

# SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AS A DEFINING TRAIT OF HUMAN NATURE: REFLECTIONS ON IMAGO DEI IN GENESIS 1-11

**Laurențiu Gabriel NISTOR, D. Miss (c)**

*Adventus University, Cernica, Romania*

*launistor@gmail.com*

---

## **Abstract:**

The increasingly diverse academic conversation about human nature seems to favour reductive theories of human nature, while relegating integrative or anti-reductionist perspectives from humanities, especially from theology and philosophy to the periphery. In attempting to offer an anti-reductive response, I re-approach the main Judeo-Christian theory of human nature, through the lens of Bernard Lonergan's concepts of human nature's self-transcendence and that of the cognitive process of sublation through which humans operate in-and-through multiple and increasingly complex levels of reality. It is through these lonerganian concepts that I approach the Imago Dei view selectively from the Genesis 1-11 narrative, attempting to highlight why and how human nature self-understanding should not only be viewed in anti-reductive terms, but positively transcendental.

**Keywords:** *Creation, Human nature, Imago Dei, self-transcendence, human vocation, reductive anthropology, Lonergan, sublation, ethics, human rights.*

---

## **Current aspects in the discussion of human nature**

To say that contemporary discourse on human nature is diverse is an understatement. It is continually updating and more voices from a wider variety of academic fields join the conversation. The publishing on the topic in the last ten years already is staggering<sup>1</sup> and the perspective on the topic itself is widening.<sup>2</sup> While a flourishing of a subject usually is a good sign,

---

1 Searching for "human nature" in Worldcat.org and limiting results to the last 10 years returns 9105 books and 27184 articles.

2 Leslie Stevenson's introductory handbook on theories of human nature, first published in 1974 presented 7 main theories, more theories were added in subsequent editions. In 2017 it has reached its 7<sup>th</sup> edition and presents thirteen theories of human nature.

within the discussion on human nature there are a number of pessimist reflections on the subject<sup>3</sup> - on the actual use of the discussion itself - as it seems that even if more cogent people join the conversation, the variety of views does not seem to veer towards consensus.<sup>4</sup>

This rather crowded conversation is not helped by a seemingly growing discord. However, the lack of consensus in the human nature discourse should not be surprising, given the constant preference to extrapolation that works with a horizontal level approach. The continued appeal to reductive methodologies common in physical and social sciences that focus on a single level of existence or a single function make consensus on human nature not a too probable prospect, as Tim Ingold writes with restrained exasperation<sup>5</sup> when reviewing the suggestively titled *Why we disagree about human nature*.<sup>6</sup> It is in this review that he decries, the exclusion, at least in the reviewed title, but aiming at the larger conversation, that among academia, the weightier arguments are given to those that seek to define human nature solely by describing human beings from their observable exterior – all the while those disciplines, ironically still called *humanities* are mostly left uninvited to the conversation (even if honourably some suggest a more inclusive conversation)<sup>7</sup>, as these do not seem objective enough

---

3 See Terry Leahy, “The elephant in the room: Human nature and the sociology textbooks”, *Current Sociology* 60, no. 6/2012, pp.806–823, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392112453834>, and Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: the Modern Denial of Human Nature*, London, Penguin Books, 2002, pp. 2, 3.

4 As the discussion of human nature itself has significant ramifications in wider areas of life, a further meta-analysis of the human discussion would add to its understanding. For wider perspective of how this affects the wider society see Richard Weikart, “Does Darwinism devalue human life?”, *Human Life Review*, 2004, 30.2: 29-37, online at <https://www.csustan.edu/history/does-darwinism-devalue-human-life>. See also Christian Smith, “Does Naturalism Warrant a Moral Belief in Universal Benevolence and Human Rights?”, *The Believing Primate*, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 292–317.

5 Tim Ingold, Review of *Why We Disagree About Human Nature*, Elizabeth Hannon and Tim Lewens (eds.) Oxford University Press, 2018, 214pp., \$39.95 (hbk), ISBN 9780198823650, in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2019, online at <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/why-we-disagree-about-human-nature/>, accessed on 14.12.2021

6 Elizabeth Hannon, Tim Lewens, *Why We Disagree About Human Nature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198823650.001.0001.

7 In the last two chapters, Maria Kronfeldter is critical to the exclusive approach of the conversation. Christina Toren also affirms the voluntariness of what constitutes the human nature and its *being*. See Christina Toren, “Human Ontogenies as Historical Processes:

methodologically, even if disciplines like philosophy and theology do not focus exclusively to describe the physical human *being*, but also have on what being *human* means.<sup>8</sup> An example of how a reductive view of human nature view affects the conversation about the subject is how Steven Pinker in elitist overtones relegates the Judeo-Christian view of Imago Dei to the past and to the less informed public.<sup>9</sup> While defending the Darwinian-evolutionist theory of human nature, he asserts that the dominant view among social scientists is that there is no human nature and that the Judeo-Christian theory is obsolete, as it is not unsupported by modern science.<sup>10</sup>

