

What are We? An Introduction to Christian Anthropology

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Introduction

The question concerning the origin of man is one that has for millennia captivated man because of two primary reasons:

- 1) If you don't understand where you're coming from you won't understand who you are. Self-knowledge is immensely important so that we can know where we come from, and
- 2) The search for purpose and direction: if we do not know where we originate, we won't know where we're going.

This is to say that the question regarding the origin and past of mankind is highly relevant not only for understanding of man's purpose and future, but also the nature of man as such. In this regard the American phenomenologist, David Carr, emphasizes the importance of our understanding of the past for understanding not only the present, but also the future. He writes:

Human events and actions derive their sense from their relation to the past and future, i.e., from their place in a temporal configuration in which they follow

from something and lead up to something else. The idea of coherence in human affairs derives from the very way we experience and exist in time, not from the imposition of on it of alien or artificial categories.¹

Car notes that human experience and human participation in reality “envisage the future, consult the past and arrange the present as the passage between the two”.² His view of the past is therefore marked by an emphasis on the practical nature thereof as inherent to human experience. In other words, our view of the past determines our view of the future. This is clear from every aspect of the past. We only have to think about, for example, the function of the history of the Battle of Blood River in terms of identifying a set narrative framework for the Afrikaner-Boer people’s place in history and the world.

Our origin—whether that be the origin of a nation, a family or humanity as a whole has an enormous impact on how we understand ourselves as well as our goal and role in the world. When it comes to understanding our humanity in the context of the cosmos, then the question concerning the origin of man is cardinal. Even non-Christians realize this.

Back in the 1950s, Raymond Dart, an evolutionist professor of biology at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg made the following claim:

What’s the use of all this prehistory and probing into the past? Well, the only means of seeing into the future, the only hope of making predictions about this

¹ David Carr. 2008. The Reality of History. In Rösen (red.). 2008, 124-125.

² —. 2014. *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 110.

earth and man's future upon it, is through the accuracy and adequacy of our knowledge about its past and mankind's upon it ... [our] futures depend on and precede from [our] historical pasts.³

The study of the origin of man is called *genesiology*. But as we have seen, our genesiology has a major impact in terms of shaping our worldview, also in terms of our *ontology* and *teleology*.

Genesiology is the study of **the origin of all things**.

Ontology is the study of **the nature of all things**.

Teleology is the study of **the purpose and end of all things**.

Anthropology naturally encompasses all three aspects, but with this lecture we focus mostly on genesiology, although at the end of the lecture we will indeed take a look at a few of the ontological and teleological implications of a Christian genesiology.

What is man?

In order to understand what we are, we must understand where we come from. In the biology classes that the overwhelming majority of children in public schools take, the answer to this question is presented as follows—and this is an excerpt from the Biology or Life Sciences handbook for grade 12's in South African public schools:

³ Raymond Dart, *Beyond Antiquity: A series of radio lectures on the origin of man*. Kaapstad: SAUK, 1951, 12.

The fact that humans, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutangs all belong to the same family of Hominoids, indicates that we all have a common ancestor.

Studies indeed point out that humans and chimpanzees share a common ancestor who lived approximately 6 million years ago ... about 150—200 000 years ago the ancestors of Homo sapiens (for example the Homo erectus) developed to Homo sapiens in the eastern and southern parts of Africa.⁴

So this shapes the genesiological framework of the dominant worldview today. But, as with any worldview, it is vitally important to note the assumptions and presuppositions upon which any worldview is founded.

Firstly, in the same handbook to which I have just referred, gradualism and uniformitarianism are presented as scientific facts, while they are in fact unprovable axioms or presuppositions. While it is almost never admitted in the public discourse, every scientist in every field of study has to make philosophical or theological presuppositions in order to enable any scientific knowledge whatsoever. Let's look at one example: in a laboratory the findings of scientific research are observed through the senses—but the assumption that the senses are always absolutely trustworthy is a pre-scientific and unprovable axiom. Trust in the senses is in itself rooted in a distinct faith to which the scientist commits even before beginning any scientific research.

Concerning the debate between evolution and Christian creationism, we have once again a case in which the matter is approached with the different worldviews. The Australian scientist, dr. Jonathan Sarfati, describes this reality as follows:

⁴ Department of Basic Education, Life Sciences Grade 12 Handbook, 292, 319.

