

Are we just naked apes?

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Introduction: Homo sapiens among other species

My working life to date has led me through various roles that involve working closely with human beings: first as a doctor, secondly as a pastor, most recently as a lecturer and part-time as a lay magistrate. I have operated with the belief that human beings are worthy of healing, advising, protecting and teaching and that they are capable of being healed, restored, corrected and taught. I have sought to fulfil each of these tasks by building on foundations and working within systems that have been developed in human societies over many generations. Although I have generally taken all of this for granted, when I reflect upon my work, I realise that none of these roles has anything approaching a parallel within other species. I am fond of other species – I have always had an interest in nature and, although I have no pets, I am a dog lover – but my working life has been dedicated to helping and serving other human beings. I operate on the often unquestioned assumption that human beings are special and distinct from the other animals that inhabit our world. In this article I want to question that assumption. Are we really unique?

Richard Ryder, philosopher and former chair of the council of RSPCA, coined the term ‘speciesism’ to describe the human tendency to give preference to human beings and to exploit other species for the benefit of the human race. He describes speciesism as being “like racism or sexism - a prejudice based upon morally irrelevant physical differences”.¹ Ryder argues that:

If we are going to care about the suffering of other humans then logically we should care about the suffering of non-humans too. It is the heartless exploiter of animals, not the animal protectionist, who is being irrational, showing a sentimental tendency to put his own species on a pedestal. We all, thank goodness, feel a natural spark of sympathy for the sufferings of others. We need to catch that spark and fan it into a fire of rational and universal compassion.

Ethicist Peter Singer picked up Ryder’s term and has argued that great apes should be given rights under law similar to those that would be given to a human infant. In 1993, Singer co-founded the *Great Ape Project*, which campaigns for the great ape species (gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos and orang-utans) to have basic rights to life, to liberty and not to be tortured. The Project’s website bases this campaign on the claim that:²

From the biological point of view, between two human beings there can be a difference of 0,5% in the DNA. Between a man and a chimpanzee this difference is only 1,23%. This similarity is proved, for instance, with the fact that chimpanzees can donate blood to humans, and vice-versa. Today it’s also known that chimpanzees, bonobos and men had an ancestor in common two million years ago.

Although I find myself sympathising with Ryder and Singer in their conviction that human beings should not torture animals and I can accept that the more intelligent those animals are the more careful we ought to be in our treatment of them, I struggle with the implication inherent in the concept of ‘speciesism’ that human beings are not fundamentally different from other species. Am I unwittingly a speciesist? Am I denying my basic animal nature?

¹ Ryder, Richard (2005) ‘All beings that feel pain deserve human rights’, Guardian Available: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/aug/06/animalwelfare> [accessed 13 May 2015]

² ‘Mission and Vision’, Great Ape Project. Available: <https://www.projeto-gap.org.br/en/mission-and-vision/> [accessed 18 May 2023]

He idea that human beings are basically continuous in our essential nature with animals did not, of course, begin with Ryder and Singer. The title of this article is inspired by the 1967 book *The Naked Ape* by zoologist Desmond Morris, which opens with the statement that:³

There are one hundred and ninety-three living species of monkeys and apes. One hundred and ninety-two of them are covered with hair. The exception is a naked ape self-named *Homo sapiens*. This unusual and highly successful species spends a great deal of time examining his higher motives and an equal amount of time studiously ignoring his fundamental ones. ... He is an intensely vocal, acutely exploratory, overcrowded ape, and it is high time we examined his basic behaviour. ... This is frequently a cause of some embarrassment to him, but his old impulses have been with him for millions of years, his new ones only a few thousand at the most – and there is no hope of quickly shrugging off the accumulated genetic legacy of his whole evolutionary past. He would be far less worried and more fulfilled animal if only he would face up to this fact.

Morris does not deny that human beings are remarkable – in fact, he later mentions “our extraordinary species”⁴ – but he clearly sees human beings as simply a more highly evolved ape when compared with our hairier cousins, the chimpanzees.⁵ In his belief that human beings are only different from the great apes by degree Morris was following in the vein of evolutionary biology that began around 100 years earlier with the work of Charles Darwin. In his 1871 book *The Descent of Man*, Darwin wrote that:⁶

There can be no doubt that the difference between the mind of the lowest man and that of the highest animal is immense. ... Nevertheless the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind. We have seen that the senses and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, etc., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well-developed condition, in the lower animals. ... If it could be proved that certain high mental powers, such as the formation of general concepts, self-consciousness, etc., were absolutely peculiar to man, which seems extremely doubtful, it is not improbable that these qualities are merely the incidental results of other highly-advanced intellectual faculties; and these again mainly the result of the continued use of a perfect language.

In this article I will examine recent scientific findings in an attempt to determine whether there is genuinely anything unique about human beings. I will then consider some aspects of human experience that may point beyond ourselves to a greater ultimate reality. In conclusion, I will present two alternative stories that claim to describe the ultimate truth about the world in which we exist and ask which fits better with the evidence of our experience.

Is *Homo sapiens* unique?

Human beings have had a unique impact on the world we inhabit, evident in our ability to cause the extinction of other species, to domesticate and selectively breed other species, to shape the topography of

³ Morris, Desmond (2005) *The Naked Ape: A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal*, London: Vintage Books, p.5.

⁴ Morris, *Naked Ape*, p.7.

⁵ In fact, human beings are no less hairy than great apes in terms of the number of hairs per square centimetre – our apparent nakedness arises from the fact that our hairs are much finer and, therefore, offer little protection from the elements.

⁶ Darwin, Charles (1871) *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, London: John Murray, p.125-126.

our planet and to alter the environment in ways that cause changes in the ecosystem. What is it that makes *Homo sapiens* so dominant over nature? Are we unique in any way? We can consider this question in terms of physiological, sociological and psychological traits.

