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Luther's Existential Imago Dei, the Deprivation Thesis, and Sanctity of Life

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LUTHER'S EXISTENTIAL *IMAGO DEI*, THE DEPRIVATION THESIS, AND SANCTITY OF LIFE

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Abstract

- Some bioethicists, like Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, question the defensibility of the Sanctity of Life doctrine
- According to Kuhse and Singer, the doctrine depends on the attribution of moral status to a morally irrelevant property: Species
- But resourcing Martin Luther's conception of *imago Dei* and the Deprivation Thesis may provide morally relevant support for Sanctity of Life
- Traditionally, the Sanctity of Life doctrine has depended upon the *imago Dei* for support
- Accordingly, the *imago Dei* is supposed to be a property that:
 - a) qualitatively separates all human persons from all non-human animals
 - b) makes human persons of far greater moral worth than non-human animals.

My solution:

- I will look to the theology of Martin Luther as well as the deprivation thesis, and argue that Luther's doctrine of *imago Dei* is successful in meeting the joint conditions challenged by Kuhse and Singer, and successful in showing why it might be *ipso facto* morally worse to kill a human than a non-human animal.

Some Helpful Resources

Luther:

"Therefore my understanding of the image of God is this: that Adam had it in his being and that he not only knew God and believed that He was good, but that he also lived in a life that was wholly godly."

"But Adam lived in supreme bliss and in freedom from fear; he was not afraid of fire, of water, or of the other discomforts..."

Peterson:

"First of all, Luther argues that the image of God provided Adam with the clearest and purest experience of life. This applied to both his spiritual and physical existence. Second, Adam had no fear of death or other anxiety."

My Formulation of Luther's *imago Dei*:

iD: For any creature p , p is in the *imago Dei* IFF it is causally possible for p to have an aesthetic experience of God e .

The Deprivation Thesis

- On the Deprivation Thesis, death is bad for a person because, in Jeff McMahan's words, "it [excludes] what would be good for a person – namely continuing to exist."
- Thus, if a person dies, she is deprived of the good life she would have had had she continued living.
- To state this in a non-decorative terms:

If p dies at t and thereby goes out of existence, p fails to incur any goods and harms that she would have incurred after t in the closest possible world in which p does not die at t .

So, killing is *pro tanto* wrong on the deprivation thesis because it causes the deprivation of goods.

A Solution

1. All conscious humans and entities that will be conscious humans in the future can have an aesthetic experience of God. (Luther)
2. No non-human animals can have an aesthetic experience of God.
3. Thus, all conscious humans and entities that will be conscious humans in the future, and no non-human animals can have an aesthetic experience of God. (1,2)
4. For any conscious human or entity that will be a conscious human in the future p , it is causally possible for p to have an aesthetic experience of God, and for any non-human animal q , it is not causally possible for q to have an aesthetic experience of God. (3)
5. Some aesthetic experiences of God are immense goods for those who have aesthetic experiences of God.
6. If some event in p 's life e is good for p , then e makes p 's life more morally valuable than it would have been, all other things being equal, if e were not an event in p 's life.
7. If (4), (5), and (6), then **iD'** is possibly true:

iD': For any conscious human or entity that will be a conscious human in the future p , p bears the property **iD**. Thus, it is causally possible for p to have an extrinsically good aesthetic experience of God e . p 's possibly having an e makes p 's future life more morally valuable than the lives of non-human animals q for which it is not causally possible for q to have an extrinsically good aesthetic experience of God.

8. So, **iD'** is possibly true. (4,5,6,7)

- **iD'** is a property that:

- a) qualitatively separates all human persons from all non-human animals
- b) makes human persons of far greater moral worth than non-human animals.

So, the Sanctity of Life doctrine is defensible.

Implications

1. **Sanctity of Life is true.** At least for those humans that can have conscious experiences, and, perhaps, for fetuses too.
2. **Severely cognitively impaired humans are in the *imago Dei*.**
3. **It might be morally impermissible to cease care.** This seems bad, but there may be ways out of this problem.
4. **The lives of "mystics" might be more morally valuable than the lives of "non-mystics".** If "e's" happen more among some group of people a than among b , aren't the lives of the people in a more valuable than those in b ? This seems counter-intuitive, but it might be okay to bite this bullet. If not, there may be ways out of this problem.

References

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