IN LOVING MEMORY: APPLYING A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF TRINITARIAN PERSONHOOD TOWARD THE PROBLEM OF MEMORY LOSS

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At the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, visitors were greeted with the maxim, “Know thyself.” This begs the question, “Who am I?” However, before we address the issue of personal identity—what is a person? Is one the sum of their personality and memories? Is one’s memory constitutive of their personhood? If so, what implications might this pose for those suffering from memory loss?

These are enormous questions that have been previously discussed within the Western philosophical and theological tradition; this essay will not be an exhaustive discussion on Christian doctrine concerning memory, personhood, or anthropology. Instead, this paper will seek to offer a brief, constructive theology of personhood—from the perspective of Scripture and Christian tradition—that specifically addresses potential problems for personhood posed by memory loss.¹ Why theology? Because while neurobiological explanations of memory loss are important, they require a theological perspective that understands memory loss (i.e. dementia or Alzheimer’s) as happening to embodied creatures—created, loved, and held by God—meaning that memory loss has theological significance.² Thus, as these embodied creatures who either suffer from memory loss or love those who suffer from memory loss, we will need a theological vision that helps “redescribe the world”—reframing our narratives around memory loss towards how God sees.³

This is the aim of this paper, which argues that personhood is Trinitarian—meaning that persons are constituted in relation to God and others. Thus, the problem of memory loss for personhood is a metonymic fallacy—while one’s memory is constitutive of personhood, it is only part of the self, not the whole. Instead, inspired by Augustine’s writing on memory and the

¹ Due to the scope of this paper, I will primarily examine the theological issues surrounding memory and personhood from a Christian perspective.
³ Ibid., p.21.
work of theologians like John Swinton on dementia and John Zizioulas on personhood, we will see that a theological anthropology must engage “in the quest to speak about humankind by viewing the human reality from the perspective of an understanding of God.”⁴ This starts from the imago Dei and imago trinitatis to see human beings as persons-in-relation—meaning that one is not merely self-constructed by memory but is also constituted by their relationships with others and—ultimately—in relationship to the God who does not forget (Is. 49:15).

Firstly, what has already been said regarding the relationship between memory and personhood, and how can we begin to theologically “re-describe” personhood from the perspective of the imago Dei? Let us first examine Locke’s definition, which has a notable influence on modern Western thought around memory and identity, in order to understand the “starting place” for our modern narratives around memory loss:

“[A] person stands for...a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it.”⁵

Notice that Locke’s definition of personhood relies on self-awareness, identity, and a stable sense of self over time—which are necessitated by memory. In other words, for Locke,

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one's personal identity extends only so far as one’s own consciousness or memory. Thus, if one’s memory fades, so does their personal identity and self. This definition of personhood seemingly understands persons as individuals that are primarily constituted by their faculties. This offers little place for relationality or hope for those suffering from memory loss. In contrast to this, Augustine offers a more robust vision of human personhood in the *imago Dei*.

Briefly looking at Augustine’s writings, we can see that he wrote about memory extensively—both as it relates to oneself and to God. In *Confessions*, Augustine sees a close relationship between memory and mind, writing, “But the mind and the memory are one and the same, we even call the memory the mind…” Later, he writes, “Yet I do not understand the power of memory that is in myself, although without it I could not even speak of myself.” In *Confessions*, Augustine’s concept of memory seems to conflate it with the mind or self from a phenomenological (i.e. experiential) perspective. However, we should be wary of anachronistic readings that interpret Augustine’s theology of personhood in line with Locke. For, in *On the Trinity*, Augustine lays out the *ontological* basis for the mind as being an image of the Trinity—meaning one’s memory, understanding, and will are acts of the mind that are analogous to the persons of the Trinity. For Augustine, “Memory, understanding, will, are not three lives, but one life; nor three minds, but one mind.” This also serves as an implicit denial of rationalistic Enlightenment notions of personhood (e.g. Locke’s) since Augustine understands personhood as being *distinct* from the mind’s faculties: “[I]t is I that remember, I that understand, I that love,

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7 Swinton, *Dementia*, p.123.
9 Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.16.25
10 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 10.11.18
who am neither memory, nor understanding, nor love, but who have them. These things, then, can be said by a single person, which has these three, but is not these three.”

Clearly, Augustine is not asserting that a person is their memory—although it is important for personhood. But to say that memory is wholly constitutive of a person—as Locke does—would be to ignore the Trinitarian dimensions of Augustine’s theological anthropology. Again, in On the Trinity, Augustine asserts that “each individual man, who is called the image of God...is one person, and is an image of the Trinity in his mind.” He concludes: “that image in the case of man has these three things but is one person, so is it with the Trinity; but therein are three persons, the Father of the Son, and the Son of the Father, and the Spirit of both Father and Son.” Clearly, Augustine’s notion of memory and mind reflects his Trinitarian theology—thus, we must turn our attention to the Triune God if we are to understand the relation of memory and memory loss to personhood. Moving forward, we will need a theological anthropology that understands personhood from the perspective of the Triune God, in whose image we are made (Gen. 1:26).

