

Article

Of Monsters and Men: A Spectrum View of the *Imago Dei*

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Abstract: I explore the view that the *imago Dei* is essential to us as humans but accidental to us as persons. To image God is to resemble God, and resemblance comes in degrees. This has the straightforward—and perhaps disturbing—implication that we can be more or less human, and possibly cease to be human entirely. Hence, I call it the spectrum view. I argue that the spectrum view is complementary to the Biblical data, helps explain the empirical reality of horrendous evil, and offers an elegant *rapprochement* between the traditional view of hell and its rivals.

Keywords: image of God; *imago Dei*; horrendous evil; hell; universalism; annihilationism; human value

1. Introduction

Philosophical theology, or its more recent cognomen, analytic theology, has so far had its hands full with the nature of God in one, and major Christian doctrines such as the incarnation, atonement, trinity, heaven, and hell in the other. By contrast, the doctrine of the *imago Dei*—that man is made in the image and likeness of God—has yet to be picked up, or at least handled with as much care and attention.¹ Given its relevance to both the nature of God and major Christian doctrines, this is surprising. As a modest redress of this situation, I explore the view that the *imago Dei* is essential to us as humans, but accidental to us as persons; we can resemble God more or less, and possibly cease to resemble God at all. I call this the spectrum view.

One of the virtues of analytic theology is its interdisciplinary nature, taking cognizance of what others outside the narrow field of analytic philosophy have said about a topic. While the contributions of Biblical scholars and theologians to the question of what it means to be made in the image of God are vast, the main views are fairly well staked out (Middleton 2005). Do we image God by virtue of our being or intrinsic nature (substantialistic view), our capacity to relate to other persons *qua* persons (relational view), or our delegated role as stewards over creation (functional view)? As far as I can tell, the spectrum view is consistent with each of these views. Moreover, as we'll see, the view arguably best accounts for all six “areas of general consensus” among scholars about the image of God as identified by Marc Cortez (Cortez 2010, pp. 16–17): (i) To image God is to reflect God in creation. (ii) “Image” and “likeness” are largely or entirely synonymous. (iii) The image includes all humans. (iv) Sin affects the image in some way. (v) The image in the New Testament is a Christological concept. (vi) The image is teleological in nature (i.e., the image is not a static concept, but implies development toward an ideal or goal).

Despite its broad compatibility—and consonance—with extant views on the image of God, the spectrum view has not received the careful consideration it deserves. I build the view up in four parts: the image of God is, first, essential to us as humans; second, it signifies resemblance to God; third, it is degreed: we can resemble God more or less; and fourth, it is accidental to us as persons. I follow this up with some reflections on how the spectrum view offers an elegant synthesis of rivaling accounts of the eschatological fate of man, and conclude by considering its practical implications, including the objection that it is ethically unacceptable.



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2. The Spectrum View

2.1. Essential to Humanity

The first and probably least controversial part of the spectrum view, as I develop it, is that the *imago Dei* is essential to humanity. As Charles Sherlock observes, “the Bible’s unique testimony is that to be human means to be made ‘in the image of God’” (Sherlock 1996, p. 16). Man “would not be man,” writes Karl Barth, “if he were not the image of God. He is the image of God in the fact that he is man” (Barth 1958, p. 184). While each of the animals were created according to its kind (Gen 1:21–15), only man was created in the image and likeness of God (vv. 26–27). Indeed, the creation narrative as a whole presents a crescendo that culminates in man as a new, distinct and very special kind of creature, namely, one that bears God’s image. Bearing God’s image is what principally distinguishes humans from other creatures, including other persons such as angels.²

Person, then, is a more general kind than *human*. All humans are persons, but not all persons are human.³ Non-human persons include angels and demons, and perhaps extraterrestrials, if there be such. What is a person, exactly? This, of course, is a complicated question, but at the very least we can say that persons, unlike non-persons, are rational moral agents: they have intentions and desires and the power to act on those intentions and desires with an understanding that makes those actions morally significant. Because all persons are rational moral agents, but not all rational moral agents are human, it is a mistake to identify the *imago Dei* with rational moral agency, as some do.⁴ Such an identification would render paradigmatic non-human persons, like angels and demons, human.⁵

If a person is, at the very least, a rational moral agent, is a human person a rational moral agent with a body? This would be in keeping with the Aristotelian definition of man as rational animal. But matters are complicated by the fact that we don’t cease to be human immediately upon death, assuming we survive the loss of our physical body. Likewise, it is doubtful that Christ became human *just* by taking on a physical body. Some (e.g., Morris 2001) have distinguished being fully human from being merely human that can help make sense of these cases, such that having a body is essential to being fully, but not merely, human. Perhaps that is the distinction to make. The main point here is that Aristotle’s ‘rational animal’ formula for human nature is too simplistic to handle the theological and philosophical nuances of our doctrines of man and Christ. Note also that if Angels have bodies or can become incarnate, they’d be ‘rational animals’ in the Aristotelian sense yet we wouldn’t want to say they’re human. Thus, just as it is a mistake to identify the *imago Dei* with rational moral agency, it is a mistake to identify the kind essence *human* with rational animality.

