been drawn to the conceptual and theological clarification on ‘image’. This constant theological interest in the *imago Dei* may be largely rooted in the consistent focus on the New Testament accounts of the image (εἰκόν) of God (1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10) and, particularly, on Christ as the true image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15).²

¹ Torrance makes this statement based on John Calvin’s theological anthropology (Calvin 2011, 1.15.1).

² Heb. 1:3 employs *χαράκτηρ* to refer to Jesus Christ as ‘the exact imprint of God’s very being’ (NRSV). An insightful reflection on this verse in relation to the image of God, see Kelsey 2009, 2:967–988. Jas. 3:9 describes humanity as created in the likeness (ὁμοίωσις) of God.

The *imago Dei* did not garner as much theological attention as Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity in the early Church. Apologists and church fathers took pains to pursue Christian orthodoxy while tackling theological issues and challenges related to the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology. It stands to reason that the creeds of the early Church do not reserve space to articulate the theological meaning of being human, let alone to speak of the *imago Dei*. That said, church fathers – such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Gregory Nazianzen, and Augustine – have offered varied accounts of the *imago Dei*, which cannot be reductively epitomised by a mere preoccupation with the rational faculty. (I will revisit this matter in Subsection 2.1.) Medieval theologians such as Bonaventure and Aquinas also presented rich reflections on the relevance between the *imago Dei* and humanity with an emphasis on the soul and reason. (It is misleading to argue that medieval theologians simply equate the *imago Dei* with the human soul or reason. We will return to this subject later.) Whilst attending to human substance and nature, Reformation theologians and their followers linked the *imago Dei* with their theological principle of human depravity and salvation by grace alone, leading to a methodology that consistently construes the *imago Dei* with an emphasis on soteriology.³ By doing so, they deliberately warded off any tendency to affirm a postlapsarian human capacity for communion with God. Although *selem* and *εἰκόν* are rarely used in the Bible, the image of God has become a key concept in theological debate. To borrow John Paul II's words, the *imago Dei* 'constitutes the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology' (Paul 1988, III.6).

The discussion surrounding the *imago Dei* continued to flourish throughout the modern era and into the present century, and this theological theme has been tethered to human uniqueness and dignity. However, theological anthropology should confront challenges emerging in the wake of Enlightenment Newtonian natural philosophy and the modern sciences – which are, according to John Slattery, defined as 'the accepted scholarly study of natural things' (Slattery 2020, 2).⁴ Newtonian natural philosophy recast Isaac Newton's theory raised in *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* to naturalise the world as a machine without reference to God and religion.⁵ If the human being is a part of nature as a machine, then the religious and transcendental implications of the *imago Dei* are highly vulnerable to doubt. A typical example is Julien Offray de

³ On the *imago Dei* in the Lutheran and the Reformed theological anthropologies, see, e.g., Berkouwer 1962, 46–48; Hepp 2007, 220–250.

⁴ This broad definition enables Slattery to classify industrial science and technology, education, and language science as branches of modern science.

⁵ See further Shank 2019, 77–96.

la Mettrie's *Machine Man* (1747), which denies the need for an immaterial soul and describes the human being as an automaton (De La Mettrie 1996, 1–40).

The thriving of the modern sciences such as biological evolution, quantum physics, and Big Bang cosmology triggered the decline of the Enlightenment Newtonian worldview and gave birth to a dynamic one. The modern sciences reshape the interpretation of the *imago Dei* in an interdisciplinary way and – as will be unpacked – dispute some conventional understandings of the human being as the image-bearer. By way of brief illustration, evolutionary theory indicates the continuity and kinship between *Homo sapiens* and other animals, eliciting reconsideration of human uniqueness and its theological underpinning – the *imago Dei*. How can the image of God be understood in an inclusive sense so that humans and other animals belong in the same community? Recent rapid advancement of digital technology also poses challenges to the received construal of the *imago Dei*. For example, having examined humanoid robots, Anne Foerst (1998, 91–111) suggests that the *imago Dei* as promise and performance to *create* relationships does not qualitatively distinguish human beings from animals or machines insofar as humanoid robots mirror humanity and display both God-given creative powers and imagination. In this way, humanoid robots can be assimilated into human communities and contribute to the flourishing of human life.

