

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

By Rod Matthews

We can find answers to the question ‘What does it mean to be human?’ in a multitude of places, from specific to global, objective to subjective. For example:

- the chemistry of the human body
- the biology of the human body
- our physiology
- our psychology
- our ethnicity / culture
- the study of sociology
- the study of anthropology
- our enjoyment of the arts
- our appreciation of literature
- our personal experiences.

Daniel Gilbert, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, jokingly opens his book *Stumbling on Happiness*¹ with the idea that all psychologists at some point in their careers will publish the sentence, ‘The human being is the only animal that ...’, and then finish that sentence in whatever way best suits their argument. In some respects to answer the question ‘What makes us human?’ invites me to finish Daniel Gilbert’s sentence. This is not a simple task as the reason we are who we are is because of countless evolutionary choices and opportunities.

Let’s focus for now on just one critical element of the human body – our minds. In our mind lies our ability to master the tools of evolution itself. We live in an age and a part of the world that allow us to stand on the shoulders and call on the ideas of millions of others around the world and across human history. There are some key things that allow us to do this and perhaps this is where our humanity lies:

- the cultural element (or memes)
- consciousness
- communication
- collaboration

The Cultural Element, or Memes

In his book *The Selfish Gene*,ⁱⁱ Richard Dawkins reminds us of the biology of genes. When two parents produce an offspring, that offspring carries half of the father’s genes and half of the mother’s genes. When the two halves combine there is a small mutation, and an individual is produced. Dawkins suggests that a similar thing happens when we communicate ideas, behaviours or personal styles. The recipient of an idea filters that idea through his or her experiences and then the idea mutates a little to form a slight variation. This variation is then tested and/or passed on to others. By doing this we are using the process of evolution itself to determine the survival of ideas, behaviours and styles.

Consciousness

Our ability to be aware that we are separate to our environment provides us with the belief (rightly or wrongly) that we have free will. Our mind enables us to understand the difference between the past, the present and the future. Being aware of the passing of time encourages

us to plan and act. Robert Levine conducted research that strongly suggests that the closer to the equator you live, the less aware you are of the passing of time.ⁱⁱⁱ Jared Diamond, in his work *Guns, Germs and Steel*,^{iv} suggests that the vast majority of industry and development happens in the temperate zones, at least in part because the changing of the seasons reminds us of the passing of time. Our own mortality is also a powerful motivator.

Communication

Speech has allowed us to communicate ideas from one person to another with a nuance that dramatically improves on mimicry alone. Humans are able to convey abstract concepts and discuss things that are not present. Pre-history, communication occurred through story, song, rhyme and metaphor. Today, if a group of people is gathered around a barbecue, at a dinner party or in a pub, they will still communicate primarily through the telling of stories. The advent of writing and the internet have dramatically sped up the process of communication. And Smartphones – many people can now access nearly all of human knowledge through their phones, the true implications of which are yet to be determined.

Collaboration

We communicate with others because we are primarily a cooperative species. Yes, perhaps the West is going through an individualistic stage at the moment, but the work of Clare W. Graves and the theory of Spiral Dynamics^v would suggest that this is necessary for us to evolve to a more sacrificial way of life. Robert Wright, the author of *The Moral Animal*,^{vi} suggests that there is no racism in Business Class on international flights because people travelling overseas in Business Class know that their success and survival are dependent on the success and survival of the people they trade with. So while it can be convenient and easy to take aim at corporations, it could be that those corporations are at the leading edge of evolution.

In the end, therefore, we are human because of countless decisions and opportunities along the evolutionary pathway. Perhaps of more importance are the tools we have picked up along the way that will help us continue to evolve. These are the tools of consciousness, the awareness of the passing of time and our own mortality, our advanced ability to communicate and our capacity to collaborate with other humans outside of our tribe.

ⁱ Gilbert, Daniel (2005), *Stumbling on Happiness*, Vintage Books, New York

ⁱⁱ Dawkins, Richard (2006), *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, USA

ⁱⁱⁱ Levine, Robert (1997), *The Geography of Time: The Temporal Misadventures of a Social Psychologist*, Basic Books, New York

^{iv} Diamond, Jared (1999), *Guns, Germs and Steel*, W.W. Norton & Company, USA

^v Graves, Clare, W. (1974), *The Futurist*, World Future Society, Maryland, pp. 72–87

Beck, Don Edward and Cowan, Christopher (1996), *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change*, Blackwell Publishing, Carlton, Victoria

^{vi} Wright, Robert (1994), *The Moral Animal*, Vintage Books, New York