With Augustine’s help, our notion of personhood becomes re-oriented toward the Triune God, in whose image humans are made—leading us to a different understanding of personhood. Persons are made in the image of a relational, Triune God and participate in this relationality with God and others through union in Christ. Contrary to a Lockean notion of self and memory that views persons as individuals with requisite properties, as well as the ontological monism of

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11 Ibid., 15.22.42
12 Ibid., 15.7.11
13 Ibid., 15.23.43
ancient Greek thought, Christian anthropology— informs by Scripture and tradition— teaches that a person is “a relational ‘mode of being’” As de Lubac writes, “[A] person is a whole world,’ but it must also be added at once that this ‘world’ presupposes others with which it makes up one world only.” Otherwise, “beings are left in their solitary state or are crushed into annihilation.” Thus, human beings must be understood as “persons-in-relation”—rather than persons merely defined by individual functions or properties.

However, a Trinitarian anthropology does not collapse personhood into collectivism—but it preserves both “relational and personal ontological integrity as essential constituents of personhood.” One implication of this is that our Trinitarian, relational personhood does not destroy the particularity of our personhood. As John Zizioulas asserts, “Communion does not threaten personal particularity, it is constitutive of it.” Indeed, Zizioulas argues, human personhood “has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion [with God and others].” It must also be added that a Trinitarian anthropology does not mean that human persons perfectly reflect the Triune God, nor that the divine, perichoretic life of God can be “collapsed” into our human relationships or categories—but rather that we participate in His divine life, through Christ and the Spirit (cf. Eph. 2:19-22; Rom. 12:5). As Eberhard Jüngel

18 Ibid.
20 Hastings, p.55
23 Hastings, p.50
concludes, “[H]uman beings must learn to understand ourselves as relational beings instead of subjects in the center of things. We must learn to conceive of being as a being-together instead of as substance”—just as the Trinity is “a community of mutual otherness.”

Thus, relationships—ultimately with God and penultimately with others—are essential to a theological anthropology that reckons with memory and personhood. This Trinitarian anthropology shows, quoting Zizioulas, that one’s “capacity for memory is not necessarily a unique characteristic of the human being.” Since we are constituted as persons-in-relation, it follows that a person is not constituted merely by their memory, but also by others and—ultimately—by God. As Zizioulas argues, rather than a Lockean or Cartesian anthropology of “I think/I remember, therefore I am,” a Trinitarian anthropology begins with “I am loved, therefore I am.”

A person is a person because they are loved by God—who is love (1 John 4:8)—and penultimately, by others (especially by our fellow members in Christ). As the Scottish theologian John Swinton, writes, “Personhood is not an individual achievement. It is a gift of community.”

One implication of applying this Trinitarian anthropology to memory loss is that it helps elucidate the grief experienced by those touched by memory loss, since—as Ross Hastings suggests—it is “experienced as the loss of something of [ourselves].” Swinton concurs in his assessment that a “person does not lose herself [due to memory loss]; her community loses her.” Memory loss grievously robs a person and their community of a unique personality. Yet,

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25 Zizioulas, “Human Capacity,” p.418
28 This does not mean that a Trinitarian anthropology dissolves personal uniqueness; see Zizioulas, “On Being Other,” p.69.
29 Hastings, p.57.
their *ontological* personhood—as differentiated from how we *phenomenologically* experience them—remains, since personhood is not merely individual, but relational.

Thus, contrary to a view that a person suffering from memory loss has “lost themselves” or “lost their mind,” a Trinitarian view of personhood shows us that persons—even if suffer from the severest forms of memory loss—are still *themselves*, constituted by God and others. For Swinton, this means that a person suffering from memory loss can be “held and sustained within the affirming boundaries of human and divine relationships” so as to be “re-membered”—brought back together in a “relational environment” which mirrors God’s loving remembrance.³¹ By re-describing memory loss in these terms, we can also embark in “re-membering”—and being “re-membered”—out of a theological conviction that those suffering from memory loss are not merely burdensome, awkward, different, or alienated. This re-description is essential for preventing the creation of a “negative hermeneutic”—which arises from negative assessments of a dementia sufferer’s relatively new traits—between those seeking to care and those receiving care.³² Rather, while those caring for memory loss sufferers (e.g. dementia patients) may experience quite them differently, it is paramount that they are not perceived as “empty-shells” or “ghosts of their former selves,” but as embodied, beloved persons—held by us and by the ultimate, theological ground of personhood, the Triune God who remembers us.

In this final section, we will examine what God’s memory means for personhood; God’s memory is not merely sentiment comfort but is tied deeply to our constitution as persons. But, when discussing God’s “memory,” it is important to recognize the analogical nature of language used in Scripture to discuss God—neither equivocity nor univocity is appropriate. While we can

³¹ Swinton, “Forgetting,” p.59
³² Swinton, *Dementia*, pp.108-109
have a natural starting point for discussing God’s memory from the *analogia entis*, God’s memory is quite dissimilar to our memories. Since God is not bound by space-time or neurology, God does not forget (Is. 49:15)—in fact, God remembers things and persons as they *really* are (Ps. 139:1). Nonetheless, the redemptive implications of God’s memory are revealed in Scripture and—ultimately—in Christ. As Benedict XVI suggests,

“[Regarding the *analogia entis*] unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language. God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as *logos* and, as *logos*, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf.”

