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# The Image of God: An Ethical Foundation for Medicine

Arthur J. Dyck

*The author, a member of Linacre's editorial advisory board, is a professor in the divinity school at Harvard.*

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I agree with philosopher Alan Donagan's assertions that contemporary definitions of personhood are "do it yourself kits" for constructing moral communities to our own tastes.<sup>1</sup> But the image of God is not and can not be the product of anyone's "do it yourself kit." It is a work not wrought by human hands and yet a work visible in us and visible to us. It is rendered visible in the work of creation and in the work of salvation through Christ, God Incarnate, God with us, in human flesh. And this reality, this image of God, can offer guidance in the midst of great confusion; and confusion there is about how to define personhood. First of all, though, if we're going to focus on the problems associated with definitions of personhood through the lens of the image of God, we need to sound a warning with regard to certain commonly recognized characteristics of the *Imago Dei*. There are characteristics of the image of God which may be used in ways that yield, or help shape, conceptions of personhood, which can actually deface or destroy the image of God. Part of the devastating work of the "do it yourself kits" in personhood is that the lines which are drawn between the person and the non person can be lethal.

## **The Image of God and Choice, Self-Awareness and Reason: Some Ambiguities**

So, to begin with, one commonly recognized attribute of the image of God in us is the ability to choose, or free will. The fact that we make choices to procreate, even as God chose to create, makes it possible for us to be moral beings. The fact that we have free will makes it possible for us to accept God and God's guidance. But it also makes it possible for us to reject God and to choose evil. Indeed, there's a strong tendency today to turn choice into outright idolatry by making choice a metaphysical principle, the ultimate court of appeal; granting the autonomous self a freedom from interference which includes the right to commit suicide if

you don't harm anyone. And if there is such a right to commit suicide which does not harm anyone, then it is a right to detach yourself from all others, so that no one could possibly be injured or miss your presence on this earth. Such a right would sanction a suspension of all our ties and all our responsibilities to others. That is what it means to commit suicide without harming anyone. Imagine that! How could that ever be possible? But it is one of the idolatries of our day, to make freedom from interference an ultimate metaphysical principle and the criterion for right and wrong. And that means that I, the autonomous self, decide whether life has value. I decide whether my children's lives have enough value to warrant nurture and protection. Yes, choice is God-like but it can be used, as people do and have done, to try to become completely like God. And that is a way to reject God and a way to lose Eden.

Secondly, there is self-awareness. In this respect also, the image of God functions to make moral responsibility a reality. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. And as beings who are self-aware, we can worship and experience God and God's love. But someone like Michael Tooley, a philosopher, uses this aspect of our humanity to justify infanticide, to justify killing infants before they are aware of themselves as selves.<sup>2</sup> Are you not yet aware of yourself? Well, then you do not have a self-conscious desire to live, says Tooley. If you do not have a self-conscious desire to live, you will not be hurt by being killed. So, on Tooley's account, killing can only harm a human being when that human being has the capacity to desire life and actually wants to live. That is what the "do it yourself kit" yields for some philosophers these days. Tooley is one example. So self-awareness is a God-given grace to cultivate for God's glory, but it's not a basis on which to make judgments about personhood, that is, not insofar as we are making judgments about human worth. And self-awareness, like choice, may be a source of great evil and that is how I regard Michael Tooley's use of his own self-awareness of self-awareness.

Thirdly, there is a reason. It is a very commonly designated attribute of the image of God and I don't dispute it. In seeing reason as part of the Image of God, we are once more describing a human power necessary for being morally responsible. But at the same time reason is a powerful tool for designing and executing evil. Indeed, we often ask about a notable crime: Who masterminded it? Crimes can be the work of superior minds. So reason is part of the image of God in us, but it can be used for unspeakable crimes against humanity.

