

**TITLE**

The Difference a Self Makes: The Scientific and Theological Foundations of Human Nature

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**TOPIC:**

The unique “human difference” of the “self” and the scientific and theological foundations of human nature.

**DESCRIPTION:**

Human beings are rather strange, complex creatures who are simultaneously similar and dissimilar from the rest of the animal kingdom. On the one hand, we share many of the same biological and psychological characteristics as non-human creatures, and yet, on the other hand, our inner life – our needs, desires, self-understanding, and transcendence – has a real difference, which in turn manifests itself in a variety of different ways. Since human beings are always simultaneously both of “the dust of the earth” and “the breath of God” (cf. Gen 2:7), this lesson investigates the twofold principles of human nature from both the perspectives of evolutionary science and Catholic anthropology.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:**

1. What does it mean to be human?
2. Can animals speak? What is the difference between animal communication and human language?
3. How are we like our evolutionary ancestors? How are we different?
4. What does it mean to be “made in the image and likeness of God?” How can *imago Dei* be understood from an anthropological perspective?

**KNOWLEDGE**

1. Explain the nature of a “self.”
2. Describe the psychological and behavioral differences between human beings and non-human animals.
3. Articulate the Catholic concept of the *imago Dei*.

**SKILLS**

1. Distinguish essential characteristics and behaviors of human and non-human animals using both scientific data and theological evidence.

2. Critically reflect on their own experience as a human being to evaluate anthropological claims.
3. Engage their imagination to apprehend the spiritual sense of Scripture.

## **METHOD:**

### **Day 1**

#### Outline:

1. Pre-Test
2. Activator
3. Video – “Animals, the Human Animal, and God”
4. Post-Video Lecture
5. Personal Experience Exercise

The essential question that we will be exploring for the next three class periods is “What does it mean to be human?” We’re going to start with an illustration.

### **Activator (15-18 minutes)**

1. Have two seats facing each other in the front of the classroom.
2. Invite a student to the front of the room to look at an inanimate object for 30 seconds. (If a non-human creature is in the room, use this instead to add to the lesson).
  - a. Have the student describe his/her experience.
    - i. What did you see?
    - ii. How did you feel while you were looking at the item?
3. Invite another student to the front of the room to sit in the opposite chair of the other student, and then instruct the students to look into each other's eyes for 30 seconds without breaking eye contact.
  - a. Have the same student describe his/her experience.
    - i. What did you see?
    - ii. How did you feel while you were looking at the other student?
    - iii. How was your experience staring into the eyes of the other student different from staring at the object?
    - iv. Why do you think this is?
4. **Optional:** Have the entire classroom split into pairs and perform the same exercise.
  - a. Have the students describe their experiences.
5. Allow the entire class to discuss why looking into the eyes of another person is so different from looking at non-human objects.
  - a. Students should be guided to understand that the unique and perilous part of looking at another person is that they are looking back at you making judgments.

- b. This is the difference between looking at an object and looking at a subject, who is always simultaneously a person with an inward life and subjectivity.

It is said that the eye is the window to the soul, that through the eyes of another we are able to see into the soul of the other in an altogether unique way, and it is for this reason that staring into the eyes of another is so qualitatively different than staring at an inanimate object or non-human animal..

As the Catholic novelist and philosopher Walker Percy asks on p. 8 of *Lost in the Cosmos*:

“Why is it that the look of another person looking at you is different from everything else in the Cosmos? That is to say, looking at lions or tigers or Saturn or the Ring Nebula or at an owl or at another person from the side is one thing, but finding yourself looking in the eyes of another person looking at you is something else. And why is it that one can look at a lion or a planet or an owl or at someone's finger as long as one pleases, but looking into the eyes of another person is, if prolonged past a second, a perilous affair?”

If you are wrestling with this question, then you are not alone, for each and every person is a radically different type of thing relative to the many items that fill this room and our everyday experience, for while the chair, the board, your desk, and smartphone are inanimate *objects*, each human being is an animate and living *subject*.

What, then, is a subject, and why does this make it difficult to look into the eyes of another?

To answer this question, we are going to watch a video from Word on Fire entitled “Animals, the Human Animal, and God.”

*(The teacher should distribute the handout “Animals, the Human Animal, and God” Student Questions)*

While you’re watching this video, I want you to be thinking about three questions:

1. Where do the science of the animal kingdom and the theology of creation meet?
  - a. Answer: Communication
2. What is the difference between animal communication and human language?
  - a. Answer: Animals communicate via signals (symbols and sounds) to coordinate with respect to food, danger, sex, and sleep, whereas human beings communicate via language (a network of symbols), which allows us to interpret our subjective experience in an objective way and even transcend them.
3. How are animal and human behavior similar? How are they different?