What else can we say about what it means for man to be made in the image and likeness of God?

2.2. Resemblance

An important clue can be gathered from the terms themselves, *image* and *likeness*. To image something, or to be in something’s likeness, is to reflect, represent, resemble, copy, or picture it in some way. Although these terms denote distinct concepts, *resemblance* is arguably the most privileged, since if *x* reflects or copies or pictures *y* (or is a reflection or copy or picture of *y*), clearly, *x* will resemble *y* in some way. Representation is trickier, as some cases of representation involve resemblance and some do not. A painting of a landscape represents the landscape but, in so doing, also resembles the landscape. A flag represents a country but does not resemble it. It is unclear what a representation-without-resemblance view of the *imago Dei* would amount to, but the Hebrew text tells against such a view in any case. *Tselem* (image) is derived from a root that means “to carve”, as one would carve a statue or figurine, and *demuth* (likeness) derives from a root that means “to be like”, as in a similitude.⁶ As just noted, things can represent without resembling. However, the pleonastic pairing of *tselem* with *demuth* in Genesis 1:26 makes clear that the

author has something closer to representation-with-resemblance in mind, like how the portrait of a king on a coin both represents and resembles him.⁷

To be made in the image and likeness of God, then, is to resemble God in some way, a way that distinguishes us from non-human animals and other created persons. Classic debates about universals and the nature of depiction in aesthetics have provided philosophers occasion to say a lot about resemblance. Thankfully, we do not need to wade deeply into those waters for an intuitive understanding of the concept. The “naïvest analysis”, according to Ben Blumson, is that resemblance between two (or presumably more) things amounts to simply having properties in common: x resembles y if and only if x has properties in common with y (Blumson 2014, p. 14).⁸ Threats of triviality will force on us more qualifications, such as having *salient* properties in common. After all, everything has something in common with everything else at the highest levels of generality. Judgements of resemblance are thus implicitly restricted to resemblance in some relevant or salient respect (or respects).⁹ The second naïvest analysis, if you will, is therefore something like: x resembles y if and only if x has salient properties in common with y . Specifying exactly in what respects man resembles God will be to answer the question of what the *imago Dei* is. Although the spectrum view as I develop it here does not depend on answering this question, I will take a brief excursus to sketch an answer.

2.3. Excursus: How Do We Resemble God?

“It is a perfectly proper procedure,” writes Thomas Morris, “for the Christian philosopher or theologian to develop his idea of human nature, his conception of what the essential human properties are, with certain presuppositions or controls derived from his doctrine of God and his belief in the reality of the Incarnation” (Morris 2001, p. 64). Morris is correct. The image of God, and the nature of man along with it, should be understood Christocentrically, based primarily on God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, the perfect human, as recorded in the New Testament.¹⁰ Significantly, Christ is repeatedly said *be* the image of God, not to bear it. Jesus is, according to the author of Hebrews, “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (1:3). Unbelievers, says Paul, cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ “who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4). Twice more Paul identifies Christ as God’s image, both times emphasizing how this makes Christ “firstborn” over all creation (Col 1:15) and among believers (Rom 8:29), underscoring its relevance to creation in general and the creation of man in particular. As Sherlock puts it, Paul presents Christ, in virtue being God’s image, as “‘firstborn’ both of original life, and of life restored: the ‘beginning’ of both, reminiscent of Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1” (Sherlock 1996, p. 67).

Much can and has been said about this New Testament motif. But I take it to mean, among other things, that a proper understanding of humanity is anchored in the incarnation. “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,” Jesus says (Jn 14:9). The God-man is our concrete reference point. We might put it this way. It is a mistake to think of the incarnation as logically posterior to humanity, where humanity is something antecedently there, and Christ sort of steps down into the middle of things and acquires a human nature. Rather, humanity is logically posterior to the incarnation. God starts at the middle (so to speak) with God incarnate, then goes back to the beginning and sets the course of humanity to anticipate the incarnation. Pithier is Panayioti Nellas: “He [Christ] was the archetype for those who have been created. For the old Adam is not a model for the new, but the new a model for the old” (Nellas 1987, p. 35).

This way of putting it is, I admit, perhaps more theological than analytic. So let me try to reverse the order. Designate the set of properties essential and exclusive to divinity {D}. *Sans* creation (or at least prior to the creation of Adam), God knows this counterfactual:

(1) If the second Person of the Trinity were embodied in W , *that’s* what he’d be like.