With the various accounts of and challenges to both the concept of the *imago Dei* and its associated anthropological questions in mind, this Element aims to constructively articulate the *imago Dei* through engagement with recent interpretations of this Christian anthropological theme. As such, it will not engage with debates over the emergence of the *imago Dei*, which is often related to evolutionary theory.⁶ Rather, it proceeds from the theological premise that the human being was created in the *imago Dei*, exploring the meaning and implications of the image instead of its emergence. It will argue that the *imago Dei* primarily means *both* the signifier of God-human stories and the stories of ethical performances towards others *and* the motivator created within humanity for the narration of these stories. It is the psychosomatic human person that participates in the narration of these stories, which have been unfolding since Genesis 2 and persist throughout the history of humanity. As such, the religious and ethical implications of the *imago Dei* extend beyond the context of the Christian faith and bear on the quotidian lives of all humankind, including atheists.

⁶ On the debates over the emergence of the *imago Dei* in reference to human evolution, see, e.g., Berry 2012, 12–38; Deane-Drummond 2012, 39–46 (a response to Berry's position); De Smedt and De Cruz 2014, 135–156.

This Element will proceed to substantiate this thesis over the course of three sections. In Section 2, I will examine the four conventional interpretations of the *imago Dei*. The *imago Dei* is often viewed as either human reason or soul, or human stewardship delegated by God for exercising dominion on earth, or human relationships with others, or something to be fulfilled at the eschaton. It will be demonstrated that none of these interpretations fully captures the meaning and depth of the *imago Dei* insofar as they each fail to spell out the holistic implications of being human conveyed by the image of God. The human being exists as a *psychosomatic* unity in here-and-now *communities* while remaining oriented towards the future. Therefore, the *imago Dei* ontologically underpins individual human existence and the community of humankind, and endures throughout the history of humanity.

Section 3 will look into how the Reformed theology of archetype-ectype has been used to articulate a holistic understanding of humanity and how this pair of theological notions should be further investigated in tandem with the theological theme of the *imago Dei*. It will be made clear that the thinking of archetype-ectype offers an ontological framework for understanding the *imago Dei* in terms of psychosomatic humanity, which in turn paves a way for a holistic account of the *imago Dei* for both individuals and communities. That is, the *imago Dei* signifies God-human stories and the stories of ethical performances towards others, and serves as the motivator within humanity to dispose humans to narrate these stories. Attention will be given to how the holistic interpretation of the *imago Dei* responds to atheism, arguing that atheists also narrate these stories in their own way. In this light, the implications of the *imago Dei* reach beyond Christian communities and pertain to all of humanity.

In Section 4, I will leverage the corollaries drawn in Section 3 to probe how the psychosomatic human person created in the *imago Dei* narrates religious and ethical stories. The rationale of science-engaged theology will come into play here, which suggests that sciences as a type of experience serve as a source for theological reflection. Following this, artificial intelligence (AI) and neuroscience will be employed to develop two case studies on the respective narration of religious and ethical stories. First, I will illustrate that neuroscience is conducive to revealing how the *imago Dei* as the motivator and the signifier enables the psychosomatic human person to narrate God-human stories. Emphasis will fall on neurotheology, demonstrating the human person's biological capacity to sense the divine. The second part of this section will be devoted to showcasing the ethical significance of the *imago Dei* in relation to AI, with a focus on ethical issues related to empathy and human–AI interaction. I will enquire into the way in which the *imago Dei* furnishes an ethical tool for

imaging empathy in AI systems by augmenting human empathic actions towards others. As such, rather than acting as a substitute for human beings, AI extends the human narration of ethical performances towards others.

These three sections together will elucidate how the holistic account of the *imago Dei* articulated in this Element will advance interdisciplinary research on psychosomatic humanity. Furthermore, it will come to be seen that the holistic interpretation possesses significant potential to deepen and broaden theological engagement with the meaning of being human and its associated ethical significance, which is expected to foster and consolidate a cross-cultural approach to anthropology. I am now proceeding to examine the conventional interpretations of the *imago Dei*.