Despite all that, there are those who counsel us to use the ability to reason as a criterion for deciding whose life should be sustained. Consider this old example: In a fire in which only one of two people can be rescued, would you rescue your parent or would you rescue a genius? You and I might say, my father and my mother are geniuses. But leaving aside that retort, would you rescue a genius or would you rescue your parent? Some consequentialists counsel us to rescue the genius because the genius will do so much good. But the genius could make the next weapon that we cannot

live with; or the next genius could be another Hitler or Stalin. So much for genius. You cannot, should not, decide the worth of a person on that basis.

Take the case of Karen Ann Quinlan. The New Jersey Supreme Court thought that she would die off a respirator, but thought that was acceptable because she would never return to "cognitive sapience". The moral of that decision is that if you lack cognitive sapience, too bad. But she did live for 10 more years without a respirator, and the philosopher Marvin Kohl thinks she should have been killed because her life was meaningless. It was meaningless during that whole 10-year period.<sup>3</sup> It was meaningless, he says, because she had lost her rational ability to think, and make choices based on thinking. And so, says Kohl, she would not have been injured if she had been killed. Killing would not be an injury; it would be a kindness. It would do no harm.

Now we see that all of these manifestations of God's image in us—choice, self-awareness, and reason — a similar point can be made: Human beings neither perfectly possess them nor exhibit them. Some human beings, for a variety of reasons, may never be able to manifest these characteristics of God's image. Some may deform or deface God's image by the way they use these very God-like powers. To some extent, we all do. We sin. We do so with our God-given and God-like powers as those made in the image of God. Now I side with those who do not consider sin powerful enough to destroy these powers. We can do God-like and God-pleasing things with our wills, our self-awareness, and our reason, but our worth does not depend on our abilities. Our worth does not depend on those God-like powers. We are sustained by the power which overcomes sin and what does that imply regarding personhood, regarding humans as bearers of rights and bearers of worth?

When I use the phrase bearers of rights, don't misunderstand me. There have been some very important criticisms of rights theory; I am among the critics of certain theories of rights. When I say that a person is a bearer of rights, or that an individual, a human being, is a bearer of rights, what I mean is that all of us as human beings who can act responsibly owe that human being something. If we are speaking of an individual's right to life, we owe them the protection of life; we owe them the restraint against killing; we owe them nurture. And so they can be said to be the bearer of a right, that is, an expectation about how we will behave toward them as human beings. And, of course, if we fail in our obligations, then they have a claim against us; then we can talk about the possibility of putting a right into law. So in that sense, people are bearers of rights, that is, they are those to whom obligations are owed. They are the neighbors we love. And that is what I mean by being a bearer of rights.

Now I wish to argue that the presence or absence, or the success or failure, of the powers to choose, to reason, or to be self-aware, does not determine our worth. Jesus welcomed those babies whom the disciples wanted to send home with their mothers, and took them into His arms. They were not reasoning yet; they were not choosing yet; they were not

likely self-aware yet; they did not likely have a conscious desire to live. But Jesus said, "For to such belongs the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:14) Well now, were these children made in the image of God? If only the characteristics so far discussed are characteristics of the image of God, where is the image of God in them? What's left of it? Thankfully, there is something more to the image of God. Two very basic characteristics of the image of God and the implications of these are what I want to discuss in what follows.

### **The Image of God as Kinship with God**

The image of God consists, first of all, in the kinship with God. We are offspring of God; imagine that! Children of God! Of course Jesus would welcome a child of God! He is the firstborn of God. These are kin! These are my kin! These children are brothers, sisters, sons and daughters. We did not make ourselves; we did not create life. We are not creating life in test tubes. We are borrowing from life that is already there. We did not make it. We are not going to make it; it has already been made, and it was not made by human hands. Human hands do not yield that first human hand. We are offspring of God, and like offspring we bear the image of our parent. I find that very interesting.