Physical

Besides our unusual hairlessness, the human body is unusual in other respects: our upright posture; our manual dexterity (due to the ability to bring our thumbs across to meet with each of our four fingers); and our complex brains (not the largest on earth, even in proportion to body size, but certainly highly complex). Human reproductive biology is also unusual when compared with the great apes: the female pelvis is relatively small in comparison to the head of the neonate, resulting in extremes of labour pains; the tendency of women to live long after the menopause contributes to the ability of grandmothers to help with the nurture of their grandchildren; the prolonged time of child-raising before independent living; the comparatively short gap between births (averaging around two years in settled communities) is also considerably shorter than that within ape species; the absence of a baculum (penis bone) in the male and the inordinate degree of blood loss during menstruation in the female. Although evolutionary advantages of each of these traits have been proposed, they do make human beings stand out from those species that are believed to be most closely related to us in evolutionary terms. As Ian Tattersall writes:⁷

We differ from our closest known relatives in numerous features of the skull and of the postcranial skeleton, in important features of brain growth, and almost certainly in critical features of internal brain organization as well. These differences exist on an unusual scale. At least to the human eye, most primate species don't differ very much from their closest relatives. Differences tend to be largely in external features such as coat colour, or ear size, or even just in vocalizations; and variations in bony structure tend to be minor. In contrast, and even allowing for the poor record we have of our closest extinct kin, *Homo sapiens* appears as distinctive and unprecedented.

Nevertheless, all of these physical distinctives are only differences of degree. What do we find when we look at a the microscopic level of our genetic make-up?

We have already noted in the introduction the statistic cited by the Great Ape Project that the genome of human beings differs from that of chimpanzees by only 1.23%. The similarity of DNA between the two species is around 96%.⁸ This statistic is, however, potentially misleading, since the organisation of genetic material in the two species is quite different and when proteins are compared between them, only around 20-30% are found to be identical in amino acid sequence.⁹ It must, however, be admitted that many of the differences in protein sequence are only very minor. Given the marked visible differences between humans and chimps, however, the minor differences in DNA and protein sequences are still clearly significant. The problem with such comparisons, however, is that they miss the point somewhat. Geneticist and popular science author Steve Jones explains:¹⁰

⁷ Tattersall, Ian (2012) *Masters of the Planet: The Search for Our Human Origins*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, Kindle edition.

⁸ Varki, A. and Altheide, T.K. (2005) 'Comparing the chimp and human genomes: searching for needles in a haystack', *genome Research*, 15, p.1746-1758. Available: <http://genome.cshlp.org/content/15/12/1746.full> [accessed 29 Oct 2015].

⁹ Glazko G., V. Veeramachaneni, M. Nei and W. Makalowski (2005) 'Eighty percent of proteins are different between humans and chimpanzees', *Gene*, 346:215-219.

¹⁰ Steve Jones, quoted in Lennox, John C. (2007) *God's Undertaker: has science buried God?*, Oxford: Lion, p.131.

A chimp may share 98 per cent of its DNA with ourselves but it is not 98 per cent human: it is not human at all – it is a chimp. And does the fact that we have genes in common with a mouse, or a banana say anything about human nature? Some claim that genes will tell us exactly what we really are. The idea is absurd.

So at a physical level we find that humans are remarkable, but that the our species and apes do appear to differ simply by degree – larger brains, more upright skeletons, some DNA and protein sequence variations. There is no difference in kind. Our basic physical building blocks are the same at both the microscopic and macroscopic level. In order to find out what it really means to be human – “what we really are” as Jones puts it – we must consider the social lives of human beings.

Social

Recent decades have seen huge advances in the study of behaviour in both human beings and apes. In general, the behaviour patterns of human beings are much more complex and varied than those observed in any other species on earth. In other words, the behaviour of an individual human being is much more difficult to predict and much less likely to conform to a ‘norm’ observed in the population or to a regular daily pattern than the behaviour of an ape. The following account weaves together in narrative form numerous details about human behaviour that are unknown in other species (almost every detail is uniquely human):

The male child was born after a long, painful labour, despite the efforts of multiple adults of the species recognised as healers to give pain relief. He was immediately wrapped up in material to keep him warm and, as soon as he had been washed, he was dressed in an outfit given by his grandparents. He was given a name by his parents, a label that would be used universally by other members of his species to attract his attention, gossip about him and describe him. He was the third child of his parents, his older brother having been born two years before him and their sister some six years before that.

The day after his birth, the child was brought with great ceremony to a shelter around which his life would revolve for the next 18 years or more living with his parents. The shelter was also inhabited by a member of another species which was regarded both as a possession and, to a large degree, as part of the family. There was a space in the shelter where a fire was burning, giving heat to the space. His father was required to go to another special shelter constructed by the wider community, where he made marks on a sheet made from wood pulp by other members of the species many miles away. The sheet would be kept as a record of his birth. Just days after the birth an adult stranger who represented senior members of the species visited their shelter to ask questions about the individuals living there, including which one from a number of distinct groups within the species, groups differentiated by language, culture and skin colour, they belonged to.

A few weeks after the birth the parents arranged to take the child to another special shelter – where a large number of other members of the species, many of them relatives, were gathered to see a member recognised as a servant of a supreme being pouring water on the child’s head and saying some special words giving thanks to the supreme being. This event marked the new life in a special way, but also indicated his parents’ desire to see him growing up with some standards of right and wrong. Visitors to the occasion gave him gifts – things that would be his, no one else’s, including an object fashioned from metal passed down through his family over several generations.

The child’s grandmother came round numerous times in the first few weeks of his life to help care for him. His sister also helped out. The parents often talked about how amazing their child’s

development was: walking upright, with only occasional stumbles, by 12 months; speaking his first words at 13 months; feeding himself with the use of a tool by 18 months. They taught him new words and new skills by instruction and he seemed to want to share experiences with them, like when he laughed and pointed at a bird flying past.

