

# On Being the Literal Image of God: Rethinking Human Essence as Uniqueness

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**Abstract:** Typically theologians take the image of God rather metaphorically and reduce the metaphor to a set of properties in virtue of which we are humans. This emphasis on the common features shared among humans supports the doctrine of shared sin and the provision of salvation by another human, Jesus. By analyzing three separate notions of image and applying them to the image of God, this paper argues that humans as God's image can be taken more literally than it typically is. The result is that the uniqueness of each human is a significant aspect of the human person, grounding our value. Doing so, however, does not entail that we lose the common features of humans supporting theological accounts of shared sin and salvation.

Suppose two painters go to northern California, set up their easels and paint images of Mt. Shasta. While there is a very good chance the two paintings will appear similar, sharing certain properties, they need not. Suppose one painter is a realist and his painting "looks like the mountain" whereas the other painter is a cubist and her painting looks (virtually) nothing like the mountain. Both, however, label their paintings "Mt. Shasta at Morning Light" and both mean their labels to be taken literally. The resulting paintings, although both images of Mt. Shasta, appear to share little in common. It is hard to see how any property of one is a property of the other except at a trivial level (say, both are painted on canvass, with oils, and the like). One might be black and grey, portraying various angles of the mountain (the cubist) and the other (the realist) might be bright red and orange, portraying a "true to life" single angle, and so forth. Images are not only unique but sometimes hardly rooted in "the way things are."

It's perhaps curious then, that when we think of humans as the image of God, we typically don't think of uniqueness. If we think of the image of God as pictures at all (which isn't, I think, common), we tend to think of cookie cutter images, each of us being enough like God that we are recognizably the same. The notion of cookie cutter images is then standardly understood in (traditional) Christian thinking by taking a platonic approach to what it is to be human. It thus cashes out the nature of humanity in terms of (essential) properties such as rationality, emotional richness,

volition, and spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Frequently, in other words, Christian theology takes the image-of-God language of scripture as mere metaphor for something more important. That is, the term “image” is taken to need reduction to some other term or terms that are literal. I want to challenge that approach.

With that challenge as my over-all goal, section I suggests some reasons why Christian theologians may be reluctant to take the image-of-God language of scripture too literally in particular with regard to sin and salvation. Sections II-IV describe three ways of understanding the term “image,” each relevant to the image of God. Section V applies the results of II-IV to the theological context of humans made in the divine image. Section VI reflects again briefly on sin and salvation.

## I

Why don't we take the phrase “image of God” as literal? For one thing, images can be wildly different from one another as noted in the first paragraph. That seems incongruent with the role the notion of the image of God plays in Christian theology and philosophy. For one thing, if we eschew taking the image language as literal, it is easier for Christian philosophers and theologians to suggest that we have common ground with our secular colleagues. We can say, for example, that humans are what we are because of some set of necessary properties by which we are all united. This sort of view grounds moral obligation and the possibility of universal virtues. But more important for our purposes here, the power of the essentialist reading of the image language plays right into how we understand two major Christian doctrines, sin and salvation.

The common nature of humanity roots the doctrine of sin. We are all born into sin because we share the same nature as Adam and Eve. When they fell, we fell. Whatever sin did to us, the fact that we all have the same essential properties is what allows sin to be passed from one to the other down through history.<sup>2</sup> The fact that we all have the image of God (in the form of essential properties) supports the doctrine of original sin. That shared nature is a corrupted nature passed along generationally.

Of course, there are other ways to think of sin's presence in all humans. Perhaps it is not that certain shared properties allow for the universal presence of sin but rather that we have a common ancestry and history that allows for sin to be passed on. Suppose, for example, sin is passed on only by example from parent to child or from folks in the neighborhood to residents therein. Sin is a result, in such a

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<sup>1</sup> The non-physical properties that might be found on the list of essential properties is quite long. Besides those mentioned in the text, one could include knowledge, moral sensibility, power, wisdom, and others. I'll stick to the list I provided in the text, but it is meant neither to be exclusive nor exhaustive.

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, being sinful is not one of the essential properties of humans, otherwise we could never be freed from it. While it seems clear that sin negatively affected the image of God in us, how that relates to essential properties is less than clear. That is a topic I'll not enter here but it seems very much worth exploring.

view, not of nature but of nurture. Such a view, taken strictly, seems open to the possibility that some of us escape sin. But then the doctrine of original sin seems unrooted metaphysically. It seems that however sin is passed on through history, it is passed on via the mechanisms by which we are all human, viz., by some set of properties we all share in common in some non-accidental way. Even with the Orthodox view that denies the Augustinian notion of the original sin and affirms that each of us sins individually, there remains an ontological affinity shared among humans. Humans are all finite and in the fall we fail to take up the opportunity to live fully into God's grace.

Here another issue might be raised. During the late medieval period much ink was spilled over various realisms and nominalisms. One of the upshots of some of the nominalisms is a denial of the existence of universals. Only individuals exist. On the latter views, it is not entirely clear (again) how sin is communicated from one generation to the next. On such views, individuals may be alike (even exactly alike) without there being some platonic (real) property they all share. We then pick out such likenesses via universal terms where the terms refer not to some existing universal entity but merely to the individuals themselves. But it then becomes mysterious why we call all humans "human" besides the fact that we do. Furthermore, what such nominalisms do to the doctrine of sin appears to be to divide sin up into as many sorts of sin as there are individuals. While that may be the case, it is not clear that that captures the notion of original sin. We have all fallen short of the glory of God.

The nominalism/realism discussion also picked up the question of salvation. Did Christ die for humankind or for individual humans? Arguably the doctrine of salvation through Christ finds its roots in taking the image of God to be something we all share. Since Christ is human he also is made in the image of God. His image, however, is without sin. Hence Christ can save us by his life, death and resurrection, effectively answering the question *cur deus homo?* Christ takes on the image of God, understood as a set of essential properties. Such a view seems to stand behind the typically Protestant notion of Christ as the "federal head" of humanity, thus supplying the (realist) means via which Christ can both represent us and provide a substitution for us.<sup>3</sup> Here there are some details we must set aside. Which properties does Christ take on? Is it the property of "being human?" Or is it some set of properties in virtue of which Christ is human? Either way, Christ is fully human and philosophers and theologians often think we are saved in part by being members of the same kind—viz., the human kind—of which Jesus is a member. By taking on the image of God, Christ works in reverse what we find in the doctrine of sin. Through one person, Adam, sin enters the world; through one person, Jesus, sin is overcome. What Adam corrupted, Jesus uncorrupts and because we are made in the image of God, because we share the same essential properties, sin can be overcome by the perfect life and sacrifice of Christ.