I found a very interesting biblical passage which bears on this. Any time you try to think of something to say you can run into very interesting materials. Consider Genesis 5:1-3: I do not remember reading this passage, but suddenly I have read this thing. I find it amazing. "This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man he made them in the likeness of God, male and female he created them." What a way to start the generations of Adam. Ah, but look: "When Adam had lived 130 years he became the father of a son in his own likeness after his image and named him Seth." Now, if you are going to say that Seth is in the image of Adam, you will have to say Seth is in the image of God. Adam is passing on the image of God. As Seth gets the image of Adam, he gets the image of God. The kinship goes on. Seth is an offspring of God. We encounter here a bodily-spiritual tie, a unity, a kinship with God which is passed on. And Christ is God in human embodiment; the likeness of God; the image of the invisible God; and the firstborn of all creation (Col. 1:15). Christ, a biological entity, bears the image of God. Every human being is a child of God, needing redemption, but still conceived and born as a child of God, is God's kin. The kinship with God assumes incalculable, inestimable worth. And this grounds moral norms. Consider the commandment not to kill, as portrayed in Gen. 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of a man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." The worth of a human life is totally incalculable because human beings are offspring of God. And the only compensation for wiping out offspring of God is something comparable. The only thing comparable is an offspring of God. There is nothing else comparable. Human life has incomparable worth. Nothing is commensurate with the image of God but the image of God

itself. Hence, you cannot make up for destroying the image of God. And, as Karl Barth observes, being made in the image of God is the clearcut reason for the command not to kill.<sup>4</sup> Human life is given by God for a specific purpose. Every life has inscrutable meaning. Every life is set under God's protection, and therefore, every life must be treated with holy awe. Everyone is owed this as God's offspring made in God's image.

Implied also by such kinship is the equality of the right to life, the equality of the protection owed. Everyone is a child of God, in the likeness of God, and this makes sense out of the Declaration of Independence. You cannot make sense out of the Declaration of Independence without this understanding, because it says we are all born equal. How could we be born equal? And of course some people say that, "We are not equal." We cannot be equal. But the claim that we are "endowed by the creator with the inalienable right to life" only makes sense in the context of being born equal as offspring of God. And we are owed, then, protection, nurture, and the restraint against killing. And however different human beings are, we are all equally God's kin; we all bear the parental likeness.

Now you might ask, "Does this reality have any power in human affairs?" You might say, "This is nice for us as Christians to discuss, this image of God, and that we are children of God, but that does not carry any weight in the political arena." Well there is a very interesting book by David Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the West*.<sup>5</sup> And it is a very ambitious study he undertook. He won a prize for his book, deservedly so. He tried to find out what ideas finally became efficacious in the successful fight against slavery in the United States. It was not the ideas of scientists and philosophers, because they did not see the people as equal. Not was it Locke, even though we borrow his rights talk in the Declaration of Independence. It was not Locke because he excluded blacks and women from the social contract. His contract was not based on kinship with God. But slavery was defeated, Davis argues, because blacks were generally acknowledged, and increasingly acknowledged with shame by slave owners, to be God's children. Blacks were God's children: What was happening to them should not happen to God's children. And God's image, remember, is male and female, as well as black, white, red and yellow; it is a powerful source of our fundamental equality.

### **The Image of God: The Law Within and Living Within the Law**

God's image takes on still another form besides kinship: God's image is expressed in living in accord with God's commandments. We have the law written on our hearts. Calvin is among the theologians who view the image of God as expressed in those who live in accord with the Mosaic Covenant, in those who live in accord with the Ten Commandments. When, therefore, self-awareness, choice, and reason are expressed in the form of obedience to the Ten Commandments, then God's image is manifest in these powers. And then, when God's image is manifest in these powers,

human beings become part of God's procreative, life-sustaining work on behalf of God's children: honoring parents, not killing, faithful in truth-telling and sexual relations, not yearning for what others have—you know the story. Thus, all humans with some powers of choice, self-awareness and reason also have the power to know and to live in ways requisite to the life of communities. You cannot found a community and you cannot sustain a community without constraints on killing, without constraints on lying, without constraints on sexual behavior, and without constraints on envy. Community hangs on fidelity to these norms. And this holds for Christians and non-Christians alike. Therefore, we can work together to hold life in holy awe, to regard every human being as of incalculable worth, as equally bearers of the right to life, and as equally owed protection of their lives.