However, going beyond reductive scientism there is hope, considering the growing relationship between neuro-sciences and theology, where more recognition is given to the psycho-somatic integrative view of human nature.<sup>11</sup> Beyond physical description, and moving towards psychology, the topic of self-realization could provide more common ground towards the secular parts of the conversation, as this reaches common points of interest for both secular humanism and in religion, even if from the religious side the topic is described as self-transcendence, as Andrzej Jastrzębski's recent research on the topic suggests.<sup>12</sup>

It is with this hope that the current paper is written. A word of caution that would inform the discourse is the differing destination of what

---

An Anthropological Perspective" and Maria Kronfeldner, "Divide and Conquer: The Authority of Nature and Why We Disagree about Human Nature" in Elizabeth Hannon, Tim Lewens, *Why We Disagree About Human Nature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp.170-185, 186-206, DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198823650.001.0001.

8 Tim Ingold, Review of *Why We Disagree About Human Nature*, Elizabeth Hannon and Tim Lewens (eds.) Oxford University Press, 2018, 214pp., \$39.95 (hbk), ISBN 9780198823650, in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2019, online at <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/why-we-disagree-about-human-nature/>, accessed on 14.12.2021

9 Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: the Modern Denial of Human Nature*, London, Penguin Books, 2002, p. 2.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 128.

11 For a perspective on the subject see Thomas Crisp, *Neuroscience and the soul: the human person in philosophy, science, and theology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2016 and for reviewing the budding field of neurotheology: Brian C. Alston, *What Is Neurotheology?* [Charleston, SC], BookSurge, 2007, and Andrew Newberg, *NEUROTHEOLOGY: how science can enlighten us about spirituality*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018.

12 Andrzej Jastrzębski, "Recent Developments in Understanding Spirituality as Exemplified by the Concept of Self-Transcendence", *Verbum Vitae* 39, no. 2 (2021): 515–25. <https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.11875>.

self-realization means. Mikael Stenmark cautions that the question of human nature should be carefully framed, and even if there are numerous challenges between the Darwinian-evolutionist theory, the theme of corruption can, for example, provide a place of dialogue.<sup>13</sup> Concerning the Self-realization/transcendence theme he cautions that while the drive to develop may be common, the destination may be divergent in articulation.<sup>14</sup> Still, the commonality remains, and hopefully, the pursuit of a dialogue is an open perspective, while philosophy and theology can still contribute to the discussion about human nature.<sup>15</sup>

With this contextual perspective, the current paper will further address why the reductive approaches in defining human nature fails to adequately account for the complexity of its intricated systems and how the Imago Dei perspective - that the human species is the reflection of God - offers a more integrative view of human nature, considers its cognitive and relational processes, accounts for its current condition and context, and carries significant positive societal applications.

I will be this doing by drawing on David Aiken's applications and introduction to Bernard Lonergan's critique of reductionism and his concept of Self-Transcendence. Afterwards, I will attempt to verify how the Imago Dei perspective relates to the concept of Self-Transcendence, as it appears in the biblical account of Genesis 1-11, as well outline some of its implications, with further detailed applications reserved for future research.

### **Bernard Lonergan's response to the use of reductionism in describing human nature**

Analysing the use of reductionism as a research method, David Aiken observes that it functions very well as a method in first-order scientific investigations, but it becomes a less trustworthy method when it is used to reach second-order considerations or normative questions of being, truth

---

13 Mikael Stenmark's framework issues will continue also to inform later research on the topic. Mikael Stenmark, "THREE THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE", *Zygon*, 44, 4/2009, pp. 894-920, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2009.01040>.

14 Mikael Stenmark, "IS THERE A HUMAN NATURE?", *Zygon*, 47, 4/2012, pp. 890-902. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2012.01300.x>.

15 Mikael Stenmark, "THREE THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE", *Zygon*, 44, 4/2009, pp. 894-920. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2009.01040.x>.

and value,<sup>16</sup> and states that “Promoting reductive strategies of explanation legitimately employed, by the empirical sciences to the status of metaphysical postulates inevitably results, in an unwarranted exclusion of relevant data (such as intentionality and finality), when investigating the ontological constitution of persons, historical processes, and the world as ‘mediated by meaning.’”<sup>17</sup>

All approaches that are reductive are related to physical sciences, and when approaching the questions of higher-order, extending their research methodology yields only partial results, while ignoring others dimensions of the research corpus. This is what Aiken describes scientism to be: a perspective considering objectively true only what can be warranted by well-accredited scientific methods; consequently, issues of significance and value remain subjective, because there is no rigorous method for their study. Aiken likens this restriction of legitimacy to methodological imperialism,<sup>18</sup> but the process itself is flawed like the storied “new clothes of the emperor”: because scientism comes with its own epistemic priorities and values that exceed the scope of scientific confirmation, it is as a matter of consequence that these will be subjective as well. This lack of coherence should be accounted for as methodological hypocrisy on behalf of scientism.<sup>19</sup>

Researching human nature with the methodological propensity of scientism gives form to an array of anthropologically reductionistic models, all of which attempt to explain what a human being is by referring to processes, events, and mechanisms that do not take the *human person* into account. Reducing the whole to its physicochemical, environmental, genetic, neurological components ignoring their dynamics, to a single level in order to address the whole system, while the whole system operates simultaneously at multiple levels of complexity, will not account for the

---

16 David W. Aiken, “Bernard Lonergan’s Critique of Reductionism: a Call to Intellectual Conversion,” *Christian Scholar’s Review*, 41(3)/2012, p. 234.

