What makes us human?

And other questions about God, Jesus and human identity

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And other questions about God, Jesus and human identity
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To Mum and Dad

Always indebted for laughter, love and life

Introduction

Who am I? At first sight you might be tempted to dismiss this question as something that only angst-ridden teenagers and wild-eyed backpackers ask as they toil to the summit of a Tibetan mountain, in search of a guru with answers.

And certainly many of us go through that experience in early life as we try to work out how like or unlike our parents we want to be, and as we explore what we should believe, test our gifts and abilities, and try to find our place in work, friendships and faith.

But at a more fundamental level, what might seem like a rather abstract philosophical question is actually something of vast and crucial importance to many of the issues that trouble and concern us day by day.

Questions of personal ethics, human rights and sexuality. Questions of economics, war, family and close relationships. Questions about right and wrong, who we are, and how we view other people. The answers we give in all these areas are shaped, deep down, by our answer to this fundamental question: *What is a human being?*

What I understand to be the answer to that question will determine both massive and mundane choices that I make each day.

- *Should I marry him, or should I stay single?*

- *Should I turn off my mother's life-support machine, or should I insist that it is kept on?*
- *Should I feel guilty and ashamed about how I treated her, or should I just shrug it off?*
- *Who should I vote for in the election?*
- *What should I eat for dinner?*
- *Which TV show should I watch?*

As the first chapter shows, you might be surprised to discover that this question—*What is a human being?*—lies at the heart of a huge and largely invisible argument that is raging in our culture: in politics, in the media and in private conversations. And it is a question that followers of Jesus need to be clear about how to answer if we are to understand the times, engage meaningfully in discussion with others and make choices that honour God.

The good news is that the Bible has a lot to say about who we are, and what makes us human. It tells us we are creatures, not coincidence. It tells us that we are precious, not pointless. It shows where we came from and where we are going to. It tells us we are dust, but that we are dust with a destiny.

And ultimately, it reveals to us a man who is the measure of what it means to be truly human. A man whose perfect humanity meant he was able to be a substitute who put right all that is wrong with a world of men and women at odds with God and themselves.

Tim Thornborough
Series Editor, June 2015

Chapter 1

Who on earth are we?

This is a short book about a big subject. A *very* big subject in fact—US!

But don't think it's big because we're egomaniacs—although some of us clearly are! It's a big subject because we're *complicated*. There's so much to us, much more than meets the eye.

That's why couples who have been married for decades still find surprising things to learn about each other. That's why we sometimes will surprise ourselves when we say or do something that doesn't fit in with who we think we are.

It turns out that people are not so much problems to be solved, but mysteries to be explored and enjoyed.

Isn't that one of the reasons why people are so fascinating? Sometimes it's fun to sit at a cafe table and watch the world go by, quietly taking in everyone's interactions and quirks while you sip your latte. You pick

up intriguing slices of conversation that hint at a whole world you know nothing about.

It's fun precisely because *we're all so different*—racially, culturally, socially, educationally, generationally, intellectually, psychologically, physically. It doesn't matter what aspect I choose, it's guaranteed that my "normal" will be someone else's "totally bizarre" somewhere on earth.

Yet here's the astonishing fact. For all the countless ways in which we set ourselves apart from others, we always have far more in common than we realise.

It's perhaps more vital than ever to tackle this question now, since the modern world offers so many options. They don't just contradict each other; they also conflict with what Christians have historically believed from the Bible.

This matters. How we understand ourselves profoundly shapes how we treat one another: when others' skin is darker or lighter, their gender or religion or marital status is different, or they are weaker or less educated or sicker or poorer, or they have yet to be born or have limited brain function.

So, before we consider the Bible's take, we'll think briefly about five different approaches that keep cropping up today. I'm sure you'll recognise them.