With this orientation, let us examine the redemptive implications of God’s memory. In Scripture, God’s remembrance of someone is tied to God’s covenantal faithfulness (Ex. 2:24; Is. 44:21; Heb. 13:5). As Brevard Childs explains, “Whoever Yahweh does not remember has no existence (Ps. 88:6). When God forgets sin, he forgives (Jer. 31:34).”

God’s remembrance sustains all things and signals his ongoing, enduring care for His people (e.g. Psalm 8:4). God’s salvific remembrance is also enacted by Jesus; for example, Jesus's remembrance of the thief on the cross (Lk 23:42-43) is a promise tied to the latter’s ultimate, eschatological salvation. As Childs concludes, “God’s memory encompasses his entire relationship with his people. His memory includes both the great deeds of the past as well as his continued concern for his people.

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33 Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Representatives of Science, Lecture of the Holy Father at the Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg on Tuesday, 12 September 2006,” (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana).
in the future.” Indeed, God’s memory is also tied to our eschatological hope. As John Polkinghorne suggests, we are “held in the divine memory until God’s great eschatological act of resurrection.” Clearly, God’s remembrance of us is not merely a palliative sentiment—nor is it triumphalism; it is the promise of His faithful, redemptive work, which is ultimately assured by our participation and union with Christ.

Union with Christ is the ontological ground of our assurance since we are persons that are constituted and vivified in Christ—in whom all things hold together (Col. 1:17) and have their being (Acts 17:28). Therefore, nothing—not even our lost memory—“will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39, NRSV). United with Christ, we find that our human memory is actually “one mode of participation in the memory of God, which is our true memory and our only real source of identity and hope.” Indeed, this participatory model of memory reveals memory as a mutual interweaving of personal and communal stories held by God. As Swinton suggests, “Some of it [i.e. memory] is held by the individual; some of it is held by her community; all of it is held by God.”

An example of this participatory model of memory is demonstrated by how our identity and narrative—such as those around memory loss—are re-described by way of participation in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:1-14). As Grenz explains, this involves “retelling one’s own narrative, and hence making sense out of one’s own life, by means of the plot of the Jesus narrative.” In other words, union with Christ is salvific, constitutive, and formative for our remembered lives—which are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

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35 Childs, p.42.
37 Swinton, Dementia, p.217
38 Ibid., 221
39 Grenz, p.329.
Finally, our union in Christ means that we are also united with others in Christ, which is the Church—assuring that “our identity is sustained and upheld within both human and divine memory.” Therefore, the “re-membering” of those suffering from memory loss is enacted in the Church, where the implications of our Trinitarian anthropology are embodied in the corporate worship of Christ’s body. This is highlighted in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which reconstitutes and embodies our shared communion and hope in Christ (Col. 3:1-4). It, as Augustine suggests—allows us “to be...what [we] see and receive what [we] are.” Moreover, Swinton writes that “[i]n the Eucharist we can hear Jesus’ words, ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ not simply as a retrospective glance back to the cross, but as...a re-membering [sic] within which the church is constituted as a body, held together in, by, and through the memories of Jesus.” Indeed, the Eucharist is the sign of God’s loving remembrance for us, in Christ—which opens us to remember others, and all creation, in love. As Alexander Schmemann writes,

“Remembrance is an act of love. God remembers us and His remembrance, His love is the foundation of the world. In Christ, we remember. We become again beings open to love, and we remember...The Eucharist is the sacrament of cosmic remembrance: it is indeed a restoration of love as the very life of the world.”

Moreover, the transforming power of Christ’s real presence—in Cyril of Alexandria’s words—“merge[s] us in unity with God and among ourselves...[and] sanctifies his faithful in

40 Swinton, Dementia, p.223.
41 Quoted in De Lubac, p.91
42 Swinton, Dementia, p.217
mystic communion, making them one body with him and among themselves.” The worshipping life of the Church, highlighted in the Eucharist, serves as the embodiment of our life together—united in Christ. It serves as the faithful reminder that even in our failures, forgetfulness, and fears, we are never alone but remembered and saved in Christ—who will never forsake us (Heb 13:5) and who will “preserve [us] body and soul unto everlasting life.”

In conclusion, the notion that memory is wholly constitutive of mind or personhood—while phenomenologically compelling—has been shown above to neglect the *Trinitarian* nature of personhood. Rather than individuals being merely constituted by requisite properties (e.g. memory), the *imago Dei* shows that humans are ontologically persons-in-relation who are constituted in communion with God and others—which is assured in our union with Christ. Moreover, a Trinitarian anthropology means that memory loss does preclude how sufferers of memory loss are constituted and “re-membered” in communion with others and—ultimately—with God (Is. 44:21). Thus, this Trinitarian anthropology allows both the forgetful and those who love them to echo the Psalmist’s cry that the Lord will not forsake his people (Ps. 94:14) but will lead us to life everlasting (Ps. 103:24).

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44 Quoted in De Lubac, p.91
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