17 Aiken redirects to chapter 3 of Bernard Lonergan’s *Method in Theology*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971 for discussing the topic, in *Ibidem*, p. 234.

18 *Ibidem*, p.234.

19 Aiken references for contemporary examples Andrew Melnyk, *A Physicalist Manifesto: Thoroughly Modern Materialism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, and Sahotra Sarkar, “Models of Reduction and Categories of Reductionism,” *Synthese*, 91/1992, pp. 167-194. For a classical example of scientism, he suggests Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language Truth and Logic*, New York, Dover Publications, 1946 apud *Ibidem*, p. 235.

emergent or higher-level operations. Therefore, as a matter of consequence conclusions are going to be incomplete and most likely erroneous if taken to refer to the whole. And even if anthropological reductive models tend to be normative, speculative and metaphysical they are attributed legitimacy as empirical-scientific endeavours, even if by the nature of their conception and process they are not.<sup>20</sup>

However, according to David Aiken appraisal, Bernard Lonergan's contribution to the question of the reductionistic approaches in metaphysics, anthropology and epistemology, in general, will not only support resistance to reductionistic approaches of human nature, but given his integrative approach to it, along with his perspective on human cognitive processes and what these entail for the understanding of human nature, will also provide an incentive in doing so.<sup>21</sup>

Along with David Aiken, I want to suggest that the question of the use of reductionism would be better served by Bernard Lonergan's "sublation" instead of "reduction" in explaining the relationship between different levels of reality.<sup>22</sup>

Lonergan starts the question of understanding the human being by using the first part of the Delphic maxim, namely analysing the human way of knowing. He starts first by observing that humans are obstinately inquisitive about their surrounding reality and actively perceptive about changes to it. In the second phase, the individual takes the gathered information to analyse and questioned it to find patterns, reasons, connections, to identify the nature of the observed stimuli – this becomes a secondary level of cognitive operation – "intelligent inquiry." The purpose of questioning reality is to arrive at understanding. For Lonergan this is *insight*, which is more than simple comprehension of brute information; it is understanding as in the "Aha!" moment that the maieutic method seeks. Thirdly, Lonergan observes the cognitive process comes to "critical reflection", where "insight-ed" information is scrutinized by being verified if it is properly obtained, defined, formulated, expressed, combined coherently, and correlated consistently with previous observations and confirmed by evidence. This act

---

20 *Ibidem*, p. 235. This also reflects Ingold's critique.

21 David W. Aiken, "Bernard Lonergan's Critique of Reductionism: a Call to Intellectual Conversion", *Christian Scholar's Review* 41:3/2012, p. 233.

22 *Ibidem*, pp. 233–234.

of evaluation tests the hypothesis through the entire arsenal of cognitive activity and if successful, confirms the hypothesis as fact. Every stage in the process were partial increments, and with this internal judgment cognition arrives at its "total increment."<sup>23</sup> According to Lonergan, this is a standard procedure about arriving at certainty by which human cognition arrives at conclusions about reality.

It is at this point that the implications for human self-definition become more evident. After the level of critical evaluation, information is passed onto a higher level of operation – that of assumption and incorporation into the agency of self<sup>24</sup> and ethical praxis. Operating at this fourth level of responsible agency brings the human being to the status of an attentive, intellectual, reasonable, and responsible actor in the world.

From the vantage point of agency responsibility, cognitional operations can go to higher or lower levels.<sup>25</sup> This approach sees higher meanings and specialized functions emerge when lower-order potencies are satisfied. To comprehend these lower-order potencies, one must first understand their fulfilment at higher and more specialized levels of functioning. Retaining the higher ethical exigency that is arrived at makes the matter of responsible agency a matter of moral conscience. So far, each level of inquiry has been sublated into a higher one. Further raising the level of inquiry beyond self, in horizontal terms extends a dynamic that allows for a redefinition of self-with-and-through-others human beings, while raising vertically towards a higher ontological plane, opens the human being to the questions of infinite existence, truth, and value, but also vertically to God, as the transcendent Other.<sup>26</sup>

---

23 Bernard Lonergan, Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, eds., *Insight: a Study of Human Understanding, Volume 3 (Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan)*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 301.

24 "Finally, the rational subject, having achieved knowledge of what is and could be, rationally gives way to conscious freedom and conscientious responsibility." Lonergan, Bernard, *Method in Theology*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971, p.16.

25 Aiken observes that this is a gradual observation in Lonergan and he references chapter 5 of *Method in Theology*; as well as "Christology Today" and "The Ongoing Genesis of Methods," in Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1985, pp. 75-80, 159-163 and Press, 1985, and also Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., *Old Things and New: A Strategy For Education*, Atlanta: Scholars, pp. 1-29, *Ibidem*.