It is a fallacy to believe that facts speak for themselves—they are always interpreted according to a framework. The framework behind the evolutionists' interpretation is *naturalism* ... So it's not a question of biased religious creationists versus objective scientific evolutionists; rather, it is the biases of the Christian religion versus the biases of the religion of secular humanism resulting in different interpretations of the same scientific data.⁵

Gradualism is certainly the most important philosophical assumption which provides the theoretical framework for evolutionary thinking. The communist philosopher, Friedrich Engels, actually—and this really surprised me—he actually referred to the rise of gradualism as one of the greatest breakthroughs against the old Christian worldview.⁶

Now, Gradualism is actually a theory or hypothesis which claims that radical changes in nature are always the result of slow and gradual processes. This theory in turn is supported by the presuppositions of uniformitarianism, that is, the idea that all natural laws, without exception, always apply, always applied in the past and will always apply in future. In other words, the assumption implies that light always travels at the same speed, had always travelled at the same speed and will always travel at the same speed, or—and listen carefully—dead people will always remain dead and will never rise from the dead, etc. Evolutionary scientists regard uniformitarianism as central, primary principle of all scientific research. But, and this is important: they themselves

⁵ Jonathan Safrati, *Refuting Evolution*. Answers in Genesis: Brisbane, 2003, 15-16.

⁶ Friedrich Engels, *Dialektik der Natur* in MER, 1883, 191-192.

acknowledge that it cannot be scientifically proven.⁷ The world-famous philosopher of science, Alex Rosenberg from Duke University in North Carolina, who identifies as an evolutionary naturalist, has acknowledged, in a 2019 publication of his, entitled *Philosophy of Science: A Contemporary Introduction*, that both uniformitarianism and gradualism are scientifically unprovable axioms.⁸

And yet it is this very scientifically unprovable commitment of faith in historical geological and natural uniformity which forms the basis upon which the theory of evolution, and also the theory of human evolution, is built. Furthermore, this is rooted in an atheistic worldview according to which supernatural or divine interventions in history by which those laws of nature which normally apply, are disrupted. The Bible in actual fact expressly condemns this axiom in II Peter 3:4-6, where we read of the scoffers who say:

“Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the very beginning of creation” For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water.

Scripture thus teaches that uniformitarianism or gradualism cannot be accepted as legitimate scientific hypothesis, since God Himself, by means of supernatural interventions in the past such as the flood during the time of Noah, has disrupted the

⁷ G.G. Simpson, “Historical science,” in C.C. Albritton (ed.) *Fabric of Geology*. Stanford, CA: Freeman & Cooper, 1963, 4-48.

⁸ Alex Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Science: A Contemporary Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2019, 173.

normal natural order. These disruptions then also leave a mark on certain geological strata, but which is overlooked by most scientists because of their atheistic presuppositions.

In contradistinction to the idea of uniformitarianism, the Christian scientific framework necessitates Catastrophism. Now, Catastrophism teaches us that geological changes happen not only gradually, but often by means of sudden and worldwide abnormalities occurring in nature. It is important to remember that the acceptance of catastrophism as philosophical axiom is not unique to Christians. There are also non-believing catastrophists. Still, the acceptance of this scientific axiom logically flows from faith in God. One of the most important aspects of catastrophism is its implications for the age of the earth. If geological and other natural processes occurred briefly and swiftly in the past, a timeline of billions and even millions of years won't be needed to explain the natural-historical development of creation. As Dr Jonathan Sarfati notes:

The evidence from the geological record is consistent with catastrophes and there are many features that are hard to explain by slow and gradual processes ... different biases can result in different interpretations of the same data, in this case the rock layers. It is a philosophical decision, not a scientific one to ... assume ... that the rock layers must have formed over vast ages.⁹

To say that mankind as species was created by God on earth around 6000-8000 years ago as the Bible teaches, is therefore not unscientific at all. In fact, when the data is

⁹ Saftari, J. 2003. *Refuting Evolution*. Answers in Genesis: Brisbane, p. 104, 107-108.

interpreted through the lens of catastrophism, it becomes clear that the scientific data is by no means at odds with the Bible and the history of creation recorded in Genesis 1. Because philosophical presuppositions is needed to shape the lens through which scientific data regarding the age of the earth and mankind is interpreted, the biblical account of creation can only be refuted on the basis of atheistic philosophical presuppositions which cannot be scientifically proven.