The advantage of having a shared, essential human nature seems thus to be sewn up in a nice, neat theological package. Without a shared human essence, it's

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<sup>3</sup> I'd like to thank Jeannine Graham for a helpful discussion of the ways in which theologians have viewed the transmission of sin.

not clear how sin could be original or how Christ could save us. In other words, it's not clear how taking the image-of-God language of the scriptures as anything but metaphorical can provide for either of these theological necessities. Images we tend to think are mere copies (a point I'll discuss further below) and copies are not related to one another in a sophisticated enough way philosophically to ground these two central doctrines. Since two copies of the same original can be substantially different, if, in fact, we take the image of God language as literal, it looks as though perhaps nothing unites us essentially. Each of us is a mere copy of God (some better, one might suppose, some worse). So while the image-of-God language lends itself well to pointing up the uniqueness of the human individual it may not point toward the commonality of all the members of the race. Insofar as we are unique creations of God, in other words, we run the risk of disconnecting humans one from the other and perhaps from Jesus himself. The potential uniqueness of images would tend to undermine the unity of human persons if we were to be literal images of God.

I propose that Christian theologians and philosophers are often beguiled by two notions. First, is the long-standing cultural assumption rooted in Plato's powerful observation that when X copies Y, X is less real than Y. X *as an image* thus misleads us by taking us away from truth and toward error. Hence, the idea that humans are made in the image of God must be a metaphor for something else, something philosophers and theologians can grapple with, something about which true or universal things can be said. Perhaps something similar is behind the ancient prohibition against making images of God or perhaps against any images at all. "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God" (Exodus 20: 4, 5a RSV). Perhaps Moses would have agreed with Plato about images. But if images mislead, somehow pulling on our emotions rather than our reason, philosophy and theology somehow gets at reality and truth. So thought Plato and maybe Moses.<sup>4</sup>

The second beguiling notion is that since God is a spirit rather than a body, and since humans are bodies, or have bodies, the image of God in humans cannot be bodily. The image of God must be non-material. Hence, rationality, emotional richness, volition, and spirituality are likely candidates for what scripture means when it's talking about the image of God. The image of God cannot be our bodies. A related factor feeding this sort of argument is also Greek, viz., that what is truly valuable is not the body but the soul. If God made us in the divine image, it must be a spiritual image, matter being somewhat suspect. No matter how much theologians have tried to correct this notion, it is still very much with us.

I argue below that understanding the image-of-God language more literally can, in fact, make sense of the doctrines of sin and salvation both of which rely on properties being shared among humans. Our being individual images of God does

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<sup>4</sup> Of course the context of the prohibition against images in Exodus is far more complicated than I've indicated. Indeed, it may be that no image was to be made in order to worship it or because we humans already are the image of God or perhaps for some other reason.

not rule out our having essential properties that we share in common and thus unite us as children of God. Indeed, I suggest that being unique is, in fact, one of the essential properties God gives to us. My argument that our individual uniquenesses are the image of God also has the result that we have theological grounds for our (fairly recent cultural) celebratory emphasis on diversity and uniqueness. Finally, the shift in emphasis developed here helps to make sense out of the intuition that our uniqueness as individuals makes us valuable. Even though this intuition is widely held (at least in popular culture) it is not widely defended or explained in either theology or philosophy. By approaching the notion of the image of God as the source of my being unique, my moral and spiritual value can be grounded in what is truly special about me and not merely the fact that you, I, and all of us together are alike “under the skin.”

## II

What does the term *image* mean? Many things, lexically. One dictionary lists seventeen entries, both nouns and verbs. I discuss only three. One common understanding of image depends on a particular structure and relationship. Typically there is a (pre-existing) entity that something else copies, resembles or represents. I’ll call this the “object/image dichotomy” and images that result from it “dichotomous images.” Often, this sort of imaging involves a physical image of another physical thing.

Typically we talk about such imaging in terms of there first being something real and then an image of it. This pattern of talk has created havoc in the way we think about images, beginning with Plato’s observation that art merely copy what is real and are, therefore, less real and, therefore, misleading. Art, suggests Plato, is simply not reality but a copy of it from which ensues the entire philosophy vs. poetry debate. In response, it is important to note that an image, although typically copying, resembling, or representing another real thing, is still, itself, real. Twentieth century art and art theory pick up this theme.<sup>5</sup>

The problem perhaps originates with the notion of copying. In general terms, to copy X implies that X already exists (or at least did exist). There is a temporal ordering that typically attaches to copying. The original object comes first and the copied image second. However, not all images have that sort of structure. Y can resemble X without X having come first temporally. Y and X merely have to be alike in some feature or other. Of course, the more alike two things are, the more likely the judgment will be made that the two things resemble one another, and certainly the better the copy, the more the copy resembles the original.

Representation need not imply resemblance or copying. Virtually anything could represent some other thing, given the right circumstances. A rock can represent, for example, the Queen of England, or the Queen of England represent a country, or a country freedom. So we really have two sorts of dichotomous images:

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<sup>5</sup>See for example discussions by Arthur Danto in (Danto 1983).

copy and representational. The only common rule among the two seems to be that if X represents or copies Y, then X and Y cannot be numerically identical. There are exceptions, perhaps. One can represent oneself in a courtroom in lieu of hiring a lawyer. That seems to be something of an anomaly, however, deriving from the fact that one typically has a lawyer represent one under legal circumstances. We may simply use the term “represent” here because one typically has a representative. In fact, however, I believe these sorts of cases involve imaging of another sort, to which I return in section IV.

