

Articles from “A More Perfect Union” Conference

Beyond Gay or Straight, Beyond Black or White, Beyond Christian or Jew:
A Recovery of the Person as the Locus of Human Identity
for Theological Anthropology

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Abstract: I critically examine the role Christian theological anthropology has in defining human nature as *Imago Dei* and propose a theo-evolutionary alternative to the traditional static conception of body/spirit hylomorphism. Through an appropriation of emergence theory and Karl Rahner’s metaphysics of being, I argue for an evolutionary theological anthropology that allows for a dynamism in human nature where one approaches inter-subjective relationships with God, the world, and others through the material variation constitutive of individual corporeal existence. Because of the fundamental relationship between spirit and matter in the constitution of the person as *Imago Dei*, persons are at once defined by, and transcend beyond, individuating terms of predication because personal nature analogically reflects the fullness of God’s being in creation.

Keywords: theological anthropology, evolution, emergence, personhood, *Imago Dei*/Image of God

How does religion elucidate human nature, and how does this factor into the rich experience that is our national and global community? On the one hand we are all different. We all come from different geographic locations with different experiences based on our respective sexual, religious, racial, and a myriad of other identities of predication. On the other hand, we are the same. For in all these distinctions of diversity, the "human element" (to quote our lovely friends at the

advertising department of Dow Chemical) remains the fundamental factor connecting all people across the diverse array of cultures and perspectives throughout our country and the world. But what is this "human element"? Consider two concepts that are intrinsic to the American psyche: the Declaration of Independence states that "all men are created equal," and we often encounter the phrase "celebrate diversity." These two concepts appear paradoxical: are we really equal if we are different, and are we really different if we are equal? This is the human paradox.

Diversity is to be celebrated, for we are all individuals uniquely distinguished by the material variation that constitutes our bodily presence in the world. At the same time we are equal, for though we are independent and unique individuals, we all share in the irreducible sanctity that is personhood. But what exactly is personhood? After all, if one takes a reductionist approach, human persons are nothing more than a very complicated combination of elements found on the periodic table that somehow has given rise to self-awareness. Although psychological and sociological accounts of personhood are important for a complete understanding of personal identity, I here wish to address a theological understanding of personhood derived from the Christian tradition. Religious perspectives about human nature, and specifically the Christian perspective, have tremendous influence on the formation of public policy and civil rights legislation in the United States (and throughout the world). Our current task, therefore, is to question the theological anthropology of human identity derived from Christian theology that has resulted in a codification of human nature in the static paradigm of

hylomorphic (form/matter) distinction. Such a static understanding leads to the labeling of certain physiologically based variations on human corporeality (e.g., homosexuality and transgender identity) as objectively disordered whenever these variations conflict with human nature—defined as the spirit or soul subsisting in a body (matter).¹ Within a pre-scientific understanding, such an objective disorder of human nature is located within a post-lapsarian framework wherein all bodily creation suffers the consequences of the misuse of human freedom as a result of the allegory of the fall in Genesis 3. However, when the data of evolutionary science and cosmology are taken into account, this interpretation of the allegory in Genesis is brought into question. Moreover, empirical studies have demonstrated that sexual orientation has physiological foundations and is not attributable to a decision of the will.² In light of these considerations, it is necessary to rethink theological anthropology in terms commensurate with the data of the natural sciences while retaining the theologically normative claims that all persons reflect the divine image

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," *Homosexualitatis Problema*, Vatican Website, October 1, 1986, accessed April 13, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html. According to the congregation for the doctrine of the faith, "[a]lthough the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder." I do not here wish to challenge the Church's position on why homosexual acts are considered sinful insofar as they are not ordered toward the procreation of children and so such acts are equivalent with the sin of fornication. The Church holds the same understanding of fornication for heterosexual persons engaging in sexual acts outside of marriage or within marriage where contraception is used to ensure procreation will not take place. This is a question pertaining to theological ethics and is therefore a separate and distinct issue from the ontological question of whether or not one's sexual orientation is to be considered an "objective disorder," regardless of the actions one does with that orientation. Although I have my own opinions on the former question, I will not address the larger scope of the issue in this paper.

² Simon Levay, "A Difference in Hypothalamic Structure between Heterosexual and Homosexual Men," *Science* 253, no. 5023 (1991): 1034-1037; and Joe Herbert, "Who Do We Think We Are? The Brain and Gender Identity," *Brain* 131, no. 12 (2008): 3115-3117

(however that is to be theologically understood). Whether gay or straight, black or white, Christian or Jew, male, female, or transgender, we all share in the irreducible sanctity of a personal nature—according to our genetic and cultural inheritance that constitutes the "image of God." I admit that I approach this question from the perspective of a male, straight, white, middle-class Catholic, but I believe Christian theology must address this issue head on since these questions of identity and human nature present themselves as the main civil rights issue of our current generation.

