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# Beyond Essentialism and Complementarity: Toward a Theological Anthropology Rooted in *Haecceitas*

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## Abstract

The field of theological anthropology has experienced something of an impasse in recent decades as a result of the critical challenges that have arisen from developments in feminist theory and poststructuralist philosophy. This article explores the possibility that an approach to theological reflection on the human person rooted in the philosophical and theological innovations of John Duns Scotus in the development of his principle of individuation (*haecceitas*) can offer new resources for avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism and complementary.

The quest to understand the human person from the perspective of the Christian theological tradition has resulted in several proposals that have come under serious critical assessment in recent decades. Grounded in the scriptural foundation for intrinsic human dignity classically summarized as humanity's creation as *imago Dei* (Gn 1:27), many attempts to provide a comprehensive theological anthropology have reduced the effort to understand better the meaning of *imago Dei* to an explication of so-called "human nature."[1] This focus on the nature of the human person, rooted as it is in the Christian appropriation of Hellenistic philosophical traditions, can rightly be

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1. Richard Lints, "Theological Anthropology in Context," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael Horton, and Mark Talbot (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) 1–12, at 4.

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described as essentialist. Over the centuries of Christian history, this focus has resulted in numerous expressions of theological reflection that emphasize the substantial quality of humanity over and against the dignity and inherent value of the particular, individual human person.[2] The primacy of substance from a hylomorphic metaphysical standpoint within the Christian anthropological tradition has reinscribed an implicit androcentrism and the privileging of a certain male normativity, which feminist theologians have raised to greater consciousness.[3] This particular iteration of tacit normativity has surfaced most explicitly in theological and philosophical anthropological projects that seek to make sense of embodiment and the *imago Dei* in terms of gender complementarity.[4] Additionally, there have been more nuanced yet comparably problematic attempts to respond to an increased awareness of the effects of demarcating human *being* into binary terms of gender categories, while also striving to uphold the apparent substantial grounding of both Scripture and the metaphysical Christian tradition.[5]

2. Ian A. McFarland, *Difference & Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001) 6–10; David Kelsey, "The Human Creature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (New York: Oxford, 2007) 121–39, at 124–28; and Eleazar Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004) 18–24.

3. Credited with helping to shift scholarly awareness of this systemic normativity are several now-classic studies including Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); and Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). For more bibliography, see Mary Ann Hinsdale, "Heeding the Voices: An Historical Overview," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995) 22–48. Donna Teevan has recently critiqued these earlier views for their lack of poststructural and theoretical engagement: "Challenges to the Role of Theological Anthropology in Feminist Theologies," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 582–97. Philosophers and feminist theorists have further illuminated the complications that are inherently present in presuppositions concerning gender and its meaning; see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

4. An example is John Paul II's *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline, 2006). Variations on this theme also appear in John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year" (August 15, 1988), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_15081988_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html (all URLs cited herein were accessed November 14, 2013). See also Russell Hittinger, "Human Nature and States of Nature in John Paul II's Theological Anthropology," in *Human Nature in Its Wholeness: A Roman Catholic Perspective*, ed. Daniel Robinson, Gladys Sweeney, and Richard Gill (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2006) 9–33.

5. See, e.g., John R. Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991). In a chapter titled "Humanity: Male and Female," Sachs attempts to reconcile the need to maintain an essentialist view of *imago Dei* with the recent secular and theological scholarship that has called "our attention to differences between the sexes to which we were previously blind" (*Christian Vision of Humanity* 43–50, at 46). Sachs's summary response is that "humanity is one nature which subsists in two distinct modes, male and female" (ibid.). While he cautions against any strict establishment of normative gender roles, highlighting the manifold cultural conditions that contribute to shape identity, he does so in an effort to maintain this dual essentialist- and complementarity-based anthropological

As Marc Cortez and others have rightly observed, the task of identifying what it means to understand and talk about the "human person" continues to challenge other disciplines in addition to theology (e.g., sociology, psychology, biology, neuroscience, cultural anthropology, etc.).[6] Nevertheless, it remains the responsibility of the Christian community to strive for better understanding of what the idea of the human person means in terms of the Christian theological tradition.

My aim here is to propose a heuristic framework for theological anthropology in a postmodern setting. Contrary to the widely accepted presupposition that theology in our contemporary age must be nonfoundational (following Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and the subsequent rejection of so-called "ontotheology"),[7] I maintain that metaphysics in general is not entirely problematic, and that certain philosophical conceptions lend helpful insights to particular challenges in the construction of a sustainable theology.[8] Consequently, the possibility of identifying and engaging metaphysical insights should not be seen as impossible, inimical to, or in conflict with a postmodern constructive project in theological anthropology. On the contrary, I believe that John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), in his unique theory of the principle of individuation popularly known as *haecceitas*, offers us an often-overlooked resource for theological anthropology.[9] For

lens (48). Sachs's view can be contrasted with, for example, Mary McClintock Fulkerson's described in her "Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 99–115.

6.  Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2010) 6.

7.  See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 17th ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993). On the contemporary theological critique of metaphysics and ontotheology, see John Franke, "Christian Faith and Postmodern Theory: Theology and the Nonfoundationalist Turn," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005) 105–21; Merold Westphal, "Onto-theology, Metanarrative, Perspectivism, and the Gospel," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005) 141–53; Thomas G. Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005) 6–20; and John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1987) esp. 32–35.

8.  Christopher Ben Simpson advances a similar argument through his engagement of William Desmond's metaphysical project in response to John Caputo's critique of metaphysics. See his *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern: William Desmond and John D. Caputo* (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 2009). For an overview of Desmond's "return to metaphysics," see Christopher Ben Simpson, ed., *The William Desmond Reader* (Albany: SUNY, 2012).

9.  Due to the dearth of instances in which Scotus explicitly uses the term "principle of individuation," some scholars, such as Jorge J. E. Garcia, prefer to use the term "individuating entity" or some other moniker. However, as Allan Wolter has argued, *haecceitas*, the term Scotus's disciples adopted, best reflects the Scotist tradition in this regard. For this reason, I use *haecceitas* when referring to Scotus's "principle of individuation" or "individuating entity." See Jorge J. E. Garcia, "Individuality and the Individuating Entity in Scotus's *Ordinatio*: An Ontological Characterization," in *John Duns Scotus: Metaphysics and Ethics*, ed. Ludger Honnefelder, Rega Wood, and Mechthild Dreyer (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 229–49; and Allan Wolter's introduction to *Early Oxford Lecture on Individuation*, ed. Allan Wolter (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2005) xi–xii. For an in-depth study of the emergence, history, and usage of the term *haecceitas*, see Robert Andrews, "Haecceity in the Metaphysics of John Duns Scotus," in *Johannes Duns Scotus 1308–2008: Die philosophischen Perspektiven seines Werkes*, ed. Ludger Honnefelder et al. (Münster: Aschendorff, 2010) 151–62.

reasons that I identify below, Scotus's approach, while of an ontological and meta-physical quality, nevertheless offers fecund possibilities for contemporary retrieval and critical engagement. His concerns were not those of contemporary theologians. I therefore do not suggest that the medieval Franciscan anticipated what we have come to recognize as problematic about essentialism and complementarity in light of feminist theory and postmodern philosophy. Nevertheless, the unique theory posited by the Subtle Doctor for understanding the particularity and individuation of "singulars" in his time might very well in our time provide a foundational principle and model from which to develop a theological anthropology that moves beyond many of the problems of essentialism and complementarity that have perennially arisen in previous theologies.

