Toward a Vocabulary of the Self

This lesson assumes a foundation of theological anthropology and will not articulate a biblical defense for each of these concepts. Our intention is not to introduce new jargon, but to clarify important concepts through a discussion of terms used in the philosophical conversation about human nature.

Human
An individual physically conceived as a member of the human race.

1. All humans have inherent dignity because they have been made in the image of God.
2. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. Therefore, being human is not a problem.
3. We will always be human. We will never be divine.

Human Nature
All that properly belongs to humans, collectively distinguishing them from other sorts of beings and things. "A quality or group of qualities, belonging to all and only humans, that explains the kind of being we are" (*Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy,* 341).

1. Human nature consists of the features humans typically hold in common, as a set, distinguishing us from the sets of features other creatures typically hold in common. The focus is on the set itself, not on isolated features that distinguish us from other creatures (e.g., "rationality" or "morality").
2. Embodiment is a central component of human nature.
3. Human nature has a composite face. Here exceptions do not destroy, but prove the rule. A human without legs only says most humans have two legs. The disabled person is still human, although not typical.
4. Christ took on this human nature. As the Second Adam, He is the rule, the ideal, while we are the exception due to the distortion of sin.

Numerical Identity
Persistence of person over time. A human being existing at one time is rightly recognized to be the same human being existing at another time.

Example: On September 30, 2004, I, Jane Doe, am the same entity that existed as a newborn infant in Dallas, Texas, the evening of July 30, 1965. I am *numerically identical* to that infant. In what does that numerical identity consist?

1. **Psychological continuity**: Through continuity of memory and experience we recognize our own persistence over time. Numerical identity must be grounded in something more stable, however, as those who lose brain function may well lose psychological continuity.
2. **Material continuity**: Though my body changes significantly over time, ultimately bearing little resemblance to its original form, at no time am I associated with a wholly separate and different body (as with the ship of

Theseus, which is thought to persist, even when all of its parts of have been replaced). I do not exchange my body for another, and I remain the same person. In the future, in rapture or resurrection, the body retains numerical identity in transformation.

3. **Immaterial continuity**: Though we cannot identify traits or functions of the individual that are "immaterial" to the exclusion of the "material" body, we maintain that some aspect of the person's being will continue to exist even after death. Between death and resurrection, one retains immaterial continuity even while "absent from the body" (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23). Some theologians have argued against psychological, material, and immaterial continuity. They believe we persist after death only in the sense that God will never forget us and we will always be "before Him." We have argued that eternal life consists of actual personal existence under providence, not just God's ongoing recollection.

Essential Self
What is genuinely true about an individual; the elements that define a particular human being.

1. Only God knows the whole truth about any individual, one's essential self.
2. Self identity is the way an individual perceives his or her essential self.
    a. Everything thought to be true about oneself contributes to self-identity.
    b. Self-identity can be confused, especially when one loses continuity of memory.
    c. Self-deception occurs when self-identity and reality conflict. May include Sartres' notion of "bad faith" as a denial of responsibility for creating one's essential self.
    d. Self-identity is particularly dependent on social interaction—our webs of interlocution. This is a circular process in which the vision we have of ourselves also affects the relations we have with others.
3. The essential self is not invariant, but changes over time and under different circumstances.
    a. People commonly associate the essential self with one's personality as socially experienced. When someone behaves unusually (e.g., due to brain injury, drugs, or perhaps simply changed circumstances) others may say, "She is not herself."
    b. Change may at times be regarded as "growth" or "deterioration"—value-based assessments that are shaped socially and theologically.
    c. As people change, their relationships with others necessarily change.
4. Since the essential self includes everything that is true about a person, it is not limited to passions, values, rational thought, choices, environment, genetics, or anything else.
    a. Everything I experience (sometimes called nurture or environment) contributes to my essential self, but my essential self is not limited to the sum of my experiences.

     i. "The environment includes everything from the type of diaper you wore as an infant and the weather on your third birthday to your parents' income and the amount of lead in your classroom paint. It's the catechism you were taught in Sunday school and the TV show you watched last night" (Dean Hamer, *The GOD Gene,* 47).

    ii. "Your brain changes when you are introduced to a new person, when you hear a bit of gossip, when you watch the Oscars, when you polish your golf stroke—in short, whenever an experience leaves a trace in the mind" (Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate,* 86).

b. My genotype contributes to my essential self, but my essential self is not limited to the sum of my genes.

     i. On twins raised apart: "Though they had different hairstyles, their faces and voices were almost indistinguishable. Their medical histories were very similar: high blood pressure, hemorrhoids, migraines, 'lazy eye,' chain-smoked Salem cigarettes, bitten nails, weight gain at the same age. As expected, their bodies showed remarkable similarity. But so did their minds. Both followed stock-car racing and disliked baseball. Both had carpentry workshops. Both had built a white seat around a tree trunk in the garden. They went to the same Florida beach on vacation. . . . Both had dogs named Toy. Both had wives named Betty. Both had divorced women named Linda. Both had named their first children James Alan" (Matt Ridley, *The Agile Gene,* 78).

    ii. Ridley argues that neither side can win the "nature versus nurture" debate. Rather, nature works *via* nurture and nurture works *via* nature. For example, language "does not just develop according to a genetic program. Nor is it just absorbed from the outside world. Instead, it is imprinted. It is a temporary innate ability to learn by experience from the environment, a natural instinct for acquiring nurture. Polarize that into either nature or nurture, if you can" (Ridley, 170).

c. Every choice I make both reflects and contributes to my essential self, but my essential self is not limited to the sum of my choices.

     i. "We allow that man has choice and that it is self-determined, so that if he does anything evil, it should be imputed to him and to his own voluntary choosing. We do away with coercion and force, because this contradicts the nature of will and cannot coexist with it" (John Calvin).

    ii. We are free in that, within the constraints of human nature and personal circumstances, we are able to choose what we desire.

d. In God's providence, the Holy Spirit works both in and beyond nature and nurture.

Fully Human
Living life that is thought to fulfill one's human potential. One may understand that potential as the fullness of God's creative intention, an existentially meaningful experience, a life lived according to reason, or perhaps a life lived in accordance with an external Good.

1. Jonathan Edwards, *The End for which God Created the World*

   <u>Our purpose: God's glory</u>
   - God delights most in the manifestation of His own attributes in creation.
   - Humans are created to glorify God by both seeing and delighting in displays of His character.
   - We will experience our greatest joy, and most thoroughly manifest God's likeness, when we delight in God.

   <u>But we delight in lesser things</u>
   "As soon as humanity transgressed ... all the excellent enlargedness of the soul was gone and thenceforward shrunk into a little point. God was forsaken, and fellow creatures were forsaken, and humans retired within and became wholly governed by narrow, selfish principles."

   <u>The Restoration of Glory</u>
   "In the creature's knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged, his fullness is received and returned. Here is both an emanation and remanation. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, are something of God, and refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is of God, and in God, and to God; and he is the beginning, and the middle, and the end."

2. Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Religious Affections*
   "The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean."

3. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God*
   a. "True human life comes from love, is alive in love, and through loving makes something living of other life too" (53).
   b. ". . . it is only the person who lives slowly who really enters into life" (57).
   c. "For the special faith in Yahweh, true life is to be found in community with the living God, and real death is the loss of this community" (79).