26 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p.13; see also pp. 95, 114, 122, 233, 243, 252, 289.

It is here that self-transcendence becomes possible, as the inquiry reaches the highest operational field, and it is here that it is confirmed to be authentic or not.

Loneragan observes that when the human agent inquires beyond its own finitude, towards the infinite, that inquiry exposes the human towards the unlimited love and companionship of God as the transcendent Being, “by whose initiative one is enabled to move beyond bias, indifference, and self-deception, through primordial wondering, toward a disposition to love without limits and conditions.<sup>27</sup> It is also the exercise of our drive towards self-transcendence and the foundation of our self-actuating patterns of cognitional operations. This happens at the spiritual level—and consequently, it is not reducible to biological or other subconscious components.<sup>28</sup> It is, therefore, possible for a human being to progress beyond the negative and limitative perceptions of self towards a vision to love beyond current predicament and conditions. This gracious call is the one that invites hope to actually reach beyond current limitations and status, towards the better, in other words towards self-transcendence. From this point of view, God is both the beginning and end of our search for Existence, Truth, and Ultimate Value, confirming the Revelation, where He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Way, Truth, and Life.<sup>29</sup> As the human being is exposed to the inexhaustible horizon of these manifestations of God’s Transcendence, the human is invited to pursue them, transcending him/herself. In other words, encountering God the scope of our potential expands and so does our capacity for self-transcendence.<sup>30</sup>

### **Imago-Dei and Self-transcendence in the Genesis 1-11 narrative**

To verify the lonerganian self-transcendental perspective of human nature in the Genesis 1-11 narrative will assume the limitation of trying to interpret the text through this lonerganian informed view, as much as possible. An exploratory dialogue with the wider tradition of theological interpreta-

---

27 *Ibidem*, p.103.

28 David W. Aiken, “Bernard Lonergan’s Critique of Reductionism: a Call to Intellectual Conversion.” *Christian Scholar’s Review*, 41:3/2012, p. 234, p. 245.

29 Revelation 1:8, John 14:6.

30 David W. Aiken, *Ibidem*, p. 249.



tion<sup>31</sup> of the Imago Dei concept in Christian theology will be reserved for later research.

Reaffirming the lonerganian perspective of human self-transcendence in relation to God is the spiritual quest by which we are invited to grow into the likeness of God.<sup>32</sup> Reading the initial creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, one could argue that by creating the human, in his image and likeness, God went beyond self, and also imbued the human being with the ability to go beyond its own existence and perception of self.<sup>33</sup> The creation of man, first from the dust of the earth, and then by reforming his being into a plural one, can be seen as an ontological process of creative sublation (in fact throughout all the creative work can be seen as imbuing the creation of with higher operation levels and beings). Thus, Adam, literally – of Earth, is the human being that is exercising his cognitive powers by knowing the creatures, understanding them and categorizing them. Given the curatorial and protective mandate of Adam and Eve, it is inferred that the whole ecosystem was in view. They had to use their higher cognitive capacities to go beyond the perception of their own being to understand this. Lonergan called this process through which lower levels

---

31 Historically influential theologians of the Imago Dei concept have been Irenaeus of Lyons, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Jean Calvin. More recent influential theologians on the topic, some touching also on the topic of self-transcendence are Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Jürgen Moltmann, as David Tarus observes in “Imago Dei in Christian Theology: The Various Approaches”, in *Online International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Volume 5, pp. 18-25; 2016.

See John Arblaster, “The Image and Likeness of God”, pages 265–86 in Edward Howells, Mark A. McIntosh and John Arblaster, *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020. For additional philosophical perspectives see also Richard Mouw, “The Imago Dei and Philosophical Anthropology”, *Christian Scholar’s Review*, 41:3, pp. 253-266.

32 Cf. 2 Peter 1:3-8.

33 God brought the animals to see how he would call them and thus man reached a certain level the self-consciousness, of the difference about the other beings, but also to address his need of self-reflection into another one like him. After addressing this need and creating the plurality of the human being, in its male and female side, he entrusted them both with the curatorial and guardian mission towards the beings of the world. For proper installation into this status such he had to perceive himself from an external perspective. This act seems to be an act of divine education, and if pre-lapsarian this is the situation, what to say post-lapsarian.

of perception are reinterpreted/recoded/readied for operation at a higher level *sublation*.<sup>34</sup> To do that, higher cognitive processes were necessary: acknowledging/knowing the environment, understanding, abstracting and then operating with processed knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, by growing in their understanding of their own nature, the created humans were supposed to further their transcendence in perception, going beyond their immediate being, when reflecting upon their heterogeneous but also co-substantial nature.<sup>36</sup> Later as this process of mutual self-knowing progressed towards, with and through the Other Human half as Co-Substantial-Self-in-Plurality in all dimensions of being, by knowing each other a new being would be begotten out of that knowledge, transcending both their individuality *and* their duality *into* procreating *another one of them*, an extension of their life. A process that also can be interpreted as a form of sublation, as their