- a. Answer: Multiple correct answers can be gleaned from the video, and students should be encouraged to provide other examples not specifically mentioned in the video.

### **Video (12 minutes)**

Play video – “Animals, the Human Animal, and God”

### **Post-Video Lecture (20 minutes)**

*(The teacher may get a few sample answers to the video focus questions, then instruct students to amend their answers in light of the following lecture.)*

Animals are amazing creatures. As the video explains, we, ourselves, are animals, and while we typically think that only human beings do things like play, mourn their dead, and solve complex problems, we are not alone in this, because other animals engage in these same activities as well.

For those who have pets, we know that they love to play with one another, and play is a common phenomenon amongst many different species.

Whales, dolphins, primates, seals, dingoes, horses, and dogs can all manifest signs of mourning when they lose a family member.

And, primates and birds, for example, can exhibit creative problem solving using crude tools when faced with difficulties in acquiring food or building nests.

How, then, are human beings different from the rest of the animal kingdom?

Whereas other animals communicate via sounds and symbols to coordinate sensual goods, like food, sex, danger, and sleep, human beings communicate through language, a network of sounds and symbols, that allow us to interpret our subjective experiences and transcend them.

Whereas non-human animals make judgments, human beings via language make judgments about our judgments.

Whereas non-human animals think, human beings think about their thinking.

In all of this, human beings can acquire an understanding of the world around them and use reason to come to new conclusions and deeper understanding.

As rational animals, we can think about and understand any given thing from a number of different perspectives.

In the video, the example was given about a lion, which can be understood as a threat by a giraffe, but human beings can understand a lion as a threat, a symbol, as a biological species, etc.

Exercise: Take two minutes and reflect about your house pet (if you have one) and think about the differences between your own

pet's experience of the world around it and your own experience and understanding of that same thing.

Use the language of “sensual meanings” (food, danger, sex, sleep) and “rational meaning” (transcendent understanding not limited to one's own immediate bodily needs and experiences). Discuss this with your students so that they come to understand the difference between animal and human understanding.

As the Catholic novelist Walker Percy explains, whereas animals live in an *environment*, which they seek to navigate to realize certain biological goods, human beings live in a *world* that contains those same elements but is enriched with a transcendent meaning, purpose, and value.

Exercise: Have the students think about their homes. Which elements of a home are features of an animal environment and which elements are features of a human world? In other words, what is it about a home that bears traces or vestiges of a uniquely human experience as a rational animal who transcends his or her own physical environment?

Concepts to explore would be: Homes (as houses) are environments that provide food storage, shelter, sleeping conditions, protection from threats, etc. Homes are also arranged around conversation, comfort, leisure, study, art, prayer, family artifacts, cooking, meaningful images, etc.

Human beings transform environments into worlds and relationships into friendships of gratuitous love.

In our next class, we will reflect upon this question more deeply by turning to explore the evolutionary origins of the human person

## **Day 2**

Optional homework: Christopher T. Baglow, *Faith, Science & Reason: Theology on the Cutting Edge* (2nd ed.), Ch. 9.

Outline:

1. Activator and Introduction using Genesis 2
2. Part I Video: “To Be Human: Genetics, Origins, and Identity.”
3. Post-Video Student Answer Sharing & Lecture
4. Small Group Prior Knowledge Discussions for Part II Video Questions
5. Part II Videos: “When Did Humans Become Human?” and “How did Humans Survive Evolution?”
6. Post-Video Lecture

## **Introduction (15 minutes)**

In our previous class, we began to reflect upon the question “What does it mean to be human?” and our examination involved reflecting upon our own experience of encountering other humans relative to non-human objects.

Furthermore, we discussed the unique difference between animal communication and human language.

**Activator:** Turn to the classmate next to you and discuss the following: “Yesterday, we explored two fundamental distinctions, one between animal communication and human language & another between an animal environment and a human world. Which was more helpful in exploring an answer to the question ‘What does it mean to be human?’ Why?”

For class today, we will explore this question in greater detail by focusing on the biological origins of the human race and the various markers that differentiate us from our ancient hominin ancestors and relatives.

If we turn to the Second Creation Account of Genesis 2, then we will see that the human being has two principles of origin, two things that are responsible for his existence as the unique type of creature that we are.