Where the demonstrative ‘that’s’ refers to a *perfect embodied person*, a person with all those properties in {D} with a body. Let us call the kind-essence that results from embodying

a divine person in W , *humanity*. A perfect embodied person in W would therefore be a *perfect human person*—a human person who is necessarily morally perfect, perfectly free, incorruptible, etc. What this translates to in the actual world, $W@$, is Jesus Christ. God sees that this would be very good. Seeing that it would be good, God decides to create persons *like that*—i.e., humans. However, because properties like *being uncreated* and *being omnipotent* are essential and exclusive to divinity, any non-divine human persons God creates must lack those and other properties in $\{D\}$. So God creates with this counterfactual in mind:

(2) If a human person were not divine, *that's* what he'd be like.

The picture God has from (2) is the same as in (1), save only those properties essential to divinity. The result is, in effect, pre-Fall Adam—a *truly* human person, albeit a merely human person—a human person who is not necessarily morally perfect, not necessarily perfectly free, not necessarily incorruptible, and so on. The blueprint for man in general was God incarnate in particular. God, prior to the creation of man in Genesis 1, knew what it would be like if the second Person of the Trinity were embodied in $W@$, and so modeled non-divine embodied persons on that knowledge. “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Rom 8:29). In brief: we image God by resembling the incarnate second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, in all the ways it is possible to resemble him as nondivine human persons. More ought to be said, but I leave this sketchy answer behind as we proceed to outline the spectrum view.

2.4. Degreed

If the concept of being in something's image and likeness implies resemblance, it also implies being degreed, for resemblance comes in degrees. Something can resemble another thing, more or less. That resemblance comes in degrees is a natural extension of the naïveté analysis of resemblance as having properties in common. The degree of resemblance will just be the number of properties things have in common, the more properties in common corresponding to a higher degree of resemblance. “It's natural to suggest”, writes Blumson, “that peas in a pod resemble each other to a high degree because their properties in common—like greenness, roundness, and yuckiness—are a high proportion of their properties in total. And it's natural to suggest that the more properties a picture has in common with what it represents, the more closely it resembles what it represents” (Blumson 2014, p. 180). All art students subjected to still-life exercises know this lesson all too well. The artistic product of some students' work will be better than others, the quality being determined by their degree of resemblance to the fruit or whatever (it's always fruit). Resemblance therefore can be modeled as a degreed spectrum, where at the one end x and y have a minimum of salient properties in common, and the other, all salient properties in common.

Exploring the extremes of a spectrum is a useful way of achieving a deeper understanding of the target concept—the target concept in our case being the *imago Dei*. A person S is human only if S bears God's image, that is, S has salient properties in common with God—whichever properties constitute the *imago Dei*. Suppose, then, that the *imago Dei* is a cluster of properties, where S 's having more of those properties makes S resemble God to a greater degree, and S 's having less of those properties makes S resemble God to a lesser degree.¹¹ At one far end of the spectrum would be what we might call a “maximal” human, or perhaps better, *perfect* human: a person who has all of the properties constitutive of the *imago Dei*, resembling God (in the salient ways) to the maximal degree. This, of course, we see in the God-man, Jesus Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15; cf. Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 4:4) and “fully human in every way” (Heb 2:17). At the other end of the spectrum would be a “minimal” human, a person who has the bare minimum of those properties constitutive of the *imago Dei*, resembling God (in the salient ways) to the minimum degree. “Savages! Savages!” as the Pocahontas song goes, “barely even human!” If that strikes you as harsh, at least a modicum of humanity is acknowledged. This seems

to be a concession compared to how several New Testament authors describe the ungodly, as we will see below.

An important motivation for the spectrum view is its consonance at the theoretical level with the spiritual life of a Christian at the practical level, where the goal is to become more and more like Christ, the perfect image of God, and true humanity. We do this in many ways and with much help, but are impeded in our Christlike trajectory by sin. In this connection, many in the Christian tradition have spoken of sin as tarnishing, defacing, distorting, and corrupting the *imago Dei*, and conversely of the need for the image to be restored, repaired, and renewed.¹² These are, again, degreed notions: an image can be more or less distorted, and more or less repaired. We more commonly refer to the restoration of the image, that of “being conformed to the image of God’s son” (Rom 8:29; Cf. Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:9–10), as the process of sanctification.

2.5. Accidental

It may be unsettling to think we can be more or less human, but that is just a simple and straightforward implication of understanding the *imago Dei* in terms of resemblance, for resemblance comes in degrees. But most of those in the Christian tradition who have thought that the image can be marred, defaced, and corrupted have stopped short of saying the image can be lost entirely.¹³ That is the possibility that I want to explore at present.

