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SET Thesis Paper

What Does It Mean To Be Human?

The human experience is a vastly complex rollercoaster of emotions, interactions, and experiences that have evolved over the last million years to emerge in its current state. The question itself is subjective in nature because what it means to be human varies from person to person. Furthermore, to be human is a dynamic experience that changes with time both on an individual level, and through the lens of society as a greater whole. In order to address a question that is so subjective, we must take a holistic approach with a large scope in order to avoid excluding vital parts of what makes someone human. For the sake of understanding where humanity is today, we must first trace back our ancestry and examine how our humble origins gave way to our present condition. It is also paramount to describe the emotional and spiritual experiences of a human and how connections with other people and things define who we are as individuals. Finally, it also bears mentioning the responsibility inherited by our species; to use its advanced powers of cognition for the right reasons and to create rather than destroy beauty in the world. I personally believe the actual implications of the question at hand to be too intricate for humans to comprehend. That being said, we can certainly attempt to describe them, as is the human spirit.

Approximately 5-8 million years ago, the earliest hominid species diverged from an ancestor common to modern day apes. These hominids began to walk upright, and their opposable thumbs allowed for them to use tools. This ultimately drove the evolution of a more analytical brain. Fast-forward a few million years, and you are left with our closest hominid relative, the Neanderthal, which coexisted with modern day humans as recently as 30,000 years ago. It is believed that *Homo erectus* was the first of the hominid species to leave the continent of Africa somewhere between 1 and 2 million years ago. Based on fossil evidence and DNA sampling from current human populations, scientists believe that a population of *Homo erectus* remained on the African continent and evolved into modern day *Homo sapiens*. Biologists believe that these *Homo sapiens* eventually migrated from Africa into Europe and Asia, and began to outcompete the hominids that had previously emigrated from Africa (PBS). Hominids evolved into humans by utilizing tools and weapons that enabled them to hunt mega fauna (large animals). As they migrated across the continents, they were faced with unprecedented environmental challenges, forcing the gradual evolution of their cognition. Eventually hominids’ brains evolved to the extent that they developed large social networks which shared food, the care of infants, and perhaps most importantly knowledge (Humanorigins). These social networks were the very beginning of society, as we know it today. The traits that our ancestors evolved were so wildly successful, that today our species has altered the face of the earth and nearly every ecosystem it contains to such an extent that it will probably never again resemble life before us.

The story of our evolution allows us to glean insight into the human condition, and yet it fails entirely to describe what it is like to be human. Unfortunately, describing the experience on a personal level would be futile because the experience varies greatly for each person. In order to do the human experience some justice, it is best to describe it through generalizations and then examine specific instances in history and in one’s own life in order to make sense of more general descriptions. On that note, the Dalai Lama summarized human existence in a nutshell in his book *Ethics for the New Millennium* when he said, “Indeed the more I see of the world, the clearer it becomes that no matter what our situation, whether we are rich or poor, educated or not, of one race, gender, or religion or another, we all desire to be happy and to avoid suffering”(ENM, 4). This statement, while true in essence, is lacking a more complete definition. Oftentimes humans will forgo their happiness for the happiness of another, or place themselves in extreme states of distress to spare a loved one. This observation appears to directly contradict the Dalai Lama’s earlier quotation, but he redeems himself by explaining, “When we act to fulfill our immediate desires without taking into account other’s interests, we undermine the possibility of lasting happiness”(ENM,53). What this means is that unlike the majority of other species that inhabit the earth, humans have the capacity for empathy. We can truly care about another’s needs more deeply than those of our own, and I believe this quality to be the corner stone of humanity.

The human brain transcends those of other life forms in its ability to create meaning internally. For example, a killer whale contained in a small tank in SeaWorld will invariably become depressed, whereas a human may find spiritual liberation confined to a 6x8 prison cell. In neoclassical economics, rational economic behavior is defined as, “A decision making process that is based on making choices that result in the most optimal level of benefit or utility for the individual”(Investopedia). While other species of animal can accurately be described by the neoclassical model, humans so often act out of empathy and charity that an entirely different model known as “Behavioral Economics” had to be developed to more accurately describe our decision making process. The propensity for humans to act out of charity is best summarized by the Dalai Lama who said, “Then as I understand it, the most compassionate form of giving is done without any thought or expectation of reward, and is grounded in genuine concern for others”(ENM,114).

This heightened state of awareness and thought are not just blessings for humanity to enjoy, they also carry a responsibility to care for those who cannot care for themselves. Being human is more than ability, it is ability coupled with responsibility. When we have the capacity to set someone free of his or her bonds, it is our duty to do so. To put this in perspective, in the New York Times article (Portraits of Reconciliation), Pieter Hugo, the photographer responsible for photographing victims and perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide, was quoted saying, “Forgiveness is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. Yet the practical necessity of reconciliation does not detract from the emotional strength required of these Rwandans to forge it — or to be photographed, for that matter, side by side.” I think this combination of power and responsibility is the most characteristic assessment of what it means to be human.

Just as being human today means one thing, and being a hominid millions of years ago meant something entirely different, the future will likely contain an entirely unrecognizable face of humanity. Early forms of humanity were far more egocentric because the survival of the species depended on the survival of the individual and his or her procreation. Now as we grow into an increasingly interconnected form of society, we find that the path to prosperity is lined by coexistence and collaboration. As time progresses, the human race appears to have coalesced into a single, living, breathing organism in which every individual acts as a cell. The cells of this “human organism” communicate within specific networks to accomplish specific functions. The greater whole consumes, distributes, and produces waste just like an individual. Even the act of war can be made analogous to a single organism, because the body can attack it’s self to great detriment, when different systems fail to communicate. In all reality, what it means to be human is personal, but there are certain qualities, commonalities, and values that unite us all, after all, we are all family.

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