But, does this kind of thinking actually get into documents today? It does. For example, in the German Constitutional Court on abortion: "Where human life exists, human dignity is present to it. The human being need not be conscious of it, or know how to preserve it. To be conceived is enough to establish it."<sup>6</sup> Within the German Court decision, human life is depicted as an ultimate value, the particulars of which need not be established. To have human life is to have human dignity, and life is the prerequisite for all other fundamental rights. This court is expressing its own version of the Mosaic Covenant.

Think with me about Israel's beginning as a community. When I ask students, "How do you start a community," among a band of escaped slaves in the desert, they want to start a military. I say, "Well, you know, I'm not going to give up my arms. I don't trust you." Or they want to form a government; they want to make rules. But the Mosaic Covenant contains rules without which there are no rules. If we did not exhibit these; if we had no such impulses and no such powers; if killing were as pleasurable as sexual intercourse, where would we be? How could we form communities? But intercourse happens to be joined with giving life. And killing happens to be, thanks again to the Creator, a deep inhibition. So we come to our classrooms and conferences unarmed. Imagine that. And we still go unarmed to McDonald's. We regard our constraints as strong. That one person would walk into McDonald's in California and start shooting people, we do not expect to happen again. And so we go into restaurants unarmed. The inhibitions against killing are deep. They are powers that be, not powers we created. The German court sees this. And it sees that once you create any category of unworthy or worthless life, then the life of a single individual means nothing. You cannot create one concept of non-personhood, of worthless life, otherwise individual life means nothing. You have to protect each individual life in its concrete existence, says the Court. But it is not talking about rabid individualism; it's talking about a community's responsibility to protect each of its members. And it says that if you make any utilitarian calculus of the value of human beings and their lives, then there will be no protection for any single individual. Period. The

German Court reminds readers of how it was under the Nazis. It explicitly aims to prevent anything similar.

### A Second Implication

Now, a second implication of the law written on our hearts is that being offspring of God and knowing God's parental admonitions is actually essential to living the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule runs through all the major religions; it is more or less universal. But how we think about the Golden Rule, how we understand its context and how we think it possible to live up to it, is important. The version of it in Matthew 7:12 is really remarkable: "So that whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them." George Bernard Shaw once remarked that we should not do for others what we wish for ourselves because they might have different tastes. Or, as someone like Sidgwick says, "People should not follow this rule, they might conspire to do evil together." But these reactions ignore the context to this. The context depicts parental behavior, comparing human parents with God. If our children ask us for bread, would we give them a stone? If our children ask us for fish, would we give them a serpent? And if we who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will God give good things to those who ask (Matt. 7:9-11). It is after this assurance that we knew how to give sustenance and will give it to our children, even as God, our Father, will give it to us, His children, that we are told to do to others what we wish they would do to us. So the Golden Rule is followed when we express the wishes of an unconditionally nurturing, creating, saving God. The Golden Rule is not just wishing for others anything anyone might wish for himself. These days there are people who wish they were dead. I do not want them behaving toward *me* as they wish for themselves. Some wish their children dead. This is no guide for relating to one's children.

Some might say this is a Christian teaching. Certainly it is. But interestingly enough, it is not exclusively so at all. When Aristotle discusses friendship, he regards it as a form of being a good neighbor to another.<sup>7</sup> And how, he asks, would you know how to be a good neighbor? You know how because you know how to be a good neighbor to yourself. And when he is discussing the qualities of friendships, one such is that a friend would wish the other to exist, "as a mother does her child." Another is that friends grieve and rejoice with one another, and again he says, "as a mother does." And Jesus takes on the qualities of mothering when He speaks of gathering the people of Jerusalem under His wings like a mother hen gathers her brood (Luke 13:34). So we dare not desecrate our image of parenthood and we dare not bring it down below the great ideal set within our knowledge of the Creator and the Redeemer.