With a dichotomous image we are dealing with two real things whose relationship includes a more or less complex sort of logical dependency. Fundamentally, the relationship is not causal in the sense that when X copies or represents Y, Y brought X into being. In the case of copies, however, without Y's existence (now or in the past), X couldn't be a copy of Y. Yet insofar as X copies Y, Y is causally relevant for at least some of the features of X, viz., those features X and Y have in common. I'll say that if X copies Y, Y is present to a causal chain of events such that, without Y being present to the chain, X would not copy Y. This is not true with resemblances. X can resemble Y without Y being present to the causal chain that brings X about. The same is true in the opposite direction as well. That is, if Y resembles X, X need not be present to the causal chain that brings Y about. In other words, X and Y can resemble each other without the resemblance having anything to do with a mutual or overlapping history. Not so with copies. If X copies Y, there is a mutual or overlapping history. Finally, any and all copy relationships involve resemblance but not all resemblances involve copies.

When X represents Y, however, there is even less of a logical connection. X can represent Y just by my saying that it does, as when I pick up a rock, set it on the table, and say that it represents (or is) the Queen of England. Representations are rooted in social or cultural relationships rather than any historical presence of the object to the representation. Often, of course, things that represent also copy or resemble the things being represented, but they need not. However, when X copies Y, X (the image) can standardly (although not necessarily) be thought to represent (the object) Y.

Also, while standardly X's copying Y does not include Y being the cause of X, it can. A picture of an apple is not caused by an apple. However, an artist can sketch herself, thereby copying herself and as such is both the causal source of the image as well as the object in the causal chain in which the shared features of the object and image are rooted. Here, so to speak, the picture of the apple *is* caused by the apple. In relation to this, cases of copying always involve intentionality, at least with artifacts. One must set out to copy something. Hence something's being a copy of another is not accidental or arbitrary. A piece of driftwood on the beach can resemble a person, but it doesn't copy a person. That is why an artist can copy herself and be the causal source of the copy. The history of a copy includes the intentional making of a copy whereas the history of a resembling image need not include intentional making at all.

With natural objects, at least those that fall into natural kinds, intentionality may not be, and typically is not, involved. But information is shared from object to image. In natural reproduction, a mother lion gives birth to offspring which are

copies of the mother. Here genetic coding carries the information for the copy and the mother (and father) are causes of the copy, as well as present to the causal chain. So in copies, whether artifactual or natural, information sharing occurs from object to copy.

Representation is similar to copying in regard to intentionality. It requires the intentional “making” of a representation. At some point, someone intends that X represents Y. While perhaps X might come to represent Y via a lost history (where no one can remember how one object came to represent another—say X marking the spot on a map where the treasure is: why not a T, for example?), there is still an intentional acceptance of X representing Y. Resemblance alone seems to be independent of our intending one thing to resemble another or even independent of informational sharing.

Let’s consider briefly how images are related to some other mental processes that generate them. There are, for example, images that seem to “come out of one’s head.” Such images don’t seem to copy another *actual* physical entity. Here we must be careful, for even images that do come “out of one’s head” may still copy some other (physical) thing or at least something based on physical things. One’s idea of an apple derives from having seen apples, and if an artist has never seen an apple, but merely had an apple described to her, her idea of an apple will ultimately be based on someone’s having seen one. There are complications here that I need not attend to in detail, but should be mentioned. One’s idea of an apple might be a very “visual” idea. That is, some people are quite adept at conjuring up a (mental) image in their minds and then are able to draw what they see in their “mind’s eye.” Those mental images, one might say, create a “virtual” reality that is then copied in the physical image (drawing, painting, sculpture, etc.). Sometimes one hears artists say “that’s what I was seeing, that’s what I wanted to draw” only after the sketch is on the paper but where, in fact, they did not have a model (physically) in front of them.

Others don’t, apparently, think in pictures but rather think fundamentally in words or concepts. Such a person might think “I’ll draw an apple” and not, in fact, conjure up a virtual mental image of an apple but just have what might be thought of (in philosopher’s jargon) as a “mental representation” of an apple. That last phrase, “mental representation” (that could, of course, include what I just called “virtual mental image”) is loaded philosophically and I’m going to by-pass it as a distraction from my main point. Let’s just say that in any (physical) image making, the image is always mediated by the mind or its ideas or thoughts. Typically there is a physical object (or some idea based on physical objects) that falls on the “object” side of the object/image dichotomy and even though that is mediated through ideas or thoughts, the resulting (physical) image is an image of another physical object or thoughts derived from experiencing physical objects. That is true even where one “makes up” a physical object to then image. The last thought allows for fictional objects to be imaged as dichotomous images. For example, one could dichotomously image a fruit from the planet Zorb, something no human has ever seen before. Nevertheless, it would be “constructed” out of what other physical things look like—shapes, sizes, colors, etc. As Descartes notes, even the (physical) things I dream about borrow from (physical) things I’ve experienced.

The last two paragraphs are related to copies but less clearly to resemblances. One can discover resemblances in nature without there being any corresponding creatively derivative work in the mind's eye.<sup>6</sup> It remains, of course, that the mind is doing some work in noting the resemblances. The same is true where X represents Y. No mental imaging of the sort required in copying is needed, yet there is clearly mental work going on that links X with Y. In noting resemblances, one mentally compares the two objects. In representations, however, one must recognize a cultural "announcement" (or make one) of X representing Y. Of course, it may make it easier for us to recognize that X represents Y if, in fact, X resembles Y in some way but X need not resemble Y to represent.<sup>7</sup>

Many times when we use the term "image" we have something like dichotomous images in mind. The limiting factor in the discussion thus far is the emphasis on the physical. While many images are physical, not all are. That some images are not physical is most certainly true in representations where both physical and non-physical entities can represent either physical or non-physical things. The flag can represent courage, courage can represent the best in humanity, my thought about my mother can represent my mother, and finally, a stone, the Queen. What of copies? We say things like "his thought pattern copies Einstein's, with such and so difference." Do such dichotomous images follow the same patterns as those with physical objects? It appears so. Copying involves the necessity of the object being present to the causal chain that leads to the image, whereas resemblance need not. Representational imaging is a sort of social construct not rooted in copies or resemblance.