Let us read Genesis 2:4-7 together, “In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”

Now, in reading this passage, we want to keep in mind that it was written by and for Israelites in an ancient Mesopotamian context, whose culture was quite different from our own.

For starters, while they certainly had some understanding of the nature and structure of the world and cosmos, their worldview was quite different from our own.

Secondly, whereas we live in a day and age where the natural sciences are part and parcel of our everyday lives, ancient Israelites did not think about and study the world like we do today, and so we have to understand this passage in light of the cultural context of their own day and not super-impose our own worldviews and perspectives upon theirs.

And so, with that being said, in light of this passage, what are the two principles or causes for the existence of the first human being?

*(Have students grouped in pairs answer this question together and then share and discuss as a class.)*

Answer: Earth – “dust from the ground;” God – “breath of life”

While the author of the Second Creation Account was not attempting to provide what we would consider to be a “scientific” account of human origins, we do see, nonetheless, that even in the Second Creation Account of Genesis 2 a recognition that the human person comes neither from the earth alone, nor from God alone, but from both. God acted upon the “dust of the earth” by forming it and breathed his own “breath of life” into this “dust.”

One of the great benefits of the natural sciences, today, is that they can help us to better understand what exactly is meant by God’s forming man from the “dust of the earth.”

Specifically, it is the science of evolutionary biology and paleo-anthropology that can help us to see more deeply and understand more truly what we are as human beings, as biological creatures and animals.

In our next class, we will examine this question in greater detail by uniting our scientific understanding of human origins with that of divine Revelation and the human person as made in the image of God, but, for today, we will focus primarily on the scientific contribution to our understanding of human origins because this, too, has something important to offer a truly Catholic perspective.

### **Video (10 minutes)**

Let us begin our examination of the evolutionary origins of the human person by watching a short video entitled “To Be Human: Genetics, Origins, and Identity.”

While watching this video, I want you to answer the following questions:

1. What is an ability that was previously thought to be uniquely human but is in fact shared by other non-human species?
  - a. Answer: Facial recognition, morality
2. What is another name for a “symbolic universe”?
  - a. Answer: Culture
3. How many different hominin species belong to the “evolutionary tree” of the human species?
  - a. Answer: At least eighteen

### **Post-Video Lecture (10 minutes)**

*(Teacher should have the students turn to one another and discuss their answers.)*

As we can see from the video, the human species, from a biological perspective, is rather complex.

While it was common in the not-too-distant past to think that there is an immense divide between human beings and other non-human species, scientific research has discovered that things like facial recognition, empathy, reciprocity, and tool-making are found in non-human species, as well.

Thus, just as the human genome shares similarities with other creatures, depending on the evolutionary proximity or remoteness to our common ancestor, so, too, do we share certain tendencies, habits, and abilities with them as well.

As Dr. Richard Potts explains in the video, certain features of human nature, like morality, are not differences in kind but differences in extent.

As a result, the emergence of the human being is the result of an unimaginably long process of evolutionary development, rather than something that emerged all-at-one.

At the same time, however, human beings are not simply identical to other non-human species who only differ in degree along a spectrum, even though we share some traits in common with them.

We share certain “building blocks” with other species, but it is the way in which these building blocks come together in human beings that make us unique.

As the Russian-American geneticist and biologist, Theodosius Dobzhansky, writes in *The Biology of Ultimate Concern*: “[B]iological evolution has transcended itself in the human ‘evolution.’ A new level or dimension has been reached. The light of the human spirit has begun to shine... [This] does not mean that a new force or energy has arrived from nowhere; it does mean that a new form of unity has come into existence.”

So, for example, we do not simply act on altruistic instincts with other members of our “in-group,” as do many other non-human species, but we are able to choose to love, that is, to will the good of the other, for other human beings and creatures that do not belong to our family or tribe, which is contrary to our evolutionary instincts.

Likewise, just as all creatures are motivated by the instinct to reproduce and preserve their species, so, too, do human beings share this same motivation, but we are able to exercise control over this instinct by freely giving of ourselves to others through a total gift of self via marital love.

Now, if we narrow our focus from the similarities and differences between human beings and non-human species to the similarities and differences between modern human beings and other extinct hominins, then what we’ll see is that our commonalities are much greater, which in turn will help us to better appreciate the magnitude of the genuine differences.

To explore this topic, let us watch two short videos entitled “When Did Humans Become Human?” and “How did Humans Survive Evolution?”



### **Videos (10 minutes)**

Before students watch the videos, have them provide preliminary answers to the following questions on the accompanying handout. Then, have students share their answers with the class.