As the child grew older, he went to another special shelter where he learned many other skills from adults of the species recognised as teachers, including drawing pictures that could be identified as what he named them and engaging in social play with other young members of his species. They would cooperate together to place objects on top of each other – an activity that once an individual had chosen to join they would not be allowed to opt out of without protests from others in the group.

Within this account some truly remarkable behavioural differences are evident. I have endeavoured to limit the following list only to those social traits that have no parallel in non-human species, not including traits like emotions, personality, or tool use, which may be present in animals, albeit in vastly inferior form:

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- **Language** – although communication between individuals through vocalisation is found in other species, the human capacity for language is vastly superior to any other species. Additionally, humans uniquely encode language in writing, which allows knowledge and ideas to be passed across generations in a way that does not occur in other species, contributing to the human sense of history and cultural identity. The capacity for spoken language develops remarkably quickly in human infants, normally without intentional efforts to teach it to them.
- **Naming** – although there is evidence that apes use particular sounds to attract the attention of members of their social groups (these sounds could, in one sense, be described as names), only human beings attribute specific sounds to individuals that are used in the absence of the individual to describe and talk about him or her. Human beings have a unique capacity to label, describe and define objects and persons.
- **Clothing** – although humans are poorly protected from the elements by hair, we are generally not naked after all because we uniquely create clothing. This serves the basic function of protecting us from the elements, but it also functions to avoid shame associated with the idea that those body parts associated with sex should be private and to express cultural or personal identity.
- **Shelter** – although other species create shelters in which they can have their young or find refuge from predators, only human beings are known to make shelters to protect themselves from the rain.
- **Ethnicity** – although other species show some traits that could be described as ‘cultures’ (for example differences in behaviours between groups of chimpanzees or dolphins), only human beings have a fully developed sense of ethnicity in which populations are distinguished by a complex of cultural and linguistic traits, often associated with distinctive physical appearances.
- **Hospitality** – whilst some groups of bonobos will tolerate strangers without hostility, human cultures uniquely, and almost universally, include the ideal of positive action towards at least some strangers.
- **Rites of passage** – human cultures generally include rituals or ceremonies associated with major events in life such as birth, puberty, marriage, death and accession to office. Such practices, and the level of social organisation they indicate, are unknown in other species.

¹¹ Many of the ideas in this section are drawn from *The Matrix of Comparative Anthropogeny* (MOCA), available: <http://carta.anthropogeny.org/moca/> [accessed 15 May 2015]

- **Cuisine** – although some animal species will eat cooked foods and chimpanzees have been known to combine fresh leaves with animal products before eating, human beings uniquely cook most of their food. Within human cultures this skill of cooking has developed into cuisine, which involves elaborate forms of food preparation designed to aesthetically improve food in both its taste and appearance.
- **Death** – human beings appear to have a unique consciousness of death, which often results in anxiety. In most human cultures there are rituals associated with disposal of dead bodies and beliefs about continued existence beyond death.
- **Religion** – there is a universal impulse in all human cultures to make sense of the ultimate reality behind the universe. This expresses itself in divination and worship as well as more highly developed religious ideas.
- **Home** – although groups of apes will live in a ‘home range’, meaning a swath of territory within which they forage for food, human beings are the only primates known to occupy a ‘home base’, meaning a central location to which they return to sleep and eat.
- **Property** – only human beings regard objects as theirs to possess, give, barter or trade. Whereas apes may carry a useful or interesting object for a period of time, only human beings transport objects over long distances when they move home. The idea of inheritance of property across generations is also uniquely human and universal across cultures.
- **Societies** – although apes live in social groups, the ideas of law (agreed rules governing behaviour within the community and including sanctions for unacceptable behaviour) and political institutions are only found among human beings.
- **Fire** – human beings are the only species on earth to intentionally start and to manipulate fire for purposes of cooking, lighting and heating.
- **Care of the dying** – care for the sick and elderly is a value that almost every human culture enshrines. This contrasts with ape groups, which usually leave behind individuals too weak to keep up with the group. Although chimpanzees have been seen to return to visit these individuals, they have not been observed passing food to them. Within human cultures the idea of nursing and medical care has developed further through the recognition of specialised individuals.
- **Parenting** – the extended time spent by human children with their parents is not the only distinctive aspect of human parenting. The openness of human mothers to allow other women to take and hold their babies in the earliest stages contrasts with the possessiveness of mothers among the great apes. The involvement of grandmothers and of older siblings in care of infants is also uniquely human. Human fathers also play a role in nurture of children in almost all human cultures, something that is almost entirely absent among apes.
- **Drugs** – animals, when they taste a chemical that is unpleasant, will avoid the stimulus in future. Humans have a unique tendency to keep experimenting with the substance until they are able to find a positive benefit or elicit a pleasant experience from it. This trait lies at the root of the human predisposition to addiction to harmful substances and to consuming intoxicating substances to excess, even to the point of passing out.
- **Teaching** – although other species learn through observing other members of the species, teaching through demonstration and instruction appears to be unique to human beings.
- **Art** – although some captive chimpanzees and elephants have been trained to draw pictures, this activity has not been observed in the wild and there is no evidence that these animals are able to relate

the pictures they draw to real life objects (they draw shapes, but are not mentally aware that they represent something else).

- **Domestication of other species** – no other species on earth has been able to domesticate other species in the way human beings have done.

