

What is Humanity?

Every now and then, we are bound to get a little reflective and begin to ask questions of ourselves and our identity. We can widen that thought yet further to question the nature of humanity as a whole. What is it to be human? It's an important question, and one that I think we can answer by looking at the past history of our species. But first, some less successful attempts at defining humanity.

Steve Jones, the biologist, once defined humans as 'a 15 foot tube through which food passes, usually in one direction.' However, that's a bit too reductive. What is it that makes human beings special and different? Perhaps one of the things that might distinguish us from other animals could be this very need to try to establish a difference.

The Greek philosopher Plato defined man as a 'featherless biped'. He was one of the earliest to attempt a definition of humanity and perhaps it shows. 'Featherless biped' is hardly as stirring as Hamlet's description:

'What a piece of work is a man. How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties. In form and moving how express and admirable. In action, how like an angel; in apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals... this quintessence of dust.'

Over the years, others have made similar attempts at a definition. Humans have been variously described as, 'a political animal', 'a laughing animal', 'a toolmaking animal', 'a religious animal', and 'a cooking animal'.

Other attempts include: an animal who is able to reason and form opinion; an animal which carries a stick; a philosophical animal; a deceiving animal; a storytelling animal and the only animal that likes hot chillies. Mark Twain defined human beings as 'the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.'

Language isn't one of our key distinctive characteristics. The ability to communicate quite complex thoughts is found in a number of other animals, although admittedly no animal comes close to the versatility of our speech. In humans, language seems to have followed on from the ability to make music. Music and song are one of the earliest human behaviours. It's intriguing to think that music and dance and language must have been at the heart of what those first humans did, as they are still central to us now – and are definitely not important to the other remaining great apes. Gorillas, Chimpanzees, Bonobos and Orang-Utan don't sing, dance or speak. Or not in a way that we recognise.

Going back to the featherless biped definition - humans are not the first bipeds to have walked the earth. Dinosaurs were doing it 250 million years ago. Their direct descendants, the birds, are still doing it today. Another philosopher, Diogenes the Cynic, mocked Plato's 'featherless biped' definition by holding up a plucked chicken and saying 'Here is your man'. An interesting dinosaur/chicken fact: rather wonderfully, chickens are the closest living relative on earth to the mighty Tyrannosaurus Rex.

As we began to do with thoughts about music and language, perhaps a better definition can be provided by our species' past. Apes and chimpanzees are capable of walking on two feet, but much prefer to go on all fours. At some point in the past our ancestors separated themselves from the other great ape species by preferring two feet to four. The earliest ancestor we have found so far left footprints about 3.7 million years ago. She was called Lucy by those that found her remains; we have her skull and from it we can deduce her species:

Australopithecus, her height: about 4 foot, and that she was female. I wonder what she would make of us, all these years later.

She could not be mistaken for humans like us, but others that followed her could have been. There have been dozens of different pre-human hominid species between Lucy and us. None actually walk the earth now, but their traces remain. If you are of European heritage, 4-5% of your genes are probably Neanderthal in origin. If your heritage is from the Far East, about the same percentage of your genes are probably from a mysterious species called the Denisovans.

Many characteristics of modern humans are a legacy of those millions of years of ancestry. We are good middle-distance runners because our hunting technique was to wound an animal and track it for miles until it fell. Hunting may also have generated language. The need to work co-operatively to find, track and kill game required complex ideas: knowledge of the natural world, animal behaviour, geography, tool-making, butchery, cooking, social structures to share out resources, and a thousand other key elements. It is no exaggeration that our sense of ourself in a social group, engaged in shared activities, was shaped by millions of years of hunter-gatherers.

So we can expand Plato's definition. We are a musical, running, communicative, social, featherless biped.

What of the other distinctive actions associated with humans but not with other animals? Certain activities are found only in human beings. Cooking, humour, art, religion and sport seem to be uniquely human.

Let's look at each. The first two are social. Cookery and humour are both rooted in the kind of bonding behaviour that shapes and ties a society together. Sitting around the fire, sharing food and laughter is a very human activity. Cookery is also important because it meant, over scores of thousands of years, we did not need to chew our food so much. As a consequence, our face become flatter and our jaw become more delicate – allowing better creation of the sounds of speech. Cooking also allows for a varied diet and the beginnings of refinement and (literally) good taste. Instead of eating our prey raw, like an animal, we brought it back to the group. Then we altered it through heat and flavouring. Surely, it was the beginning of sophistication. Humour is also an important shaper. Simple humour, like slapstick, translates across all cultures. Just look at the success of Mr Bean. More sophisticated humour relies on an element of surprise or reversal of expectation. Both require a theory of mind to work. We tend to associate a theory of mind with humans, but have a look at this video of a monkey seeing a magic trick. [Monkey Sees A Magic Trick - YouTube](#). I wonder if this is evidence for a theory of mind and a sense of humour in other apes.

Art, religion and sport also have elements in common. All rely upon conceptual thought – the ability to have abstract, creative ideas. All are representations and interpretations. Art is notoriously difficult to define – in its broadest sense, it is anything that we do that is unnecessary. However, a working definition is that art is a deliberate, consciously conceived representation of the world. Thus, a bower bird building a nest of coloured objects and attractive things is not making art – the bird is not trying to say anything with its creation. Religion is an attempt to make sense of our lives, by overlaying upon the world a spiritual dimension, where powers greater than ourselves pursue their plans and we can change things for the better by engaging with them through offerings or prayer. It interweaves a new layer of meaning and significance into our lives – as such it also relies on conceptual thinking. Sport codifies physical prowess into rule-based systems. Animals are capable of running, jumping and throwing but only humans make a game out of these actions by adding rules and scoring. All these activities are representations, based on conceptual thinking.

So now we have arrived at a new definition of ourselves: humans are a musical, running, communicative, social, sophisticated, cultured, conceptually thinking, competitive, featherless biped.

Next time you have some kind of existential crisis and question your own inner essence or that of your species, hold that definition close. It might not be perfect, it might not solve the crisis, but it will at least be better than Plato.