One prominent theologian who takes this possibility seriously is N. T. Wright, who says “there is nothing in the Bible or in Christian tradition to deny the possibility that individual humans can progressively choose to be less and less genuinely human, until they eventually cease to be human at all” (Wright 1994, pp. 94–95).¹⁴ Connecting the thought with the *imago Dei*, he writes:

When the Bible speaks of human beings and how they order or disorder their lives, the assumption is that we are all made in the image of God . . . But if we worship other gods—and the other gods are very powerful and active in our world right now—than all we can expect is for the image to atrophy. It is dangerously possible to start reflecting gods other than the true God in whose image we are made. But the other gods are not life-giving. To worship them, and to reflect their image, is to court death: the eventual utter destruction of all that it means to be truly human. If we doubt it, we need only watch the news. (Wright 1994, p. 94)¹⁵

This last comment of Wright’s—“if we doubt it, we need only watch the news”—is an oblique reference to empirical evidence for the view expressed that should be fleshed out.

Most of us have encountered, in some form or another, evil so radical and horrendous that to call it *inhuman* would be a gross understatement. Some crimes are so ghastly that seeing their perpetrators as fellow humans is nigh impossible. The most effective way to make this point would be to simply reproduce examples of such evils here, but I will respect the readers’ conscience. Some examples I have encountered are so soul-crushing and incomprehensibly depraved that to showcase them in print to make a point itself seems wrong. But the reader can be certain that the most horrendous evil his imagination can conjure has already been superseded in reality many times over. This category of evil is so extraordinary that we rightly sense that a special explanation is required, one that outstrips the explanatory resources found in ordinary human agency and experience. We see these evils more readily as the product of another species—of monsters rather than men.¹⁶

Perhaps the best way to make sense of this intuition is to simply grant it literally: that is what they are. The fact that we so often feel the need to appeal to another category of agency to explain some evils is evidence that some other category of agency is needed to explain some evils. There are various ways we might spell this out, but one way is to appeal directly to nonhuman agents of malevolent bent, such as Satan and demons. William Abraham makes the point effectively by quoting Roméo Dallaire, a Canadian general tasked by the UN to intervene in the Rwandan genocide. After being asked if he

still believed in God after encountering so much evil, Lt. Dallaire replied, “I know there is a God because in Rwanda I shook hands with the devil. I have seen him, and I have smelled him and I have touched him. I know the devil exists and therefore I know that there is a God” (Abraham 2021, p. 184).

We need not interpret Dallaire as saying that he took himself to have literally encountered the Devil incarnate. At the very least, Dallaire is expressing the common belief that the best way to make sense of some evils so inhumane is to appeal to a non-human, Satanic agency, or presence embodied in human perpetrators. I have little doubt that this is sometimes the best explanation. However, notice the hypothesis here involves Satan or demons as nonhuman agents of influence behind the scenes, as it were, in addition to the humans (willing as they are) who perpetrate the evil with their own hands. I see no reason why there may not sometimes be a simpler hypothesis available, one that still appeals to nonhuman agency to explain inhumane evils. There is no need to appeal to Satan or demons if some people, ostensibly human, have become devils themselves. It is scary to think such people exist. But if we are honest, it is hard to deny that they do.

Perhaps you do deny that, maintaining instead that there is always a trace, however small, of God’s image in us so that we never fully cease to be human. But we can’t just ignore those parts of scripture that throw a wet blanket on such jolly optimism, however. Peter describes the ungodly as “unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct,” and compares them to dogs and swine (2 Pet 2:12, 22). Jude says something nearly identical (v. 8). Paul was no softer, saying of the ungodly that *God gives them up* to their dishonorable passions and to a depraved mind. Why does God do this? Because, Paul explains, “they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom 1:23). This is significant, for “the glory of the immortal God” here plausibly alludes to the image of God.¹⁷ They exchanged the glorious image of the creator, the divine imprimatur as it were, for an odious image of a creature. They sold their birthright for a mess of pottage. Thus some commentators (e.g., Schreiner 2018) have suggested that there seems to be a loss of human glory contemplated here, a kind of inversion of the created order in Genesis where man, though once above the animals in virtue of bearing God’s image, is no longer. And clearly Paul is contemplating this as true of those responsible for much less severe sins—by modern sensibilities, anyway—than those responsible for horrendous evils.

If the reality of inhumane evils is insufficient reason to think we can lose the *imago Dei* in this life, the reality of hell should be sufficient reason to think we can lose it in the next. Hell is traditionally understood as eternal separation from God (2 Thess 1:9).¹⁸ How can a person in a place “away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,” as Paul describes it, continue to bear or reflect God’s glorious image? Once again, it seems much more fitting that they become like those for whom hell was originally created: nonhuman persons who have rebelled against God and His creation. Jude seems to make this very point. The same fate of those angels who abandoned their proper dwelling—eternal darkness—is reserved for ungodly, brutish people who reject Christ (v. 6, 13). This brings us to an attractive theoretical feature of the spectrum view, which is that it offers an elegant *rapprochement* between the traditional view of hell and its rivals in universalism and annihilationism.