The existence of so many unique social traits in *Homo sapiens* has led palaeoanthropologist Ian Tattersall to conclude that, humans represent a "totally unprecedented entity" on Earth and that "*Homo sapiens* is not simply an improved version of its ancestors - it's a new concept."¹² Perhaps the most remarkable dimension of human social life is the unique way in which human beings cooperate on projects, including altruistically (where there is no personal gain for the individual offering help). Although other species have been shown to help one another in some circumstances, the natural tendency observable in young children to "help other persons solve their problems, even when the other is a stranger and they receive no benefit at all" is one of a number of indicators "that human beings cooperate with one another and help one another (especially non-kin) in ways not found in other animal species".¹³ Human beings, thus, have a unique way of collaborating towards "joint goals and shared commitments" that is maintained by a sense of "obligation to help the group" that causes "children, but not chimpanzees, [to] expect and even demand that others who have committed themselves to a joint activity stay involved and not shirk their duties".¹⁴ In line with this unique kind of human sociality, whereas communication within ape groups is "almost exclusively for the purpose of getting others to do what they want", human infants additionally "gesture and talk in order to share information with others — they want to be helpful" and "share their emotions and attitudes freely".¹⁵ This is enhanced by the uniquely human ability to "manipulate information symbolically".¹⁶

Summarising our findings so far, we can conclude that whereas human beings are anatomically and genetically continuous with other species, we are sociologically quite distinct. Human social behaviour is discontinuous from apes in significant ways. We must now consider what it is about the human mind that makes us so different and this consideration will cause us to consider the phenomenon of morality.

Morality and 'theory of mind'

Charles Darwin postulated that morality is the strongest candidate for a true distinction between human beings and other species: "The moral sense perhaps affords the best and highest distinction between man and the lower animals."¹⁷ More recent researchers have suggested that morality is not distinctively human. For example, Dutch primatologist, Frans de Waal (b.1941), writes:¹⁸

I've argued that many of what philosophers call moral sentiments can be seen in other species. In chimpanzees and other animals, you see examples of sympathy, empathy, reciprocity, a willingness to

¹² Tattersall, Ian (1999) *Becoming Human: Evolution and Human Uniqueness*, Orlando: Harvest, p.188.

¹³ Warneken, F., and M. Tomasello. 2006. Altruistic Helping in Human Infants and Young Chimpanzees. *Science* 311: 1301-1303.

¹⁴ Tomasello, Michael (2008) 'How Are Humans Unique?', *New York Times Magazine, Idea Lab*. Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/25/magazine/25wwln-essay-t.html?_r=0 [accessed 15 May 2015]

¹⁵ Tomasello, 'How Are Humans Unique?'

¹⁶ Tattersall, Ian (2012) *Masters of the Planet: The Search for Our Human Origins*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, Kindle edition.

¹⁷ Darwin, Charles (1871) *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, London: John Murray, p.126.

¹⁸ Frans de Waal quoted in Angier, Natalie (2001) 'Confessions of a Lonely Atheist', *New York Times Magazine*, 14th January. Available: <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20010114mag-atheism.html> [accessed 15 May 2015].

follow social rules. Dogs are a good example of a species that have and obey social rules; that's why we like them so much, even though they're large carnivores.

Dale Peterson, in his book *The Moral Lives of Animals* argues that the function of morality is to allow individuals to negotiate the potential for serious conflict with other individuals.¹⁹ This is the standard explanation for the evolution of morality: that it developed as a mechanism enabling selfish individuals to live peaceably in societies, thus enhancing the survival of the social group as a whole. Marc Bekoff, similarly, claims that moral norms are learnt by social animals in play and that these “can then be extended to other situations such as sharing food, defending resources, grooming and giving care”.²⁰ This is, however, a highly reductionistic understanding of morality. Christian author C.S. Lewis wrote that morality is:²¹

concerned with three things. Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly with what might be called tidying up or harmonising the things inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for

The vision of morality described by de Waal and Peterson only engages with the first of these three concerns. Yet human experience suggests that the other two aspects are important.

Expert in child development, Helene Guldberg, who authored the book *Just Another Ape?*,²² insists that morality, properly understood, is a distinctively human trait. Engaging with Dale Peterson's ideas, she insists that:²³

humans and animals negotiate 'conflict' by fundamentally different means. Peterson is presenting us with examples not of animal morality, but of Darwinian evolution selecting for behaviours that minimise conflict and strengthen social ties among group-dwelling animals.

Human beings, however, negotiate conflict through socially created values and codes of conduct. If one reduces everything to its simplest form then one can find parallels between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom. But this kind of philistinism does not deepen our understanding of human beings and human society or indeed of animal behaviour.

The kind of 'morality' that has been observed in animals involves instinctive responses to events or stimuli, but this falls far short of what we mean by 'morality' in human beings. The human version of morality involves culturally imbibed values, but it also entails a uniquely human “ability to recognise that one's own perspectives and beliefs can be different from someone else's” and, therefore, “to reflect on and make judgements about our own and others' actions, and as a result ... to make considered moral choices”.²⁴ Academics label this ability 'theory of mind'.

'Theory of mind' may be defined as “the ability to interpret one's own and other people's mental and emotional states, understanding that each person has unique motives, perspectives, etc.”²⁵ It is called a

¹⁹ Peterson, Dale (2011) *The Moral Lives of Animals*, New York: Bloomsbury.

²⁰ Marc Bekoff quoted in Douglas, Kate (2008) 'Six 'uniquely' human traits now found in animals', *New Scientist*. Available: <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn13860-six-uniquely-human-traits-now-found-in-animals.html?full=true> [accessed 12 May 2015]

²¹ Lewis, C.S. (1952) *Mere Christianity*, London: Fount, p.67.

²² Gulder, Helene (2010) *Just Another Ape?* Exeter: Imprint Academic.

²³ Guldberg, Helene (2011) 'Only Humans Have Morality, Not Animals: Only humans make moral judgements and moral choices', *Psychology Today*. Available: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reclaiming-childhood/201106/only-humans-have-morality-not-animals> [accessed 13 May 2015]

²⁴ Guldberg, 'Only Humans Have Morality'.

²⁵ 'Theory of mind', *Dictionary.com*. Available: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/theory+of+mind> [accessed 15 May 2015]

'theory' because, whereas we may be conscious that we ourselves have a mind, we can only theorise that other individuals have a mind analogous to our own. 'Theory of mind' is not to be confused with theories about the relationship between the mind and the body, for example where the mind resides and whether it is distinguishable from the biochemical function of the brain. Rather, 'theory of mind' is a technical term for the awareness of self and of the thoughts and motivations of others of which human beings are capable.²⁶ Guldberg's claim that only humans possess 'theory of mind' has been debated since a seminal article authored by David Premack and Guy Woodruff in 1978.²⁷ They showed chimpanzees videos of human actors struggling with problems and offered the chimps a choice of photographs of objects which may solve the problem. The consistency with which apes chose the correct object led Premack and Woodruff to suggest that 'theory of mind' was at play – the chimpanzees had entered into the mind of the actor in the video.