I argue that the Christian tradition contains within its theology a theoretical framework of theological anthropology that can overcome this static codification of human nature as well as account for the evolutionary development of persons while maintaining the language that all persons are created in the "image of God." Recognizing that human physiology, and specifically human consciousness, has emerged from 13.7 billion years of cosmic evolution allows for a shift toward an evolutionary theological anthropology that is better suited to account for the dynamic character of human nature and the possible emergence of personhood in other forms of material complexity—whether biological or even technological. In short, it is the person, with all of the person's life experience drawn from material existence (including culture), that is the irreducible locus of identity in human experience. It is not just human nature, but personal nature, that constitutes the irreducibly sacred "human element" and analogically reflects the fullness of God's being in creation.

I argue for the thesis above in three parts. First, I provide a brief background on the Christian interpretation of the *Imago Dei* doctrine in terms of humanity's rational nature. Second, I explore the implications of the science of emergence theory in elucidating how rationality and consciousness arise from material complexity as an irreducible property of the brain. Lastly, I turn to the metaphysics of Karl Rahner and link the previous two sections to the concept of the person as an analogical reflection of the fullness of being within creation. I argue that an appropriation of Rahnerian metaphysics elucidates an emergentist understanding of personal irreducibility for theological anthropology by locating the self-transcendent nature of material being in the spiritual source from which being derives its very existence—God.

I. The *Imago Dei*: the Promise and the Problematic

What does it mean to be human? The Christian tradition understands the fundamental constitution of human nature from Gen 1:27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (RSV). To be human in the Christian faith, therefore, is to reflect the being of God as either a man or a woman. Although we must recognize the allegorical and metaphorical nature of the Genesis narrative, this understanding of human nature as created in the image and likeness of God is normative for the Christian faith and is often invoked to preserve the irreducible sanctity of human existence in the face of dehumanizing oppression. For this very reason, the theological concept deserves to be retained. The data from evolutionary theory, on the other hand, demonstrates that the human species is a result of the non-teleological process of natural selection

where appeal to God or purpose is unnecessary to account for the history of human development.³ How then is one to say that the human person is created in the image of God in an evolutionary context? It appears that human rationality may hold the key. According to Thomas Aquinas, "The intellect or mind is that whereby the rational creature excels other creatures; wherefore this image of God is not found even in the rational creatures except in the mind."⁴ The evolution and role of mind in the human species can therefore be seen as the focal point for the dialogue between theology and science in theological anthropology. But what is this capacity for intellectual rationality that Aquinas identifies as the mind? Karl Rahner modifies Thomistic understanding in more evolutionarily cogent terminology: "Human beings are bodily creatures who have a fundamentally unlimited transcendentality and unlimited openness to being as such in knowledge and freedom."⁵ The human, although existing in a material body, points beyond embodiment to a reality that is greater than material existence. Therefore, the human in the theological tradition is irreducible to material explanations, for the human person finds her ultimate constitution in God.

Philip Rolnick offers a helpful way to understand theological anthropology in light of criticisms from biology and philosophy. Rolnick holds that any concept of "person" and "nature" within theological anthropology begins and ends in the unity

³ Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 121

⁴ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies (Book V, Ch. 16)," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Kevin Knight, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103439.htm>; and Maximus Confessor, "Mystagogia" in *The Church, the Liturgy, and the Soul of Man: the Mystagogia of Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Julian Stead (Still River: St. Bede's, 1982)

⁵ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (Limerick: Centre for Culture, Technology and Values, 2005), 42

of God. In other words, human nature consists of a material being finding its source of existence in the divine nature. According to Rolnick,

Understanding the divine substance as equally primordial to the communion of Persons points to something of surpassing beauty—the infinite unity of person and nature in God. Nature is different from person, but it is a necessary correlate. We can imagine a nature without a person, e.g., a tree, fish, or stone, but we cannot imagine a person without a nature, whether human, angelic or divine. In the human case, the natural origin of individuals is indisputable; the spiritual origin of human persons is a question of faith.⁶

Rolnick here recognizes that spirit is neither what a human “really is” (instead of matter), nor a fictional property rendered invalid by scientific reduction. Instead, matter and spirit are mutually constitutive factors for human nature and personal identity. Drawing on Boethius’ fourth century definition of the person as an “individual substance of a rational nature,” Rolnick points out that “an ‘individual substance’ suggests that a person is a whole, distinguishable from others but undivided in itself,” thus affirming the individual human as unique among others.⁷ Rolnick further notes that “‘of a rational nature’ distinguishes human, God, and angel from all other sorts of individual substance.”⁸ Boethius further expands his understanding of personhood by noting that the human person is a unique, incommunicable reality. According to Rolnick,

[Boethius’] point seems to be that individual humans, at their deepest conceivable locus of identity, do not just possess but *are* this unique reality. On the one hand, human nature is communicable because it is universally shared by all humans. On the other, the *incommunicabilis*,

⁶ Philip Rolnick, *Person, Grace, and God*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 56-7

⁷ *Ibid*, 39

⁸ *Ibid*, 39

the distinctiveness of each individual, is utterly singular, non-universal.⁹

We see in Boethius' definition a theological defense for the human paradox mentioned above: all persons are equal because all persons share in a communicable human physiology, but all persons are unique because the very personhood that arises from the complexity of human physiology is irreducible to that physiology. Therefore, for reasons that will become more apparent in the second part of the paper, we can consider the created person to be a transcendent level of physical complexity. Given this transcendent level of physical complexity, both scientific understandings of human nature (biology, neuroscience, psychology, etc.) and theological understandings of the *Imago Dei* are necessary to fully articulate a theological understanding of human personhood.