In summary, dichotomous images can be physical and non-physical but come in two sorts: copies and representations. Copies involve the presence of the object to the causal chain leading to the image, and representations involve a decisional aspect of someone denoting that X represents Y even where neither copying nor resemblance is present.

### III

I turn now to a second sort of image. Although not as common as the first one, there is a use of "image" that, if you will, carries its object with it. In this sense to be an image is to be an example of, the epitome of, or to typify.<sup>8</sup> For instance, we might say that Joe is the image of a football player or Mary is the image of a CEO. What this sense of image picks out depends a good deal on the tone of voice with

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<sup>6</sup> Here I'm setting aside the creative mental work that may go on in recognizing resemblances.

<sup>7</sup> It is also worth noting that lots of things besides images are related in similar ways to ideas as are copies. Cars, computers, and apple pies, for example. Although we sometimes refer to such things as images, as when, for example, we say the 1959 Cadillac is the image of post-war, American self-congratulation, typically we don't call cars "images." The process of making a car involves images, of course—sketches of proto-types, for example. However, that is art and often it is only art that draws out the term "image" for us. Of course, art covers a lot of territory.

<sup>8</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/image?s=t>



which judgments about it are expressed. Both these examples can suggest a caricature of the sort of object under consideration. “Mary is the image of a CEO” could be pejorative, suggesting a negative picture not only of Mary but of CEOs in general. Similarly “Joe is the image of a football player” could suggest a negative picture of football players and Joe as well. Or both could be positive. Mary or Joe could image the best of being a CEO or a football player where being a CEO or a ball player is considered a good thing in its own right. In both the positive and the negative versions, however, what is meant depends further on the distinctions among examples, epitomes, and typifications.

To say X is typical of the set of Ys is often to say that X’s properties are the properties commonly found attached to Ys. To say X is an example of the set of Ys is often to say the same sort of thing—X’s properties are what are commonly found among Ys—but to be typical implies a stricter account for what is typical of a set would not normally be capable of being a poor example of the set, whereas a mere example could be a poor example. Finally, for X to epitomize the set of Ys seems somewhat stronger than either being an example or being typical. To epitomize often picks out what is distinctive of the set or what is a superlative example of the set. Of course, there are no hard and fast rules here. Sometimes we do use “typical” and “epitome” interchangeably, or we add a “best” to “example” with a similar meaning in mind. What’s important to notice, however, is that to be the best example or most typical or the epitome of a set can itself be ambiguous. The ambiguity arises out of depicting what members of the set are generally like (“general typifying”), having in mind not what is generally true but making a value judgment (about what the ideal member would look like), and picking the closest example of that (“ideal typifying”). Which we use depends on our purposes.

For all their ambiguities, let’s call these “typifying images.” The typifying image minimally resembles the other members of the set. To have a typifying image of a set, we must have a set made of members that resemble one another in some significant way. Some sets have members that do not resemble one another much, if at all, beyond the trivial feature of being members of the same set. One could put typewriters, ghosts, and moon shots into the same set and one would be hard pressed to say how they resemble one another, whereas mules, donkeys, and horses would be easier to describe in terms of their resemblances. To have a typifying image, the set must be constructed of significantly resembling members. The more the members of the set resemble one another, the easier it is to say why these things belong to the set and the easier it is to find a typifying image. However, the resemblances need not be exactly the same in each member of the set.

There is obviously an overlap between dichotomous images and typifying images. As noted, sets can be made up of all sorts of wildly dissimilar things, so not all sets will have typifying imaging members. But typifying images do not merely represent the set. As we’ve seen, representation can be done with no resemblance at all (except perhaps the most general—perhaps being things, for example). To typify or epitomize, one has to resemble. In fact, one has to resemble *in the right way*. What is the right way? To some degree, that depends on the purposes one has. Consider “Joe is the image of a good football player.” (Notice the addition of “good” into the earlier example). Is our purpose to pick out some set of general features of all

football players? What would those be? It's not "big and burly" or "can run fast." Nor is it "good throwing arm" or "good on the catch." Wide receivers have different features than quarterbacks, and quarterbacks than centers. And all of them have different features than the defensive players. To typify a good football player *in general* may have little directly to do with the particular game of football: team player, ability to concentrate, etc. Perhaps better to say "Joe is the image of a good quarter back" or whatever one more specifically wants to pick out.

Consider the other example: "Mary is the image of a good CEO." (Again, note the addition of "good.") The category of "CEO" is in some ways narrower than that of football player, so perhaps it is tempting to respond that it is easier to say what would make a typifying member for CEOs than football players. Yet the problem doesn't go away. We could ask: "Do you mean good CEO in terms of bringing in a huge profit, leading people well, knowing when to hire, when to fire, or speaks well to the board?" Without the "good," typifying the CEO might be easier (as it would be with football player). Any CEO would do, perhaps, so long as the CEO ran a corporation. Here the ambiguity between the ideal and the general comes to the fore. To be clear about a typifying image, we have to ask some detailed questions about what it is we want to capture; that is, what is our purpose in trying to typify or epitomize a set of entities?

## IV

I turn now to a third and narrower but related sense of image. It is, perhaps, a philosopher's sense of image. Consider single-membered sets, sets consisting of a unique member. Take that member as an image of the members of the set. In that case, the singular set member images itself. Unlike with typifying images—where one thing epitomizes or typifies the other things in the set by resembling them—in this case, the thing that is the image just is (fully and completely) the thing in the set. Looked at in one way, such an image also epitomizes the members of the set but in a narrowed down or even trivial sense of epitomize. In another sense, however, such an image truly epitomizes the members of the set because it simply is all the members of the set. It's not that one thing represents or copies the others in the set; the thing doing the imaging is the only thing in the set. "Resemblance," "copy," and "representation" are the wrong terms. "Presentation" is closer. The image presents itself or, one could just as well say, that the object presents itself. In short, the image just is the object and the object the image. In this case, the image truly does bring its object with it. I'll call this the "presentational image."

One final point about images. The typifying image appears to bridge dichotomous and presentational images. On the one hand, the typifying image resembles the other members of the set. On the other hand, the typifying image is a member of the set itself and thus presents at least one member of the set. Although not identical to the set, it is at least identical to one member of the set. It could be said to be a presentational image of the subset made up of the singular member that typifies the larger set.