---

34 Bernard Lonergan presents in his own words summarizes the process as such: „What is sublation? When you distinguish operations of different kinds and certain operations with respect to others. You introduce a new principle, and because there is a new principle there is a new end. And they complete the previous set of operations that are sublated, and sublating operations complete the sublated operations and perfect them and go beyond them and give them a new, fuller finality and preserve them as opposed to destroying, cramping them, or interfering with them....I see a bug walking across the table, and for me it is just a bug. There is nothing wrong with my eyes, but for me it is just a bug. An entomologist looks at it and can tell you a hundred things about it, and he will have names for each of the hundred things. I will have to get out a dictionary and find out what the names mean. The intellectual development, even if it is just a matter of elementary classification, enables you to see what otherwise you don't see. If you haven't got words for it, you don't see it. It's not merely that your language depends upon your seeing, but your seeing also depends upon your language. And different languages emphasize different aspects of things. It is a very interesting study of words: people who know different languages will tell you how the English see this and the French see that and the Italians see that, and so on, and their words are all built on it. Now that is the process of sublation. Understanding, so far from interfering with sense, perfects it. And judgment, so far from interfering with understanding, prunes off the overgrowth of myth and magic and astrology and alchemy, and God knows what. Deliberation and evaluation and decision take you out of the ivory tower, have you doing something, and so on. Each successive level sublates previous levels. And when you say, What do you mean by level, and higher and lower levels? I mean what is defined by sublation, the set of words I use in sublation.” *Lonergan Workshop*, 1975 *Transcript of Q&A June 16-20, June 19* (TC 852 A and 852 B), online at <http://bernard-lonergan.com/pdf/85200DTE070.pdf>, see also Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971, pp. 315-316.

35 Genesis 2:19.

36 Genesis 2:23.

knowledge pro-created another being<sup>37</sup> - their self-knowledge transcended not only from the physical to the abstract levels but also ontologically, bringing their self-sublation to the full *Imago Dei* circle, reflecting their own creation.<sup>38</sup> On the final day of Creation, on the Seventh Day, the Creator celebrated the completeness of this process.<sup>39</sup>

The primordial temptation proposed to the first humans a different kind of self-transcendence than that that God created them for, namely not the self-actualization in each other and in Him, but subverting the upward drive of transcendence of man and woman, with an *altera* axiology - that resourced morality in the self, excluding God from the view. By attempting to elevate the human agents against and beyond their ontological category, inducing a false auctorial status of morality, the Tempter pitted them against the created framework, oriented them against their connected environment. In effect, sin, because of its self-referentiality altered the *direction* of human's sublative perception, taking them away from the elevated experience of Communion (as Self-with-and-through-Others-in-Creation), but by demanding that existence should always serve first the self.

Sin has hit this exact dynamic image of the Creator, by corrupting the primeval humans exactly by hitting and breaking the fine-tuned relational balance between Self-transcendent and self-transcended<sup>40</sup> - the initial one flesh-into-the-Other-while-remaining-one's-self/or the by elevating the One against the Other and regressing from the Communion shared by mutual self-transcendence.<sup>41</sup>

Embracing the digressive approach of sin meant that human existence would become a *transgression* of the Created telos. While self-transcendence makes use of higher levels of cognition and offered higher and more profound perspectives on life, and relationships,<sup>42</sup> allowing for a communal existence, this trespassing of existential boundaries damaged the being and its entire existential experience.

---

37 Genesis 1:28.

38 Genesis 1:26, 27.

39 Genesis 2:3.

40 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971, pp. 254, 105.

41 Humans start blaming each other, ultimately blaming God for their choice: Man the Woman, the Woman blaming the Serpent created by God. Genesis 3:11-13.

42 Genesis 2:23.

While initially the test of obedience to the Creator and His framework of being may seem abstract and arbitrary, the effects of withdrawal from this relationship become evident: first, the primeval relationship of oneness and mutual self-transcendence becomes one of contempt and distrust,<sup>43</sup> secondly, the fruit of this alterity and transgressive<sup>44</sup> thinking brings death between kindred beings, not only as a biological phenomenon, but as a choice for resolving an emotional dissatisfaction,<sup>45</sup> thirdly, the subversive moral nadir becomes even deeper, where self-comfort and self-gratifying existence are the criteria by which others are allowed life around the “elevated” self,<sup>46</sup> and fourthly, on the general level (further) procreated beings continue these lines to bring the martial ways to become the currency of societal hierarchy<sup>47</sup> and finally transgression, from the godly values, becomes the new norm.<sup>48</sup>

The Genesis narrative describes Cain’s descendants devolving morally with each generation, reaching the low point where their “values” are defined by revenge, violence, and death. Even if resistance to the subverted way of sinful existence was initially present,<sup>49</sup> most of it became corrupt and diminished.<sup>50</sup> The marring of the image of God extended into almost the whole of humanity,<sup>51</sup> and by its influence, it extended to the world<sup>52</sup> that initially the Creator deemed perfect. Now instead of life, instead it glorified violence, revenge, and death.