The structure of this article is fourfold. First, I offer an overview of the challenges to theology presented by essentialism and gender complementarity so as to highlight the need to seek an alternative framework for Christian theological anthropology. Second, I outline the contemporary questions that arise for those engaged in constructing theological anthropologies today in light of what is often called the "postmodern turn."[10] Third, I show that identifying these questions help delimit a set of heuristic principles that provide the condition for a postmodern constructive project. Finally, I offer an introduction to Scotus's theory of haecceity and highlight the ways it might serve as a foundational resource for a contemporary theological anthropology.

## Problems with Essentialism and Complementarity

While fully capable of analysis according to their respective and individual thematic contents, the problems of essentialism and complementarity occupy an overlapping space of mutually problematic influence. Traditionally, these two concerns have been seen as interrelated, such that the focus on the substantial or essential *nature* of the "human person" has been subsumed into gendered discourse that presents a containable and static expression of the quiddity of (a) *the* "human person" and (b) the "male" and "female" human persons. Referring to this problematic connection, Kathryn Tanner writes, "Feminists remind us of the way appeals to fixed and given natures help solidify unjust social arrangements and disguise their contingency."[11] In what follows I briefly examine some of the both latent and, at times, more overt problems with approaches to theological anthropology that seek to present (or, perhaps, unwittingly rely on) categories of essentialism and complementarity.

### Problems with Essentialism

Some contemporary theorists, whose work has served theologians well, have rejected the possibility of such a substantial consideration of the human person. Linda Martín

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10. See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford, 1997); Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); and Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993).
11. Kathryn Tanner, "In the Image of the Invisible," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham, 2010) 117–34, at 118.

Alcoff, naming Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault as the three most prominent figures in this regard, explains: "Disparate as these theorists are, they share the view that the self-contained, authentic subject conceived by humanism as discoverable below a veneer of cultural and ideological overlay is in reality a construct of that very humanist discourse."[12] The condition in which we find ourselves is therefore hostile to any essentialist enterprise, and for good reason. Among the many concerns that a critical examination of the reductionist anthropological approach of essentialism raises, there are three pressing issues that I highlight here: the problems of knowledge, depersonalization, and ecological elitism.

One of the most fundamental problems with an essentialist approach to understanding the human person is the required—though rarely acknowledged—presupposition that we are capable of getting to an "essence of things that is free from interpretation or the noninterpreted essence" of the human person as such.[13] The axiomatic starting point for uncovering or expressing the "noninterpreted essence" of the human person has typically fallen under one of two nature-based anthropological efforts. One such quest might seek a "single-nature model" of human personhood, which presumes a universal *substantia* or essence common to humanity as distinct from or prior to gender or biological sex. The second (classical) form of inquiry seeks a "dual-nature model," which "stresses that the sexes are different and complementary, with preordained roles in the created order."[14] This form of essentialism attempts to describe the universal natures of both "male" and "female" in a manner closely resembling the single-nature model. The differentiation of the two natures presents additional challenges that I address below. In addition to the implied problematic qualities of both models, there stands an a priori fallacy in asserting the possibility of an apodictic method that can guarantee access to either this singular "human nature" or those differentiated dual natures. Such a starting point is burdened by the platonic specter of the ideal or eternal forms, a view that, in light of modern hermeneutic theory, can no longer be seriously sustained.

A second problem that arises with essentialist approaches is depersonalization. Ian McFarland has shed much light on the significance of recognizing the inherent differences in the lives, social contexts, relationships, outlooks, and values of human persons. Supporting the critique of objective, "pure" knowledge of any sort of human "nature," McFarland explains: "The distinctiveness of human beings within creation lies not in any intrinsic qualities or capacities that people share, but rather, in the differences that mark their lives under God."[15] He roots this anthropological claim in his understanding of personhood, which is constituted in part by relationship and identity formation. An essentialist approach to theological anthropology universalizes the inherent dignity and

12.  Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University, 2006) 140.
13.  Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human* 18. See also Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Creation and Construction: On the Theological Appropriation of Postmodern Theory," *Modern Theology* 18 (2002) 153–69, at 158–61.
14.  Teevan, "Challenges to the Role of Theological Anthropology in Feminist Theologies" 584.
15.  McFarland, *Difference & Identity* vii.

value of human beings at the expense of those outliers who do not immediately exhibit the qualities that form the essentialist nature. For McFarland the process of essentialist theological anthropological reflection defines the human person in terms of the "lowest common denominator" that ultimately excludes certain people from consideration as authentic persons.[16] Essentialist approaches mask the authentic and very real differences that mark the experiences of women and men of all backgrounds and social locations and depersonalize their respective existences, offering instead an iteration of a platonic ideal or eternal form according to which individuals can be evaluated, compared, and dismissed.[17] Depersonalization as a consequence of essentialism devalues the experiences and quotidian reality of those at the margins and perpetuates systems of injustice and inequity when adjudicators of such universal claims find that a given human person (the sexual minority, the person in a persistent vegetative state, the abject poor, etc.) insufficiently qualifies as a "legitimate human person."

A third problem of essentialist approaches is the demarcation between humanity and the rest of the created order. As Kathryn Tanner has observed, the exclusive focus on a particular nature (or "natures") of humanity unnecessarily and falsely segregates humanity from the rest of creation:

> At least in part, preoccupation with a well-bounded and clearly defined human nature seems fomented by theological anthropology's isolated attention to humans in and of themselves, as if the image of God could be located *in* them, in abstraction from their relations with others, particularly the God they are to image. The underlying problem is simply the presumption that human beings have a definite nature to begin with that could be considered in itself and perfectly well specified in its own terms.[18]

In recent years theologians have focused more intently on this tendency within certain approaches to theological anthropology that establishes a rigid hierarchical system of order. Humanity is portrayed as apart from, above, and over the rest of the created order by virtue of some essential or intrinsic distinction. Theologies of creation that have focused on what has been traditionally called a "stewardship model"—an approach to understanding the created order as "entrusted" to humanity for faithful stewardship and care—have also come under attack for similar, if tacit, hierarchical implications that resemble this problematic demarcation in less overt ways.[19] Any

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16. Ibid. 8.
17. Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject" 99–115.
18. Tanner, "In the Image of the Invisible" 118, emphasis original.
19. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist, 1993); Kathryn Tanner, "Creation, Environmental Crisis, and Ecological Justice," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 99–123; Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart That Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006); Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University, 2008); Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (New York: Oxford, 2009); Daniel P. Horan, *Francis of Assisi and the Future of Faith: Exploring*

attempt at a sustainable theological anthropology today will have to account for humanity's interrelationship with the rest of the created order, an approach that aligns well with the so-called "kinship model" of creation.[20] An essentialist approach toward understanding the human person from a Christian perspective presents a challenge to this task, for such a view necessarily emphasizes the unique ontological status of the human person in a manner that (perhaps only implicitly) subordinates the rest of the created order.[21]

## Problems with Complementarity

As indicated above, categories of complementarity—including iterations under the respective forms of the gendered, biological, or ontological variety—often arise from anthropologies that take for granted a form of essentialism intrinsic to the human person in some universal way. Beyond the few examples of the manifold challenges present in such approaches to Christian theological reflection on humanity presented above are additional concerns about relying on complementarity as an axiomatic condition for consideration of human personhood.

