

**What makes human beings special? The 'being' part of humanity is what counts**

What makes human beings special? That question was posed in a recent "Today's Moderator" column on this page, and I've been giving it some thought.

Why should we treat humans differently from other creatures? After all, we share many traits with other living things—including some we hunt or breed for food, some we use for our convenience or amusement, and some we kill as pests. Why should we exempt our fellow humans from exploitation? For one thing, they are "our fellows"; each human is in certain ways "one of us." Reciprocity (plus a little experience) dissuades most of us from doing to others of our kind what we would prefer they not do to us.

Humankind has distinguishing traits. We are fully bipedal, walking upright on two legs, not bowed over like our knuckle-dragging primate cousins. We have a fully opposable thumb, able to grasp an object between itself and any other digit on the same hand. We have a unique vocal apparatus that enables us to articulate various sounds to express complex ideas in spoken language. And we have the largest brain proportionate to our body mass; it not only extends our communication into writing, but also equips us to reason well beyond the ability of other creatures.

What gives us these traits? Our genetic code, carried on 23 pairs of chromosomes. This code shapes our development to make us human, just as a cow's code makes it a cow, and a mosquito's makes it a mosquito. Yet there are enough variations within the code to make each of us a unique individual.

But what distinguishes a human being *human being* from something that is merely human? Our hair and nails are just as genetically human as the rest of us, yet we do not count them as human beings, whether they are still attached, or fresh-cut clippings. Why? Because

hair and nails, as well as tonsils and so-called wisdom teeth, are not consciously self-aware, cannot reason abstractly, and thus lack the ability to become morally aware and distinguish right from wrong. This distinctly human ability arises from the uniquely human features of the living adult brain. The “human” part of us is a physical object. The “being” part is not a material object, but a process.

Because we personally experience “being,” most of us agree that it exists, though we might disagree about what it is. Most religious people call it “spirit” or “soul,” and many suppose it can transcend physical death. Secularists, on the other hand, call it “mind,” and many think of it as biochemical in its underlying nature, like life itself. To this way of thinking, being is a process that operates only as long as the brain continues to function above a threshold sufficient to sustain it, and ceases when brain activity falls below that level.

Between dim awareness on a physical level (as in fish or chickens), and moral awareness on an abstractly rational level (as in normal human adults), there lies a region of consciousness without conscience (as in most animals—and even a few people we may know). Moral awareness, and the ability to be guided by it, are what distinguish conscientious beings from other conscious creatures. “Being” is not a frivolous term tacked onto “human” to call up an illusion of superiority, and maybe the vanity to compare ourselves to a supreme being. Rather, it denotes a specific justification for special consideration of morally reasoning entities *vis-à-vis* other living things we might presume to exploit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Published 2018-10-08 as an “Ideas & Voices” guest column.