As we think about these alternative approaches, one danger we must constantly be alert to is what is called "reductionism". We've already seen that human beings are complicated. Reductionism always tries to oversimplify reality by reducing it to a single principle, or a few sound bites. The giveaway words are when someone

says that a certain aspect of human behaviour is "just *this*" or is "nothing but *that*". An eminent scientist and Christian, Donald Mackay, coined the phrase "nothing buttery" for reductionism. The problem is that it's a tendency that even Christians are prone to, as we'll see.

1. MINDS: *Humans as thinkers*

"I think, therefore I am."

The French philosopher René Descartes was one of the greatest minds of all time. He wanted to know how we could be sure about what is true. So he set himself the task of finding a set of principles about which there could be absolutely no doubts. But to do this, he doubted all kinds of things that people unthinkingly assume are true—like whether we exist or not.

His momentous conclusion was that the only things truly beyond doubt were the thoughts flowing through his mind. We can't always trust what others around us tell us. And we can't always trust our own views about the world around us. Our fellow humans and our own physical senses often play tricks on us. All that's left are the conclusions we come to in our own minds. We have our reason.

Because it's impossible to separate thoughts from the person thinking them, Descartes arrived at his famous statement. I can know I exist because I know I am thinking, or more famously: **"I think, therefore I am".** So even the fact that I might doubt the truth of a statement proves my own existence.

So then, what can we know for certain? Who on earth are we? Descartes's answer is that we are *thinkers*. We are people who are able to process ideas, and to act in the world on the basis of what we've considered.

We are thinking beings: animals are not. Therefore we are justified in eating them and treating them differently. But it's quite a limited definition, when you stop to think about it. Here are some questions it side steps.

- ***What about other people?*** *How can I be sure they exist? They could simply be figments of my own active imagination—as if the simulated reality experienced by humans in the movie* The Matrix *was actually operating in my mind! What's to stop my reality becoming totally cocooned from everything around me?*
- ***What about my body?*** *Is it just incidental to who I am? Perhaps it's even a restrictive inconvenience, especially when it stops me thinking rationally—as when I've had too many beers or am under too much stress.*
- ***And what about my reason?*** *What actually makes me so sure I can get stuff right, even without my manipulative passions and flawed perceptions? Human reason is hardly as stable or reliable as some might hope. Hasn't history proved that some of the most rational people can still be the most flawed?*

So perhaps it might help to look outside ourselves for more rounded views of who and what we are…

2. APES: *Humans as animals*

"Human beings are nothing but upright animals with a taste for clothes and complicated food."

Jane Goodall is renowned for her remarkable and sometimes controversial work with East African chimpanzees. With great courage and painstaking research, she has popularized the idea that we share many characteristics with apes. So in chimps, Goodall has observed personalities, emotions and perhaps even some rational thought. They certainly show remarkable social behaviour, with hugs and tickling, familial affection and memory.

Genetic research has shown that chimps share between 95 and 99% of human DNA. This is why some scientists can make this kind of claim:

Darwin wasn't just provocative in saying that we descend from the apes—he didn't go far enough. We are apes in every way, from our long arms and tailless bodies to our habits and temperament.
National Geographic, August 2005

The most powerful wildlife film I've ever seen follows the visit of conservationist Damian Aspinall to the West African jungles of Gabon. He wanted to track down Kwibi, a gorilla that had grown up with Aspinall at a conservation trust before his introduction into the wild, aged five. Eventually, they found him. No one knew how Kwibi, now a fully-grown ten-year old, would respond. With threats or even violence?

But Kwibi recognised Aspinall instantly. He embraced him and wouldn't let him go! He then "introduced" his family, who gathered to watch. When the camera team were eventually able to extricate themselves in a boat, Kwibi followed them along the riverbank and slept overnight with his family on the opposite bank. It was a remarkable demonstration of just how similar we are.

So perhaps we really are just animals, albeit rather more developed, or more evolved? It does seem possible to have a genuine relationship of sorts with them, perhaps even at a deep level. Dog and cat owners would all testify to that (and we share 90% of DNA with cats and 80% with dogs).