If the Bible then teaches us in Acts 17:26 that God has created mankind from “one blood,” that is, from the historical person of Adam, then we know that it, like everything revealed by God in Scripture, is also scientifically true. Mankind is therefore not an evolved animal, but the crown of creation made in the image of God and with the mandate to rule over creation as representatives of God’s Kingdom—Genesis 1:26.

Now, it is particularly interesting that John Calvin starts off his influential Institutes of the Christian Religion by emphasizing two aspects of human knowledge, namely knowledge of God, that is theology, and knowledge of ourselves, that is anthropology. In Institutes I.1.2 Calvin then also makes the following anthropological claim:

It is clear that man never reaches true self-knowledge prior to gaining knowledge of God and only then viewing himself from this perspective.

So what does this teach us? Man can never achieve independent self-knowledge. There can be no pure or true anthropology or doctrine of man outside of God’s revelation of what man is. And what does Scripture teach concerning the nature and essence of man? Allow me to emphasize just a few main points:

1. The first man, Adam, was created by God, not *ex nihilo* as the rest of creation, but from the “dust of the earth” (Genesis 2:7). The creation of the first man is therefore secondary to the creation of matter and life, which is important to remember as we get to the next aspect, namely that
2. Man is unique in the sense that we are the only creation endowed with an immortal soul (1 Corinthians 15:53).
3. This soul has been blown into us by God Himself according to Genesis 2:7 and, interestingly enough, we also read in Job 32:8 that “there is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding.” So in other words the soul of man, infused by God, makes us unique in the sense not only that we are immortal, but also that this soul provides the space in which the Holy Spirit indwells in us and enlightens our mind. Thus, the fact that man, as rational being, has been endowed with an immortal soul, is exclusively the result of us being created in the image of God.
4. This rational mind and immortality of man, both rooted in the fact that man has been created with a soul in the image of God, also radically distinguishes us from every other creature in the cosmos. We are indeed matter like plants and flesh and blood like animals, but unlike them we are also simultaneously spiritual beings, since God is a Spiritual Being (John 4:24).
5. Mankind also represents a distinct diversity rooted in the Trinitarian nature of God. It is no co-incidence that Genesis 1:26 states that “God said: ‘Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness.’” As RJ Rushdoony describes it:

Our anthropology, or doctrine of man, is a product of our theology, our doctrine of God. When the temporal one and the many problem is viewed in non-trinitarian terms, either the anarchistic autonomy of man, the many, is asserted, or the totalitarian reign of the one, the state or some other total order.¹⁰

In other words, within a non-trinitarian framework you will always end up with a distorted doctrine of man, since it is only within the context of the *imago dei* as image of the Triune God, that the tension between the individual and the collective can be adequately solved. This is of course why Christianity, unlike Liberalism, which absolutizes the individual, or Communism, which absolutizes the state, sees the family as central to society, with the family being a reflection of the Trinity in terms of its threefold constitution of father, mother and children. But we see this unity and diversity everywhere in society, for example in the biological differences between men and women or nations which all still form part of one humanity.

It is especially interesting to note that, as Rushdoony points out, the Darwinist view that man is an evolutionary product of nature also has decisive socialist political implications, since man as a product of his environment is of course also seen as a product of his political environment, as opposed to the Christian view where the political life logically flows out of the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28. The Darwinist view logically culminates in viewing “[t]he State

¹⁰ Rushdoony, R.J. 1978. *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy*. Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 19.

as absolute and unconditioned in its relation to its unit life ... Sovereignty is the supremacy of the State over all its parts.”¹¹

Now we see, of course, why the view of man as being ontologically the product of nature is so vital to the philosophy of education in public schools today. At the start of this lecture we saw how the grade 12 handbook describes man as belonging to the same family as chimpanzees and gorillas, with only natural selection causing an evolutionary distinction. This has implications for every aspect of education, since whereas Christian education aims at equipping students to exercise dominion in submission to the Lordship of Christ in every area of life, public schools today aim at the radical transformation of society in accordance with the humanistic principles of the state. The state and the law of the state is regarded as sovereign, since it provides the framework in which a political and evolutionary “humanity” emerges. It is the state, not God, who grants men liberties and “human rights.” This stands in stark contrast to the Christian view of the family as the basic covenantal unit and ontological basis of political life.