One of the more reductionist ways in which essentialist forms of theological anthropology inform theories of complementarity is the advocacy of intrinsic characteristics that subordinate women to men in accord with "God's intention." This generally takes place in one of two ways. First, in what might be categorized as a "classicist" perspective, women are seen as "imperfect" or "deficient" men.[22] In this line of thought, theological anthropology "involves questioning what may be termed the image of the 'normatively human.' The very term 'doctrine of man' suggests that 'man,' as pictured in Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing, is male and white."[23] Thinkers during the course of Christian history, including notable luminaries of theological authority such as Thomas Aquinas, have advanced iterations of this inadequate or privative notion of humanity in women. There is then a sense of dependence on men to "complete" or "complement" those qualities of women that are found lacking. In this case, those characteristics that are indicative of "human nature" are most fully signified and expressed by men, whereas women—by virtue of not being men—necessarily fail to reflect the fullness of humanity.

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*Franciscan Spirituality and Theology in the Modern World* (Phoenix: Tau, 2012) 101–14; and Dawn M. Nothwehr, *Ecological Footprints: An Essential Franciscan Guide for Faith and Sustainable Living* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012).

20. On this see Susan Ross, "Theology, Science, and Human Personhood," in *Anthropology: Seeking Light and Beauty* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012) 133–53.

21. Catherine Keller has keenly observed that even certain feminist efforts to overcome *andro*centrism necessarily slip into a problematic *anthropo*centrism ("Seeking and Sucking: On Relation and Essence in Feminist Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology* 54–78, at 56–61).

22. See Susan Ross, "Christian Anthropology and Gender Essentialism: Classicism and Historical-Mindedness," *Concilium* 27 (2006) 42–50.

23. Ross, *Anthropology* xiv.

The second way that this view of women as subordinate to men is frequently prof-fered is as an ontological status of inferiority generally linked to differences that are ostensibly "determined by [women's] *nature* to be weak, dependent, emotional, intui-tive, nurturing etc."[24] According to this schema, men complement women (and vice versa) because each lacks qualities inherent in the other. However, the presupposed absent qualities are not of equal value or dignity. On the contrary, those characteristics identified with men are privileged as superior to and more valuable than those identi-fied as foundational to the *nature* of women.[25] In this case, which might be described as symptomatic of the dual-nature essentialist approach, women are inherently inferior and subordinate to men because the qualities fundamentally identified with women are hierarchically beneath those fundamentally identified with men.

There are further complications and additional problems with complementarity as a foundation of theological anthropology. The Christian tradition has, at various points, relied on both the single-model and dual-model essentialist anthropological groundings to support teachings on the identity, place, vocation, and sociological roles of women and men. Anne Carr has drawn on the work of theologians who have surveyed magiste-rial texts that routinely affirm the "complementarity or 'different but equal' status of men and women as inherent in nature, in the created order, and therefore as part of the divine plan."[26] While this might at first seem a reasonable approach to anthropological reflection in light of the Christian tradition, Carr notes that what is really at stake is the maintenance of some universal "nature" that is "given by God and must not be changed." Additionally, "new knowledge of the human person, derived from the biological and human sciences, is irrelevant to theological discussion since the goal of theology is to preserve the past order as natural, as the order of creation, and therefore revealed by God."[27] While Carr notes that this sense of universal nature is most acutely portrayed in theologies that rely on a dual-nature essentialist approach (intrinsic, a priori differences between women and men),[28] there are problems likewise in relying on the single-nature approach preferred by early feminist theologians.[29] Among these pitfalls are the ways social location, culture, sexual identity, structures of systemic injustice, and other fac-tors are not adequately considered in asserting a single-nature approach.[30]

24. Kelsey, "The Human Creature" 125.

25. Ibid. 125. See also Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

26. Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (New York: Continuum, 1996) 125.

27. Ibid.

28. See Jean Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986).

29. For example, Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper, 1968); Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973); Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk*, and Reuther, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

30. Carr, *Transforming Grace* 126. Also, see Jane Kopas, "Beyond Mere Gender: Transforming Theological Anthropology," in *Women & Theology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis Kaminski (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995) 216–33.

As Mary Ann Hinsdale and Donna Teevan have noted, other recent feminist theologians have sought to move away from essentialist approaches in various ways.[31] Nevertheless, Teevan and others have argued that these efforts, while constructively heuristic, do not entirely exonerate the Christian theological anthropological project from the mire of the particular-universal tension that exists throughout the tradition. It is well understood that the Christian tradition has, in general, leaned decisively in the direction of emphasizing the universal at the expense of the particular. However, overemphasis on the particular runs the risk of disassociating the human person from humanity as such. The possibility of this narrow focus also threatens to ignore the biological, psychological, and social sciences that have offered significant insight to our collective understanding of the human person. A new approach to or framework for constructing theological anthropology is needed that does not rely on any of the traditional essentialist approaches, that will not perpetuate an outlook that maintains complementarity, but that will concurrently appropriate valuable insights from the postmodern theological work of contemporary theologians and theorists, while still grounding such a project in the Christian theological tradition.

## Postmodern Questions for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology

The dissolution of the human person as subject, in a sense, stands at the fore of much postmodern critique of theological anthropology. Responding to the received history of essentialist prioritizations of a static and comprehensible "human nature," some postmodern thinkers have asserted rather starkly that "there is no human nature, no substrate to human history, just as there is no trajectory along which humankind moves."[32] While this sort of declaration might seem to sound the death knell for theological anthropology, it is important to consider the validity of the postmodern critique. Critiques of certain metaphysical foundations and paradigms are not without their veracity, for the Christian tradition's doctrinal reliance on Hellenistic philosophical modes of thinking have burdened the task of those who seek to make sense of the tradition in light of contemporary culture, the social and natural sciences, shifting philosophical discourses, the phenomena of hypertechnology, globalization, and pluralism, to name but a few popular descriptors of today's situation. Theologians are tasked with offering a coherent and sustainable response in light of the shifting landscape that is popularly (if variously) termed "postmodern." Because the term "postmodernity" itself has been subject to substantial critique and misunderstanding, I limit my consideration of postmodernity to what is known as "deconstruction," an iteration of

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31. Hinsdale, "Heeding the Voices" 22–48; and Teevan, "Challenges to the Role of Theological Anthropology in Feminist Theologies" 582–97. Teevan points to the work of Mary Buckley and Elizabeth Johnson as two representative examples of the "transformative, person-centered model" and the "multipolar model," respectively.
32. John Webster, "The Human Person," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (New York: Cambridge University, 2003) 219–34, at 222.

the poststructuralist mode of philosophy made popular in the last half-century.[33] In what follows, I look at some themes to which any contemporary theological anthropology must be able to respond. These include the "linguisticality of the subject,"[34] relationality and alterity, and the historicity of identity.

