In December 2019 the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will meet in Geneva as it does every four years for our International Conference. Once again, we will gather under a banner promoting the power of humanity. But what is humanity and what is the power behind this slogan?

Humanity means three different things: a species; a behaviour, and a global identity. The historical relationship between these different dimensions of humanity has been elegantly discussed by the late Bruce Mazlish in his 2009 book The Idea of Humanity in a Global Era and it is important to distinguish between these three aspects of being human as we prepare to meet as a global humanitarian movement once again.

Humanity as species

The first meaning of humanity describes a particular kind of animal that biologists encouragingly call homo sapiens – or wise human – and which seems distinct from all other animals because of its powers of language, reasoning, imagination and technology. This biological and evolutionary use of the term has the same meaning as “humankind” and marks us out as a particular life form that is different to other kinds of animal and vegetative life.

The power of the human species is considerable over the non-human world. This is mainly because our intelligence has consistently invented and deployed tools and technology which means we have come to dominate the earth, and our imagination has shaped religious and political meanings around which we form competing interests and social movements.

Our tools mean we are not a simple species but always function as a hybrid species – part human and part technology – in a constantly changing mix of human and non-human components. This hybrid humanity must infuriate non-human life like lions and microbes who could easily “take us down” in a fair fight of simple life forms, but who have consistently encountered us in hybrid forms in which we merge our humanity with spears, guns, horses, cars, vaccines and antibiotics.

We operate routinely in these human-machine interactions (HMI) of various kinds. I am doing it now typing on my Macbook Air with an electric fan to keep me cool on a hot summer’s day. Our mechanization gives us exponential power and unfair advantage over non-human life forms both large and microscopic, which tend to remain simple in one form except for bacteria and viruses, our most threatening predators, which can change form relatively fast.

Our essential hybridity with other animal, plant and machine life is now in the emergent stages of a giant leap towards new forms of power which we cannot envision. New applications of biotech, robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) mean that our hybrid humanity is about to expand exponentially in a way that is already changing what it means to be human. Today’s technologists are focused hard on simplifying human-machine interfaces – different types of “dashboards” which use our five human senses and recognize human gestures so that our humanity interacts seamlessly with AI of various kinds. These interfaces will increasingly be embedded in our bodies and minds as new levels of interactivity with technology which will inevitably change the experience of being human and the power of humanity.

Technology will not just change us where we are but also change where we can be. Humanity will be enhanced in time and space but also relocated across time and space. For example, because I am on Twitter or Skype, I can already be visibly present elsewhere, speaking and responding in thousands of different places across time and space. This is radically different from my great grandmother who could only ever really be visible and engaged in one place at one time, or in two places at two times when someone far away was reading a letter from her.

This time-space compression and its resulting context collapse which began with radio and television is an ever-increasing feature of being human. Some of our grandchildren will probably be talking and listening simultaneously in a hundred different places at once in embodied replicas as holograms or humanoid drones. They will probably be fluent in all languages, move through space much faster than us and live forever on earth and in space because of biological and AI enhancements. Our machines will develop new levels of autonomy which, although created by humans, are inevitably adapted by machine learning into new forms of non-human and non-animal life.

This all means that the power of humanity as a species is about to increase dramatically because of a revolution in human-machine interaction which will see new forms of hybridity beyond our current imagining. Our human power will become even greater but what about our wisdom and the way we use this new power of humanity? In short, what about the ethics of our behaviour in our new hybrid humanity?