

1. Life: The Dignity of Being Creatures

Introduction

When you encounter another human being, what are you encountering?

How do you know if someone's life is worth living?

1. We are creatures

- In the beginning God created... (Gen 1:1)
- God the Holy Trinity (Gen 1:2, 27; Jn 1:1-4)

- We are creatures, created from nothing (*ex nihilo*)

- Contrast human creativity

- 'Nothing' is not a strange kind of 'something'

- Hebrews 11:3; Isaiah 44:24
 - 'all things...alone...by myself'

- God alone is 'the all-embracing cause of all existence'.¹

Implications:

- We do not create ourselves

- The shape, purpose, goal and dignity of human life is defined by our creator
 - Rom 11:36

- To reject God's shape, purpose and goal for our lives is to attempt our own unmaking

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.45.2

2. As creatures, we are needy and dependent

- God has life in himself
 - Exodus 3:14; John 1:4; 5:26
 - Acts 17:24-25

(God plus the world) cannot be conceived as better than God alone... That is, no perfection would be lost if God had not created the world. The world and God must be so understood that nothing but God could be all that there is, and there would be no diminution of greatness or goodness or perfection. God is not better or greater because of creation, nor is there more goodness or greatness because God did create.²

God 'is perfect blessedness in himself in the absence of creatures'.³ Therefore, 'the triune God could be without the world; no perfection of God would be lost, no triune bliss compromised, were the world not to exist; no enhancement of God is achieved by the world's existence'.⁴

- As creatures, we depend utterly on God for existence and life
 - Acts 17:28; Rom 11:36

Implications:

- Weakness and dependency are natural and inevitable to human life
- We need one another, and the rest of creation (Gen 2:9, 16, 18)
- Above all, we need God
- Prayer is utterly basic to true human flourishing

² Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Catholic University of America Press, 1995 [1982]), 9.

³ *GWMI*, 89.

⁴ *GWMI*, 91.

3. As creatures, we are good

- Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

a. God Alone is Good

- Mark 10:18; Ps 119:68

God only is infinitely good. A boundless goodness that knows no limits, a goodness as infinite as his essence, not only good but best; not only good but goodness itself, the supreme unconceivable goodness. All things else are but little particles of God, small sparks from this immense flame, sips of goodness to this fountain.⁵

b. All God's works are good

- Ps 119:68

- Therefore, creation is good

*c. Humans are **very** good (Gen 1:31)*

- The image of God (Gen 1:26-27)

- Creation is exaltation!
 - Ps 8:5-8

'God the creator gives life, and the gift of life includes the bestowal of inalienable and inviolable dignity.'⁶ (John Webster, 'Dignity of Creatures')

⁵ Stephen Charnock, *Discourse on the Existence and Attributes of God*, in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 277.

⁶ John Webster, 'The Dignity of Creatures', in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology. Volume II: Virtue and Intellect*. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 35.

d. What happens if you remove God from the picture?

Immanuel Kant (1785): ‘*autonomy* [‘a share in universal legislation’] is...the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature’.⁷

‘[God] is the ground of creatures; without him, all is surface, and apart from him appeals to dignity can scarcely be more than cries of alarm, or prohibitions, or commands which lack final authority to compel action. Apart from God, dignity is precarious, hovering in an order of obligation untethered to an order of being.’⁸

Examples:

- Abortion and Infanticide

[I]t is...characteristics like rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness that make a difference. Infants lack these characteristics. Killing them, therefore cannot be equated with killing normal human beings...No infant—disabled or not—has as strong a claim to life as beings capable of seeing themselves as distinct entities, existing over time.⁹

- Canada: ‘Medical Assistance in Dying’ (MAID)¹⁰
 - 10,064 people in 2021

Implications:

- We don’t get to decide which lives have dignity
- *All* human life is good
- The shape, meaning, and dignity of human life: ‘from him and through him and to him’ (Rom 11:36)

‘God wants us for Himself...’

God calls [us] to Himself as a father his child.’¹¹

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, §436.

⁸ John Webster, ‘The Dignity of Creatures’, 29.

⁹ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981 [20th printing (!), 2005]), 182.

¹⁰ Alexander Raikin, ‘No Other Options’, *New Atlantis*, Winter 2023;

<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/no-other-options>

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, 657.