

Remember being Human?

Gary Thomson

What does it mean to be human? How would you describe us?

Evolved animal? Mind encased in flesh? *Soul* encased in flesh? Biological machine?
Economic actor? Manifestation of the divine?

Our heads might hurt just considering such an intractable question. Perhaps the fact of us asking this question in the first place defines our humanity? *Humans are those animals which seeks to understand themselves!*

The list of possible answers I've suggested above is, of course, not comprehensive but provides some of the common responses. As well as the proposals for how we *do* define ourselves are ways in which we usually do not. In this essay I explore one key characteristic of being human which is not only overlooked, but which is positively denied by the prevalent cultural story. Accepting that this feature is, in fact, true, radically changes how we see our place on the Earth.

But let's start five hundred years ago. During the scientific revolution we were driven forward by the mantra 'we . . . don't . . . know?' Although this does not seem like a particularly revolutionary question to ask, many people at that time assumed they already knew everything there was to know, or was important to know, about the world. This was largely because of religious beliefs; if your version of God wants you to know something important it will be in your religious texts.

Recognizing that not to be the case opened the floodgates to a general thirst for inquiry and led to a host of technologies and areas of study which have ultimately comprised the world we now know. The ages of great European exploration were driven by scientific curiosity as well as the desire for conquest and wealth. Vast new discoveries occurred in a range of disciplines and around the globe; in some cases European scholars even added to a foreign nations understanding of their own history or culture - albeit a conquered nation. India and Egypt are obvious examples.

But many of those discoveries lay waiting to be made, even if it did take a voyage to the other side of the world to make them. Closer to home a Frenchman was busy asking more fundamental questions about who exactly these people making such discoveries are. Rene Descartes wanted to probe deeply into the human and see what lay waiting to be discovered *there*. He reasoned that ultimately the human is a flesh robot, controlled by an all-powerful mind. For Descartes, the body was subservient to mind with no essential intelligence of its own. Furthermore, he contended that it is the capacities of the human mind which separates us from other animals who, Descartes reasoned, operate on instinct alone, lacking any real sense of self determination or will.

Since the human species had shown itself capable of having a significant impact on nature, it seemed that the human mind was, in some sense, master of the entire world. This obsession with mind as primary source of intelligence (and power) has accelerated throughout the last 500 years, giving rise to countless once unimaginable technologies but also, some would claim, to a range of fundamental problems such as a general retreat from nature with significant health and social implications. Is it any surprise that we modern humans prize our massive brains over other faculties when this is the one key physical advantage we have over all species?

Perhaps Descartes was also influenced by the general Christian consensus at the time of the flesh being a source of sin, shame and even disgust. Thus it was natural to elevate the mind to a higher status than the body. Perhaps the body was an unwanted reminder of our obvious animality, and therefore something we wanted to shy away from? Whatever the myriad influences of the time were, Descartes' conclusion was clear; *I think*, therefore I am. Not *I am*, therefore I think – mind was the master of flesh.

We can understand why this was an easy perspective to accept. After all, it is our thoughts that lead to movement and control of the body . . . isn't it? I have the intention to reach out for my coffee cup using my left arm and seemingly before I can even complete the thought I've achieved it. Incredible! In fact, is it so incredible as to be almost unbelievable? Doesn't it sometimes seem like our body is thinking for us; as though our body acts and then our brain catches up?

400 years after Descartes, his fellow countryman, the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, stated that there is *a mind of the body and a body of the mind*. Perhaps the clear waters of Descartes famous assertion were murky after all. Merleau-Ponty, through his consideration of the nature of experience, concluded that the body has its own intelligence, and not just the systems that reliably tick away beyond our conscious control. The body, he contended, is actually the primary experiencing subject; the mind reflects on and categorizes experience but it is the *body* that actually facilitates awareness of, and interaction with, the world outside of itself. The body, then, must have an intelligence of its own – even if it is a different kind of intelligence to that of the mind.

Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty was affirming Descartes conclusion that the body would be useless without the mind, but just as significantly the mind would be adrift without the body. Science fiction has long ago imagined the day when we separate brain and body and keep them alive. But perhaps there's an alchemy in the brain-body union - beyond the systematic - that we've still to uncover, or perhaps never will.