## V

To take up the topic of the image of God in humans, we need to reflect on what sort of image humans are. It is too quick and easy to simply replace the image language of the scriptures with the philosophical language of essences. Further, I believe that is a mistake. Since their early reflections on the biblical witness, theologians have approached the image of God by saying humans have an essence—that is, (the capacity for) thought, emotional richness, will, and creativity. Rationality is often the main notion used by theologians to explain what the biblical writers meant when the former thinkers unpacked the notion of the image of God in us. Here we confront some of the prejudices *against* images and *for* philosophical abstractions that rest in Plato’s lap. Images mislead, he told us, whereas philosophy tells the truth. While I don’t deny human essences (and in fact they are important for a variety of theological reasons) I do want to think more seriously about the image *qua* image. To say that we are made in the image of God is not the same as saying that certain universals are instantiated in us. To be *made* in the image of God is a making, not an instantiating from abstract universals to the concrete instances of those universals, even if the former (making) involves the latter (instantiating). Adam is made from dirt and God’s breath into the image of God. It is too easy and quick, again, to treat the image language as mere metaphor and replace it with philosophical theory. What if we treat the language of image as literal, or at least as literally as we can?<sup>9</sup>

First, we have to acknowledge that in our being made in God’s image there is no physical object (God is not physical) even though the resulting humans are themselves physical. Now the notion of physicality is itself problematic philosophically. Perhaps those philosophers who suggest that we have no uncontroversial notion of physicality are correct. But the point I want to make can survive those philosophical challenges by noting that I take “physical” to refer to what we typically think of as every day, furniture-sized objects such as, well, furniture or human bodies or pieces of grass or over-ripe strawberries. I won’t worry here, in other words, about trying to answer the challenges of Wilfred Sellar’s pink ice-cube question (how is the phenomenon of the pink ice cube to be maintained when we know that the ultimate parts of the cube are neither pink nor cold nor ice, etc.?). Whatever God is, God is not an entity anywhere on the spectrum from parts to whole as we would (or might come to) understand that spectrum as we contemplate the objects of our (physically rooted) experience around us. God, being bodiless, simply is not physical, whatever the term “physical” ends up picking out. God creates the physical but is not, in the divine being, physical.

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<sup>9</sup> I don’t mean to imply that I think God literally made Adam out of the dust of the ground. But to say that God literally created an image of the divine self does not imply that every scriptural reference should be taken literally. God could very well have used (and I think probably did) an evolutionary scheme to make humans in the divine image. That can be literal without treating the text of scripture as scientific description.

In discussions of the image of God it is common to note that the image is *not* physical. What is typically meant is that our bodies do not have anything to do with the image of God that is in us. Our spiritual or non-physical attributes image God. But in walking that route we don't take the image language very seriously. We make physical images of non-physical things with fair regularity. Some flags are physical images of freedom, for example.<sup>10</sup> We can take the U.S. flag as an example (although it is not the only good one). A flag as an image is a merely representational image, however. It seems that what's going on with the image of God in humans is not merely representational (hence not merely socially created) but closer to copying.

But there are plenty of examples of physical images that copy, not merely represent, non-physical things. Consider the 1959 Cadillac. It was an image of American post-war self-congratulation and prowess, especially since Harley Earl had American greatness in mind as he designed the largest tail fins for a car in history, right down to the bullet-shaped tail lights! Many car designers of the 1950s used WW2 fighter planes as models for their work, which adds to the complexity of how physical and nonphysical symbols and images interact, and links the post-war self-congratulatory attitude to very physical images. One can begin with a non-physical notion (self-congratulation or prowess) and end up with a physical image of it.

Corporate trademarks are examples of physical images that copy non-physical entities. In thinking of what a corporation is like, graphic artists try to capture in a physical image the "essence" of the corporation. (And by corporation, I mean not the people, or the business that a corporation engages in, but the non-physical, legal entity that is the corporation and its social features.) Think of Ronald MacDonald or the Nike "swoosh." (Note that the image is called a "swoosh" rather than a sloppy checkmark.) One finds something similar in book cover images: a physical image captures the non-physical topic of a book. Take, for instance, Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking*, a book about how human noetic work makes the many ways the world is. Suppose it had a better cover than it actually does, a cover with a number of wooden blocks—with no letters, numbers, or colors on them—stacked in some sort of order. That physical image would capture the non-physical topic of the book quite well. Does it resemble the theme of the book? Yes. Does it copy it? Well, why not?

In like manner, humans in their very physical bodies may copy God's very non-physical being. Of course, there is a lot of overlap between non-physical characteristics of the human person (thought, emotion, will, etc.) and the non-physical God. But in fact, for the most part, our experience with the divine is embodied in people we know, the nature we experience, and, of course, the Jesus we love and worship. Nevertheless, the plausibility of the very physical bodies we have copying the non-physical God is not that difficult to grasp. Our bodies act, think,

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<sup>10</sup> An anonymous reviewer noted that flags might be better understood as symbols than as images. That may be true, and it raises the question of the relationship between symbols and images, a subject of interest and importance but too large to take on here.

create, and so on.<sup>11</sup> The separation of these features of humans from the body is perhaps driven by the desire to turn the image language of scripture into decorative metaphor.

But we need to say more, for the image of God into which we are made is arguably not a copy of God's properties—intellect, emotion, creativity, moral capacity, spirit and so forth—but a copy of God. God of course has certain properties or capacities (God thinks, emotes, creates, is spirit, etc.). But God is not making images of abstract entities but making images of the divine self. The properties God has are, of course, instantiated in the individual humans (as arguably they are in the divine persons), but the instantiation of properties is not the making of the image or the image itself. The image—the made copy—is the concrete person, the individual human.

God's making us in the divine image seems to follow the same sort of pattern we find in dichotomous imaging. First there is something real and then a copy is made of it; object then image. But the image of God, as it is typically understood in theology, is a "shared" image. This is the place where it is tempting to ignore the actual language of scripture, replacing the notion of image with the notion of essential properties which are shared by all humans *qua* human. But that is not what an image is.