What this requires then is a radical shift in the theological understanding of "nature" when the term is applied to the category of persons. The Christian tradition has classically understood the constitution of humanity to be a hylomorphic union between form (soul) and matter (body), where the intellectual soul is the form of the body.¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas posits that, "matter acquires actual existence as it acquires the form; while it is corrupted so far as the form is separated from it."¹¹ Because of the fall of humanity, it is the body that is prone to corruption, leading the soul—that which fundamentally grounds human identity—astray and away from communion with God. Through such an understanding, it is easy to see how a

⁹ *Ibid*, 41

¹⁰ *ST*, Q. 76, Art. 1

¹¹ *ST*, Q. 75, Art. 6

specific corporeal variation, such as a homosexual orientation, would be considered an objective disorder. But when we consider that all material objects (including people) derive their individuality and identity from the interplay of a finite amount of matter, according to evolutionary change in accordance with gravitational and thermodynamic entropy,¹² then the corporeal constitution of all material beings is indeed what they are in actuality, in terms of their corporeal existence, and not some form floating in Platonic space that is somehow joined to matter. What I mean by this can be easily understood in terms of technology: the “essence” of the Apple I computer was not existing in a realm of forms before Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak built it by hand (out of matter) in a garage in 1976.

In denying the form/matter distinction in reality, I do not wish to undermine the importance of the soul for theology. Therefore, I argue for the existence of the soul as a confession of faith (however it is to be theologically understood). But perhaps it is now necessary to recognize the inadequacy of the form/matter distinction in philosophy for our current era of empirical knowledge. Karl Rahner recognizes this inadequacy when he states that “because of the commonly held theory of evolution, it is no longer easy for theologians today to conceive spirit and matter as being more or less disparate realities which originate only in the creator of the two and then continue to encounter one another only in the case of human beings.”¹³ Terrence Klein notes that Rahner prefers the term spirit over soul and

¹² See William Stoeger, “Entropy, Emergence, and the Physical Roots of Natural Evil,” in *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil*, vol. 1, ed. by Murphy, Russell, Stoeger (Vatican Observatory: Vatican City, 2007), 96-100

¹³ Rahner, *TI*, 21: 8

"thus to speak of the human person as spirit our soul is really to reference the human person as that part of the world that is oriented towards that which lies beyond the world."¹⁴ Although I will address these Rahnerian themes in greater detail in the third section of this paper, Rahner's observation leads to the conclusion that if the purpose of life is to exist in a relationship of communion with God apart from sin, then we must approach this communion through our material disposition. How is a characteristic intrinsic to the physiology of person, such as homosexuality, to be considered an objective disorder when one is born that way and such an orientation is not a result of a willed decision made by the individual? Through many personal conversations with homosexual friends, I have no reason to believe that their particular sexual orientation is any result of their own choice, especially considering the abuse they have suffered for being born the way they are. The traditional explanation for this answer from a biblical perspective is that the free choice of our first parents led to the fallen state of man, wherein bodily corruption and death are an assault to our spiritual nature. And St. Paul reminds us in Gal. 5:17 that the spirit and the flesh are in constant conflict with each other. However, when the data from evolution and cosmology are considered, this "hard" bifurcation between flesh, spirit, and the consequences of the fall is brought into question.

When one considers the data from the natural sciences as a normative explanation for the way God's good creation functions, a logical inconsistency can be identified for this traditional understanding of the fall. Granted, the Genesis account

¹⁴ Terrence Klein, "Karl Rahner on the Soul," in *The Saint Anselm Journal*, 6,1 (2008), 6; Cf. Mark F. Fisher, "Karl Rahner and the Immortality of the Soul," in *The Saint Journal*, 6,1 (2008)

of creation is to be considered metaphorical and allegorical and should not be (nor was it ever intended to be) understood as a scientific treatise on universal cosmology—save for the claim that God is indeed responsible for creating the universe/multiverse in the first place. The logical inconsistency can be identified in the following formal argument:

1. God created the material universe and declared it "very good" (Gen. 1:31, RSV).
2. Human sin through free choice is responsible for distorting creation and introducing privation (evil) into creation, resulting in natural death and corruption.
3. However, if the data from evolutionary and cosmological science are correct, then (2) did not happen until around 80,000 years ago.¹⁵
4. Therefore, the natural system of matter that God created 13.7 billion years ago is characterized by evolutionary development, including death and "corruption," and is to be considered "very good" from God's point of view.