Merleau-Ponty's contention that the picture is not as clear as Descartes suggested has been given further credence by recent research. Experts in a wide range of disciplines have confirmed intelligences of the body which seem to lie out-with the kind of purely mental control that Descartes conceived of. They've theorized a mind-body system that operates on principles very different to those we've come to accept over the past half millennium. I like to think of this realization as somewhat akin to the progression from a mechanistic understanding of the universe to a quantum understanding; in other words, a step change.

So present-day researchers are unpicking Descartes conception of the mind body relationship and tentatively replacing it with a different model. But an important question arises which has not yet been fully addressed. If the brain cannot function without its bodily host and the primary sensory information and other *intelligence* that host provides, does it also have a reliance on the wider environment? Should the world outside of the human body also be considered part of the host?

The human brain has developed in *response* to the Earth environment. Although it does not have an immediate physical connection to the outside world as the body does, it has nevertheless, evolved neural pathways and programming that reflect the conditions of existing here on Earth. Had we evolved on some distant planet, with different rules of gravity, space, time, different materials, animals and air, the human brain would have evolved to reflect that. We are custom-built for the Earthly rules we find ourselves playing by.

But the physical Earth environment does not just provide a background to our lives, like a set design in a movie. Rather, we are constantly processing information we take from our surroundings, often doing so without conscious thought, such is our proficiency of living here on Earth. We feel the temperature, wind conditions, air pressure, moisture level, brightness . . . we pick up on the smells around us which can alert us to danger, make us feel happy, or even recollect a time from the past . . . we hear the sounds of the world – both the sounds of nature that our primal bodies recognize such as the call of birds or the rustling of leaves and the sounds of modernity which often unsettle us . . . and we look out on a mind-boggling amount of information which the eyes efficiently transmit to the brain and, indeed, to all parts of the body – signalling us to relax or get ready for action.

The brain, then, does not just require the information passed to it from a bodily host but also from the wider environment. Of course, this model could still fit with Descartes conception of the mind-body situation; the body collects information about its environment, passes this onto the brain, which processes it and passes instructions back to the body about how to respond. But, resonating with Merleau-Ponty's assertion of a *mind of the body and a body of the mind*, the Dutch philosopher Spinoza countered Descartes neat separation of mind and body, insisting instead that the two are, in fact, manifestations of a single phenomenon.

Returning for a moment to where we started; what does it mean to be human? I'm not sure Descartes or Spinoza have the essential answer but perhaps their conflicting philosophical arguments help to highlight one of the greatest myths of modern times – that humans are fundamentally separate from our Earthly environment. Following the line of enquiry from Descartes through Spinoza to recent research certainly confirms that we do not truly understand the mind/body/environment interaction – is it even a philosophical or scientific question?

In the 1970's the much celebrated philosopher Arne Naess, a student of Spinoza's work, formulated deep ecology. Deep ecology suggests that we do not merely interact with our Earthly environment, but that it defines us, and we define it. Deep ecology postulates that

all lifeforms are described by a series of intrinsic relationships - there are no discrete separate selves outside of these.

If deep ecology is correct then not only is the mind-body relationship less mechanistic than we thought but the mind-body-environment relationship is too. Naess's proposals in deep ecology add intrigue and mystery to the prevalent belief that we are beings going about our business *in* the environment – which forms a backdrop to our *real* lives. Although we cannot see or measure the intrinsic relationships that Naess talks of, we can quite easily imagine them. For example, I maintain the life of my biological body because I eat food; the food I eat grows as crops; the crops require water and sunshine. No sunshine means no crops which means no food which means no me; I have an intrinsic relationship with the sun – I simply cannot claim to be a completely separate being . . . I am, rather, part sunshine!

The neat conception of discrete human flesh robots under the control of their almighty brains roaming around the planet Earth is simply not accurate; it's a crude model of reality at best. What the *real* picture is we may never truly know – perhaps explaining it would require us to condense every development of the human organism and our ways of interacting with the world into a single tidy postulate.

But I am confident of one thing – we need the natural environment and it needs us. We need it because it defines who we are and has been the basis for our brain-body instruction set; it's a key character in the ongoing human drama, not merely the stage. In modern times we've tried to deny this reliance on the natural world and instead attempted to master and control it. Now nature is in awful pain and we must attend to its needs. Doing so is not just altruistic but rather like attending to the wants of our own family. We care for our family members not because a birth certificate tells us we're related but because we are kin and are each reflected in the other – we have an undeniable intrinsic relationship.

So what does it mean to be human? Hopefully history will answer that question by recording that humans are the species who *used their gifts and abilities to halt the decline of nature and made space for the re-emergence of abundant life on Earth.*