## The Linguisticality of the Subject

In sharp contrast to the received Christian tradition that maintains certain constant factors of human subjectivity, a claim bolstered in part by the post-Enlightenment turn to the subject, deconstructionist thinkers are skeptical of any absolute, unmediated, or static notions of subjectivity. Following the incredulity toward metaphysics and the desire to overcome ontotheology in the work of Heidegger and his followers, thinkers like Jacques Derrida advocate an approach to the human person (and, for that matter, all phenomena) that is tied to the constructive, if unstable, role of language. Kevin Hogan summarizes this point well:

> The subject is inscribed in language, is a function of language. Furthermore, language itself is not a reliable structure from which to assess reality. Rather, in Derrida's poststructuralist view, language . . . is characterized by *différance*, a neologism used to affirm the way in which language demonstrates only difference and deferral, while lacking the reliability of stable meaning. If the human subject is inscribed in language as *différance*, no stable prelinguistic anthropology can be espoused.[35]

In one sense, this deconstructive approach is indeed truly postmodern in that it seeks to reinvigorate the dynamism of reality back into being, which Heidegger and others recognized was absent from the pre-Socratic philosophers after Heraclitus until those post-Cartesian philosophers, theorists, and theologians of recent modernity.

The Derridean notion of *différance* is a helpful and key concept here. Drawing on the semiotic and linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida argues that no sign has a self-enclosed identity or absolutely stable meaning.[36] The word *différance* is a play on the French word *différer*, which can alternatively be translated as "differing" and "deferring." Derrida claims that language finds its meaning through a series of

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33. Largely considered the "father" of deconstruction, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida serves as the most notable figure in this line of theory. For something akin to an introduction to several of the central ideas of this form of deconstruction, see John D. Caputo and Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University, 1997). See also James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006). Thinkers like Slavoj Žižek (who draws on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory) and Foucault (in his analysis of power, for example), among others, are also significant contributors to poststructuralist discussions in various ways.

34. A term borrowed from Kevin Hogan, "Entering the Otherness: The Postmodern Critique of the Subject and Karl Rahner's Theological Anthropology," *Horizons* 25 (1998) 181–202, at 187.

35. Ibid. 188.

36. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *A Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1983).

other referents (anterior, concurrent, and posterior elements in relationship) and that an expression of language, a sign, or phenomenon also never arrives at its complete or absolute meaning, but is instead perpetually deferred or postponed. One might be tempted at this point to read this theory as a destructive passage to an entirely relativistic outlook on meaning and signification. However, Derrida makes it clear in his *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere that deconstruction is not something someone "does" from without, but is instead an already-always present reality that is uncovered by this analysis; and that deconstruction is a positive theory that should not be confused with the negative *de*struction.[37]

The central notion of the subject as linguistically constituted, in part, responds directly to at least two of the previously identified concerns about theological reflections on the human person that rely on an essentialist approach. First, the idea that there is an "essence" or "nature" of the human person (or, according to the dual-nature model of ontological complementarity, "human persons") cannot be sustained in light of the constructive nature of meaning according to language. There is a constant unfolding of meaning implied in deconstruction that disrupts attempts to impose forms of stasis on reflections of the human person. This is not to suggest that the theological consideration of human personhood is arbitrary, but it does challenge Hellenistic models that advocate eternal ideals and substances.

Second, the concept of *différance* finds an unlikely partner in the transcendental theology of some modern theologians like Karl Rahner. From the way meaning is deferred according to *différance*—due to the inescapable reliance on other referents— there arises an intrinsic resistance to the possibility of uncovering one's complete meaning at any present time during one's life. Instead, in a manner akin to Rahner's transcendental notion of the "fundamental option,"[38] the fullness of our identity, meaning, and transcendental response to the relational invitation of the absolute mystery cannot occur until our earthly end. Jan-Olav Henriksen has described this contribution of deconstruction to Christian theology as the condition for a radical awareness of one's (and the other's) existential vulnerability. Henriksen writes, "Paradoxically, it seems that when the human being is seeking him- or herself in a not-yet-fulfilled destiny, realizing that this cannot be wholly appropriated or fulfilled at the present, this safeguards the possibility of living here and now in a way that recognizes the vulnerability of both others and oneself."[39] In other words, deconstruction challenges theological anthropology to a sense of presence in the moment wherein women and men become attuned to both the foundationally relational dimension of their existence and the historical grounding of reality—two dimensions I explore below. Additionally, deconstruction helps reorient one's view of reality to the ultimate horizon that is encountered only in the culmination of one's life.

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37. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997) 24 and *passim*; and Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982) 1–27.
38. See Karl Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," in *Concerning Vatican Council II*, Theological Investigations 6, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 178–96.
39. Henriksen, "Creation and Construction" 164.

## Relationality and Alterity

John Caputo has noted the connection between the deconstructive notion of *différance* and the condition of the possibility for relation to the other that is another constitutive theme of postmodern challenges to theological anthropology. He writes that deconstruction "insisted not on multiplicity for itself but on the heterogeneity, the difference, the disassociation, which is absolutely necessary for the relation to the other."[40] Derrida has likewise affirmed that it is indeed difference and particularity (over against hegemony and universality) that provide the condition for relationship. This emphasis on relationship, whether in the construction of meaning by constant appeal to ulterior referents or in the pragmatic identification of personal identity formation, disrupts any sense of a self-enclosed and contained human "nature" or "essence."[41]

Ian McFarland has identified a similar connection between the poststructuralist theory in terms of deconstruction and our understanding of the human person. He recognizes the contribution of deconstruction to contemporary philosophy, theology, and critical theory as the uncovering of the central role of differentiation that moves beyond the semantic realm to impact our reflection on human personhood.[42] A dynamic sense of relationality shifts our prioritization of subjective inherency toward a more constructive notion of the human person that recognizes that human beings are constituted, at least in part, by social institutions and practices.[43] Mary McClintock Fulkerson summarizes this succinctly when she writes, "The subject is not an entity, a substance, but a relation, or sets of relations."[44]

Postmodern theory raises helpful questions that challenge theologians to be attentive to the implicit and unacknowledged tendencies that the Christian tradition has passed on in terms of monadic-like views of the human person. Because meaning and subjectivity are understood by poststructuralists as constituted in relationship—something that McFarland has argued is compatible with gospel insight[45]—conceptualizations of solidarity and community become radically suspect. The critique is not aimed at devaluing or dismissing ethical praxis, but is instead focused on uncovering latent biases that

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40. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 13.
41. For examples of the turn to relationality in theological anthropology, see Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (New York: Cambridge University, 1990); and F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
42. McFarland, *Difference & Identity* 16–17.
43. Teevan, "Challenges to the Role of Theological Anthropology in Feminist Theologies" 588. Additionally, Karl Rahner makes a similar assertion in his essay, "Experience of Self and Experience of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1975) 127: "The only way in which man [*sic*] achieves self-realization is through encounters with his fellow man, a fellow who is rendered present to his experiences in knowledge and love in the course of his personal life, on, therefore, who is not a thing or a matter, but a man."
44. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 82.
45. See McFarland, *Difference & Identity* 19–29.

privilege facile and misleading notions of "common experience" and "common human nature" within the tradition that can be unmasked as a consequence of a history.[46]

Identifying the relational dimension of subjectivity and meaning also works to counter complementarity. As Fulkerson has stated, the theological tradition of asserting human beings as *imago Dei* "has never been fully paid to women." This can be traced, at least in the theological tradition, to "misnaming the ideal human as male."[47] When the establishment of gender norms and social mechanisms of knowledge/power rest with men, as has largely been the case throughout the history of Christian theological reflection, various forms of subjugation and diminution of women's inherent expression of the *imago* follows. Feminist theologians and theorists rightly note that the identification of alterity has been the domain of men, thereby reinforcing both static iterations of ontological inequity within essentialists paradigms, while concurrently justifying social, ecclesiastical, and ontological "complementarity" as fundamentally inscribed in "nature" and in accord with the divine will. Postmodern theory in the form of deconstruction aids the unveiling of unjust and inaccurate demarcations and reinscriptions of complementary relationships that privilege men. If subjectivity and meaning are inherently constituted in relationship, through the social and historical structures of language, then complementarity can no longer be viewed as the a priori category of reality and divine intentionality, but as a social and historical construct that is in need of being overcome.