3. Hell and the *Imago Dei*

According to the traditional view of hell, not all people will be saved. Universalists and annihilationists demur, the former maintaining that all humans will (eventually) be saved, and the latter that those humans who are not saved will (eventually) be annihilated. All parties in this dispute over the ultimate eschatological fate of man appeal to Biblical texts in support of their view. The spectrum view of the *imago Dei*, I think, gives the defender of the traditional view a hermeneutical upper hand. How?

The key, if it isn’t obvious, is that a hell-bound human person loses his humanity by the time, or at the time, of his death (or final judgment, if those are distinct moments).

What is left (if anything) of the *imago Dei* is expunged along with his humanity. The traditionalist who holds the spectrum view can therefore embrace at face value texts favored by annihilationists which say of the wicked that they will “wither away”, “be no more”, “perish” (e.g., Ps 37:2, 9–10, 20, 38; 68:2; Mal 4:1–2), and those which describe the punishment for the wicked as “destruction” (Rom:22; 1 Cor 3:17; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess 1:9; 2 Pet 2:1, 3, 12; 3:7; Heb 10:39). When a human person loses the *imago Dei*, this just is what happens to that human *qua* human. Likewise, the traditionalist who holds the spectrum view can embrace at face value texts favored by universalists which seem to universally quantify over humans as recipients of salvation (Rom 5:18–19; 11:32; 1 Cor 15:22). The “all” in these passages, universalists insist, should be taken at face value—it means *all* humans, not some. On the spectrum view, indeed all humans are saved, since no person who is not saved is human. No human ever ends up in hell.

It might be worthwhile to spell this last point out a bit more clearly. This can be done by constructing what we can call the traditionalist defense. The strategy should be a familiar one, as it is modeled after Alvin Plantinga’s celebrated Free Will Defense, which aims to demonstrate no logical incompatibility between

(3) God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good.

(4) Evil exists.

As Plantinga explains, the strategy of the defense is to find “a proposition *r* that is consistent with (3) such that (3) and (*r*) together entail (4)” (Plantinga 1974, p. 26). He suggests the following proposition as one that might do the trick:

(5) God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so.

So long as it is even possible that there is state of affairs such that, if it obtained, an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God would have a good reason for permitting evil, it follows that (3) and (4) are consistent. Accordingly, a traditionalist defense will aim to demonstrate no logical incompatibility between

(6) Not all people will be saved.

(7) All humans will be saved.

Now the question is: Is there a proposition *p* consistent with (6) such that (6) and *p* together entail (7), rendering (6) and (7) logically consistent? Here is one that might do the trick:

(8) All people not saved will cease to be human.

Voilà! If something like (8) is possibly true, then the traditional view of hell is logically consistent with the universalist’s claim that all humans will be saved—and the annihilationist’s claim that unsaved humans will be annihilated.¹⁹

The traditionalist defense may strike the universalist and annihilationist as a bit flip-pant. Suppose a fire breaks out in the library. All of the books are damaged to some degree, though many are salvageable. Many, however, are not. Indeed, the ones unsalvageable are no longer books at all, but just charred remains. The distraught librarian peeks in after the fire is put out and is horrified at what she sees. The librarian sheepishly asks the fireman, “How many books are saved?” The fireman replies, “All of them, ma’am. No charred remains you see here is a book”. I suspect that the librarian would not be very satisfied with the fireman’s logic. The fact is that many books were lost. Not all books were saved. What is true is that the only things saved are books. But that seems rather trivial. *Mutatis mutandis*, the traditionalist defense is likewise trivial.

The fireman’s response to the librarian seems cheeky because we think the librarian really means to ask “How many of things *which were books at some time* are saved?” But is this what the librarian means? Presumably she is not asking the fireman about the salvation of those things which used to be books a week ago that a disgruntled student destroyed. So what she really means to ask is “How many of the things which were books at the time of the fire are saved?” But now it is obvious that the traditionalist defense is not trivial. Suppose all that was reduced to charred remains in the fire happened to be just those ‘books’ that were already destroyed by disgruntled students before the fire broke out (maybe the

students wanted to get rid of the evidence). In that case, what the fireman says is not only true, but reason to celebrate: all the books *are* saved. Again, *mutatis mutandis*.