1. When did human beings become human?
2. How did humans survive evolution?

As students watch these videos, have them answer the following questions.

3. How long ago were various hominin species roaming about central and south Africa?
  - a. Answer: 4-6 million years ago
4. What commonalities do various human species share with one another?
  - a. Answer: Collaboration, imagination, conflict
5. Why have human beings survived when no other hominin species have?
  - a. Answer: Ability to adapt
6. Besides changing rocks into tools, what else were human beings able to do?
  - a. Answers: Speak, exchange goods, express meaning, transcend our circumstances

### **Post-Videos Lecture (5 minutes)**

As the videos explain, various hominin species have existed in central and southern Africa as long as 4-6 million years ago, and our own human species emerged from these populations.

Like other hominin species, human beings collaborated, imagined, and experienced conflict with one another.

However, it was our ability to adapt to difficult and changing circumstances that allowed our species to survive and thrive, whereas all other hominin species have not.

Besides technological developments like changing rocks into tools, our ancestors were able to transcend our environments through language and a robust imagination, to exchange goods across vast networks, and to express meaning, all of which helped them to form tight communities that allowed them to survive, together, even though they regularly came into contact with other hominin species.

Beyond mere survival, our human ancestors took a great “ontological leap” forward into a world wherein the greatest good was no longer survival but things like meaning and purpose, and it is here that our exploration of the biological origins of the human species ends and the beginning of the theological origins of humanity begins.

As Christopher Baglow states on p. 214 of *Faith, Science & Reason*, “On the one hand, the origin of our species is a natural process, with the same mechanisms and processes involved in the evolution of any mammal. And yet evolutionary biology can only take us as far as its own method will allow, a method that strictly focuses on natural causes. At the advent of the

specific kind of life we call human, we will see nature reach a terrain that requires perspectives that the science of biology cannot provide, the wider wisdom of philosophy and theology.”

### **Day 3**

Outline:

1. Context-Setting Introduction
2. Lectio Divina - Paying Taxes to the Emperor, Mtt. 22:15-22
3. Teacher Lecture, Students Take Notes
4. Graphic Organizer Activity and Small Group Discussion
5. Post-Test

*The Day 3 PPT presentation can be opened and the Day 3 handout distributed to have students navigate the lesson.*

#### **Introduction (10 minutes)**

*Share with students some explanation of the following:*

Throughout this lesson, students have been exploring the question, “What does it mean to be human?” On Day 1, students searched for an answer by wrestling with the characteristics that distinguish human beings from their fellow living creatures. Day 2 brought greater clarity to the question by focusing on the distinguishing characteristics that the earliest humans would have had relative to their hominin ancestors. Today, on Day 3, the question will be addressed not by distinguishing man from animals (whether contemporary or ancient) but by likening man to God, his Creator. (PPT Slide 9)

*Remind students of the closing theme from **Animals, the Human Animal, and God...***

Only one creature on our planet can say “Amen” to God freely and with understanding, in the way God says “Amen” to the universe. That creature is the human person, made in the image of God, who can speak, understand, and offer thanksgiving in worship to the Creator of all. (PPT Slide 10)

*Share with students the Day 3 Essential Questions:* The three-day essential question remains, “What does it mean to be human?” After exploring what we can know about being human from observation and experience in days 1 and 2, today we explore how God helps answer the question through revelation: What has God revealed about human nature? How does *imago Dei* unlock the meaning of life? (PPT Slide 11)

The source of our knowledge that human persons are made in the image of God is divine revelation. The concept of *imago Dei* is not deduced from the data of human experience or

archeological findings, but is a mystery to be probed, revealed by God from, among other places, the creation story in Genesis. (PPT slide 12)

Define the term *image* by contrasting with the concept of *vestige*. Although, as you recall, some knowledge of the life and culture of early hominin ancestors can be inferred from the vestiges that are discovered, an image is different. An image is a precise representation of the subject depicted. You can see in the image a trait or quality that exists in the subject it depicts. (PPT Slide 13)

While all of creation bears within itself vestiges of the creator, only the human person is made in the image of the creator. (PPT Slide 14)

This is precisely what Jesus has in mind when he is confronted by the Pharisees about paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus asks whose likeness is on the Roman coin, he is asking about the one who has authority over the distribution of the coin. By saying, “Render to God the things that are God’s,” Jesus lets his listener make the inference that the human person is the one who bears God’s image and therefore, belongs to Him. (PPT Slide 15)

### **Lectio Divina - Paying Taxes to the Emperor, Mt. 22:15-22 (Slide 16)**

*In the first time listening to the passage, students should write down the word or phrase that moves them or provides a spiritual insight..*

Read the passage once through. Give students 3 minutes of silence to reflect and write down the words or phrases.