The conclusion we can draw from this is simple: matter is not intrinsically "fallen," nor is the development of matter according to the causal laws of the natural system. Hence, if a person is born with a specific skin color, physiological condition, or sexual orientation derived through the evolutionary causal history leading up to his or her particular life, the physiologically based characteristic in question is not to be considered disordered from God's point of view—i.e., it is not an evil in terms of a privation of being. In short, it is not what we are that is fallen; it is what we decide to do with ourselves as self-conscious subjects in our relationships with God, others, and the world that is fallen.¹⁶ So what happens when we, in agreement with the Christian tradition's emphasis on human corporeality, pay attention to the

¹⁵ Paul Mellars, "Why Did Modern Human Populations disperse from Africa *ca.* 60,000 years ago? A new Model," Proceedings from the National Academy of the Sciences of the United States of America, April 2006. <http://www.pnas.org/content/103/25/9381.abstract>

¹⁶ Even Aquinas locates the existence of good and evil solely in the domain of moral reasoning. See *ST* Q. 48. Art. 1.

evolutionary and physiological factors that go into establishing human nature? I argue that we begin to see a shift from a static theological anthropology in terms of hylomorphism toward a dynamic understanding of human nature in terms of evolutionary development where the image of God reflected in human nature arises from material complexity. If there is indeed to be any form of static nature in human identity, it is located in the concept of personhood. I wish to jettison neither the doctrine of God as a Trinity of persons nor the doctrine that humanity is created in the image of God and, as a result, is the "fullness of being within creation," to use a Rahnerian term. But when we consider the evolutionary history of the cosmos coupled with the neurological necessities needed to establish an inter-subjective relational nature, we see a dynamism to human experience that is at once established by, and transcends beyond, our material disposition.

II. Emergence Theory: The Irreducible Constitution of the Person within Material Complexity

This raises an important question: how is it possible for an irreducible personal nature to arise out of a natural system characterized by deterministic causal laws? How is it that the human person is somehow materially constituted yet irreducible to the very particulates of matter that instantiate this particular entity within the physical world? Responding to reductive criticisms on the nature of human personhood, Rolnick observes something significant regarding the relationship between body and spirit as understood in the Christian tradition:

We can recognize the full gamut of lower level power such as genetics possesses without arbitrarily reducing the complexity of the range of interactions.... Restrained by the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, the human person is the kind of being who can exhibit a

higher-level freedom that cannot be explained in terms of the lower levels.¹⁷

Although he does not state it explicitly, Rolnick is adopting an emergentist position regarding the nature of the human identity. That is, the human person understood theologically as constituted by the Holy Spirit is indeed dependent upon and subject to her biological complexity. The caveat for both theological understanding and emergence theory is that the human person is “something more” than just what arises from the complex interactions within human physiology. This understanding of the person as “something more” than a mere physical system is not limited to human nature. Emergence theory posits different levels of emergence that occur all the way from the inorganic to the mental.¹⁸ According to emergence theory, the phenomenon of consciousness is not unique in being an emergent reality, but rather is indicative of an entire system of evolutionary development whereby irreducible physical properties constantly develop over time in accordance with evolution.

The relationship between mind and body is perhaps the most important question in western philosophy. The hope that advancements in neurology would provide an explanation of the nature of human consciousness, although helpful in understanding the workings of the brain, remains elusive. What is conclusive, however, is that the complexities of the brain have arisen out of natural selection,

¹⁷ Rolnick, 78

¹⁸ See, Harold Morowitz, *The Emergence of Everything: How the World Became Complex* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25-38. Morowitz identifies 28 levels of emergence in the natural system ranging from the emergence of something from nothing, “the primordium,” to the heights of human consciousness, “the spiritual.”

and that a neurological structure, such as the brain, is necessary for consciousness.¹⁹ Thus it appears that the entire neurological system working together (brain structure, the work of specific regions, neurons, synapses, dendrites, axons, etc.) is necessary to produce consciousness. Although human personality cannot be reduced to biological properties, nor even identified with the biological capacity for self-conscious thought, self-conscious awareness appears to be a major factor in why humans are said to be persons in contradistinction to other beings in the natural system.

The question of what constitutes the nature of human consciousness is necessarily a question about metaphysics when applied to theology. If we reject the dualistic distinction between form and matter, as well as the reductionist tendency to say that we are nothing more than the goings-on of the neurons in our brains, then an emergentist framework offers the only fruitful alternative.²⁰ According to Philip Clayton, “emergence is *the theory that cosmic evolution repeatedly includes unpredictable, irreducible, and novel appearances.*”²¹ Instead of a separate substance called mind that constitutes consciousness, consciousness is said to arise as an irreducible physical property that is unidentifiable when reduced to what is physically required for consciousness to operate. Emergence, therefore, provides a

¹⁹ See Philip Clayton, “Neuroscience, the Person, and God,” in *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert Russell (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1999), 182-84

²⁰ For an extended and more specific discussion of these categories and how they have been applied to the mind-body issue see: Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness* (Oxford: University press, 2004), 130-33. Cf. Brown 2007, Deacon 2007, Ellis 2006, Graves 2009, Gregerson 2006, Haag 2008, Haught 2007, Jackelén 2006, Murphy 1999, Murphy 2006, Stoeger, 1999.