Let's say two things accidentally resemble a third. Under those circumstances, we have resemblance but not copying. But in the making of X in the image of Y, one is not merely making a resemblance (although one is also doing that) but one is copying. In the case of the accidental resemblance, there is no copy. Copied images seem to be singular, with each image an image of the object itself. The resemblance it has, let's say, to other copies is of course not totally accidental because each copy is a copy of the original. But neither is the resemblance among copies planned, or at least it need not be. Two copies of one object resemble each other not as copies of one another, but as *copies of the original object*. A copied image is not an image simply because it instantiates the same properties of the object. There is a causal history that is vital to its being a copy. The image is a concrete, non-universal entity, a particular and historical uniqueness in the world. The image of God that each of us is, is an individual life with human properties instantiated in the particular space, time, culture, and peculiarities in which we find ourselves.

A problem may arise here. If we start with the image as a real entity and have that as the primary sort of thing each of us is (with each individual copy of God standing on its own, so to speak), and then understand the shared properties as secondary (with our commonality not being the main feature of humans), don't we end up with the image of God as shaky ground for sin and salvation? That conclusion is too hasty. That we are unique copies of God individually does not entail that there is nothing in common among us. It only places the commonalities in the right perspective.

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<sup>11</sup> My suggestion here may require the rejection of Cartesian dualism in which one's soul or spirit does things with one's body. Since I generally reject dualisms of that sort, I find no problem with that.

What I've suggested does not, in other words, deny that insofar as each of us is made in God's image that each of us resembles one another or that we do, in fact, instantiate essential properties. But it is the copying that makes us in the image of God and not the resembling or instantiating *per se*. Consider an analogy. All copy-images, say, of Mt. Denali, share some set of common properties in virtue of which they are images of Denali, just as all copy-images of God share something in common in virtue of which they are images of God. Now it is primarily because they are copies of Denali that they resemble Denali, they are not copy-images of Denali just because they resemble one another. No resemblance the images have to one another is enough to make them copies of Denali. They could resemble one another and be copies of each other without being copies of Denali. So it is with humans. We could all resemble one another, or we could all be instantiations of certain properties *without being copy-images of God*. In fact, that is often what secular philosophies from the Enlightenment on have said. No need for God, just a need for some sort of platonic essences in the universe that all humans happen to share, and that is enough to ground, for example, ethical treatment.

Be that as it may, if we want to emphasize the uniqueness of the image of God that each of us is—that is, if we want to emphasize the fact that we are *made* images of God—we'll need to say more of how the instantiation of a property is a unique instantiation. The notion of essences and instantiation is a large and complicated topic. There are a variety of ways in which the term "essence" is used. We are working with kind-essences. When we think of kind-essences, we typically think of necessary properties. To be a member of a kind (here I'm talking about natural kinds rather than artifactual kinds—dogs and stars rather than cogs and cars) is to have certain properties without which one wouldn't be in the kind. Whatever the properties are that make humans human, we all have them. Often, and for the most part traditionally, essences or necessary properties are thought of along realist lines. By "realist" I mean that for the vast majority of natural things in the world, they are what they are independent of human noetic contributions. So cows have bovine essential properties independent of what any human person wishes about, believes about, or otherwise thinks about cows. Kinds (natural ones, at any rate) are found or discovered not made by humans.

However, one need not be a strict realist about properties in order for kinds to be rooted in a reality independent of human noetic work. In fact, taking a more relaxed (partly unrealistic) approach to essences allows for more diversity among the individual (copied) images as I described them above. When talking about the essence of being human (the supposed image of God) it is common to take that essence realistically so that the image of God in you is the same as the image of God in me. Rationality, emotional richness, volition, etc. all turn up in each of us as realist essential properties. But perhaps the set of properties shared among humans need not be instantiations of the same abstract essence, *except in a fairly limited way*. Perhaps, instead, we each receive what I'll call a "Wittgenstenian family resemblance" set of properties.

The standard Wittgensteinian picture (as many seem to conceive of it), claims that if A, B, C, D, and E resemble one another, A is like B, B like C, and so forth. But A may not resemble E. That is, A may share no (resembling) properties with E.

Hence one game is like another and that one like another and so forth but the last game may not share anything in common with the first game, except being called a game. I propose a different view. By “Wittgensteinian family resemblances” I intend the following: Although A and E may be quite dissimilar, A and E still resemble each other because they have the same *thin essence*. A thin essence is made up of thin properties. Thin properties are more or less stripped down properties, properties that depend on thin concepts. For example, the thin concept “mind” might be something like “that aspect of the human person that thinks.” Such a concept will be filled out in the world by one’s conceptual scheme, noetic framework, and historical situation. How one thinks about the concept “mind” will, of course, be situated in one’s place in history which in turn will be influenced by one’s noetic commitments (including cultural understandings) and the particular conceptual scheme one has developed. Conceptual schemes include the richer, more filled out accounts of the thin concepts. One does not typically consider only the thin properties and their related essences or concepts of a thing unless one is considering the question: How are all these things united? One can and should ask that question, of course, and when it is asked, one turns to the barest account of the essence to place things into a resemblance set. So members of a set of entities are in the same resemblance set when considered on the thin level. The thin properties a thing has could hold across all conceptual schemes, noetic frameworks, and historical situations and thus provide for essences across schemes, frameworks, and situations.

The thick properties, however, those that are embedded in the conceptual schemes, noetic frameworks, and historical situations, provide for various levels of uniqueness. In many instances, two things could resemble each other a great deal and in other cases not so much. Here is where Wittgensteinian resemblances enter the picture. Two members of the set at opposite ends of the resemblance continuum that ground a resemblance set would still (necessarily) have enough in common so that one could recognize them as members of the same set.<sup>12</sup> The thin essences unite a set of objects but those thin essences are sometimes hard to see, for one has to whittle down through various thickened up accounts of the thin essences to find the thin. Here we need to consider typifying images briefly. One of the reasons for limiting Wittgensteinian resemblances the way I do is that if A and E (on opposite ends of the continuum) don’t resemble each other at all, then it’s hard to see how one could have a typifying member of the set, whether general or ideal.

