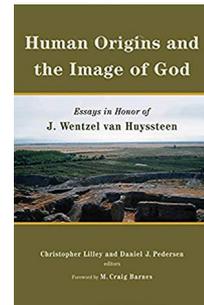


Book Review

Christopher Lilley and Daniel Pedersen (editors).
*Human Origins and the Image of God:
Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen*
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Reviewed by, David Muthukumar S. Fuller, Pasadena



Human Origins and the Image of God is brought out as a *festschrift* to the Princeton Theological Seminary Professor Wentzel van Huyssteen, in acknowledgement of his scholarship and contributions to theological thinking on the question of human uniqueness and human origin. It comprises of a collection of essays written by some prominent scientists, philosophers and theologians. In this volume, they augment, challenge and at times refute his wide and pertinent theological reflections on the specificity of human species as he is in close conversation with leading paleoanthropologists and archaeologists and evolutionary cognitive theories of religion. The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is an assemblage of essays written by a few natural scientists. Part 2 is a collection of writings by selected philosophers and historians. Part 3 contains reflections by some prominent theologians. In the introduction, Neil Gregersen traces the intellectual trajectory of van Huyssteen that grounds subsequent reflections. Gregersen notes that van Huyssteen follows a postfoundationalist hermeneutic combining the strength of both the modern and postmodern epistemologies. His postfoundationalist epistemology helped him to overcome the problematics of the modernist distinction between ‘objective’ empirical (scientific)

reasons and more ‘subjective’ ethical, religious, or aesthetic reasons. Gregersen also notes that van Huyssteen is a strong advocate of science-theology interactions as he averred that science is the “best bet” we have for understanding the structure of the universe and evolution of life and humanity. With his use of evolutionary epistemology, he was able to argue for the common biological roots of human rationality that signify the general trajectories of human reason. Gregersen also mentions that in his book *Alone in the World?*, Van Huyssteen expounds his theological anthropology in conceiving the biblical symbol of the *imago Dei* in human beings as embodied persons endowed with a symbolic awareness. These varied reflections of van Huyssteen are engaged by the contributors to this volume in highlighting certain aspects in regard to the specificity of the human species.

In the first chapter, Ian Tattersall traces the acquisition of human uniqueness through the evolutionary understanding of humans acquiring of bipedality, brain size expansion, symbolic thought, language and material culture. In the second chapter, Ian Hodder explores the concept of “Entanglement” which he defines as “the sum of human dependence on things, thing dependence on humans, thing dependence on other things and human dependence other humans.” Using

paleolithic and evolutionary origins of religion he establishes that religions can be seen as playing a role in “making sense of, accepting, or coming to terms with, or rationalizing this entrapment.” However he does concede that religion can be both a response to, or a major contributor to such entrapments. In chapter 3, Justin Barret and Tyler Greenway explore the cognitive-evolutionary perspectives on human uniqueness and the *imago Dei*. They argue that animal domestication might have been a critical point in human religious evolution and may be even central to an understanding of the humans as being created in the image of God. They refer to the fact that humans possess a unique cognitive capacity that distinguishes humans from non-humans by alluding to Higher-Order Theory of Mind (HO-ToM). In the next chapter, Agustín Fuentes takes a lead from van Huyssteen to argue that a substantial component of our evolutionary success is due to our being a semiotic species. He notes that the use of symbols and imagination in perceiving the reality around us as well as responding to it is a major factor in human evolutionary histories that sustained the survival of *homo sapiens*.

In the following chapter, Richard Potts goes on to describe the latest archaeological clues concerning the complicated aspects of human origin. As the human species evolved, the “enlargement of mental and behavioural flexibility, expanded connectivity across social groups and the growth of adaptive options to diversify into different cultures” constituted the critically important dimensions of human life. In this evolutionary growth, he avers that religion became one of the great avenues of symbolic understanding of the world as it has the potential to dissolve the differences and instil the coherence of human life and the unity. But, he also points to its ability to increase the

differences between the people that would drive them apart. This confirms the earlier notion of religious potential for “entrapment”.

In part 2, Keith Ward reflects on the dignity and distinctiveness of the human being from a philosophical perspective. Ward argues that cosmologists who argue for the origin of the universe from a “quantum vacuum” will find little difficulty in postulating “nonmaterial, non-spatiotemporal entities and nonphysical causes.” Thus, he argues that this view can easily incorporate “an eternal, intelligible, causally effective, and not fully comprehensible origin and continuing basis for the physical universe” – God. He further advocates for a theistic evolution that captures the progressive emergence of consciousness and responsible action for the humanity in the material world. In the next chapter, Wesley Wildman discusses the origin of “axiological sensitivity” where axiology is the faculty that conceives values—moral and aesthetic— as it evolved through the evolutionary process. He locates its origin in the development of human social-psychology facilitated by our embodied cognition and the “valuational hybridity” of reality present in the interaction of an organism with its environment. He claims that the meaning of our lives is construed through our individual and corporately structured adventures in axiological engagement. From a theological anthropology perspective, Wildman conceives God as the ground of being, which he understands as the condition for the possibility of axiological landscape of possibilities with “dynamic structures yet valuationally ungraded.” He disagrees with van Huyssteen for whom “God is morally interested and aesthetically invested being.” He claims that this anthropomorphic model has to be displaced as he denies all possibilities of a “valuational grading” by

pointing to some “illusory stories of absolute valuational grading (God’s moral interest).