So, if we sum up the question of personhood, what I have claimed is that all the respect due to a person is due to all human beings. They are all equally offspring of God, and they are all of incalculable worth. So if you want to talk about respect for persons and respect for human beings, you



are talking about the same thing: respect for *persons* is respect for *all human beings*, all equally offspring of God and all expressing God's image. And this respect is only possible because there are people expressing God's image by living out the commandments, by living out the requisites of community. This is the lesson of the Good Samaritan story.

But we cannot seem to learn it, so I have to say something *again* about the Good Samaritan story. Everywhere I go I have to tell the Good Samaritan story. And remember, the Good Samaritan story is a powerful part of medicine. But how is it a part of medicine? And how is it a part of our lives? It begins with the lawyer who asks, "Who is my neighbor?" This question is one he asks after being told that he will have the eternal life he seeks if he will love God with all his heart and soul and his neighbor as himself. He knows that but he is not content. He asks that never-ending question, "Who is my neighbor?" He has to ask that question, just like so many keep asking, "Who qualifies as a person?" There is a place for speaking of persons for legal purposes but not for the purpose of assigning worth. And that is what this lawyer needs to learn, as we all do. And so we are told the story about the Samaritan who helps the half-dead person. Who then is the neighbor? The Samaritan is the neighbor. What does that say to us? It says that all people are capable of expressing the image of God, of living out the commandments. The Samaritan is equally a moral agent, equally a bearer of the image of God. We should not create categories of racially, ethically, or sexually second-class humans and citizens. The Samaritan is also the bearer of rights, and so is the half-dead person. Indeed, do not even ask the financial cost of helping the half-dead person. "If you need more money," says the Samaritan, "I'll give you more money. Do everything you can." This is how one made in the image of God relates to another made in the image of God.

The way we decide the personhood question from a moral perspective is to treat all human beings as persons. They are owed everything which everyone who is a member of the species is owed. That's what I'm really arguing.

### **Image of God: Some Applications to Medicine**

I want to say a few things about medicine. Let us look briefly at truth-telling in the relations among physicians, nurses, ministers and patients. One of my colleagues at Harvard, Denise Ross, a nurse, is doing some research which reveals that nurses are most vexed when patients are not told the truth by doctors. When that happens, neither the patient nor the nurse is a neighbor to the doctor. The doctor is not regarding them as equal moral agents, and they are not being treated as such. But what about the deceptions? Do they express the image of God? What some people say to that is, "Well, sometimes you have to lie." Yes, but when do you lie? What, after all, is lying? Lying is a decision. When you lie, you decide to take charge; you try to withhold a fact or information so that you can exert some control over someone. Basically, what you do is treat that individual

not as a neighbor but as an enemy. Now, sometimes you have to treat a person as an enemy. That is what is happening in the classic case of the Gestapo agent seeking out a Jew. You, knowing where a Jew is hidden, treat the agent as an enemy because he is an enemy; he could kill someone with your information. So, you withhold it. But remember, this classic exception to telling the truth occurs when that other person being deceived is not acting as a responsible, moral agent. In medicine, however, the presumption is that all are equally moral agents; they are all neighbors. That is the presumption.

I could tell you interesting cases, but you probably know them yourself; cases, for example, of the squeeze that people have been put into because ministers or nurses or both have been instructed by physicians to withhold the truth from patients. But I could also tell you good stories of how nurses and ministers, confronting doctors, have also found them amenable; there are happy endings to some of these stories. To some of these stories, however, there are *not* happy endings. In short, there is work to be done to exhibit the image of God through truth-telling in medicine.

Well, secondly, with regard to the reverence for life, it is very important to distinguish killing and letting die. You really have to make that distinction in order to define futile treatment in such a way that it does not involve killing but only a decision to refrain from causing unnecessary suffering. But, apparently some physicians are no longer being guided by the Golden Rule as we have depicted it. Even though there was only a 38.8 per cent response rate I consider these findings startling: "Do you feel that patients should have the option of requesting active euthanasia when faced with an incurable terminal illness?" Yes, 70%; no, 23%; unsure 7%; no answer, 1%. Question: "If you do feel that legalization of active voluntary euthanasia would be appropriate, do you think that physicians should be the ones to carry out such requests?" Yes, 54%; no, 26%; unsure, 11%; no answer, 9%. Is this the wave of the future? Or is that future already here? The majority are not expressing reverence and awe before life; they are not thinking of life in its most essential kinship with the Creator and essential, equal worthiness. Certainly I think people who are dying should be able to decide how they live while they are dying and make decisions for comfort only and the like. Indeed, a hospital patient might make the decision to go home and write a book. In fact, that decision was the very salutary for one inoperable cancer patient. Physicians offered him an operation for the sake of comfort. He did not want it; he wanted to finish his book. He finished many books and died of a heart attack 20 years later!