More recent research has attempted to test the hypothesis that great apes have 'theory of mind' further. The key question is whether these apes simply solve problems by observing the behaviour of others or whether they can read the minds of others. In their title to a 2007 journal article, Derek Penn and Daniel Povinelli claimed, there is no real evidence that any species other than *Homo sapiens* has "anything remotely resembling a 'theory of mind'".²⁸ A particular focus of studies has been whether great apes can recognise when another member of their species holds a false belief. This is a key element of 'theory of mind', which is only truly present if individuals can recognise that the perceptions of others may differ from their own perceptions. Josep Call and Michael Tomasello, writing in 2008, explain that whilst "chimpanzees understand the goals and intentions of others, as well as the perception and knowledge of others ... there is currently no evidence that chimpanzees understand false beliefs".²⁹ According to Call and Tomosello, "chimpanzees understand others in terms of a perception-goal psychology, as opposed to a full-fledged, human-like belief-desire psychology". In other words, chimpanzees perceive things from what they observe and draw conclusions about goals, whereas humans are able to determine what others believe and so predict their desires. This is, however, a rapidly developing field of research. In 2019, Fumihiro Kano *et al.* reported on the basis of experiments with great apes that "nonhuman animals have a theory of mind and do not simply rely on behavior rules to interpret and anticipate others' actions".³⁰

The debate clearly continues as to whether apes have some understanding that the perceptions of others may differ from their own. The evidence that they do is limited and debatable. Great apes are difficult to work with and the numbers in experiments are often small. More significantly, there are alternative explanations for what is observed in these experiments. Oxford psychologist Cecilia Heyes insists that claims of 'theory of mind' in non-human primates invariably rest on "weak arguments" from experimental results that could just as easily be explained without invoking a theory of mind. She writes that, "in every case where nonhuman primate behavior has been interpreted as a sign of theory of mind, it could instead have occurred by chance or as a product of nonmentalistic processes such as associative learning or

²⁶ I discuss theories about the relationship between mind and body in the article 'What Does it Mean to Be Human?', available on the Ethics page on my website (www.paulcoulter.net).

²⁷ Premack, David, and Guy Woodruff (1978) 'Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1(4): 515-526

²⁸ Penn, Derek C., and Daniel J. Povinelli (2007) 'On the lack of evidence that non-human animals possess anything remotely resembling a 'theory of mind'', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 362: 731-744

²⁹ Call, Josep, and Michael Tomasello (2008) 'Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind? 30 years later', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12(5): 187-192

³⁰ Kano, Fumihiro *et al.* (2019) 'Great apes use self-experience to anticipate an agent's action in a false-belief test' *proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 116(42): 20904-20909. Available: [https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1910095116#:~:text=Call%20and%20Tomasello%20\(2\)%20argued,understan ding%20of%20others'%20false%20beliefs.](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1910095116#:~:text=Call%20and%20Tomasello%20(2)%20argued,understan ding%20of%20others'%20false%20beliefs.) [accessed 18 May 2023]

inferences based on nonmental categories".³¹ Other experts are more optimistic, suggesting that researchers will eventually design experiments that give a higher quality of evidence.³²

The idea that apes might be able to understand that others have a different perception is interesting, but if it can be shown that they do, would this mean that apes minds are not qualitatively different from those of humans? Not according to Ian Apperly and Stephen Butterfill, who point out that human infants can pass false-belief tasks at around 13 to 15 months, but do not pass tests of belief reasoning before the age of 3 or 4 years.³³ In other words, the ability to recognise that others hold wrong beliefs may not equate to 'theory of mind', which also requires the ability to understand what that wrong belief is, why it is held and how it differs from one's own. Apperly and Butterfill argue that what is seen in younger human infants and, if researchers like Kano are correct, in great apes, is not belief-reasoning or 'theory of mind' but a lesser "a cognitively efficient but inflexible capacity for tracking belief-like states".

The vast superiority of human reasoning is clear when we consider the degrees of 'theory of mind' of which humans are capable, for which there is no evidence at all in other species. Not only can we guess what others are thinking, but we can guess what they might be thinking that we are thinking and so on. Ian Tattersall describes this phenomenon:³⁴

We know what we are thinking (known to sociologists as 'first-order intentionality'), we can guess what others are thinking (second-order), we can suspect that someone else has a belief about a third party (third-order), and so on. Apes seem to have achieved first-order intentionality, and alone among nonhuman primates may have clambered on to the second level; humans, on the other hand, seem to be able to cope with up to six levels of intentionality before their heads begin to spin (he believes that she thinks that they intend ... and so on).

Although Tattersall leaves open the possibility that apes may have second-order intentionality, as we have seen there really is no significant evidence to support this claim. Findings in studies into other aspects of reasoning, such as the cognitive basis of traits such as tool use, have also shown just how great and how multifaceted the differences between the human mind and ape minds are.³⁵

Taking the evidence in the round, I suggest Derek Penn and Daniel Povinelli were right to claim in 2008 that there is no real evidence that any species other than *Homo sapiens* has "anything remotely resembling a 'theory of mind'".³⁶ Elsewhere they have written that: "Darwin was mistaken: the profound biological continuity between human and nonhuman animals masks an equally profound discontinuity between human and nonhuman minds."³⁷ Jeremy Taylor, author of *Not a Chimp*, similar, argues that:³⁸

³¹ Heyes, Cecilia M. (1998) 'Theory of mind in nonhuman primates', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 21: 101–148

³² See the discussion in Ed Yong's 2019 article in *The Atlantic*, 'Apes Might Know That You Don't Know What They Know'. Available: <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/11/do-apes-have-theory-mind/602038/> [accessed 18 May 2023]

³³ Apperly, Ian A, and Stephen A Butterfill (2009) 'Do humans have two systems to track beliefs and belief-like states?', *Psychological Review*, 116(4): 953-70

³⁴ Tattersall, Ian (2012) *Masters of the Planet: The Search for Our Human Origins*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, Kindle edition.