Furthermore, alterity serves the problematic structures of inequity whenever determinations of "the other" are reserved for a particular individual or group of individuals. The central relational and constitutive dimension of human personhood named by postmodern theory generally, and deconstruction specifically, challenges theologians to resituate the adjudication of alterity within the divine. If we understand our otherness as part and parcel of our having been created, the essentialist problematic of humanity's relationship to the rest of the created order begins to be healed. No longer is a particular population of human beings the adjudicator of alterity, nor is humanity, broadly conceived, the collective agent of this ontological demarcation that inherently prioritizes human beings over the rest of creation, but theologians can strive to recenter God as the source of our otherness. As Edward Schillebeeckx has affirmed, this intrinsic relational characteristic of human personhood extends beyond intrahuman interactions to include the broader order of creation. "The relationship of the human being to his [*sic*] own corporeality—man *is* a body but also *has* one—and by means of his own corporeality to the wider sphere of nature and his own ecological environment, is constitutive of our humanity."[48]

## The Historicity of Identity

John Webster, whose views are grounded in the centrality of relationality as that which constitutes human personhood, encourages contemporary theologians concerned with

46. Teevan, "Challenges to the Role of Theological Anthropology in Feminist Theologies" 592. See also Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*" 101.
47. Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject" 108.
48. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Seabury, 1980) 734.

responding to postmodern challenges to anthropology to recall the necessarily historical context of the human person. "Theological talk of human nature and destiny does not refer to abstract, a-historical entities but to the identity acquired by subjects as they act and are acted upon in the reciprocities of relation to God and others."[49] Webster's point about the relationship between God and the human person is another dimension of theological anthropology often overlooked when essentialist approaches to human nature are foregrounded. In light of deconstructionist and other forms of postmodern theory (e.g., the Foucauldian schools of historical critique), Webster urges theologians to take seriously our social locations and groundedness in the categorical, historical world. This attention to history, and the constitution of subjectivity and meaning within a matrix of relationships in history, directly critiques essentialist approaches (and, subsequently, complementarity models) that rely on and reiterate ahistorical, static, and eternal essences, substances, or natures. Webster continues: "In more directly theological terms: human nature is not antecedent to the economy of God's works, but precisely that which *becomes* through participation in the drama of creation, salvation, and consummation."[50]

Here we see again the veracity of Rahner's anthropological insight. In his *Hearer of the Word*, Rahner asserts, "To be human is to be spirit as a historical being. The place of our transcendence is always also a historical place. Thus the place of a possible revelation is always and necessarily also our history."[51] We are always already bound to the historical reality of our existence, apart from which there exists no eternal or Platonic forms, essences, or substance. To put it another way, Hogan explains that "history, therefore, is not seen as incidental to the human, but as belonging to humanity's existential, ontological reality."[52] Like Rahner, Schillebeeckx also emphasizes the consideration of history, in terms of time and space, when examining the meaning of humanity from a Christian perspective. He asserts, "Time and space, the historical and geographical situation of peoples and cultures, are also an anthropological constant from which no man can detach himself."[53]

The renewed emphasis on the constitutive dimension of history and context for theological anthropology responds to what I referred to above as the problem of "depersonalization" brought about in essentialist approaches. As McFarland noted, such an approach diminishes or dismisses the distinctiveness of human beings, rendering their particularity in history and within specific social, cultural, and national contexts immaterial as a result of the prioritization of substance, nature, or essence. The valuation of

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49. Webster, "Human Person" 227.
50. Ibid., emphasis original.
51. Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994) 94.
52. Hogan, "Entering the Otherness" 194.
53. Schillebeeckx, *Christ* 738. Schillebeeckx draws on the hermeneutical insight of Hans-Georg Gadamer in his explication of this "anthropological constant." See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2011) 235–74. See also Michael Himes, "The Human Person in Contemporary Theology: From Human Nature to Authentic Subjectivity," in *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Ronald Hamel and Kenneth Himes (New York: Paulist, 1989) 49–62.

history as a central factor in contemporary theological anthropology proposes particularity as a necessary point of consideration for exploring the meaning of the human person from a Christian perspective today.

## *Haecceitas* as a Starting Point for Theological Anthropology

Articulated in a philosophical key, the tension between an essentialist approach and a particular, contextual, or experiential approach to theological anthropology can be identified as a problem of universals and singulars. On the one hand, scholars want to consider the ways human persons share or participate in some universal dimension of human "nature"—put colloquially, we might ask, What makes all of us *human* as such? On the other hand, recent critical theory and contextual theology has challenged the tradition to account for the particular experiences of individuals in theological reflection on the human person. To bridge the seeming divide between these two approaches, this section of my article is dedicated to exploring the possibility that Scotus's principle of individuation, commonly known as *haecceitas*, might serve theological reflection on the human person in our postmodern context.

### *The Concept of* Haecceitas

Allan Wolter has noted that the philosophical question of what precisely individuates something has theological implications: "The problem of individuation in the latter portion of the thirteenth century became one of the more controversial and hotly discussed issues in university circles, especially at Paris and Oxford."[54] Although the philosophical and theological milieu out of which Scotus's approach arises helps contextualize the radicality of his thought in contradistinction to his predecessors and contemporaries, the limited scope of this article prevents my exploring the various theories of individuation that Scotus considered prior to advancing his own argument.[55] Instead, I will examine what he means in responding to the question, "Is a

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54.  Allan Wolter, "Scotus's Individuation Theory," in *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1990) 68–97, at 68. See also Timothy Noone, "Individuation in Scotus," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69 (1995) 527–42.