6. Because mankind has been created according to the image of God we can also be holy or sinful, unlike animals or plants. As the Canons of Dort III/IV.1 explains:

Human beings were originally created in the image of God and were furnished in mind with a true and sound knowledge of the Creator and

¹¹ Rushdoony, R.J. 1973. *The Institutes of Biblical Law*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 443.

things spiritual, in will and heart with righteousness, and in all emotions with purity; indeed, the whole human being was holy. [And then, importantly, in the next article it adds:] Human beings brought forth children of the same nature as themselves after the fall. That is to say, being corrupt they brought forth corrupt children.

So here a vitally important aspect enters into the fore with regard to the question “what is man?” Here we see that a biblical anthropology also views humanity in light of both the fall as well as its condemnation and redemption in Christ. This is a particularly important reality in light of the fact that only Adam and Eve were immediately created by God, while the rest of us were created by God through the mediation of human acts of procreation. In other words, Adam and Eve were created by God and their souls were directly given to them by God. But what about the rest of us?

Leviticus 17:11 teaches us that our soul—that is our נִשְׁמָה “*nefesh*”—is in our blood. In other words, the implication is that there is a genetic element in how we receive our souls. Although God had created Adam and Eve sinless, we are all born sinful, that is corrupt children born from corrupt parents as the Canons of Dordt teaches us. This depravity is therefore also genetically transmitted by parents to their children as original sin.

Man is therefore naturally depraved, but we must remember that this does not mean that our human nature as such is bad. Now, listen carefully: I’m not saying that man is inherently good. We are all depraved sinners worthy of condemnation. But what I am saying is that our human nature, as created by God, is morally good, and only *becomes*

corrupted through the fall. If the image of God is then restored in us through the power of the Holy Spirit and in Christ, then it is not like God is giving us a completely different nature, but that he indeed restores our nature to its originally good state.

What happens when we die?

Since man has an immortal soul, we don't simply cease to exist like plants or animals when we die. We exist, as spiritual beings, unto eternity. Our immortality is therefore also a vitally important aspect of the fact that we have been created in the image and likeness of God. Whenever a human being dies, one of two things happen, and it depends on whether the person dies *in Christ* or *outside of Christ*. In Christ the image of God is restored in us, and we are equipped by the Holy Spirit to live lives to the glory of God and eventually, upon death, we are taken up into glory. we immediately go to heaven and there is no stage in which souls "sleep" as the Roman Catholic Church teaches, since as the apostle Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:8: "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Christ also proclaimed to the sinner next to Him on the cross that he will be in paradise on that very same day (Luke 23:43). In other words, even before the resurrection of our bodies with the return of Christ, our souls are taken up into heaven, and we are present with the Triune God in glory from the moment we die. For those who die outside of Christ, however, the prospects are radically different since their lot is eternal death, as in the case of the rich man who went to hell upon death in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:22—23).

Conclusion

In conclusion: man is not a product of nature or evolution or the descendent of ape-like ancestors. Man has been created, as man, in the image of God and with an immortal and rational nature. This nature of man is now indeed depraved through sin, but every man, whether they are born again or not, still has some remnants of the image of God in them, such as the ability to have empathy, tolerance, to care, to experience sadness and happiness. Man as moral and rational being within the framework of Christian anthropology must therefore always be sharply distinguished from animals and plants, who do not share our immortality. As immortal and moral beings, however, we also stand guilty before the Lord since we have violated his commandments. But through redemption in Jesus Christ not only the image of God in fallen man, but also the relationship with God as sovereign Creator and humanity as the crown of creation, with a unique and special place in God's creational hierarchy, is completely restored.

Because man has, ontologically speaking, a special place in God's creation, we also have a teleology or end that is much greater than the mere struggle for survival which Social Darwinism reduces life to. Think, for example, of Marxism's interpretation of human reality as fully economical: in Classical Marxism society as such is viewed as the result of this economic struggle for survival. Humanity as such is then conceived of in terms of the rights the state endows upon it in this perpetual evolutionary battle for survival. But the Christian worldview is of course radically different: we do not live merely for ourselves, but to glorify God. We therefore do not only speak of

human rights, but of human responsibilities towards God and our neighbor. If we then understand where we as human beings originate from, namely creation by the one and only true God in his image, we also understand that we have a higher purpose than mere survival, namely to glorify God with our very existence.

Thank you.