While all this is undeniable, does it actually get us anywhere in establishing who *we* are? After all, we also share 50% of our DNA with bananas, but few would suggest this helps! We might all be "half-banana" at the microscopic level, but we have precious little else in common—apart from becoming a trip hazard if we are left lying around.

Yet even if human biology does share this much with the animal world, does *nothing* distinguish us from the animal kingdom? There are three substantial things that we can point to:

- ***Levels of communication:*** *Surely there's a* ***qualitative*** *difference between our respective abilities to communicate. Consider the complexities of human language: it can be so nuanced, flexible and multi-layered. Just read a Shakespeare sonnet to see that. That's of an order far removed from the glories of the*

dawn chorus or a mammal's ability to warn its group of a predator.

- ***Animal instinct:*** *Why is it wise to visit an African game park with a professionally trained warden? It's because wild animals are* dangerous. *How can lions or hippos be anything else? They can't be expected to be "responsible" or even "reasonable", especially when they spot a potential threat or the next meal. It is one of the facts of (wild)life. As Tennyson rightly pointed out, nature really is "red in tooth and claw".*

- ***Human responsibility:*** *We're so much greater than the sum of our ingrained or learned instincts. We can't simply excuse any behaviour as a symptom of our genetic make-up or subconscious instincts. Our nature or our nurture may help to explain, of course. But the entire criminal justice system would be rendered irrelevant if these provided a total excuse. Nobody could be held responsible for anything. How would the victims of rape or violent assault feel then?*

These kinds of questions show the problem at the heart of the simple statement "we are nothing but animals". Many people would say this, but it is not how they feel or behave. When great athletes achieve great feats, isn't it remarkable how few brush off compliments and accolades by saying: "It was just my genes, you know"?

Inherited physical attributes and predispositions are undoubtedly important. For example, I don't have anything like Usain Bolt's thighs, Lionel Messi's ball skills or Michael Phelps' lung capacity. But just as important as

these inherited traits are the will-power, ambition, and stamina that need to be deployed to make a great athlete. Not to mention the wealth and opportunities to train with the best.

We want to have our cake and eat it.

We must beware of "nothing-buttery". We certainly do have lots in common with animals so that we must never be seen as less than them. But surely we're so much more, aren't we?

3. COMPUTERS: *Humans as biological machines*

"I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

STEPHEN HAWKING

This is almost the polar opposite of humans as animals. Instead of fellow mammals, we find analogies in the man-made. Think about it. Aren't there more than a few similarities between human brains and computers?

- *Brains and computers both use electrical signals to send messages for which they need energy (the former using chemical reactions rather than electricity).*
- *Both have expandable memory (with brains adding stronger synaptic connections and computers adding more chips).*
- *Both can multitask (though some brains are perhaps better than others at this!).*

- *Both can learn from trial and error.*
- *Both can get damaged, with unpredictable consequences.*

The list goes on. This is subtly different from Descartes's argument about thinking. It's about all the things the brain does, whether we're conscious of them or not.

Computers are developing all the time with breathtaking speed—unlike the human brain. Back in 1965, Intel's Gordon E. Moore predicted that the number of transistors within a computer chip would double every two years. Moore's Law (as it was soon dubbed) proved remarkably accurate.

So in August 2014, IBM unveiled a brand new product with a deliberately neurological-sounding name: a neurosynaptic chip they called TrueNorth. It has almost quadruple the number of transistors of previous chips (with 5.4 billion) and has a million neurons. If that seems meaningless, it squeezes the power of a super-computer into the space of a postage stamp. It's incredible.

TrueNorth is not a human brain—we each have 100 billion neurons and up to 150 trillion synapses. IBM still has a long way to go! But with the development of TrueNorth, the possibility of human-like artificial intelligence looms ever closer. All kinds of claims have been made for various machines in recent years—but senior researchers have dismissed these as nonsense, while acknowledging that "it will happen eventually". The ideas of science fiction (as in films like *2001: A Space Odyssey*; *I, Robot*; and *Ex Machina*) seem to be becoming "science fact".