“True”, the universalist might respond, “But there are still persons who were formerly human in hell, and that’s what we deny. Whether we *call* them human doesn’t matter”. But it does matter. To be human is no mere nominal honorific, but a real kind of thing: a person who bears the image of God. And it is precisely because man is *that* kind of thing that hell is an unfitting place for him, and why it is disturbing to think of him there. After all, we are not as disturbed by thinking of malevolent creatures like Satan and demons being in hell (are we?). So why should we be any more disturbed if such creatures are joined by others *who have become like them*, having rejected likeness to God? I can do no better than to quote C. S. Lewis:

You will remember that in the parable, the saved go to a place prepared for them, while the damned go to a place never made for men at all [Matt 25:34, 41]. To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being on earth; to enter hell, is to be banished from humanity. What is cast (or casts itself) into hell is not a man: it is ‘remains’. To be a complete man means to have the passions obedient to the will and the will offered to God: to have been a man—to be an ex-man or ‘damned ghost’—would presumably mean to consist of a will utterly centered in its self and passions utterly uncontrolled by the will. It is, of course, impossible to imagine what the consciousness of such a creature—already a loose congeries of mutually antagonistic sins rather than a sinner—would be like. (Lewis [1940] 2001, pp. 127–28)²⁰

The traditionalist who holds to the spectrum view is not being glib in accepting the proposition that all humans will be saved. Far from it. He finds the prospect that there should be image bearers of God eternally separated from God just as objectionable as the universalist and annihilationist.

4. Human Value

We come at last to what many would consider to be an unacceptable ethical implication of the spectrum view. If we can bear God’s image more or less and, accordingly, be more or less human, doesn’t that mean we can be more or less valuable? Does not the spectrum view open a door we thought permanently closed, the door that leads to the unequal treatment of others on the grounds they are less than fully human?

The gravity of the question of human value demands that we cannot outsource the truth to political platitudes. And the truth is that the egalitarian assumption that all humans are equally valuable has not earned the unassailable status it currently enjoys. For the assumption to be true, there must be some morally significant quality equally shared by all and only human beings. But identifying any *natural* quality intrinsic to humans that meets these conditions has proved to be enormously difficult (Kekes 2001). This has driven some egalitarians to propose a theological alternative, namely the image of God (Perry 2007; Wolterstorff 2008). But this won’t help if the image does not meet the requisite conditions either, and on the spectrum view, it doesn’t.

Or does it? True, not all humans resemble God to the *same* degree, but equally true on the spectrum view is that all humans resemble God to *some* degree. And even the minimal degree of resemblance to God—equally shared by all humans—is enough to ground a baseline of value and ethical treatment. Well and good: scripture quite clearly cites bearing God’s image as grounds for ethical treatment (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9). In this sense, the egalitarian assumption is true. But if human value is tied in this way to God’s image, and humans can image (i.e., resemble) God more or less, it does indeed follow that humans can be more or less valuable. In *this* sense, the egalitarian assumption is false.

I make no apologies for this. In fact, this is a second way that the spectrum view accurately reflects the empirical reality we encounter. Compare a three-year-old toddler, brimming with all the love, happiness, and innocence that a child of God could have, with the most hardened MS13 gang member on trial for drug peddling, child molestation,

rape, and capital murders who smirks at his victim's families in the courtroom. Both have value, we can assume. But the child resembles God to a much greater degree, and the world is a better place with the child and without the criminal. These facts reflect a real value difference that underwrites intuitive judgements about justice, judgments too often muted by popular—and dangerous—egalitarian illusions.²¹ Granted, apart from extreme comparisons like that above, we are rarely in a moral or epistemic position to make judgments about the value differences between humans, being ignorant sinners ourselves.²² But even if we could never justifiably make such judgements, or at least should never make such judgements, that still would not mean there are no value differences between humans.

This should, I hope, address John Kilner's complaint that vulgar versions of what I am calling the spectrum view have been responsible for an untold number of injustices throughout history (Kilner 2015). It is not the spectrum view as such that is responsible, but the spectrum view in conjunction with other dubious axiological and theological assumptions. Furthermore, we should be careful, no less here than elsewhere, to not conflate a view with its abuse. After all, there is no shortage of injustices committed under the banner of equality that one could decry. That being said, Kilner is right to emphasize that our view of the image of God—of what it means to be human—has profound practical implications for how we view and treat others. If anything, the spectrum view should heighten our sensitivity to this fact. C. S. Lewis's poignant observation comes to mind:

It is a serious thing . . . to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. (Lewis [1949] 1965, pp. 14–15)

What this means in practice, Lewis says, is that “the load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken”. This is all the more true on the spectrum view. It is simply incorrect to think that the spectrum view inevitably leads to the unethical treatment of others. Properly understood, it should have precisely the opposite effect by magnifying to us the true gravity of all our social interactions.

