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WHAT IS ONTOLOGY?

IF YOU ever read the book *Moby Dick*, you'll need to brace yourself for countless chapters of cetology. Cetology is the study of whales, and in a book about the Great White Whale, the reader is blessed (and burdened) with a full discussion of whales and their nature.

When I listened to *Moby Dick* a few years ago, I was unprepared for this. Choosing to bypass the abridged version (which surely skips Cetology 101), I endured many hours of whale shapes, sizes, habits, and habitats. This might seem like overkill—and it would be if the reader already had a working knowledge of whales. But for the reader who knows nothing of the sea or the creatures who dwell in the deep, such an introduction is necessary for Herman Melville's classic novel. Indeed, to understand the drama of Ishmael and Ahab, along with the tragic voyage of the *Pequod*, you must spend some time on cetology.

The same is true for the subject of ontology. Ontology is a word that simply means “the study of what is” or, more precisely, “the study of the way things *are*.”¹ In philosophy, it is a subject that ranges from Plato and his forms (in his *Timaeus*), to Aristotle and his first principles (in his

1. Under the heading of “Metaphysics/Ontology,” Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints, and James K. A. Smith define ontology as “The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and structure of reality. . . . The term can be traced to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which investigated Being qua being [i.e. the nature of being], or what kinds of things exist. In philosophical terms, the nature of being is not about particular things [what concrete expressions of a dog may be found], but rather about the ultimate *kinds* of things [the essence of what makes a dog a dog].” *101 Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance for Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 51–52.

Metaphysics). Likewise, in church history, men like Augustine and Aquinas have deployed the ideas of these Greek philosophers, while others like Cornelius Van Til and Vern Poythress have argued for an ontology that is self-consciously reliant on Scripture.²

Clearly, there is an academic appreciation for ontology, as well as a robust field of study that intersects history, philosophy, and theology. Yet, as noted in the introduction, this book is not that. Instead, it is a primer on the way things are, and a recovery of the way God created human beings and institutions composed of men and women—things like marriage, family, and the church. In this way, it is a study of nature and what is natural. Or to put it more bluntly, the Business of Is-Ness is a remedial course aimed to recover something that should never have been lost—namely, the doctrine of creation.

For countless centuries, and across all continents, the nature of things simply was. God made the world and everything in it, and human beings accepted it as such. Oh yes, there was sin, lawlessness, idolatry, and endless forms of superstition, leading to false religions. Still, for all the confusion, the essence of humanity was not in question. Boys and girls would grow to be men and women. Men and women would get married and have children. Children were received as gifts, or at least they were in every place touched by Christianity. And so a study on the way things are (ontology) was largely unnecessary. But no longer!

Our world has lost sight of the way things are, and that threatens to undo all that God created as good. Consider a few examples. In 2023, the city of Manassas, near my home in Virginia, hosted a drag queen event with corporate sponsors like Wegmans (a grocery store), Wawa (a gas station), and Inova Health (a local hospital).³ On social media, females with painted

2. This does not suppose that Augustine and Aquinas ignored the Bible (just the opposite); or that Van Til and his disciples rejected arguments based on empirical evidence. That is a live debate and one that is beyond our purview. For an introduction to the ontology of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Van Til, and others, see *Christ Over All's* month on the subject: "Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts: Plundering Plato without Becoming a Platonist." *Christ Over All*, September 2024, <https://christoverall.com/theme/beware-of-greeks-bearing-gifts-plundering-plato-without-becoming-a-platonist>.

3. "Equality Prince William Pride 2022/23," Equality Prince William, accessed July 10, 2024, <https://www.equalityprincewilliam.org/pride-2022>.

nails are posting pictures of forearms with muscles ripped from them. Why? So that ideological monsters, who happen to have an MD after their names, can construct with human flesh a phallus-like appendage to “affirm” the desires of a misguided youth.⁴ Indeed, woke medicine is a hotspot for denying human nature. As Grace Hall notes in a report on recent trends in medical schools, “The future of healthcare in the United States is in jeopardy if it continues down the path of woke ideology rather than scientific fact.”⁵ And why is the future in jeopardy? Because a realist approach to the world (i.e., one that receives and affirms the world as God made it) has been replaced by a postmodern delusion that we can remake the world according to our own ideas and ideologies.⁶

Illustrating this point most painfully is what Carl Trueman says at the beginning of his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. The British-born Church historian looks to his grandfather and surmises that he would have no understanding of what it means for a “woman [to be] trapped inside a man’s body.”⁷ Trueman goes on to explain the fact that our generation’s ability to understand such a statement, or to appreciate the pain of gender dysphoria, does not mean that we are smarter or wiser than our ancestors. It means we live in a Bizarro World where technological advances have resulted in societal regression. While older generations had less access to information, they had more wisdom. Creation has a fixed order to it, and ancient agrarians who planted crops and birthed calves possessed an understanding of being, essence, and ontology that exceeds every existential philosopher who puts experience before essence.⁸

4. On the horrors of gender reassignment surgery and the hope of the gospel, see Craig Kline with David Schrock, “What Is Gender Reassignment Surgery? A Medical Assessment with a Biblical Appraisal,” *The Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 20.1 (Spring 2015): 35–47.

5. Grace Hall, “In Medical Schools, Woke Ideology Trumps True Healthcare,” The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, April 11, 2022, <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2022/04/in-medical-schools-woke-ideology-trumps-true-healthcare>.

6. For a full-fledged response to this problem, see Anthony Esolen, *Sex and the Unreal City: The Demolition of the Western Mind* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016).

7. Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 1.

8. The technical term for this philosophy is existentialism, in which a person’s choices (experience) determine their essence (ontology). See Andrew Hoffercker, ed., *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007), 310–311.

Yet this is our postmodern world. In response to the loss of what really is, we who know the I AM need to study ontology. This does not mean we must become academics or take a class on the intellectual history of Western Civilization. That may be good and necessary for some, but it is not the argument here. Instead, I am calling Christians to go back to the only source of wisdom and ask some crucial questions: What has God said about His world? What does it mean to be human, and why does it matter? Are humans simply smarter animals, or is there some higher calling for which we were made? Will *Homo sapiens* continue to stand at the top of the evolutionary pyramid, or will we soon be replaced by artificial intelligence (AI) and computer-integrated bodies that transcend these meat suits?

In answer to these questions and so many more, we need to study ontology. And yet, instead of leaving the Bible to go find the best of philosophy, we can look to the Bible itself to see what it says about God and the world He has made. In Scripture, we have more than a doctrine of redemption; we also have a doctrine of creation. And tuning our minds to sing the praises of the God who made the world is necessary for rightly understanding what it means when Revelation 21:5 says that God will make “all things new.” The only way to understand the new creation is to have a proper sense of the first creation, and the only way to appreciate what it means for grace to restore nature is have a sense of what nature *is*. Truly, this is our business, and it leads us back to the beginning, where the uncreated God spoke the world into existence.

Beginning at the Beginning

When we begin at the beginning, the first verse we find is perhaps the most important: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). In our day, this watershed verse is arguably the most controversial in the Bible, and it has been for some time. Either one will accept that God has created all things and is therefore the rightful sovereign over all creation, or, in an attempt to evade God’s lordship (and His judgment), one will attempt to redefine the verse as myth, or something else less than literal.

Understanding the vital role of this single verse, longtime blogger Dan Philips stated in a discussion related to so-called same-sex “marriage”—a

topic still up for debate in his 2013 post—that he would simply stake his claim on Genesis 1:1:

The most offensive thing that I believe is Genesis 1:1, and everything that it implies.

That is, I believe in a sovereign Creator who is Lord and Definer of all. Everything in the universe—the planet, the laws of physics, the laws of morality, you, me—everything was created by Another, was designed by Another, was given value and definition by Another. God is Creator and Lord, and so He is ultimate. That means we are created and subjects, and therefore derivative and dependent.

[This means] we are not free to *create* meaning or value. We have only two options. We can *discover* the true value assigned by the Creator and revealed in His Word, the Bible; or we can *rebel* against that meaning.⁹

If Genesis 1:1 was debatable before the Supreme Court's 2015 decision in *Obergefell*, it is even more contentious now. Indeed, every public debate now stands at the crossroads of Genesis 1:1. Either one bows to God as his Creator, confessing his sinful rebellion and need for redemption, or one rejects God as Creator, ignores His offer of salvation, and attempts to bend God's world to his own self-gratification project. This is the divide at the heart of everything happening in the world today.

To understand this divide and to side with God against all manner of unrighteousness, we need to understand what Genesis 1:1 says about God and about everything that exists that is not God. In other words, to properly understand the nature of things, we need to know not only *who* God is, but *what* God is. Establishing that point of reference, we are then able to understand what the world is *and* what it is for. That is what this book is about. And yet, because we cannot address everything in creation, let me preview the points we will discuss in the following chapters.¹⁰

9. Dan Philips, "The Most Offensive Verse in the Bible," *Pyromaniacs* (blog), February 26, 2013, <https://teampyro.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-most-offensive-verse-in-bible.html>.

10. Thanks to Sarah Ascol for her editorial help in outlining this section.

Unfolding Creation

The God Who Is

In our study of ontology, we must begin with the God who is, was, and forever will be the uncreated God who decreed, created, and now sustains all things in creation. Indeed, in a book that primarily seeks to reject the idea that creation is plastic and ever-malleable, it is vital to begin with the God who cannot change. Doctrinally, God is immutable, impassible, and irrepressible. In other words, the I AM cannot change, cannot suffer as a result of His creation, and cannot be thwarted in His plans and purposes for the world. Unlike His creatures, who are ever-changing, ever-suffering, and ever-failing, God is different.

His difference is not one of degree, but of kind. He is absolutely other, or *sui generis* (one of a kind). And any biblical discussion of ontology must begin with a proper understanding of His nature. In truth, such a study of theology proper requires volumes. Yet, in this book, I will make ten observations from Genesis 1 and the rest of Scripture about the God who is. Clearly, this is insufficient. But I want to ground our study of nature in the nature of God. And so, chapter 2 will begin with *who* God is and then move to *what* God does.

The Cosmic Temple of God

Chapter 3 will consider the world God has made. Most uniquely, I will show from Psalm 104 and other places in Scripture how God created this world to be His cosmic temple! Such a vision of the cosmos can be seen in Genesis 1–2. As we move through the Bible, it becomes apparent that the relationship between heaven and earth turns on an understanding of the temple. In fact, the tabernacle was created after a pattern revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 25:9, 40). Not coincidentally, this pattern matched Mount Sinai itself, which in turn shed light on the garden in Eden and the placement of mankind in God's world (Gen. 1–3).

In contrast to our enlightened age, which defines the universe through ever-changing evolutionary theories, the Bible describes the world as a temple that God shares with His creatures. Without denying scientific inquiry, God's Word reminds us that our Lord now walks among the