²¹ *Ibid*, 39. Author’s emphasis.

way of retaining the science of reduction while holding that a property, such as consciousness, exhibits more than just the sum total of operations within a physical system.

Although emergence theory supports methodological reduction for scientific investigation, emergence questions the ability of reductionism to explain all natural phenomena. Clayton establishes four features of emergence that are necessary to highlight:

1. *Ontological physicalism*: all that exists in the space-time world are the basic particles recognized by physics and their aggregates.
2. *Property emergence*: When aggregates of material particles attain an appropriate level of organizational complexity, genuinely novel properties emerge in these complex systems.
3. *The irreducibility of the emergence*: Emergent properties are irreducible to, and unpredictable from, the lower level phenomena from which they emerge.
4. *Downward causation*: Higher-level entities causally affect their lower-level constituents.²²

It is this fourth point, downward causation, which is championed by advocates of what is called strong emergence. According to Clayton,

strong emergentists maintain that evolution in the cosmos produces new ontologically distinct levels, which are characterized by their own distinct laws or regularities and causal forces. By contrast, weak emergentists insist that, as new patterns emerge, the fundamental causal processes remain those of physics.²³

The difference between the strong or weak nature of consciousness revolves around where to attribute the causal power of subjectivity. In both cases, consciousness is an emergent property of the natural universe, a perspective Clayton calls emergent monism. The question, however, is whether or not the subject's mental causation is

²² Ibid, 4

²³ Clayton, *Mind and Emergence*, 9

attributed to the constraining complexity of the physical system from which the mental has arisen (weak emergence), or if the subject is indeed an ontological reality, and his or her consciousness, although arising out of physical complexity, becomes a new center of agency in the evolving universe.²⁴ According to Clayton, in weak emergence “such mental properties, although they exist, do not themselves *do* anything; all the ‘doing’ occurs at the level of the physical processes of which we are constituted.”²⁵ In other words, there is no “I,” for I am merely the goings on of my brain. Strong emergence, therefore, is necessarily committed to the ontological reality of the subject as a causal agent within the physical system.

The idea of downward causation indicative of strong emergence is not without criticism and controversy,²⁶ and so we should not be too hasty in adopting it as an explanatory model without more empirical data confirming its veracity. However, strong emergence would appeal to theological anthropology, for it provides a scientific explanation for understanding the human person as an active subject in freedom of relation in the physical system while finding its constitution within that very same system. Thus, Clayton's position provides a way to scientifically understand human consciousness that is congruent with theological anthropology. Clayton asks: if it is the case that mental agency is an emergent causal principal unconstrained by the deterministic functioning of its subvenient biological

²⁴ Ibid, 130-33

²⁵ Ibid, 131

²⁶ See Mark Bedau, “Downward Causation and Autonomy in Weak Emergence,” in *Emergence: Contemporary Readings in Philosophy and Science*, ed. by Mark A. Bedau and Paul Humphreys (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 155-188; and Jaegwon Kim, “Making Sense of Emergence,” in *Emergence: Contemporary Readings in Philosophy and Science*, ed. by Mark A. Bedau and Paul Humphreys, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008) 127-153

base, then “what is the organizing principle for the study of mental causes?”²⁷ Neuroscience, psychology, biology, etc. all play a role in the study of mental causes. “But,” according to Clayton, “it is, more generally, the notion of *person*-based explanations that ties together the various pieces.”²⁸ Concepts of what constitutes personhood are legion: genetics, social interaction, culture, language, emotion, belief, art, sport—the list goes on and on. All of these aspects can be studied by the natural and social sciences, and both areas of inquiry have provided immense and worthwhile knowledge elucidating how different biological and social influences constitute individual personal identity. Clayton’s point, however, is that “personhood is...a level of analysis that has no complete translation into a state of the body or brain—no matter how complete our neuroscience might be. Of course, it presupposes such states; yet personhood represents an explanatory level that is distinct from explanations at the level of our ‘hardware.’”²⁹

Such person-based explanations, however, do not necessarily need to import the metaphysical baggage of spirit, as Christian theology would have it. Instead, Clayton thinks “a minimalist account of personal agency is sufficient (and necessary) for the scientific study of humans in the world.”³⁰ Thus it is important when talking about personhood to clearly differentiate between what is learned from scientific inquiry and what is learned from theological reflection. The person may be understood theologically to be “created in the image of God,” but because the person

²⁷ Clayton, *Mind and Emergence*, 144

²⁸ *Ibid*, 145, emphasis added.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 145

