

Theological Anthropology Track

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The basic question discussed thrown out for discussion: Are the differences between humans and animals a difference in kind or in degree?

A. Arguing from a “difference in kind” standpoint in terms of what makes humans unique, the following points were brought up:

- 1) Suppose that one of the ways we are distinct in kind is the uniquely special way that humans are hardwired for language acquisition. That is, there’s something distinctly different about language, e.g. toddlers learn language so amazingly different than a chimpanzee. If one prime reason we’re distinct in kind is because of our language capacities, a key question to consider is whether humans are uniquely hardwired in a way that is critically different from all other creatures — i.e., the Chomskian view — or alternatively, if human ability to learn statistically in conjunction with our memory capacity is what gives humans our unique language capacities? Another key question is whether the unique language capacities of humans can be explained equally well with physicalists models of human anthropology as well as with dualist models? And is there anything theological at stake in hypothesizing a physicalist view vs. a dualist view? The consensus around the table was that the spiritual component of human identity is not threatened because language can be discussed in plausible terms on both physicalists and dualists models of human anthropology.
- 2) The imago Dei gives humans a unique standing and relation to God the Creator in the first instance, and following from that to other image bearers, and creation itself. All creatures are put before God but we are the only one who know that we are put before God in relationship. The image of God is less critically about ontology (capacities, rationality, etc) and more about the status the image bearer has before God, but you can’t have that status unless you have these capacities. It’s very important that human not be defined in functional terms. Moreover, memory, imagination and the ability to chose accordingly are factors that seem to be essentially entailed in the moral responsibility/accountability that humans have before God and to each other. This speaks to the spiritual/ethical dimension of human personhood. The lion can eat the gazelle and is not morally culpable, but Cain’s killing of Abel reveals his moral culpability and his being answerable to God for that. The ability to make moral judgments includes the ability to imagine the counterfactuals and the ability to not choose them. For example, we don’t hold a small child as morally responsible as we do adults for their actions. Humans are unique because God says so, being created in his image. Humans are the focus of his redemption, different than other creatures. Nor did Jesus die for the fallen angels. God doesn’t give his help to others in the way that he does to humans. Death is the prime problem of humans. No real focus in the NT on animals. Nonetheless the future of animals is tied to the future of humans.

- 3) If you look at science and philosophy a good candidate in support of a “difference in kind” is self-consciousness, for it seems that humans are the only ones who are conscious that we are conscious. We have this mysterious capacity of self-consciousness. There’s not much discuss on self-consciousness in scholarly works. The self-consciousness does not constitute us in the image of God but it gives us the capacity to know that. Stroke victims, down syndrome are examples where the self-consciousness is not functioning properly. There’s a second-order consciousness whereby apes can follow something but not in the same way that they are conscious that others are following them the way than humans are. Humans know they’re in relationship with God with others who are doing the same, not just in a way that is individualistic.

B. Arguing more from a “difference in degree” standpoint in terms of the difference between humans and animals, the following points were brought up:

- 1) The idea of emergent dualism might allow that the emergence between animals and humans involves factors of degree. How do humans emerge as morally responsible on that view? How do humans transcend the physical-moral order, and what grounds that? One idea is that the potentialities are in the physical order and that it emerges in humans. A theological rationale is when God said “Let the earth bring forth.” Another proposal is on the basis of election, i.e., God elected to endow humans with such things like moral capacity. If this is the case, then descendants are in connection covenantally or through some other relational solidarity with those God has elected. A push back on this last view is the alternative notion that God has designed the created order such that organisms are imbued with things that are non-physical that emerge at certain stages in the evolutionary account. That is to say, God just builds this into the fabric of the universe such that a new non-physical thing emerges in the course of things. Does evolution cause a problem in an emergent dualism scenario? Depending on how it’s parsed out, if it’s a naturalistic account of evolution then that’s a problem, but not evolution per se. Another view is that we are evolved with a complex of physical and spiritual attributes. The push back, however, is that a mere gradual process will only ever produce a quantitative difference, there has to be something done from the outside that produces a qualitative difference. Emergentists have their own counter push back that even human beings do not know when we became self-conscious, so it can be said that physical and spiritual attributes may plausibly emerge without any self-consciousness of this happening. A rejoinder to the analogy that humans do not know when they become self-conscious is that humans do not become qualitatively different in kind just because they do not know when they become self-conscious. The difficulty at large here is the question of how do you make emergent physicalism work for such non-physical capacities as attitudes, will, and other soulish capacities.

Summary: With respect to the question — Are the differences between humans and animals a difference in kind or in degree? — there was basic agreement that the following aspects represent some of the key ways in which humans differ in kind from animals: (1) human language capacities, (2) the image of God, and (3) self-consciousness. With respect to human language capacities, the group agreed that these can be explained plausibly with physicalist models of human anthropology as well as with dualist models, and that neither physicalist or dualist models necessarily threaten the spiritual attributes that characterize human beings. There was also full agreement that the imago Dei gives humans a unique standing and relation to God the Creator in the first instance, and following from that to other image bearers, and creation itself. Moreover, the future of animals is tied to the future of humans. The group wrestled with the notion that there may be aspects between humans and animals that are best appreciated as a difference in degree more than in kind. The theistic evolutionists in the group proposed that either emergent dualism or emergent physicalism are plausible means/mechanisms in which both physical and non-physical potentialities in the physical order emerge at certain stages of the evolutionary process. The group debated what emergentism of either stripe implied in regard to how divine action was involved in the emergence and/or constitution of human beings but there was no consensus.