2 The Conventional Interpretations of the *Imago Dei*

The *imago Dei* has been construed in varying senses, each placing emphasis on particular aspects of humanity and indicating a specific meaning of being human. The various conceptions of the *imago Dei* can be organised into four hermeneutical frameworks: the substantive, the functional, the relational, and the eschatological. The substantive framework is also named the structural interpretation of the *imago Dei*. It identifies the *imago Dei* with a specific component, characteristic, or capacity intrinsic to humanity. Unlike the substantive one, the functional framework avoids seeking a specific object and homes in on the performance of humans, defining the *imago Dei* as the God-given stewardship that humans assume to achieve certain tasks. Instead of concentrating upon humans themselves, the relational framework links the *imago Dei* to one's relationship with others and positions human relationality as the locus of significance within the being of humans. The eschatological framework looks to what will be given to humans in the future, which is often envisioned from the Christological perspective and thereby highlights the new humanity in Jesus Christ. By doing so, it more often than not makes the *imago Dei* abstract or lacks explanatory strength when fleshed out within the non-Christian spheres of the created order.

The four frameworks do not compete against one another. Some interpretations of the *imago Dei* can be situated within more than one framework. Notwithstanding that the four frameworks have brought forth a diverse range of hermeneutical insights into the *imago Dei*, they do not capture the full sense of the *imago Dei* with a holistic principle of the collective nature of humanity and the psychosomatic unity of the human being, which is derived from the religious and ethical implications of the *imago*. In this section, I will critically analyse the four hermeneutical frameworks and explore the aspects that merit a holistic understanding of the *imago Dei*.

2.1 The Substantive or Structural Framework

Having identified the *imago Dei* with human reason, the rational faculty, intellectual capability, or the soul, the substantive or structural framework is often traced back to church fathers and has developed over centuries of reflection on Christian anthropology. The bishop of Hippo is repeatedly drawn in support. Augustine's exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27 suggests that the creation of humankind after the *imago Dei* connotes the intellectual and rational faculties, which lie in the human soul (Augustine 2002, 3.20.30–32; 10.2.3). As such, he argues that 'each individual man who is not called the image of God according to everything that pertains to his nature, but according to the mind alone, is one person and is the image of the Trinity in his mind' (Augustine 1963, 15.7.11). In like manner, Gregory Nazianzen is invoked as a patristic source of the substantive framework. He asserts that the soul is created in the image of God such that humans are capable of imitating God (Gregory 2003, 6.14; also see 1894, 28.17). As God's image, humans come from and return to God, 'tam[ing] the flesh by the spirit' with Christ as their guide (Gregory 2001, 158).

That said, it is an overly reductive way to derive a corollary that both Augustine and Gregory Nazianzen represent a preliminary substantive framework for the interpretation of the *imago Dei*. The sophistication of patristic theology must be borne in mind when delving into their concepts of *imago Dei*. Augustine's identification of the *imago Dei* with the rational mind should be understood in his theological spectrum of reason. Integral to his position is the concurrence of reason, faith, and love, which are created to operate together to direct the human being to God for wisdom and eternal happiness (Augustine 1963, 10.5.7; 14.14.18; 14.19.26). Following this line of thought, the rational mind as the locus of the *imago Dei* is, in Augustine's work, taken to signify the spiritual communion between God and humans, which is to unfold throughout the journey of human life. By the same token, Gregory's theology of the *imago Dei* should be unravelled in respect of his broader theological themes. Recent studies on Gregory's theology demonstrate that he conceptualises the *imago Dei* in relation to the whole human person in order to bring to light the potential that humans possess for *theosis* (Thomas 2019). Indeed, both Augustine's and Gregory's concepts of the *imago Dei* are characterised by an emphasis on human rationality. This tendency, however, cannot be reduced to a simple equation of the *imago Dei* with the soul or the rational mind.

Such oversimplified hermeneutical approaches to Augustine's and Gregory's works are also evident in studies on Thomas Aquinas's theology of the *imago Dei*. These studies share the point of view that the *imago* is primarily defined by

Aquinas as the soul and rational mind (e.g., Emery 2007; Pasnau 2004).⁷ Few studies attribute to Aquinas a conception of the *imago Dei* that theoretically incorporates human bodies. It should be conceded that Aquinas gives precedence to the soul and mind over the body, arguing that the mind alone is the image of God (Aquinas 2012, I, q.93, art.6, s.c.). He even goes so far as to claim that angels are a better image of God in their intellectual nature insofar as they are not attached to physical bodies (Aquinas 2012, I, q.93, art.3, resp). Be that as it may, Aquinas contends that the full sense of the *imago Dei* cannot be presented without reference to the body.