³⁰ *Ibid*, 147

exists in matter he or she is often better understood, although not fully explained, in terms of what can be known through the application of the natural and social sciences to certain aspects of human physiology and psychology. Therefore, we can appropriate Clayton's emergentist definition of personhood and say a person is "that level that emerges when an integrated state is established between a person and her body, her environment, other persons, and her overall mental state, including her interpretation of her social, cultural, historical, and religious context."³¹ But what do we make of humanity's spiritual constitution in light of the success of material reduction? Although Clayton's emergent definition of personhood refrains from talk of divine image or spirit, one can see different levels of influence bearing on a person's overall constitution. Therefore, it is the conceptual paradigm of the person rooted in an emergentist understanding of the natural world where scientific and transcendent understandings of human nature meet. Emergence theory provides the scientifically aware theist hope for articulating a theological understanding of the person that retains the necessity of scientific inquiry and explanation. The task remains, however, for theology to articulate how emergent monism is a feasible paradigm given the theological understanding that the human person is embodied spirit.

III. Emergence and Personhood in Light of Rahner's Metaphysical Anthropology

Karl Rahner's understanding of the metaphysical structure of the human being is helpful for the current inquiry into the physical and transcendent nature of

³¹ Ibid. Author's emphasis.

personhood. Why his understanding is fruitful rests on an appropriation and employment of the scientific method along with the revelatory truths of the Christian faith. Rahner sees an intimate epistemological relationship between theology and science for addressing such a question because they are distinct both in subject matter and method. According to Rahner in *Natural Science and Reasonable Faith*,

Natural science investigates in a posteriori experience individual phenomena which human beings (ultimately through the experience of their senses) encounter in their world, and the relationship of these phenomena to one another. Theology has to do with the totality of reality as such, and with the ground of this reality, and its method is ultimately one of a priori questioning.³²

Since theology deals with what constitutes reality absolutely, theology can and must recognize the necessity of the scientific method for making sense of the physical and contingent reality of material being. Such an understanding provides theology a better foundation to consider the metaphysical relationship between spirit and matter in light of science.³³

Rahner did not have the tools of emergence theory at his disposal. If he did, however, I imagine he would accept a qualified theory of emergent monism. Rahner notes that where pre-modern theologians have understood matter and spirit to be two distinct realms of creation established by God, current science provides a better understanding of the nature of matter wherein spirit is no longer a necessary postulate for the function of the natural system. Recalling Rahner's observation about how theologians are to understand the relationship between spirit and matter

³² Rahner, *TI*, 21: 2-3

³³ *Ibid*, 8

in light of evolution, one can see a rejection of dualism in Rahner's schema. According to Rahner, "with all the justified and necessary distinction between the material and the spiritual *within* finite being, one cannot conclude that what has been created, in its very first moment, divides into a separate material element and a purely spiritual element."³⁴ The concept of the person as an "individual substance essentially different from anything else," according to Rahner, "finds its legitimation in the experience of the spiritual, personal, and free subject in the human being."³⁵ Rahner concludes that a person is a truly unique reality within material reality, and theologians must defend this reality over and against reductive explanations. How, then, is the person an "individual substance essentially different from anything else" if it is constituted by matter—that which is constitutive of all created being?³⁶

Rahner's understanding of the development of personhood sounds very similar to an emergent understanding of evolution: "All respective individual realities in their further development possess in the physical and biological realm the characteristic of the possibility of self-transcendence. Each in its own stage can become something else, can change and become 'more' ('higher')."³⁷ Rahner's understanding of the irreducibly emergent nature of material evolution is rooted in a metaphysical understanding wherein that which causes matter must have within itself at least as much being as matter in order for the new transcendent level of reality within matter to be brought into being. In other words, material being

³⁴ Ibid, 9

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ For the sake of the argument, I am leaving questions of the angelic realm aside for now. Created being, therefore, is applied in this essay only to the material expression of creation—the natural system.

³⁷ Rahner, *TI*, 21:15

achieves transcendence in the person because matter finds its cause in uncreated being which is infinitely greater than created material being. This is possible, according to Rahner, for the nature of the being that constitutes created being is absolute:

With this relationship between absolute being and finite being in the process of becoming there is present (always and everywhere) a determination of self-transcendence coming from absolute being itself...The capacity to become more is an ontological determination of every finite being which is necessarily implied in this being, and which includes that more precise relationship of God as continuing creator.³⁸

Because God is the constituting creator of all that is, all created being has within itself "a determination of self-transcendence." This self-transcendence is possible because all created being is derived from the creative act of absolute being. According to Robert Masson's analysis of Rahner's metaphysical anthropology, the person is to be understood as the pinnacle of transcendence within the natural system for "a dynamic orientation towards the unlimited fullness of being belongs to the fundamental constitution of human existence."³⁹ As the "image of God," therefore, we can say that the individual person is material being's analogous reflection of the fullness of being that is absolute in God.