In the subsequent chapter, Michael Ruse also, from an “inquiring agnostic” perspective, raises some tough questions for Christians about human evolution. Firstly, he challenges the unique creation of Adam and Eve as modern science based on the shared mitochondrial evidence proves that human ancestors “hominins” were part of a larger group of conspecifics. Thus, he claims that there is no basis for Augustinian original sin. He shows that the “natural selection” of evolutionary process will do away with the Church’s insistence of male supremacy as biologists have repeatedly proven that female apes are as powerful and effective as males. He also raises doubts about arguments for theistic evolution as if God wanted humans to evolve out of natural selection, he would have gone out of luck. He denies any possibilities of a purposeful evolution as in his opinion the extreme complexity of the randomness of selection will preclude such.

Next, John Brooke takes a different approach as he argues that the adaptive cognitive fluidity as found in the human evolutionary process (also van Huyssteen) is manifested in inter-relationships between technology and artistry. He goes on to show how even mere “technological” innovations have carried aesthetic and religious connotations. He points to the manner of getting solutions to structural problems in the form of sudden inspiration that has the character of revelation. He argues that the constitution of human species is a cumulative effect within the evolutionary process. He believes that concepts of human nature and human uniqueness can only be adequately analysed by examining what humans *do*, and not simply by reference to how they are biologically constituted. This is in agreement with van Huyssteen’s

own understanding that human evolution happened through “niche construction” that blurs biological and cultural factors involved in mapping human evolution.

Part 3 focuses on the theological and ethical perspectives on human origins and uniqueness. Firstly, Celia Deane-Drummond argues for “*inter-morality*” as the emergent of morality was parsed and shaped in interactions with other species. She concludes that evolutionary biology reminds us of the “collective morality”, that also includes the tendency to sin signalling the beginning of a “distinctive and deliberative collective will to err in the human community,” as a way of explaining the “original sin”. Then, Michael Welker emphasizes the aspects of conviction, communicability and comprehensibility as he argues that the presence of pluriform voices in their truth-seeking is what makes theology theology. Also, David Fergusson investigates the aspect of “anthropocentrism” that is key to understanding human uniqueness as he juxtaposes it with the paleobiological understanding of hominid evolution and warns about the dangers of alienating the human species from its intrinsic relationship with other species as well as extra-terrestrial possibilities. He challenges for a reconsideration of *imago Dei* as human beings are “embodied and embedded” in a wider narrative of creaturely existence. Subsequently, Etienne De Villiers explores the relationship between van Huyssteen’s postfoundationalism and his ethical responsibility theory and highlights the correspondences between the two notions. In the last essay, Dirk Smit notes the minimal presence of ethical implications in van Huyssteen’s reflections and engages with the conceptions of several other ethicists in constructing certain ethical discourses in reference to the problem of “living with

strangers” in the world.

The essays in this book deal comprehensively with the evolutionary science theories and relate them to theological issues (especially *imago Dei*). This results in a pluriform reflections on the understanding of human origin and uniqueness that will challenge and inform the reader. The mix of theistic, atheistic and agnostic voices is an interesting twist to this task. One of the salient aspect that is brought to the fore in this volume is a critique on the narrative of the sufficiency of a mere evolutionary biological understanding and emphasizing the “embedded and embodied” sense of human existence within the natural world. However, on the other side, I think that the process of engaging such an evolutionary and cognitive scientific interpretation to understand the *imago Dei* has raised more questions than shedding light on the matter. For example, an evolutionary awareness of the possession of a higher order cognitive faculty does not necessarily point to an automatic self-perception of human species as bearers of the *imago Dei* unless we account

for the Self-Revelation of God. As we can perceive throughout the history of the Church, it has been repeatedly made clear (by Aquinas, Calvin, Barth and others) that a mere natural theology will never be adequate and the notion of the special revelation has to be accounted for. But, it is not clear how a “natural selection” process will supply the means to understand such a divine “intervention” event. Hence, it is rather safe to say that such science-theology engagements have a limited interpretational value as science may unwittingly assume a priority role. Also the notion of “collective morality” that emerges in the complexity of biological and social interactions to account for the notion of “fall” and “original sin” is still in need of more explication as it raises the age-old philosophical question of the existence of evil and good. Is this “imperfection” an inherent aspect of evolution and can we construe the meaning of evil as a mere absence of good or as a potential force counteracting against the “good”?