³⁵ Vaesen, Krist (2012) 'The cognitive bases of human tool use', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 35: 203–262

³⁶ Penn, Derek C., and Daniel J. Povinelli (2007) 'On the lack of evidence that non-human animals possess anything remotely resembling a 'theory of mind'', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 362: 731–744

³⁷ Penn, Derek C., Keith J. Holyoak and Daniel J. Povinelli (2008) 'Darwin's mistake: Explaining the discontinuity between human and nonhuman minds' *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 31: 109–178

³⁸ Taylor, Jeremy (2010) *Not a Chimp: The hunt to find the genes that make us human*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.287-288.

Our relationship with the chimpanzee is in need of drastic revision. It has become dysfunctional thanks to a staple diet of popular science articles and television programmes about chimps and the other great apes, which take a simplistic view of the science available to us and use it to stress their ‘extraordinary’ similarity to us, in terms of both genetics and cognition, often with the active connivance of senior figures in the world of primatology, who should know better. ...The cuddlesome ‘chimps are us’ image is as misguided, wrong, and morally and intellectually bankrupt as the infamous PG Tips Tea advertisements that ran for 40 years on British television.

The tendency to downplay differences between human beings and other species described by Taylor is evident in numerous articles,³⁹ but even Taylor concludes that, “We are a truly exceptional primate with minds that are genuinely discontinuous to other animals.”⁴⁰

‘Theory of mind’ is inextricably linked with being moral creatures – only beings who can understand the consequences of their actions can be truly moral. Morality is a universal human quality across cultures, but is morality simply acquired by learning from culture? There are some moral standards that seem to be universal across human cultures (for example the prohibition of adultery in both monogamous and polygamous cultures), but there is a growing body of evidence that some moral standards are innate in human nature. There appears to be a moral law in the human heart that may underlie universal moral standards. Paul Bloom, a researcher into morality in babies, writes that:⁴¹

Morality ... is a synthesis of the biological and the cultural, of the unlearned, the discovered and the invented. Babies possess certain moral foundations — the capacity and willingness to judge the actions of others, some sense of justice, gut responses to altruism and nastiness. Regardless of how smart we are, if we didn’t start with this basic apparatus, we would be nothing more than amoral agents, ruthlessly driven to pursue our self-interest. But our capacities as babies are sharply limited. It is the insights of rational individuals that make a truly universal and unselfish morality something that our species can aspire to.

Interestingly, Bloom is suggesting that the kind of morality that is wired into our nature is not the kind that makes sense within evolutionary theory. It is not a drive towards a harmonious society in which survival of members is maximised, but a fundamental sense of justice and preference for people who are altruistic over those who are cruel that are observed in infants. Bloom believes that we need to transcend our basic natural instincts through the exercise reason in order to attain to the kind of moral society he approves of. It appears, then, that C.S. Lewis was correct in identifying a level of morality that is internal to the individual – a standard of ‘right and wrong’ that we can recognise in the actions of others towards us, even if we do not always consistently live up to it ourselves.

In summary, then, human beings are physically markedly different from the most similar species presently observable on earth, but the differences are only of degree. When the human mind is considered, however, there is a radical difference in that human beings have ‘theory of mind’ and are moral creatures. The ability to enter into the minds of others is the basis of the remarkable social abilities of human beings. Paradoxically this ability is the basis both of our amazing potential for cooperation and empathy, but also of

³⁹ Good examples are: Douglas, Kate (2008) ‘Six ‘uniquely’ human traits now found in animals’, *New Scientist*, 22 May; Kenneally, Christine (2008) ‘So you think humans are unique’, *New Scientist*, 21 May.

⁴⁰ Taylor, Jeremy (2010) *Not a Chimp: The hunt to find the genes that make us human*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.308.

⁴¹ Bloom, Paul (2010) ‘The Moral Lives of Babies’, *New York Times Magazine*. Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/magazine/09babies-t.html?_r=0 [accessed 15 May 2015].

our distrust of others and deceptiveness. We have an innate moral sense, but also an innate ability to contravene its guidance.

From what to why?

The uniqueness of the human mind among the species currently living on planet earth is an indisputable fact and it is widely agreed that, "the most challenging frontier for the biological sciences now is to understand how the human brain produces the mind. If it can be argued that the brain has evolved to enable us to interact and communicate with each other, then finding the basis of this ability will be the key."⁴² It is unsurprising that scientists should want to understand how the mind relates to the brain, but there is a deeper question, namely 'why do we alone have minds capable of moral judgements and what are we supposed to do with them?' Science is not equipped to answer the 'why' question and no scientific advance in our understanding of what we are and how our minds work can remove the deeper question of whether there is any purpose to our existence – whether we are here for something more than survival and reproduction. In what follows I will inevitably move beyond scientific research on human nature to ask whether there are any pointers in human nature that can help us discover whether there might be purpose to our existence.

Pointers beyond ourselves?

The following are three aspects of human behaviour that are unique to our species, but which have not been discussed earlier in this article:

- **Blushing** – humans are the only species known to blush, a behavior Darwin called "the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions."⁴³ Evolutionary biologists suggest that blushing helps to expose dishonesty, so benefiting the group as a whole, but this is difficult to square with the fact that revealing emotions that the individual had tried to keep hidden, is likely to be detrimental to the individual.
- **Weeping** – although many species produce tears in response to a physical stimulus to the eye or, often, as a reaction to personal pain, only human beings cry in response to the pain or grief of others (so-called psycho-emotional tears). This is an indicator of our immense potential for empathy, but it does not make sense in evolutionary terms. Investing energy and time in feeling for others who will not survive, or are unlikely to do so, cannot be beneficial to the individual.
- **Fainting** – although some animal species feign death in order to avoid predators, only human beings are known to become unconscious in response to fear. This is highly counterintuitive from an evolutionary perspective, since it makes the individual incapable of fight or flight.