55.  The primary text for the five theories Scotus engages prior to advancing his own is *Lectura* II, d. 3, pars. 1, q. 1–5, in *Opera Omnia: Studio et cura Commissionis Scotisticae ad fidem codicum edita*, 21 vols., critical ed., ed. Carlo Balíc et al. [Vatican City: Vatican, 1950–] 229–73) (hereafter Vatican). Subsequent references to this edition will be noted by the Latin text with this edition's internal notion, followed by the volume and page number in parenthesis. Unless otherwise noted, English translations of this section of the *Lectura* are from John Duns Scotus, *Early Oxford Lecture on Individuation*, trans. Allan Wolter (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2005). Wolter's paragraph numbering in his translation differs from that of the Vatican Latin text, although he cites the Vatican critical edition. My numbering here follows the Vatican's. Additionally, Scotus's slightly later reflections on the principle of individuation can be found in the *Ordinatio*. For selections see Giovanni Duns Scoto, *Filosofo della libertá*, ed. Orlando Todisco (Padua: Messaggero Padova, 1996) 164–85.

material substance individual through something positive determining the nature to be just this individual substance?"[56] with his response, "I reply therefore to the question that material substance is determined to this singularity by some positive entity and to other diverse singularities by other diverse positive entities."[57]

Like the reflections of his medieval contemporaries, Scotus's reflection arose from the ongoing conversation about the individuation of angels and other nonmaterial substances.[58] Yet his ultimate concern was rooted—as was his inquiry that ultimately led to his semantic theory of the univocal concept of being—in what Wolter describes as "a more fundamental and psychological question."[59] Scotus was interested in the objective nature of intellectual knowledge. In this sense, he can be understood as a realist, a thinker grounded in the experience of the human person's ability to generalize or abstract what is universal from a variety of material objects. At the same time, he recognized that there was something unique, something *individual*, about what the intellect perceives in common. Contrary to more recent critiques of Scotus that label him a "nominalist,"[60] he rejects a "purely logical or conceptual division."[61] He believes—following his reading of Avicenna—that there is such a thing as *natura communis* ("common nature") and that this *natura communis* is a way of maintaining a real sense of the universal that differs from the theory generally advanced by Thomas Aquinas.[62] Such realism appears in Scotus's distancing from Avicenna's "neutral nature" by positing the *natura communis* as the universal.[63] Scotus agrees with Avicenna that a "nature" cannot exist outside of some concrete thing, either intellectually in the mind or in extramental reality. Both thinkers were concerned with explaining how something universal can be predicated of multiple individuals. However, for Scotus, that there is something shared implies a community. He believed that *natura communis* is universal only if there are individuals to which such a "nature" could be applied. Universality of this common nature presupposes particularity. Thus, he asserts, a nature cannot exist as such on its own.[64] While Scotus follows Aristotle in

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56. *Lectura* II, dist. 3, pars. 1, q. 6, n.139 (Vatican 18:273).
57. *Lectura* II, dist. 3, pars. 1, q. 6, n. 164 (Vatican 18:280).
58. See *Lectura* II, dist. 3, pars. 1, q. 1, n. 2 (Vatican 18:229–30) and following.
59. Wolter, "Scotus's Individuation Theory" 71. See also Mary Beth Ingham and Mechthild Dreyer, *The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus: An Introduction* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2004) 102–3.
60. The best examples of such accusations are perhaps those associated with the "Radical Orthodoxy" movement; see especially John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); and Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). For an analysis and corrective, see my *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Assessment of Radical Orthodoxy's Use of John Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming).
61. Wolter, "Scotus's Individuation Theory" 73.
62. See Allan Wolter, "The Realism of Scotus," in *Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus* 42–53.
63. Wolter notes that Scotus's "realism" might better be described as "moderate realism" in contrast to more Platonic approaches associated with a certain positive realism ("Scotus's Individuation Theory" 94–95; and "The Realism of Scotus" 42–53).
64. See Ingham and Dreyer, *Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus* 102–5.

maintaining the category "substance" (from *sub-stare*, "to stand beneath") as the "bearer of qualities," in his usage substance does not exist apart from the individual "singulars" that in fact exist. In other words, while Scotus conceives of a substance that could be called "human" or "stone" or "cat," such substances, or natures, do not exist apart from or prior to a singular existent, and such universals, albeit real in some sense, follow only from the existence of particulars.[65]

Having rejected the possibility that a thing is individuated by existence, quantity, or material, Scotus gives his counterargument in his *Lectura.* Ingham and Dreyer summarize this position well. According to Scotus,

> the material substance becomes individual through a principle that contracts the common nature (*natura communis*) to singularity. Scotus calls this principle the individuating entity (*entitas individualis*). In the literature on Scotus, this is as a rule described as thisness or *haecceitas*, a term that Scotus uses in his *Questions on Aristotle's Metaphysics*.[66]

The justification for Scotus's advancing such a claim comes in the form of two specified presuppositions that arise from his earlier argumentation on this particular distinction in his *Lectura.*

First, Scotus has shown that any *natura communis* must bear a unity that is less than that of the individual.[67] In other words, as Wolter shows, the significance of this claim for Scotus's argument is that

> this positive entity to which we attribute singularity [i.e., *haecceitas*] must be formally other than the entity constituting the specific nature. Though formally distinct, this individuating difference must form with that nature a *per se* unity; hence, its proper "haecceity" is not accidental to any individual.[68]

This argument, as I indicate later, is significant for the absolute maintenance of the intrinsic constitution of this principle. It is, in other words, bound up *really* with that singular iteration of the *natura communis*, such that Scotus can argue that being (the existence of the thing) and the unity of the particular instantiation of the *natura communis* can be understood as "interchangeable or convertible."[69]

Second, Scotus's thesis is rooted in the affirmation that, following Aristotle's use of *diversa aliquid idem entia* ("different things that are somehow the same") in Book

65. Because I am not here concerned with Scotus's position on universals as such, I simplify my overview and offer only a preliminary foundation for understanding the context of Scotus's response to the question of individuation. For more on the relationship between his understanding of universals and singulars, see Timothy Noone, "Universals and Individuation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams (New York: Cambridge University, 2003) 100–28.

66. Ingham and Dreyer, *Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus* 113.

67. *Lectura* II, dist. 3, pars. 1, q. 6, n. 166 (Vatican 18:280–81). Also, see Ingham and Dreyer, *Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus* 115.

68. Wolter, "Scotus's Individuation Theory" 90.

69. Ingham and Dreyer, *Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus* 113.

Five of the *Metaphysics*, there is an intuitive and logical distinction among different "natures" (e.g., dogs and cats). Yet, there must be something that differentiates things of the same nature (e.g., Plato and Socrates). It cannot be the *natura communis* as such, Scotus argues, because

> the nature in the one and the other is not primarily the cause of their difference, but their agreement. Though the nature in one is not the nature in the other, nature [of "Plato"] and nature [of "Socrates"] are not that whereby the two differ primarily, but that whereby they agree. . . . Hence there must be something else whereby they differ. But this is not quantity, nor existence, nor a negation, as was established in the preceding questions; therefore, it must be something positive in the category of substance, contracting the specific nature.[70]

Through a number of comparisons, as if to secure his bases, Scotus demonstrates the ways these two foundational principles of his thesis demand that the principle of individuation—also referred to in the *Lectura* as the *entitas individualis* ("individual entity")—is, in fact, "one" with the *natura communis*, albeit "formally distinct" from it.[71] Ingham and Dreyer summarize this point:

> This distinction of the common nature [*natura communis*] from the principle of individuation [*entitas individualis* or *haecceitas*] is a formal one; the two are merely formally distinct (*formaliter distinctae*) in the individual. While two individuals are in themselves really distinct, two formally distinct entities are not in themselves distinct in reality; instead, they only become distinct through the intellect, i.e., they can be conceived independently of one another. Nevertheless, they are not mere concepts because the intellect does not produce them.[72]

According to Scotus's principle of individuation (*entitas individualis* or *haecceitas*), what makes an individual an individual is identical with a thing's very existence or being. It is not an external, accidental, or material modification of an eternal idea or of a universal *substantia* but a real, positive, unique, unalienable, and unrepeatable