*In the second time listening to the passage, students should imagine themselves as one of the by-standers watching the events of the scene unfold. They should pay special attention to the way the passage makes them feel while experiencing the scene.*

Read the passage a second time through. Give the students 3 minutes to reflect and write about how they feel.

*In the third time listening to the passage, students should imagine themselves in heaven with God the Father, watching themselves in the scene as it is unfolding. After the prayer is read, they should have a conversation with God the Father about what they see.*

Read the passage a third time. Give students 3 minutes to reflect and write any resolutions they have for action in their life.

### **Post-Lectio Divina Lecture (15 minutes)**

**Slide 31:** Let’s consider Caesar’s coin from the passage, especially what the image of Caesar would signify in the minds of those who viewed the coin. Putting his image on the coin is a power move. It signifies both the extent and value of his authority. Seeing the coin in Ephesus or

Antioch would let everyone know that Caesar's power extends there. The image also communicates the very ground for the value of the currency. It is the power and authority of Caesar that ascribes a currency value to an otherwise arbitrary chunk of metal.

**Slide 32:** In an analogous way, the human person who is the image of God signifies something to those who encounter him. At the first level, the human capacity for reason and will reveal to anyone interacting with him that this is a Godly creature. In his sermon *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis says, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. ... It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."

**Slide 33:** The Catechism underscores reason and will, these God-imaging features of human persons as distinguishing capacities of the human soul.

**Slide 34:** But the concept of *imago Dei* doesn't end there. Humans are not in the image of God only because we are shadowy carbon copies of two attributes of God. These capacities of reason and will in man mean that man is made for something that itself more deeply images God: communion. Relationship to God gives man a fundamentally meaningful orientation in life, without which man falls back to the status of brutes.

**Slide 35:** *Read Slide.* The capacities of reason and love point to something higher about the human person, namely that he is made for communion. After all, God reveals "it is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18).

**Slide 36:** C.S. Lewis beautifully captures the distinctly human capacity for personal communion for which free will is a prerequisite. *Read Slide.*

**Slide 37:** Human communion itself is a way that man is in the image of the God who Himself is a communion. *Read Slide.*

**Slide 38:** The human family is an image of the Trinitarian love. Perhaps this is a good jumping off point for exploring the way in which the human family community itself is an image God, while non-human animal families bear in vestige form a sort-of squinty eye resemblance to God that comes to a fullness in human love. *Read slide.*

**Slide 39:** Finally, it is not just that human love, for which reason and free will are prerequisites, show man to be made in the image of God. *Read slide.* Man's relationship to God himself is a distinctively human capacity.

**Slide 40:** As the Catechism states, *read slide.* This is the fundamental meaning of life. Made in God's image, man alone is capable of communion with God. This is why *imago Dei* reveals the meaning of life. Just like the coin, whose value is grounded in relation to Caesar, the human person finds the supreme value of life precisely in relation to God.

**Slide 41:** Given this context, it is easy to see why the *imitation of Jesus Christ* is the basis of Christian existence. Jesus is the fullness of relationship to the Father. So much so that He is the one true image of the Father. God does not leave the call to live in the *imago Dei* in the abstract,

but makes *imago Dei* concrete in person of Jesus. *Read Slide*. Because of the incarnation of Christ, the *imago Dei* becomes *imago Christi*.

**Post-Lecture Application Exercise (10 minutes)**

Have students reflect and write on the following prompts:

1. Create a graphic organizer that shows the relationships between the concepts of Imago Dei, Reason, Free Will, Human Community, Family, the Trinity, and Communion with God.
2. In your own words, explain why the image of Caesar on a Roman coin is a good analogy for the concept *imago Dei*.

*Have students share their answers in small groups (with the teacher floating around to engage the small group discussions) before turning in their work to be evaluated.*

**Post-Test (5 minutes)**

Have students complete the post-test assessment.

## **ASSESSMENT SECTION**

Pre-Test (see Resources)

Post-Test (see Resources)

## **RESOURCES**

[Powerpoint Slides](#) (Videos are embedded within these slides)

[Pre-Test](#)

[Post-Test](#)

[Day 1 Handout](#)

[Day 2 Handout](#)

[Day 3 Handout](#)