It seems odd that human experience of life in the world is marked by such ambivalence. We know joy and pain, either of which may cause us to cry, and we know shame, embarrassment, grief and fear. Relationships with others seem more complex than they ought to be. Death seems foreign, like an enemy rather than a natural part of existence.

⁴² Frith, Uta, and Chris Frith (2010) 'The social brain: allowing humans to boldly go where no other species has been', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 365(1537): 165-176

⁴³ Darwin, Charles (1998) *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, 3rd edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.310

Could it be that these three counterintuitive behaviours point to something beyond ourselves? Mark Twain is quoted as having said that "Man is the Only Animal that blushes – or needs to." Does our sense of shame and guilt point to something beyond ourselves? Does our longing for ultimate justice point to the existence of ultimate purpose? Could our desire for unconditional acceptance indicate that there can be acceptance? Is there a supreme being before whom we ought to feel ashamed, whose character is the basis for a universal morality and our attendant sense of guilt? Does our sense of sorrow find an echo in a supreme heart of compassion and indicate that our world is not the way it ought to be? Could it be that sorrow itself is unnatural? Is it possible that the intensity of our fear in the face of our own mortality is shouting to us that death is not the end and that immortality was our original condition? Do these aspects of our experience correspond to ultimate reality, or are they simply cruel twists of nature?

Human beings are unique on planet earth (and, so far as we know, in the universe) in having 'theory of mind' which allows us to relate to one another as moral beings. We have unique propensity towards altruism, care of the vulnerable and hospitality, but we also have a unique ability to deceive, to organise exclusive institutions and to fight over ideas. We seem oddly at variance with our environment – fearful of death to the point of fainting; ashamed of wrongdoing to the point of blushing; sorrowful at suffering to the point of weeping. May the fact that we are so ill-at-ease in our environment indicate that it is not the environment for which we were originally intended? We have an innate drive to explore and describe the world we inhabit (the root of science), to capture and celebrate its beauty (the beginnings of art) and to seek ultimate meaning behind it (the impulse of religion).

Throughout the centuries Christian writers have pointed to different aspects of human experience as evidence for the existence of God. Three of these aspects seem particularly compelling:

- *Intelligence* – the idea that rational human minds, capable of imagination, creativity and complex communication, could evolve from blind forces of chance, seems highly counterintuitive. We should ask whether there may have been an intelligent, personal designer. This becomes even more compelling when we realise that our universe is intelligible – there are laws and patterns that we are capable of discovering, predicting and using as a basis for innovation. The correspondence between our intelligence and an orderly universe forms the basis for science and seems to point logically towards the existence of a designer.
- *Desire* – it is our normal experience that our innate desires correspond to something that can fulfil them. Hunger finds its fulfilment with food, thirst with water and sexual desire in sex. This should cause us to ask whether our desire for a transcendent, ultimate reality greater than our natural experience of the universe also corresponds to reality. Does our deepest longing for purpose and significance find its end in a purpose-giver?
- *Conscience* – our experience of a sense of obligation to do what is morally good and our sense of guilt or shame when we fail to do it is an intriguing aspect of human experience. There are certain moral values that are almost universal across human cultures and the idea that to act against one's conscience is wrong is universal even among those who deny objective moral standards. Our sense that morality is universal becomes stronger when we are the injured person – we expect others not to harm us. The existence of morality and conscience should make us ask whether there is a lawgiver and judge.

The roots of morality?

Although, as we saw earlier, Paul Bloom suggests that human reason can lead to unselfishness and impartiality, the evidence of history does not support his conclusion. The fact that principles of fairness and human rights developed in Europe, with its Christian heritage, rather than in Hindu India, Confucian-Buddhist China or Muslim Arabia, is worthy of note. Enlightenment philosophy, founded in rationality, certainly hastened the spread of these ideals, but they are intrinsic to the Christian gospel and were enacted by Christian communities long before they gained mainstream appeal. The history of morality reveals that the teachings of Jesus were truly revolutionary. The 'golden rule' is often cited as an example of a universal morality found in diverse human cultures, but there is a distinctive element of the Christian version which is not found before Jesus Christ. Many philosophers proposed the principle that we ought *not* do to another person something we would *not* want them to do to us,⁴⁴ but Jesus is the first person recorded as stating a positive, directive version of the rule: we should do to others what we would like them to do to us (see the Bible, Luke 6:31).⁴⁵ The shift from a negative principle aimed at minimising harm to others to a positive vision of maximising good to others is distinctively Christian, although Christians have admittedly often failed to embody it. It exposes the contradiction in human nature between our ability to be selflessly altruistic and to be incredibly selfish.

Many atheists are moral people and seek to be good people, but there is a threefold problem with their position. Firstly, they have no universal authority by which to recognise moral absolutes. Our basic innate sense of justice is tainted by our ability to deceive and to act against conscience, which develops as we move beyond infancy. When atheistic naturalists claim, as does Richard Dawkins,⁴⁶ that human beings can transcend the impulses of our genes to create a superior morality, they are inevitably bringing into the argument some moral authority, generally their own opinion.⁴⁷ We simply cannot assume that all human beings, selfish as we so often are, will agree with this standard or that society will always maintain the principles of social justice that we currently enjoy in Western democracies. If we do not recognise the possibility of the collapse of public morality in the face of economic and political crisis, then we have not learnt lessons from the twentieth century history of Europe.