Although the image of God in man is not to be found in his bodily shape, yet because *the body of man alone among terrestrial animals is not inclined prone to the ground, but is adapted to look upward to heaven, for this reason we may rightly say that it is made to God's image and likeness...* But this is not to be understood as though the image of God were in man's body; but in the sense that the very shape of the human body represents the image of God in the soul by way of a trace. (Aquinas 2012, I, q.93, art.6, ad.3)

Aquinas makes it clear that a comprehensive interpretation of the *imago Dei* pertains to both the soul and the body, which together indicate the heavenly oriented human life, that is, the human journey towards God himself. His view of the *imago Dei*, in a broad sense, belongs to the substantive framework, provided that the structural understanding encompasses the significance of the physical body for the *imago Dei*. This position has found resonance in the work of other theologians. For example, John Calvin registers that the glory of the *imago Dei* shines through bodies while the soul is the primary seat of the image (Calvin 2011, 1.15.3). Both Aquinas and Calvin would turn down the suggestion that the soul alone can fathom the meaning of the *imago*.

That being so, the substantive framework involves more than the simplified identification between the *imago Dei* and the soul or the rational mind. It extends across every part of the human being, albeit prioritising the role of the soul and the rational mind. Taking this in account, it is an invalid criticism that the substantive framework turns out to denigrate human bodies, as Van Huyssteen (2006, 134) contests. Furthermore, the substantive understanding associates the human journey towards God with the *imago Dei*. The soul and the rational mind are not determinative of the meaning of the *imago Dei*. Rather, being the *imago Dei* is predicated upon human spiritual communion with God, which is constantly operative in the human journey towards the divinely given destiny and in which the rational mind plays a crucial role.

⁷ It is argued that the structural framework was developed in the early church and extended through the medieval church (Cortez 2010, 18).

Having reconsidered the substantive framework, it suffices to contend that certain arguments levelled against this framework lack analytical rigour and are theoretically tenuous. One illustrative concern is about the connection between humans and other creatures. To locate the *imago Dei* in the soul is supposed to deny commonalities shared between humans and the rest of creation, which have been confirmed by the scientific discoveries of biological evolution (Cortez 2010, 19–20). Nevertheless, the due place of the human physical body within the substantive framework signifies the affinity between humans and other creatures, as they were alike formed out of the ground (Gen. 2:19). A second concern pertains to the exemplification of the *imago Dei* among those whose rational capacity is impaired or premature (Crisp 2015, 218–219). The human journey towards God offers a top-down theological apparatus through which to expand the substantive framework to comprise the whole human person with the soul as the start point of the journey. The purpose of the substantive interpretation of the *imago Dei* is not to demonstrate human rationality. In fact, the impaired or premature rational faculty does not rule out the human being's potential for living towards God.

Contrary to these critiques, a recent robust defence of the substantive framework is offered by Aku Visala's theory of property dualism. For Visala, a major distinction should be made between property and substance dualism: 'Property dualists think that only physical substances exist but that some properties that these substances have are more or less nonphysical. Against this, substance dualists believe that in addition to physical substances there are nonphysical substances' (Visala 2018, 69; also see 2014, 105; 2015b, 67–68). While substance dualism puts the body alongside the soul as two substances, property dualism treats the soul and the rational mind as nonphysical properties of the human substance. 'Physical' is not the antonym of 'nonphysical' in terms of property dualism. On the contrary, the physical and the nonphysical belong together in the human being with the former as the origin of the latter. In this way, both physical bodies and nonphysical properties, such as the soul, the rational mind, and reason, are equally valued.

Having foregrounded property dualism, Visala leverages evolutionary theory to reformulate the structural interpretation of the *imago Dei*.

Dualists readily admit that souls are emergent and depend on the function of the body and the brain. When bodies and brains evolve, various capacities emerge and get shaped by the environment. What souls add to the mix is the existence of the person: self-consciousness where the outputs of cognitive systems come together. [The structural theology of the *imago Dei*] entails that there must be a point where the first human soul emerges – a point in time