This sad narrative expanded on the larger consequences of what departing from God’s design meant, on the results for transgressing from the Created order, offering a demonstration of what sin brought into the perfectly created world. Considering this catastrophic state of affairs, while for our sensibilities the Flood may seem too harsh a judgment, the biblical narrative presents it as a cap to the well of violence that kept flowing, a reset button. The Flood was not only a judgment, but by Noah’s ministry, it also

---

43 Genesis 2:12.

44 Genesis 4:7.

45 Genesis 4:8.

46 Genesis 4:23.

47 Genesis 6:4.

48 Genesis 6:5.

49 Genesis 4:26.

50 Genesis 6:1-6.

51 Genesis 4:5-18, 23, continued from Cain, to Lameh.

52 Genesis 6:12.

was pressing an existential and final moral choice, to retrace the transgression of sin back towards a life with God.<sup>53</sup>

After the Flood, the narrative of Genesis presents God recalibrating humanity, its own self-understanding and resetting its role in Creation through the covenant with Noah, his descendants, and the rest of the world. As we shall see, this re-establishment of humanity reflects the initial creation account, as well as a reaffirmation of the same divine plan,<sup>54</sup> but with some differing points, that seem to take into account the previous failures of humanity.<sup>55</sup>

In the preamble of the noahic covenant, alluding to the antediluvian violence, God restates the value of human life by presenting the human individual to be the bearer of God's Image,<sup>56</sup> and explicitly forbidding the killing of any human,<sup>57</sup> pending divine punishment (that was supposed to be exacted retributively and equivalent by peers – a *lex talionis*). While antediluvian humanity was simply presented through a stark contrast between the society of godly people and that of the rebellious that was ruled by power and violence, for the postdiluvian world God reframes relationships horizontally with more explicitness, with humans being taught how to value each other's life and relate to it.

---

53 Genesis 6:13.

54 „The 'blessing' of procreation and dominion conferred upon the postdiluvian world is a restatement of God's creation promise for the human family and the creatures (1:22–25, 28–30), but now its provisions are modified in light of encroaching societal wickedness." Mathews, K. A., *Genesis 1-11:26*, electronic ed., Vol. 1A, Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, p. 398.

55 Genesis 9:5 is the second use word brother since the Genesis 4:8-11. "Here the narrative clarifies some of the left unanswered question of the dialogue between God and Cain. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' argues Cain (4:9). Our passage answers explicitly yes. Moreover, there are other allusions in our passage to that early fratricide, such as Abel's 'blood which cries out' (4:10) and Cain's concern that "whoever will find me will kill me" (4:14). The popular notion that retributive justice is canonized in the Noahic covenant may be true, but it is only a reflection of antecedent practice as indicated by the fearful Cain and the boastful Lamech (cf. 4:14–15; 4:24). As we noted at chap. 4, murder is fratricide by virtue of the inherent covenant all people have with God as created in his 'image.' We are to that fundamental degree all brothers and sisters in that we are all human." Mathews, K. A., *Ibidem*, p. 404.

56 Reflecting on Genesis 1:26, 29.

57 It is presumed that antediluvian generations, having had the witness of the Adam and his faithful descendents, were aware of this, but chose to disregard the divine norms.

Later the narrative shifts view and it should not be surprising that it presents the survivors of the flood and their descendants with signs of what we today would call survivor syndrome (being risk-averse, distrusting of authority, self-absorbed, etc).<sup>58</sup> Coupled with the self-referential drive of the lapsed moral state people thus resisted the repeated divine command to multiply and fill the earth.<sup>59</sup> Instead, they wanted to cultivate homogeneity, develop a reputation by establishing a uniform identity and purpose,<sup>60</sup> obviously against God's design.<sup>61</sup>

This is a story presented from behind the scenes, as the divine intervention happened without people knowing.<sup>62</sup> Matthews K.A. sees here the gentle search of God for man, similar to what happened after the fall, and the warning that the Babel achievement rings with the same warning that preceded the denial of access to the Tree of Life.<sup>63</sup> The Babel narrative gives only hints of God's purpose – humanity was to disperse and populate the planet. At that point, it actively worked against it. It doesn't seem to

---

58 For further study of Survivor Syndrome see: Erwin K. Koranyi, "Psychodynamic Theories of the 'Survivor Syndrome'", *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal* 14, no. 2/ April 1969, pp.165-174, <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674376901400210>; Steven H. Appelbaum, Claude Delage, Nadia Labib, and George Gault, "The survivor syndrome: aftermath of downsizing" *Career Development International* 2, no. 6 (1997): 278–86. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13620439710178639>, and Yehuda Baruch and Patricia Hind, "Survivor syndrome – a management myth?", *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 15, 1/2000, pp. 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940010305289>; Also for a deeper correlation of survivor syndrome and the Babel narrative see Ben Gussen, *The Tower of Babel Syndrome: locality and governance in response to the ecological crisis*, Honours Thesis, University of Auckland, New Zealand, 2011, where the author presents that at any major worldview shift brought by an ecological crisis localism is brought to the centre as a solution.

59 Genesis 9:1,7.

60 See also K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, electronic ed., Volume 1A, Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, p. 482.

