

## What does it mean to be human?

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All of life is contained in this question, since everything we know about our existence is apperceived through human sense organs and conceptualised by the human mind. Indeed, what does it mean to be **not** human - we can only guess! Yet we cannot discuss our human need to make sense of and give purpose to our lives without also taking into account the phenomenon of consciousness, something we share with all sentient life forms.

Homo sapiens is a bio-socio-psycho-spiritual being and so the question applies to all these aspects of humanity.

At the biological level, the human species is the most complex and advanced life form on the planet, a biped whose evolutionary prowess has bestowed immense power to both create and destroy. We are a recent species. Homo habilis fossil remains go back a mere couple of million years, along with the use of stone tools, followed by Homo erectus around one million years later, and then Homo sapiens half a million years after that. A massive enlargement of the neocortex, the frontal lobes of the brain, has resulted in exceptional intelligence and not least, self-awareness, a crucial development I'll refer to again.

At the social level, we live in a highly complex world of relationships. Care of the young provides the same protective and nurturing characteristics as in other higher mammalian species and there is a lengthy process of cognitive and emotional maturation until myelination of the brain has fully developed. Human society is still largely tribal, but elaborated emotionally and intellectually by the human capacity for language, thought and symbolisation. This has resulted in a rich creative and artistic cultural history.

Through the power to manipulate the environment, science and technology have brought immense benefits to what we call the civilised world, in human welfare, health, comfort and longevity. However, given the times in which we are now living, the negative side has to be acknowledged. Our species, still young in evolutionary time, displays serious aggression on a global scale, killing over 100 million humans in the last century - more than throughout the previous time-line of history. Indeed, we might be better called Homo ignorans, for in a collective assault on the delicate ecosystems of the natural world, we could quite possibly bring about our own extinction in the next hundred or so years.

On the psychological level, we are a strange mix of the insightful, thoughtful and reflective with chaotic emotionality. This brings about immense suffering, a cardinal feature of the human condition. Suffering is the reaction to loss, real or fantasied, including foreknowledge of one's own inevitable death. The poignant nature of loss has, however, been a profound spur to the cultural history of humanity, figuring prominently in all the great religious and spiritual traditions.

At the spiritual level, East and West have held different attitudes to suffering. In the East it is treated stoically as something to overcome by detachment of ego, as in Buddhism and Daoism. In the West, suffering is more often taken to be the path to redemption and salvation, according to the Abrahamic faiths.

Also on the spiritual level we can further explore the nature of self-awareness, in which the ego is rooted. The ego is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it profoundly separates us from unity of being, the consciousness that makes one out of the many, and which powers the cosmos (what in human terms we know as love and will). On the other hand, without making one's individual journey through life, there would be no search, no aspiration and no evolution of the soul. For all of this there has to be subject and object - indeed without such duality, we could not become aware of our inherently divine nature. I like to think that in a small way (for the universe is very big) we are helping God get to know more of God. Finally, if humanity wakes up to the realization that all life is the one life, we have a great opportunity to stop inflicting pain on each other and start making heaven on Earth.

There is recent evidence from the Max Planck Institute using fMRI scans that choice of action that we take to be entirely spontaneous and voluntary begins in the brain seven seconds earlier. This raises the question of what we mean by free will, a notion held dear by human society as we like to think that we can choose our destiny independent of the play of influences unseen and unfelt.

Once the earth was held to be at the centre of the universe, and then the sun, before astronomers discovered it is one of two hundred billion stars in our galaxy, itself one of at least a hundred billion galaxies in the known universe. Now the latest evidence is that our universe is infinite, yet according to string theory occupies only three spatial dimensions out of eleven!

Newtonian science supported a vision of humankind as a self-determining life form in a mechanical universe made up of billiard balls suspended in space. This painfully overthrew a cosmology held by the Church to be inviolable. Now in the light of quantum physics we have to think again about why we have evolved, and what part we are playing in the consciousness of the cosmos. The human ego might feel both flattered and humbled if we discovered that in so much as the universe conjures us into existence, we conjure it into existence with our consciousness. I say our consciousness, but in all likelihood, there is but one consciousness and just as the buds that flower on a tree have no choice in the matter, we take our place in the greater design of things. It is wonderful that we can know this, witness it, and thereby celebrate both our humanity and our divinity.

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