Let’s consider an example from the list of supposed essential properties typically used by theologians. Being rational on the thin level, let’s say, is the property of assessing claims for truth and acting on those claims. Now two philosophers could thicken up that property in quite different ways via alternative conceptual schemes (or alternative noetic frameworks). Looking at the philosophical literature on rationality, one could have one’s pick about how to thicken up the property. Any two of those ways of thickening up the thin notion of

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<sup>12</sup> Phil Smith pointed out that another way to think of a resemblance set (rather than as the linear A, B, C, D, E) is as a complicated 3-D map. Consider a globe where areas are labeled by letters but on the surface A and E don’t touch at all. However, on the third dimensional level, A and E may connect. I thank Phil for this observation as well as other comments on the penultimate draft of this paper.

rationality may be contradictory to one another. Typically that is reason to reject at least one of them. However, if a claim is true only within a conceptual scheme, noetic framework, or historical circumstance, then what is true is relative to conceptual schemes, noetic frameworks, or historical circumstances and the claims are not contradictory unless removed, *per impossible*, from their situations.<sup>13</sup> Two people living their lives according to rationality, then, might be living in two substantially different ways. One's rationality might not agree with another's at all, in fact. This (irrealist) way of considering essences allows for necessary properties at the thin level but not at the thicker level. What is true at a thick level within a situation depends not on the "real" way the world is but on a variety of features deriving from the conceptual scheme, noetic framework, or historical circumstance. But still, at the thin level, it will turn out true in every situation that humans have certain thin essential properties.

By way of analogy, when Nelson Goodman considers realism in painting, he makes the following observations. He describes two pictures, one realistic (that is, what we Westerners typically take to be realist, one that "looks like" nature, whose perspective is "ordinary" and whose colors are "normal") and one in reverse perspective and whose colors are replaced by the normal colors' complements. He then says this:

The two pictures . . . are equally correct, equally faithful to what they represent, provide the same and hence equally true information; yet they are not equally realistic or literal. For a picture to be faithful is simply for the object represented to have the properties that the picture in effect ascribes to it. But such fidelity or correctness or truth is not a sufficient condition for literalism or realism. The alert absolutist will argue that for the second picture but not the first we need a key. [In response,] . . . the difference is that for the first the key is ready at hand. . . . Just here, I think, lies the touchstone of realism [in the arts]: not in quantity of information but in how easily it issues. And this depends upon how stereotyped the mode of representation is, upon how commonplace the labels and their uses have become.<sup>14</sup>

The analogy is this. Just as what counts as a realistic painting depends not merely on content but on how easily the representation unmask itself—how easily it issues from the painting—so the truth about human persons depends not merely on description but on how easily the truth unmask itself from the historical circumstances. One can find, in short, the thin essential properties underneath the layers of thickened up descriptions and layers of historically rooted lives. So there is a real basis (a basis not relying on our histories, conceptual schemes, and noetic frameworks) that ties us all together, and yet each of us is unique in that we copy God in the particular, historically situated way that we do. Each of Goodman's pictures stands in a copy (he says representational) relationship with what they

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<sup>13</sup> See my (McLeod-Harrison 2009) for further details on how this account might go.

<sup>14</sup> (Goodman 1968, 36)



copy but they are quite different and distinct portrayals of their object. Although quite different, they are equally real presentations of their objects even though one might be less familiar.

Thus, while each person shares the same thin properties, how those properties are thickened up depends on historically rooted conceptual-schematic features. What being rational looks like for one person may be quite different from what it looks like for another. So instead of Wittgensteinian resemblances varying so much between A and E because A and E fail to have any properties in common, A and E can *appear* to have little in common because the thickened up versions of the properties are so disparate. All of this is consistent with the idea that God makes us in the divine image as copies of God. God is the object and each of us, in our historical, conceptually nuanced context, develops into the thickened up instantiation of the thin properties. Because we are made as images of God, the thin properties are always thickened up by the historical circumstance and its related (set of) conceptual schemes and noetic frameworks.

The result of all this is that humans copy God, and hence resemble God, via historically conditioned properties that are copied from God in rather unique ways. Humans also resemble (but do not copy) each other at the thin level.<sup>15</sup> Copying involves God being present to the causal chain of each human's development whereas resemblance does not. Some of the differences in resemblance (even radical ones) can be explained via the Wittgensteinian resemblance properties being different from one another in quite significant ways at the thick level and yet similar enough at the thin level to count individuals as members of the same resemblance set. This resemblance, thus, is not accidental.

Returning now more fully to the typifying image, we might ask for a typifying example of humanity in a theological context. Our first inclination might be to say that any one of us might be as good as any other to typify humanity. Let's say that what it is to be human is to be made in the image of God. Each and every human is made thus. If we want to talk about thin properties that are essential to humans, we might say that to be human is to be capable (in principle) of rationality, emotions, creativity, free choices, or spirituality.<sup>16</sup> Once again, any one of us would fit the bill as typical.

But what of the other sense of typifying image—the ideal typifying image? Here we run into some substantial difficulties, for if we are in the set “human”

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, there is a sort of copying going on with our genetically related children and ourselves. However, even there the copying seems to lack the *intentional* control over what the children are like.

<sup>16</sup> Here is important to note that all humans, even those who are extremely mentally challenged and have lived, let's say, in a permanent vegetative state since birth are made in the image of God. Hence the importance when putting the image of God into philosophical terms to speak of “capacities in principle.” It is also theologically (and morally) important to consider that Jesus holds up children as models of spirituality. “Let the children come to me, for to such belong the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:14, RSV). He also indicates that the least will be the greatest and it is not difficult to infer that the most mentally challenged human will be, in fact, the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. As such, we may be honoring saints in serving those among us who are the least capable now of serving anyone. I owe this observation to my wife, Susan J McLeod-Harrison.

because we resemble one another, we resemble one another in Wittgensteinian resemblances rooted in thin essential properties, at least according to my account. That is, we run into the problem that humans are so varied, and indeed, unique, that it is hard to point to any singular set of features by which one human can be suggested as an ideal. Since the ideal typifying image requires us to make certain value judgments, the vast differences among us might incline us to narrow the field. We might want to ask which aspects of humanity we desire to typify. Is it courage, creativity, rationality with emotional sensitivity, or something else? We might propose, for example, the heroic among us, or the great inventors, leaders, or other “important” figures. But if we try to pick out the ideal *human*, we are probably going to run into challenges of all sorts. There is a theological answer, however. Jesus might be the only human who fits the ideal account, for not only has he all the properties at the thin level that go into making up the human person, but he also lacks a property that keeps the rest of from being ideal: viz., sin. Whereas many other superlative human persons are superlative in having various of the thin properties thickened up in interesting and powerful ways, no one but Jesus can claim to be superlative in being without sin (by nature).<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the fact that Jesus is without sin also implies that he is physically, psychologically, and emotionally whole and complete. While he is the unique person he is, he would also not suffer from the challenges and problems the rest of us have in terms of dealing with the stresses of life. I’m not saying he would not feel stress or anguish, or other emotions, but only that he would be capable of handling them well and appropriately. In this sense he would be a superlative human as well.