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70. *Lectura* II, dist. 3, pars. 1, q 6, n. 167 (Vatican 180, 281).
71. Following in the tradition of Bonaventure's *distinctio rationis* and Henry of Ghent's "intentional distinction," Scotus develops the notion of the "Formal Distinction," which is a *via media* of sorts between something that is only conceptually (and, therefore, non-extramentally) distinct and something distinct in reality (like an apple and an orange). For a more extended treatment of this philosophical theory, see Allan Wolter, "The Formal Distinction," in *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus* 27–41; Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (New York: Oxford University, 1999) 149; Ingham and Dreyer, *Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus* 33–38; Marilyn McCord Adams, "Universals in the Fourteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Kenny et al. (New York: Cambridge University, 1982) 411–39; and Stephen Dumont, "Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus," in *Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John Marenbon (London: Routledge, 1998) 291–328. Antonie Vos also provides an accessible presentation of Scotus's "Formal Distinction" among the various competing forms of philosophical distinction (*The Philosophy of John Duns Scotus* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2006] 253–63).
72. Ingham and Dreyer, *Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus* 116.

principle. This principle, *haecceitas*, is absolutely intrinsic to that which it individuates within creation—including both material and nonmaterial things[73]—and *really* identical with such an individual thing's very *being*.

## The Significance of Haecceitas *for Theological Anthropology*

Scotus's esoteric response to the question of what makes a particular thing an individual might at first seem removed from the theological concerns of both the problematic reliance on anthropological approaches rooted in essentialism that often lead to complementarity categories of difference; and the challenges postmodern theory poses for theologians today. However, I am suggesting that Scotus's unique approach to the question of individuation provides a surprisingly valuable contribution to our contemporary efforts.[74]

Concerning the three problems I raised earlier about various forms of essentialism, Scotus's notion of haecceity resituates the locus of human value and dignity from an essential *substantia* or nature to a place of particularity. Primacy is placed on the individual, while concurrently recognizing the inherent relationality and community among creation by virtue of the *natura communis* on the one hand, and by the more expansive presupposition of *being* on the other hand. As Antonie Vos explains, "The basic category is not *universality*, but individuality—the individual has [his or her] own identity, something essential which cannot be shared with anything else. They [haecceities] are unique, not something negative."[75] This notion of a negative principle (in contradistinction to Scotus's positive principle) could be found in other medieval iterations of hylomorphic philosophical anthropology. Ingham summarizes Scotus in contrast with other thinkers by emphasizing that his *entitas individualis* is "a *this* rather than a *not-that*," referencing, of course, the quiddity or nature of a given thing.[76] While Scotus maintains a certain logical place for common nature that might prima facie be misconstrued as another form of essentialism in the modern sense described earlier as a problem, he actually subordinates this as secondary to the more primary and intrinsic transcendental

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73. Including angels (nonmaterial individuals), which is why this question of the possibility of a material individuating principle in Aristotelian terms frequently became the source for medieval debate in terms of the ontological constitution of differing angelologies.

74. This is not to suggest that Scotus's medieval philosophical contribution is a panacea for all the challenges theologians face today. Rather, the way he used the tradition, reason, and the philosophical tools at his disposal to imagine an alternative approach to disputed questions on individuation gestures toward a way of engaging theological anthropology today that points us toward a new framework by which to move beyond the current anthropological impasse.

75. Antonie Vos, "John Duns Scotus: An Anthropology of Dignity and Love," in *Words Made Flesh: Essays Honoring Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M.*, ed. Joseph P. Chinnici (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2011) 151–75, at 163. For another treatment of Scotus's contribution to the theological concept of "person," see Isidoro Manzano, "Ontología de la persona humana según Escoto," *Antonianum* 78 (2003) 321–56.

76. Mary Beth Ingham, "The Tradition and the Third Millennium: The Earth Charter," in *Words Made Flesh* 183. See also Jorge J. E. Garcia, ed., *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation 1150–1650* (Albany: SUNY, 1994).

reality of *haecceitas*.[77] Recognizing *haecceitas* as an a priori and necessarily constitutive dimension of human existence, Vos explains that, in fact, to talk about the need for an individuating principle almost seems unnecessary from a Scotist vantage point "since *individuality* is an essential property of everything that is" by means of *haecceitas*'s ontological status.[78] Scotus might not push this anti-essentialist approach quite so far, nor is there textual evidence for such a claim, but there is a sense in which Vos's somewhat hyperbolic statement here captures the "revolutionary changes" of Scotus's philosophical anthropology: "The ontological tables have been turned upside down: universals are not the pillars of being, individuals are."[79]

In response to the first critique of essentialism made at the beginning of this article, Scotus's overturning of the ontological priority of *substantia* through the subordination (yet realistic acknowledgement) of *natura communis*, can be read as decentering the theological focus of the inherited tradition's concern with establishing apodictic clarity of a universal human nature or seeking to uncover a "noninterpreted essence" of the human person. While one might say that Scotus remains a thinker of his time and maintains a type of essentialism in terms of a collection of similar kinds, what is promising in his thought for my purposes here is his capacity to imagine another starting point in theological reflection without ignoring the importance of commonality or genus.

It is easy to see how Scotus's *haecceitas* approach to individuation likewise responds to the second critique of essentialism, namely, what I called the depersonalization of humanity. The uniqueness, unrepeatability, and inalienable inherency of one's *haecceitas* can be interpreted as an elevation of the particular and personal over the universal or the common. This resituating of human personhood within a theological framework, where the individual is understood as primary, and the universal is seen as concurrently present and real (yet secondary), unveils the intrinsic relationality, dignity, and value of each person over against the depersonalizing elevation of "humanity" in a general and essentialist sense. Ingham reiterates this point: "Each being within the created order already possesses an immanent dignity whose foundation is relational; it is already gifted by the loving Creator with a sanctity beyond our ability to understand."[80] One's value as a human being is not predicated on the ability of a particular person to exhibit a certain universal "human nature."[81] Such a

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77. Scotus's views on universals and singulars, particularly as those philosophical considerations relate to individuation, are more nuanced than I can show within the limits of this essay. For more comprehensive treatments of this subject see Noone, "Universals and Individuation" 100–29; Wolter, "Scotus's Individuation Theory" 68–97; Woosuk Park, "*Haecceitas* and the Bare Particular," *Review of Metaphysics* 44 (1990) 375–97; and Woosuk Park, "Common Nature and *Haecceitas*," *Franziskanische Studien* 71 (1989) 188–92.