If absolute being is the fundamental constituting foundation of both matter and spirit, then is this not merely a Hegelian or pantheistic understanding of the spirit of God realizing itself in the world? Quite the contrary, for "spirit" revealed in personal nature is different than "spirit" as predicated of God. According to Rahner,

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Robert Masson, "Language, Thinking and God in Karl Rahner's Theology of the Word: A Critical evaluation of Rahner's Perspective on the Problem of Religious Language," (PhD diss., Fordham University, 1978), 122

God, in the Christian metaphysical understanding, is not a part of this world but rather is its all-embracing ground directly bearing all its differentiated realities; he is not simply the unity of all realities brought about by the parts of the world, but the previous ground of the possibility of this unity, the ground which therefore also exists before this duality of subjectivity and objectivity which we call spirit and matter. God's 'spirituality' is therefore from the very start of a qualitatively different kind from that to be found within the world; the latter is what is different from matter, that which presupposes but does not create materiality, whereas the former is the ground of spirit and matter in the world, the ground which has an equally immediate relationship to both. This ground is called 'spirit' only because the 'spirituality' experienced by us rightly appears as the higher reality within the world.⁴⁰

Let me reiterate the profound insight offered in this paragraph. Rahner understands God not to be part of the world, able to be understood by that method which one applies to observable phenomena (science). God is instead the foundation from which material existence derives its being. More specifically, creation is not an extension of God's being. Instead, God is the fundamental constitution of being itself. The Rahnerian interpretation I am proposing is to understand God as that which⁴¹ makes being be, and as such, creation is a different way of being being than God's way of being being. If God's being is self-constituting, then God's way of being being is absolute. Material creation, theologically understood, requires a foundation for its being. This foundation is established through God's Trinitarian creative act, and as such, creation is dependent on God's grace-filled spiritual act for its existence. Therefore, material creation is said to be contingent being. What one identifies as spirit or transcendent mind within the created universe is not a separate substance

⁴⁰ Rahner, *TI*, 6:156

⁴¹ Unfortunately there is no gender neutral pronoun, so I am using 'that which' as opposed to the masculine 'he who.' 'That which,' is insufficient, however, because God is indeed personal—a who, not a what.

alongside matter, but matter's self-realization (self-awareness of the human subject) of one's fundamental constitution as a contingent being. In *Hearer of the Word*, Rahner understands that "[t]he essence of being is to know and to be known, in an original unity which we have called the self-presence of being, the luminosity of being for itself."⁴² This self-presence of being to itself is absolute in God and analogous in humans. This awareness of oneself as contingent necessarily leads the self-conscious subject to that from which contingent being is derived: first the world, then God.⁴³ Absolute being, therefore, appears to be the end term in such an inquiry. Whether invoking spirit or matter, the common denominator of both is being.⁴⁴

Matter and spirit are therefore mutually correlative ways of being created existence—distinct but not separate. This is confusing, however, for Rahner rejects the dualism of a matter/spirit distinction by claiming that matter has its constitution in spirit. For example, Rahner believes that “deduction of the spirit from matter has no meaning, since one would [b]e [*sic*] trying to deduce what is logically and ontologically prior from what is posterior in both these senses.”⁴⁵ So, is one to understand the development of matter in a Teilhardian sense whereby

⁴² Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word* (Continuum: New York, 1994), 39

⁴³ This should remind the reader of Friedrich Schleiermacher's categories of world-consciousness and God-consciousness as the two potentiating determinates of one's immediate self-consciousness in the feeling of absolute dependence. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and James Stuart Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 12-26, 138; and Robert Vance, *Sin and Self-Consciousness in the Thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Pr, 1994), 21.

⁴⁴ Rahner, *TI*, 6:164

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 166

consciousness is the guiding force of evolutionary development? Rahner answers in the negative:

There is therefore no independent leap from the material into the 'noosphere' by any means belonging to its essential constitution or by any power inherent in the essence of the material being. This limiting of the limited (called matter), however, does happen in the spirit, and this above all where the spirit itself enters so closely into materiality that it differentiates it from itself *and* keeps it as a factor of its own becoming as a spirit, of its becoming-conscious-of-itself, viz. in man.... It is a moment of the spirit and of its fullness of being itself.⁴⁶

Spirit and matter are not antithetical, separate, or divided in any way from each other. Instead, "matter is...the openness and the bringing-itself-to-appear of the personal spirit in the finite world and hence is from its very origin related to the spirit, is a moment in the spirit."⁴⁷ Therefore, one encounters God as spirit in and through our constitution and identity as persons through one's individual material (and cultural) variation—whatever the distinguishing predicates.