Finally, the presentational image appears to be the sort of image that Christ is of God insofar as Jesus is divine. Since he is God, he doesn’t copy God, at least in the sense that we find him described in Colossians 1:15ff. So the image that Jesus is of God is a presentational image. Equally truly, I am the presentational image of myself. Since I am a member of the single-membered set made up solely of myself, I presentationally image myself, as do you yourself, and your neighbor herself, and so on.

## VI

I want to weave these various themes together with some reflections on sin and salvation. Jesus is the presentational image of God, the unique member of the set “divine-human persons.” That makes him unique not only among humans, but among all the things in the universe. It would be a mistake, however, to think that that is all there is to Jesus’ uniqueness, viz., that he has a divine history. He also has a human history that is unique. He was born of Mary, taught carpentry by Joseph, walked along the road between Jerusalem and Bethany on a certain day in the year 27, and so forth. We “regular” humans are unique in that same way. We are born of

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<sup>17</sup> Here one might suggest the Roman Catholic version of Mary. She however, is sinless by grace, not nature. In fact, we can all become sinless by grace.

particular parents, raised in particular neighborhoods. In that way, each of us is the presentational image of ourselves.

Jesus' unique history as a divine person, however, includes becoming human and staying human. That is, the second person of the Trinity is forever the divine-human. When the New Testament speaks of Jesus as the image of God (see Colossians 1:15ff, 2 Corinthians 4:4 and the related John 14:9, Hebrews 1: 1-4, Ephesians 4: 17-24, Romans 8:3 and Philippians 2: 7,8), it speaks of us seeing God (in the divine self) when we see Jesus the human. The two are not separated, as Chalcedon recognizes when it says Jesus has two natures and two wills but is one person. To see Jesus the human is to see Jesus the divine creator of the universe.

What has that to do with our being made in the image of God? Just this: if Jesus is truly human, then he too is made in God's image. That is, Jesus is as much the dichotomous image of God as we are. That explains, if my earlier description is right, why Jesus is unique as a human. He is the unique copy of God as is each of us. Yet there is something else about Jesus that is unique. When a "regular" human is made, she is made from scratch as a copy of God. But Jesus pre-exists his human incarnation and thus, in a sense, *he copies humans* when he is made the incarnate God. Whereas we all resemble one another because we copy God, Jesus resembles us because he copies us.<sup>18</sup>

But Jesus copies us without sin. Sin, of course, is adventitious to humans. It is not a necessary property. When God incarnates as a human, he does not copy us in that respect. To put it as the Orthodox would, the image of God is separate from the likeness of God in the creation of humanity. The image of God is our reason, will, emotional richness, and creativity. But the likeness of God is our capacity for virtue, our capacity to be fully like God *in the human way*. Jesus becomes like God *in the human way* in his incarnation. We see God in Jesus because he has grown into the sort of reliance on God that is needful for true sanctification (true deification, as the Orthodox would say). He has by nature what we can have by grace. By nature, he never was sinful. He chose, in his earthly life, to shape his earthly being after God's will rather than his own human will. That makes him the full image of God as a human. So not only is he God by nature, but he is the ideal typifying image of God as well, a human without sin, totally reliant on the will of God. His human will is amalgamated to God's will and he thus lives out the life of God on earth.

So Jesus is the presentational image of God (God in the divine self), the ideal typifying image of a human (in his sinless humanity) and the dichotomous image of God in his being made the unique human he is, a copy of God. Salvation is provided by God in Jesus because of the way these three images work together. Because Jesus is a copy of God as we are, his presence among us is related to us via both his uniqueness from us and his commonality with us. He is, via the thin properties that we all share, and in virtue of which we more or less resemble each other, the savior for all humanity. But he copies us as well in his uniqueness, his historicity, his being thickened up according to a conceptual scheme or noetic structure that places him

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<sup>18</sup> One of the editors wondered why I haven't taken up the Orthodox notion that Christ is the ikon of God and, as such, the archetype of humanity. I would affirm this Orthodox viewpoint as well, and hope to take it up elsewhere.

very much among the finite and contingent. His uniqueness is, in short, just as much a part of the image of God as is the fact that he shares the properties necessary for his being a human. But it is because he is the unique, particular example of the ideal human that we can learn to become like God as well (on the Orthodox view). He chose to be like God and hence imaged God in the full way a human ought to and not merely in his rationality, emotional richness or creativity. He lived the life of sinlessness and thereby is the example of how it can be done.

Thus we have the image of God, as much unique as it is shared. The implications of our uniqueness is not limited to the development of our individual ways of being in the world, but to the development of the wide variety of cultures and expressions of the celebration of the life God gives us. But it also influences how we should understand the nature of (original) sin and the nature of our salvation. We come to God both corporately and individually. When the rich young man asks Jesus what he must do to be saved, Jesus asks him if he'd followed the law. He had! Then Jesus says he lacks one more thing. He is to sell all his possessions and to follow Jesus. That is a very different approach to the particulars of salvation than he tells Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and Martha. Each of us comes to salvation in unique circumstances with our unique personalities, but also with the knowledge that we are all related to Jesus our brother. It is that relatedness that means Jesus' singular life, death, and resurrection can save us.

So we should celebrate our commonalities. They bind us together in our lives. But we should equally celebrate our uniqueness and our diversity for that is, indeed, the way the image of God is.

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