5. Conclusions

To review, the basic ingredients of the spectrum view are that, first, bearing God's image is essential to being human, and, second, bearing God's image means resembling God in some salient way. I call it the spectrum view because resemblance comes in degrees, which implies that we can resemble God more or less, and so be more or less human. The empirical reality of inhumane evil suggests we can cease to resemble God in any salient way, and thereby cease to be human entirely. Each of the basic ingredients of the view are harmonious with the Biblical data, and the view as a whole offers an elegant *rapprochement* between the traditional view of hell and its rivals in universalism and annihilationism. The view cannot be regarded as mere academician's play, however, as it has profound implications for how we perceive and treat others.

We can conclude by emphasizing that the spectrum view has no less profound implications for how we live our own lives. We are all on, or at least all start out on, the same spectrum, and are either progressing forward, being conformed to the image of Christ, or regressing away from him and our own humanity. And experience teaches us that it

is much, much easier to go backward, for that is the direction all our natural, and worst, instincts flow. “A dead thing can go with the stream”, Chesterton quips, “but only a living thing can go against it”. And it becomes much, much harder to reverse course the longer we allow ourselves to drift. Atrophy sets in. This is a sobering truth and is why repentance is a matter of such urgency. “Come back to your senses and stop sinning”, Paul urges, so that we too “shall bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor 15:34, 49).

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Notes

¹ Some exceptions are (McLeod-Harrison 2014) and in (Farris and Taliaferro 2016).

² Although the Bible nowhere explicitly says angels aren’t created in the image of God, it is reasonably implied. For one thing, if angels are also created in the image of God, it would be otiose for the creation narrative to climax in something God has already done (i.e., make creatures in his own image). Thus it is quite implausible to interpret the plural “we” of Gen 1:26 as including angels, as some have suggested. “God is never said to take counsel with angels, who—themselves creatures—cannot create man” (Hoekema 1986, p. 12). For another, it is widely recognized that God’s creation of man in His image involves, inter alia, granting to man dominion over the Earth, which angels do not have.

³ In common venacular ‘person’ and ‘human’ are often used interchangeably or treated as synonyms, but in theological, philosophical, and legal contexts the two must be distinguished. How to understand the relationship between ‘person’ and ‘human’ more precisely is unclear. I say more about this in (McIntosh 2016).

⁴ Such as those who agree with the long tradition of identifying the image with the soul, or having the capacities for rationality and free will. For critique of this tradition, see (Green 2016). The title of Green’s chapter (“Why the *Imago Dei* Should Not Be Identified with the Soul”) is overdrawn, as he argues only that there is no Biblical reason to identify the *imago Dei* with the soul. There may be other reasons.

⁵ This should not be taken to downgrade the value and importance of the body, as the physical form of the body may be the external expression of the *imago Dei*. This seems to be the dominant position among the Patristics and Reformers. See (Hughes 1989, pp. 10–14). For more on this, see below.

⁶ For *tselem* see Strong’s entry 6754: “from an unused root mean. to shade; a phantom, i.e., (fig.) illusion, resemblance; hence a representative figure”. For *demuth* see entry 1823: “from 1819; resemblance; concr. model, shape; adv. like:—fashion, like (-ness, as), manner, similitude”. Entry 1819 is *damah*: “a prim. root; to compare; by impl. to resemble, liken, consider:—compare, devise, (be) like (-n), mean, think, use similitudes”. Note that ‘resemblance’ is in in all entries.

⁷ I am not suggesting that a linguistic analysis of the Hebrew terms settles their meaning. Richard Briggs seems correct that the author of Genesis uses the phrase “the image of God” as a “relatively under-determined placeholder” (Briggs 2010, p. 112) whose meaning is to be later clarified in the Genesis narrative, and, depending on one’s hermeneutical persuasions, the rest of the Old Testament and even New Testament. But the text does seem to me to privilege the concept of resemblance and to tell against a mere representation understanding of “image and likeness”. Andrew Hollingsworth (2021) explores an account of the *imago Dei* that he frames as representational, but it explicitly relies on the concept of similarity, which is a resemblance relation.

⁸ For a nice overview of the metaphysics of resemblance, see (Cowling 2017).

⁹ This raises the question of how salience is determined, which I take no stance on here. Furthermore, I assume that the reference to properties need not be ontologically committing. The anti-realist will have to consult the literature on resemblance nominalism for a suitable alternative. See, for example, (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002).

¹⁰ For further defense of this point, see (Cortez 2016; Crisp 2016).

¹¹ Or is a property that is itself degreed, or a cluster of properties that are themselves degreed. A reviewer recommends that I explore the doctrine of *theosis/apotheosis*, often associated with the Eastern theological tradition, in connection with a degreed understanding of the *imago Dei*. Russell’s (2004) study of this tradition indicates that the historical connection is surprisingly

tenuous. I am not prepared to appropriate insights from this tradition for the present study, though I imagine that could help with specifying the manner in which we become more like Christ.