61 Genesis 11:1-4, Genesis 3:22.

62 Ibn Ezra recognized the story's lack of censure: „The builders of the tower hoped that their city and tower would prevent them from dispersing, but this was not God's will. However, they did not know this.” Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch*, trans. H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver; New York, Menorah, 1988, 136-45., 140, apud, Thomas Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, 1/2007, p.56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27638419>

63 K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, electronic ed., Volume 1A, Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, p. 484.

have been a moral stake, here, except that God's plan for humanity and the world was in jeopardy. To mitigate the impending crisis, God subverted the cognitive processing and oral communication within humanity, modifying and augmenting language-group affinities, group-thinking, finally creating a group identity.

The ethnic fragmenting of humanity decelerated the advance of sin's self-referential framework by introducing a harder wired element in the perception of self – the ethnic identity rooted into the system of language – an abstraction by which reality is understood and communicated – a uniquely shared reality sublation technique, that we intimately call the mother-tongue.

This allowed people, through their own language to independently interpret reality with their own words again. This divine act mirroring to a degree the taxonomic exercise of Adam, which had him cognitively and experientially realize the need for Eve, his co-substantial Other.

In the Babel event humanity is prodded to come to the realization that it is in its best interest to disperse.

As mutual understanding as a cognitive and communicational process became scarce, it increased in value. Its shared presence redefined how community was understood and what value was attached to it. As information exchange began to increase within the groups with shared language and decrease between these nascent population groups, mutually shared space also became more valued, with an added and interference avoidance, and a drive towards autonomous communities. Dispersion was the solution that each population group resorted to and also received a greater degree of freedom than previously had been the case: instead of addressing the ideological purpose of the Babel Tower, communities had to work towards their own survival and well-being. Individuals had to self-transcend, but also serve their communities. This served *both* their identities and the interest of the larger group. The communal dimension of human nature was restored.

Mutual understanding became limited to a smaller community – serving and more importantly, also its absence or misunderstanding forced the seminal *ethne* to grant each other freedom to be and express their thoughts and ideas within one's own group against and in competition with other groups of different expressions and self-understanding. Previously to this event the only important freedom that had been exercised was the moral one.

But given that the framework of human understanding still had self-referential and self-gratifying proclivities<sup>64</sup> the human mind had to have both a reference point and a motivation to reach back to self-transcendence. Instrumentally, to maintain the ability to reflect God, the human mind had to be confronted with the need to self-transcend the self-referential and transgressive approach that just wrecked humanity. This would be later achieved as inter-group relations would develop: the otherness of *those different from us* eventually invited people to extend their perception beyond their circular self-definitions, that had been generationally maintained.

As Thomas Hiebert notes, this became possible from Babel onward, as since then the world would exist as ethno-cultures<sup>65</sup> (in their various relations), and since then, freedom<sup>66</sup> was understood and sought in ethno-social terms as well – allowing others to be, as you would want to be allowed.

### The continuing journey of Imago Dei in Missio Dei

By virtue of the christological understanding of the Imago Dei, the pauline kenotic perspective directly connects the Missio Dei and informs it.<sup>67</sup> Other approaches have made the connection of these two core Christian theological concepts by reading the common *telos* of the creation mandate and the Great Commission<sup>68</sup> that is given to the disciples. As Fobes observed,

64 As Noah embarrassedly experienced. See Genesis 9:22-27.

65 Thomas Hiebert, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World’s Cultures”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, 1/2007, p.31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27638419>

66 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Om-Demnitare-Libertate (Man-Dignity-Freedom)*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Risoprint, 2019, pp. 201-215. Idem, “Religious liberty – a natural human right”, *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Ganoune Diop, Mihnea Costoiu, Liviu-Bogdan Ciucă, Nelu Burcea (eds.), Les Arcs, France, Editions IARSIC, 2015, pp.595-608.

67 “[The Great Commission] is itself a renewal of the Genesis 1:26-28 commission to Adam”, K. G. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: a Biblical Theology of the Temple*, Downers Grove, IL, Inter-Varsity Press, 2014, p. 175, apud Clark Fobes, *IMAGO DEI IN MISSIO DEI: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR WORK AND MISSION*, presented at Southwest Regional Conference, “Mission and Evangelism in a Secularizing World” / March 23, Biola University, Los Angeles, 2018, p. 6.

68 Instead of seeing the two as separate mandates throughout biblical history, the Great Commission can be seen as a continuation of the Creation Mandate, *Apud* Clark Fobes, *Ibidem*, p.9.



several theologians and missiologists<sup>69</sup> have seen Mandate of Creation and of the Great Commission having the same encompassing *telos* as finality, in the first case as pro-creators of Imago Dei, and as its pro-restorers in the latter, the christological recovery of Imago Dei and its missiological applications are more direct.