This is not to say that matter is actually spirit as in an idealistic system. One can turn the table and argue that spirit is "materialized" in the same sense. According to Rahner, "spirit and matter, even though distinct from one another, must rather be thought of...as factors of created reality indissolubly referred to one another."⁴⁸ Due to the empirical incoherence of invoking spirit in a physical system, perhaps it is better to think of spirit as personhood—that which contingently reflects absolute being. Personhood is not a manifestation of spirit as a separate substance. Instead, through material complexity, the transcendent nature of the person is considered a materially conditioned reflection of absolute being shining

⁴⁶ Ibid, 168-9

⁴⁷ Ibid, 170

⁴⁸ Ibid

through created being in each individual human subject. Much like tarnished silver is burnished to reveal one's reflection in the backside of a spoon, so too does the evolutionary development of subjective self-consciousness contingently reflect the absolute being-ness of God through the unique and incommunicable nature of the person.

Although the human person is both matter and spirit, Rahner does not explicitly address issues of the mind-brain distinction. According to Klein, it was obvious to Rahner that "the mind is dependent upon the brain. But the philosophical and theological issue for Rahner is that the mind represents the evolutionary emergence of a higher sphere of existence."⁴⁹ Therefore, Rahner concludes, "matter and spirit have a unity in their starting-point, in their history and in their goal. Both of them remain eternally valid before God and form for ever, now and in the state of perfection, the mutually correlative, non-separable constitutive elements of the one created reality."⁵⁰ If one wishes to maintain a theological understanding of the person as constituted by both matter and spirit, and an emergentist understanding of the nature of human consciousness, then the monism of emergent monism must extend not only to the material world, but to the "spiritual" world as well—the realm of being *qua* being. Theologically speaking, therefore, whether existing as matter or as spirit, beingness presents itself as the only way for something to exist, and as such, created material being, whatever its variation, must have its constitution given to it through what is being absolutely—God.

⁴⁹ Klein, 5

⁵⁰ Rahner, *TI*, 6:177

IV. Conclusion

When we say that all persons are created equal we mean that every individual person is 1) an irreducible subject within created existence that transcends all categories of material and cultural predication (gay, straight, black, white, man, woman, Christian, Jew, etc.) and 2) theologically defined solely as "an analogical reflection of the fullness of being." On the other hand, amidst this equality of irreducibility we celebrate the diverse forms of persons in the world. The person as "an analogical reflection of the fullness of being" is only capable of encountering inter-subjective relation, and so reflects the image of God as a person through material existence and the unique variations which particular predicates signify. We must not, however, jettison the language of the Imago Dei for Christian theology. Whatever the person is, the person is an analogical reflection of that which constitutes reality absolutely, God, who is the fundamental constant of all reality. Due to the evolutionary character of human intelligence and personhood, it is no small intellectual leap to speculate that some other animal species will one day achieve inter-subjective awareness—if there is not already an inter-personal species somewhere else in the universe. Moreover, since conscious nature is somehow the result of a very complex arrangement of matter, one can imagine that perhaps one day artificial processing will achieve a level of complexity wherein something akin to consciousness indicative of personhood is possible. Whether this would come through the design of a computer that thinks like humans, as in the case of IBM's Watson "who" competed (and beat its human competition by very large margins) on

Jeopardy in the spring of 2011,⁵¹ or through the replacement of neurological components with artificial components within the human brain (transhumanism), we must nevertheless recognize this as a possibility. What would it mean if machines, let alone other animals, were capable of inter-subjective relationships? Would they too share in the image of God? Although both instances of personhood arising outside of human physiology are a long way off and perhaps (in the case of artificial intelligence) improbable, nevertheless when we recognize that the inter-subjective nature of human personhood has arisen out of 13.7 billion years of cosmic evolution, we must entertain the possibility that one day humanity may not be the only recipient of God's salvific act affected in the incarnation. Thus, while the Christian faith grapples with the current issues surrounding gender identity and sexual orientation, theology must keep these future considerations in mind. In the future, sexual orientation may seem like a question of small potatoes compared to the question as to whether or not a machine or other animals capable of inter-subjective relationships share in the "image of God" as created persons. All I wish to do here is to highlight what I see as an important and unrecognized issue in Christian theology: that theological anthropology is evolutionary in nature.

In conclusion, I argue that in whatever way personhood manifests itself, whether spiritually (God), biologically (humans and other animals), or technologically (artificial intelligence), personhood is fundamentally sacred as it is a reflection of God who, in speaking as cataphatically as possible, is absolute being. The person is always a unique, unrepeatable, and irreducible reflection of absolute

⁵¹ IBM Website. Accessed, May 4, 2012, <http://www-03.ibm.com/innovation/us/watson/index.html>

being (spirit) in contingent being (matter). As such an analogical reflection of absolute being in created existence, the person is at once dependent on material complexity and spiritual support. Therefore, one's unique material variation and cultural conditionings are constitutive of one's inter-subjective identity as a sacred and irreducible individual within a community of inter-subjectivity consisting of other persons, the natural world, and the Creator of all that is. Whether gay or straight, black or white, Christian or Jew, male, female, or transgendered, we cannot help but approach a relationship with God, the World, and each other save through the irreducible sanctity of our personhood that finds its constitution in the being of our bodily existence.

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