See quotations from Augustine and Calvin among others in (Hughes 1989, p. 66ff).

A minority of voices suggest that the image was entirely lost in the event of the Fall. This interpretation, however, is exegetically indefensible in light of passages which clearly imply fallen man continues to bear the image (e.g., Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9). For discussion, see (Hoekema 1986, pp. 15–18).

The view can also be found variously expressed throughout C. S. Lewis's writings (see below).

See also (Wright 2008, pp. 182–83). Cf. Philip Hughes: "Nothing is more basic than the recognition that being constituted in the image of God is of the essence of and absolutely central to the humanness of man. It is the key that unlocks the meaning of his authentic humanity. Apart from this reality he cannot exist truly as man, since for man to deny God and the divine image stamped upon his being and to assert his own independent self-sufficiency is to deny his own constitution and thus to dehumanize himself. That this is so is confirmed by the appalling inhumanity of ungodly men in every age of human history" (Hughes 1989, p. 4). Later, however, Hughes seems to walk back the idea that this dehumanization is literal (p. 69).

Calvin says when the *imago Dei* has been obliterated, "we do not deserve to be regarded or accepted as people . . . [and instead become] like brute beasts". See references in (Hughes 1989, pp. 65–66). Similarly, Emil Brunner says the image in man ceases "where true human living ceases—on the borderline of imbecility or madness". See (Hoekema 1986, p. 54). We return to this idea below.

A few reasons can be given for this judgment. First, Paul closely associates God's glory and God's image elsewhere (1 Cor 11:7; 2 Cor 4:4). Second, idolatry, the offense Paul has in mind here, is conceptually linked to the image of God as its inversion in the created order. As Richard Lints (2015) puts it, "the character of idolatry, of creating an image of an alien deity, was the conceptual undoing of the original act of being created in the image of God" (p. 93). A bit more fully: "In the canon the closest conceptual counterpart to the *imago Dei* are graven images. Idolatry provides the wider canonical context for the *imago Dei* as that which most centrally threatens the security and significance of the covenantal relationship between Creator and creature, between Redeemer and redeemed, between Christ and his people. Paradoxically, the idol-maker is the theological opposite of the image-bearer. But it is true both exegetically and theologically that bearing the image of God and crafting graven images are two sides of the same coin" (p. 35). Third, exchanging the image of the creator for the image of a creature fits the contrastive pattern throughout the latter half of Rom 1, where a series of absurd exchanges are made: truth for unrighteousness (1:18), what can be seen for darkness (1:20–21), wisdom and knowledge for foolishness and ignorance (1:21–22), honor for dishonor (1:24), truth for a lie (1:25).

Jerry Walls says the "traditional popular view" or "the traditional orthodox view" of hell is "the view that hell is God's eternal punishment which falls irreversibly on all who die in a state of sin" or "who obstinately refuse his grace to the end of life" (Walls 1992, pp. 12–14). More concisely, Jonathan Kvanvig says "the view of hell held by traditional Christianity" entails what he calls Anti-Universalism, the view that "not all people will be saved" (Kvanvig 1993, p. 24).

I hope the logicians will forgive the informal statement of the point in the text. More carefully, it should be: (8*) All people who are not saved are not human [$\forall x((Px \wedge \neg Sx) \rightarrow \neg Hx)$], and what follows is (7*) All people who are human are saved [$\forall x((Px \wedge Hx) \rightarrow Sx)$]. Since (8*) alone entails (7*), of course (8*) together with (6), conjunctively or disjunctively, will also entail (7*).

Cf. Richard Swinburne's description of a totally corrupt person who has lost his capacity to overrule his desires: "There is no longer a 'he': the agent has turned into a mere theatre of conflicting desires of which the strongest automatically dictates 'his' action . . . We may describe a man in this situation . . . as having 'lost his soul'". See Swinburne (1983, pp. 48–49). And elsewhere: "This corrupt being has sinned against his creator, and made no atonement for his sins, nor helped others to atone for theirs. He has destroyed his God-given capacity for moral awareness and choice and left himself as an arena of competing desires" (Swinburne 1989, pp. 181–82).

Dangerous? Among other innumerable examples, I'm reminded of the 2018 news story about a young, idealistic American couple who set out to bike around the world under the illusion that—in their own words—"humans are kind" and that "evil is a make-believe concept we've invented to deal with the complexities of fellow humans holding values and beliefs and perspectives different than our own." The couple along with two companions were run off the road and stabbed to death by members of ISIS in Tajikistan.

That famous passage from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* comes to mind: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various stages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil" (Solzhenitsyn 1974, p. 168).

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