Consider one more application, this one having regard to the quality of life. One of the things that has disturbed me over and over again in discussions of cases with physicians are judgments made about the quality of other person's lives. And these lives, judged as they are, become unequal. I remember the case in which there were two children who were desperately ill. The medical personnel were deciding whether to treat. But, interestingly enough, since physicians tend to think of themselves as very

scarce resources, the debate centered around whether to go for both, or one, or none — the whole spectrum. It seems that one child is not doing well in school, has quarrelsome parents, is financially not particularly well-off, and is not a particularly happy child. What then is the decision? Do not treat. What do you tell the parents? Tell them it is hopeless. That's the key word, so often used. It is hopeless. So, what options do the parents have? Well, you don't treat, if it's hopeless. The other child is doing well in school, has hobbies, rides horseback, for goodness sakes, and has pleasant parents. These parents have quite a bit of money; if your child rides horseback you probably have money. What is the decision? Treat. What are the parents told? There is still a chance. Several times I asked the doctors reporting the case, "Now, do you really think these cases were medically equal? That is, were they both pretty well hopeless?" "Yes," they said, "There's no question about that." And yet, they had two different stories for the parents and two different judgments. That was not equal reverence for life. I realize that no physician here can second-guess them; nor can I second guess them as to whether they should or should not have treated. Both children died as expected. However, one of them might not have. My own tendency is to err on the side of life as they did for the one child. But that policy should have applied equally to both children. How can one make these judgments based on quality of life for someone else? If we reverence life, if we think of it as equal, then we should not be talking about rationing. We now have all these conferences on rationing. Do you know what we ought to ration? We ought to ration malpractice suits. We ought to ration malpractice insurance. We ought to ration lawyers' fees. We ought to ration unnecessary tests. Why aren't we talking about these things? Why are we saying we lack resources? We *squander* billions of dollars fighting one another, and we say we don't have the resources to treat people equally when we should err on the side of life. It is for fighting that we do not have resources, as far as I am concerned. But we certainly should ration waste and save money to save lives.

I have to end where i often end, because I've never heard this thing said better, as to why we should reverence life and why we should reverence it equally. This letter was a wonderful ringing response to Duff and Campbell.<sup>8</sup> Duff and Campbell reported a lot of hopeless cases, including even happy Down's Syndrome children in their list. This letter was a response to a *Newsweek* article describing Duff and Campbell making the decisions that certain infants and certain handicapped infants should not be saved because the quality of their lives is not good enough. The letter reads:

I'll wager my entire root systems and as much fertilizer as it would take to fill Yale University that you never received a letter from a vegetable before this one. But much as I resent the term, I must confess that I fit the description of a vegetable as defined in the article, "Shall this Child Die?" Due to severe brain damage incurred at birth I am unable to dress myself, toilet myself, or write. My secretary is typing this letter. Many thousands of dollars had to be spent on my rehabilitation and

education in order for me to reach my present professional status as a counselling psychologist. My parents were also told, thirty-five years ago, that there was little or no hope of achieving meaningful humanhood for their daughter.

This is somebody who understands the Samaritan story. When you find somebody who does, hang on to their story. And I have. Here is how she ends this story:

Have I reached humanhood? Compared with Doctors Duff and Campbell, I believe I have surpassed it! Instead of changing the law to make it legal to weed out us vegetables, let us change the laws so we may receive quality medical care, education and freedom to live as full and productive lives as our potential will allow.

I rest my case.

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