I chose to see the connection between the two concepts from the christological kenotic perspective – envisioned in another missionary-minded text from Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:5-11, which appeals to the immanentization of Imago Dei in Christ, itself an act of salvific transcendence but in reverse. And this can be directly read missiologically in the lines of an appeal: “by reaching beyond ourselves in transcendence « we both realize our authentic being (true self) and respond to the gospel’s call to loving service of the neighbour.”<sup>70</sup>

The Great Commission is realized as the disciples are called to reflect and follow Christ with the now-telling metaphor of taking up one’s cross, denying oneself. This extends the perspective of the being-in-community, namely how Imago Dei is reflected collectively and inter-relationally by practising self-denial, namely transcending themselves towards others in loving the service.<sup>71</sup>

Attempting to verify this at the assumed responsibility level that calls to action may imply the exercise of self-transcendence, purpose, importance, and connection to others in life. It will supersede commonly

---

69 Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, “Toward a Missiology That Begins with Creation”, *International Review of Mission* 100, nr. 2/November 2011, pp. 320-321. John Frame says: “A creation missiology...offers a vision of mission as the quest for eco-justice” in John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2008, p.309-310. Similarly, William Edgar views three parallel themes in both mandates: “1. The rich covenant blessing of God as he gathers his people together into his kingdom through the agency of the preached word and the appropriate social action. 2. The fruit-bearing and spreading of the good news to all the nations in anticipation of populating the new Jerusalem from above. 3. Dominion over all the forces that opposed God’s purposes, human guilt, idols, and death itself.” in William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2016. p. 215 , apud in Clark Fobes, *Ibidem*, p. 9.

70 Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self*, New York, Paulist Press, 1998, p.36. Apud. Lidums, Gatis. “The Doctrine of Imago Dei and Its Relation to Self-Transcendence in the Context of Practical Theology”, Doctoral dissertation, Helsinki, University of Helsinki, 2004, p. 37.

71 *Ibidem*

held human rights or resource distribution;<sup>72</sup> it is also about the change of hearts and aspirations to conform to God's goal of conforming us to His image. On a macro level, self-transcendence is associated with the prophetic mission that God has mandated His people with: the spiritual task of liberating the human being from all bondage and oppression - this comes as a consequence of the active reflection of God's ideal. Enlightened by *Imago Dei*, horizontal self-transcendence would try to always actualize the qualitative horizon of human relations with the vertical one, effectively making the Golden Rule a morally progressive spiral.

### Selective Bibliography:

- Aiken, David W., "Bernard Lonergan's Critique of Reductionism: a Call to Intellectual Conversion", *Christian Scholar's Review* 41 3/2012.
- Bi Lin, Muh; Leslie, Wuest & Yongqiang Cheng, *Genesis of Helping: a biblical integrative perspective*, presented at North American Association of Christians in Social Work 2017 Convention, November, Charlotte, 2017.
- Hannon, Elizabeth & Lewens, Tim, *Why We Disagree About Human Nature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Hiebert, Thomas, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1/2007, pp. 29–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27638419>.
- Jastrzębski, Andrzej, "Recent Developments in Understanding Spirituality as Exemplified by the Concept of Self-Transcendence", *Verbum Vitae* 39, no. 2 (2021): 515–25. <https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.11875>.
- Leahy, Terry, "The elephant in the room: Human nature and the sociology textbooks", *Current Sociology* 60, no. 6/2012, pp.806–823, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392112453834>.
- Lidums, Gatis, "The Doctrine of *Imago Dei* and Its Relation to Self-Transcendence in the Context of Practical Theology", Doctoral dissertation, Helsinki, University of Helsinki, 2004.

---

72 Concepts present in an applied approach of horizontal self-transcendence in charitable and missionary action by Muh Bi Lin, Leslie Wuest, & Yongqiang Cheng, *Genesis of Helping: a biblical integrative perspective*, presented at North American Association of Christians in Social Work 2017 Convention, November, Charlotte, 2017.

- ✦ Lonergan, Bernard J. F., *Collected Works, A Study of Human Understanding*, 3.3. Insight, Toronto, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992.
- ✦ Lonergan, Bernard, *Method in Theology*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971
- ✦ Mathews, K. A., *Genesis 1-11:26*, electronic ed., Vol. 1A, Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001.
- ✦ Pinker, Steven, *The Blank Slate: the Modern Denial of Human Nature*, London, Penguin Books, 2002.
- ✦ Rotaru, Ioan-Gheorghe, *Om-Demnitare-Libertate (Man-Dignity-Freedom)*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint Publishing, 2019, pp. 201-215.
- ✦ Rotaru, Ioan-Gheorghe, "Religious liberty – a natural human right", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Ganoune Diop, Mihnea Costoiu, Liviu-Bogdan Ciucă, Nelu Burcea (eds.), Les Arsc, France, Editions IARSIC, 2015, pp.595-608.
- ✦ Stenmark, Mikael, "IS THERE A HUMAN NATURE?", *Zygon(r)* 47, no. 4/2012, pp. 890–902, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2012.01300.x>.
- ✦ Stenmark, Mikael, "THREE THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE", *Zygon(r)* 44, no. 4/2009, pp. 894–920, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2009.01040>.
- ✦ Stevenson, Leslie F., *Thirteen theories of human nature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.
- ✦ Weikart, Richard, "Does Darwinism devalue human life?", in *Human Life Review*, 2004, 30.2: 29-37, online at <https://www.csustan.edu/history/does-darwinism-devalue-human-life>