78. Vos, "John Duns Scotus: An Anthropology" 164, emphasis original.

79. Ibid.

80. Ingham, "Tradition and the Third Millennium" 184.

81. On a related theme, Richard Cross engages the thought of Scotus, among others, as a resource for contemporary disability studies and theologies of personhood in "Disability, Impairment, and Some Medieval Accounts of the Incarnation: Suggestions for a Theology of Personhood," *Modern Theology* 27 (2011) 639–58.

theological requirement would necessarily exclude whole populations of people who do not emulate the (arbitrary and external) qualities of "authentic human personhood." Rather, Scotus's *haecceity* locates human value and dignity as a constitutive element of a person's very being or existence. Ian McFarland has highlighted how Scotus elsewhere uses an analogue of *haecceitas* to talk about the trinitarian Persons and how that principle of individuation models a path toward a more justice-oriented conceptualization of the human person and humanity's intrinsic relationality.[82]

Third, this inherent relationality and intrinsic dignity of the human person *qua* individual is not limited to humanity. Rather, Scotus predicated *haecceitas* of all the created order, such that every blade of grass, every stone, and every living creature is unrepeatably unique and inherently valued according to the divine act of creation.[83] One can see the manifold applicability of Scotus's approach to the further development of a kinship model of the theology of creation, one that sustains the interrelational dimension of created existence and simultaneously affirms the value and dignity of the nonhuman aspects of the created order without adjudication of worth coming from human beings.

With regard to the additional problems of complementarity, Scotus's *haecceitas* avoids binary distinctions between genders and biological sexes. The value of human personhood is located within the context of the principle of individuation, which is really identical with, yet formally distinct from, a person's actual existence or being. Value and dignity, then, are not located within a given person's status as male or female, just as they do not reside within the strictures of the "human." Individuals are what God primarily intends, not the biological gender or the socialized and constructed gender shared among a certain population. Fundamentally, all people share, on some level, their status as contingently existent and, on another level, their *natura communis* as something we might call "human," but any further demarcation is an a posteriori material distinction that falls outside the traditionally essentialist and a priori ontological foundation that is the ground for theological anthropologies that engender complementarity.

## The Significance of Haecceitas *for a Postmodern Theological Anthropology*

It might seem counterintuitive to assert that a medieval philosopher and theologian can offer contemporary scholars a resource in responding to the challenges certain postmodern theories raise for theological anthropology, but I believe that Scotus's *haecceitas* can

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82. See McFarland, *Difference & Identity* 134–36.
83. As if to make his point about the extension of haecceity to all creation abundantly clear, Scotus uses the example of a stone in his argumentation rather than the commonly preferred example of a horse (in Avicenna). Adopting this Scotist line of thought, the twentieth-century writer Thomas Merton, in his *New Seeds of Contemplation*, uses the example of a tree—see Daniel P. Horan, "Thomas Merton the 'Dunce': Identity, Incarnation, and the Not So Subtle Influence of John Duns Scotus," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 47 (2012) 149–75.

help postmoderns negotiate the contentious terrain of the deconstructionists and other critics. First among the challenges identified in this article is that of the "linguisticality of the subject." While Scotus's own concerns were far from those of Jacques Derrida, the Subtle Doctor's semantic theory of the univocal concept of being and subsequent development of the "Formal Distinction" offer us a clue to the innovative and linguistic concerns of the medieval Franciscan.[84] Although the concept of *différance* was not on Scotus's horizon, his *haecceitas* does not necessarily bear the same ontotheological problems that other more essentialist metaphysical approaches do. For example, there is a sense in which haecceity is unknowable as such. Ingham explains that, "*Haecceitas* points to the ineffable within each being," which bears a certain dynamistic quality of deferral and difference vis-à-vis one's ability to concretely identify the fullness or completeness of one's identity or subjectivity.[85] Among the many contributions of Derrida, this quality of *haecceitas* most resembles the deconstructive notion of "the event." Caputo explains, within the landscape of *différance*:

> Events cannot be fully fathomed or analyzed, but only inhabited, settled into, coped with. An event cannot be saturated by thought; it is too dense for that. Events are the complex settings for action, the impenetrable background in which agents act, in which action happens, in which anything happens. . . . Events are concrete and singular. "Singularity" is in the first place the singularity of events, their unrepeatable and unique configurations or concretion of time, place, circumstance.[86]

Notice the congruence that this postmodern notion of "event" bears alongside the medieval Scotist concept of *haecceitas*. In each of these notions, it is the particularity or singularity that carries the primacy within each philosophical system. One might analogously say that an individual's *haecceitas* is the "event" of both their existence and fullness of identity—the articulation, conceptualization, or expression of which is fundamentally subject to the linguistic unfolding of subjectivity according to *différance*.

I have already indicated how *haecceitas* inherently provides the condition for relationality as a constitutive dimension of existence (a step even beyond limiting relationality to human personhood). Furthermore, the Creator—not individual human persons or groups of persons—adjudicates alterity within the framework of Scotist haecceity. Our a priori otherness is part and parcel of the act of creation in that nothing in the created order is self-made or self-determined. There is always already a matrix of relationships, beginning with that between creation (in each aspect and writ large) and the Creator, that emphasizes the fundamentality of our alterity and inherent relationality. Additionally, the move away from an ahistorical essentialist approach that

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84. For more on this notion of "univocity," see Allan Wolter, *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1946); and Stephen Dumont, "Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus" 291–328.
85. Ingham, "Tradition and the Third Millennium" 184.
86. John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1993) 94–95.

privileges *substantia* over against the particularity of the individual toward a starting point like Scotus's *haecceitas* responds to the postmodern challenge for theologians to be increasingly aware of the historical grounding of being. The particularity of the unique and unrepeatable individuality of a given person necessitates theological reflection on the concrete social, cultural, and historical conditions of experience and place.

## A Heuristic Conclusion

Ingham, in addressing the need for contemporary theologians to take the thought of John Duns Scotus seriously today, writes, "Medieval thinkers hold a key for us today. I do not mean that we must return to a time in history that is long gone. Rather, I think that by taking a closer look at their intellectual legacy we might discover principles to help us integrate the scientific with the religious, the intellectual with the spiritual."[87] In this article, I argued for taking a closer look at one dimension of Scotus's intellectual legacy with the intention of discovering a principle that might guide us in approaching contemporary theological anthropology in a new way. Burdened as the tradition has been with the problems of essentialism and complementarity, theological reflection on the Christian understanding of the human person remains particularly challenging today. Compounded by the often provocative yet insightful questions of various postmodern theorists, any effort to develop a theological anthropology in our age requires an attentive focus on articulating the Christian tradition in a discursive manner that is in dialogue with these contemporary issues. Scotus's principle of individuation, *haecceitas*, does not provide a theological panacea for the difficulties of contemporary theological anthropologies. However, as I tried to illustrate, this frequently overlooked medieval resource may be more relevant now than ever.

I hope this article serves as a clarion call for systematic and historical theologians to reimagine the possible engagement of marginal voices within the Christian theological and philosophical traditions with the contemporary concerns of the church and world. Rather than exploring these trajectories in a second-order reflection, work modeled on Scotus's principle of *haecceitas* highlights the need for a new approach to talking about anthropology that can provide a robust theological language to address the ontological and existential dimensions of human existence. As in every age, there is a great need to confidently and cogently address injustice, discrimination, and violence with a return to the theological anthropological foundations of our Christian tradition. John Duns Scotus's *haecceitas* might serve us well in moving toward a postmodern framework for theological reflection on the human person that can help us address these problems.[88]

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87. Mary Beth Ingham, "John Duns Scotus: Retrieving a Medieval Thinker for Contemporary Theology," in *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition*, ed. Elise Saggau (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2002) 93–104, at 93–94.

88. The author wishes to express his gratitude to the three anonymous reviewers and the editor of *Theological Studies*, each of whom offered helpful and constructive feedback on this essay.

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