A second problem for the moral atheist is that the vision of morality they present tends to be reductionistic in that it generally reflects only the idea of doing no harm to others – living in a society of fairness and justice. Whilst this is an important aspect of moral behaviour, to assume it is the only dimension of morality is to assume a world in which only we and our fellow creatures exist. In other words, it assumes a naturalistic world. Our experience, however, points to the fact that we are not at peace within ourselves, even if we are at peace with others. There is an inner deficiency which underlies the experience of guilt and shame and which suggests that we need healing at a deep level. The evidence of basic morality in infants suggests that guilt and shame are not simply a result of social conditioning – they also result from situations where we have acted against our innate moral sense. We feel as if we are broken – failing to match up to what we ought to be – and in need of fixing (healing, forgiveness and restoration).

⁴⁴ Versions of this statement are found in ancient Greece, ancient Egypt, Hindu text and the teachings of both Confucius and the Buddha.

⁴⁵ Topel, John (1998) 'The Tarnished Golden Rule: The Inescapable Radicalness of Christian Ethics', *Theological Studies*, 59: 475-485.

⁴⁶ Dawkins, Richard (1976) *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.3; Dawkins, Richard (2006) *The God Delusion*, London: Bantam Press, p.221.

⁴⁷ I discuss theories of morality and present a vision of Christian ethics in my article 'Introducing Ethics', accessible on the Ethics page of my website (www.paulcoulter.net).

Thirdly, the moral atheist cannot provide a convincing reason *why* we should be moral, especially if moral behaviour runs against the powerful drive for self-preservation and self-advancement. Why should we not harm others when it is to our own advantage and, even more, why should we ever positively do good for the benefit of others? Why should we struggle to fight against our 'selfish genes' rather than simply just giving in to them? Morality requires some answer to the 'why' question, but the atheistic naturalistic worldview does not provide any basis for moral responsibility.

Which story fits best?

This article has described our current understanding of human life and what distinguishes it from other species, but conclusions about why human existence is this way cannot be drawn only on the basis of descriptions of what human nature is. Description is not to be confused with explanation. When an atheistic scientist describes some aspect of human behaviour, then suggests an explanation as to how this behaviour may have evolved without any need for a designer, they are engaging in a leap of logic. Suggestions as to 'how' something may have developed do not explain why it exists – you could read this article and draw conclusions about how I wrote it and how it was structured, but that does not explain why I decided to write it in the first place. The question whether there is a purpose behind the existence of our uniquely human traits cannot be answered by deepening our understanding of how they operate or how they may have come to exist. Those who jump from explanations of 'how' to claims about the absence of purpose behind our existence make this judgement because they believe in a particular story about the world we live in, one which may be called 'atheistic naturalism'. According to this perspective, we inhabit a godless world in which physical material and forces (what we can see, feel and measure) are the sum-total of reality.

The atheistic naturalistic story sits uneasily with our basic human nature – it is not natural for us to believe there is no god and no ultimate purpose. Taken to its extreme, it leads to nihilism – the belief that life is utterly meaningless. Faced with this possibility, reactive waves in philosophy, including existentialism and postmodernism, have pursued purpose in individual choices, experience and stories, but they lack an alternative underlying story (or 'metanarrative') that can explain why life should have meaning. They are merely attempts to numb the pain of existence in a purposeless universe in which our sense of greater value is only an illusion. The atheistic naturalistic worldview is highly ironic. It presumes that for millions of years the species that preceded humankind in the evolutionary trail were concerned only with the basic instincts of survival and reproduction. Then suddenly with the appearance of *Homo sapiens* these basic instincts were overtaken by deeper questions about why we exist, what life is for and what happens after death. These questions are, of course, meaningless, since the cosmos is purposeless. Atheistic naturalism insists that: the universe exists for no purpose; human beings are simply one species among many, without special dignity; death is the end of existence. Within this worldview our sense of our special dignity and destiny is merely an illusion. The weeping, blushing, fainting human being is an odd anomaly within this story.

The Christian story of ultimate reality contrasts radically with atheistic naturalism. It claims that: God is a supreme, intelligent, personal being who created the universe for a purpose; human beings have a special relationship to God as moral creatures and a responsibility to live in obedience to God; death is not the end, but precedes to judgement by God and a destiny which depends on choices made in this life. Furthermore, the Christian message adds that God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus certainly claimed to know ultimate reality in the person of the God he called Father and to be able to

lead others who trust in him to know God too. For Christians, the incarnation is the ultimate proof of the special dignity of humankind. The Christian story of humankind is one of dignity and depravity. The Bible bases human dignity in our creation by God in God's image, meaning that we were designed to represent God and be agents of God's rule over the earth, living in a trusting relationship with God and with one another. God's image is reflected by humanity as a whole, meaning that God's intention was for us to cooperate in caring for creation and furthering God's purposes. This purpose fits with what we observe in human nature – it explains why we are endowed with great powers of creativity, have a moral compass at the core of our being, have an innate sense of something greater than ourselves and have such extraordinary ability to cooperate in society towards shared goals. The story of the Bible adds, however, that we are fallen in sin, meaning that we have rebelled against God and elevated ourselves into God's position. God has written the divine law on our hearts, but we are corrupted by our own selfishness and our loss of innocence in relation to other human beings. Death is one result of this rebellion, meaning that it is unnatural for human beings and, therefore, dreaded by us. Shame is another consequence, reflecting our awareness that we are guilty before God and fallen from our original innocence. Suffering and loss are a third consequence, meaning that there is a sorrow that we live with. The weeping, blushing, fainting human being makes sense within this story.

Thus, we have two radically different stories about ultimate reality. How are we to decide which is true? The appearance of design in the universe and the existence of information (in the form of DNA) at the very basis of life suggest an intelligent designer. The unique relational and moral minds of human beings also point in the direction of a creator who can be known and to whom we are accountable. Of course, following this evidence does not lead us automatically to Christian faith, but these indicators should lead us to accept that the Christian story does make sense of the world we live in and the lives we live within it. In order to test the plausibility of Christianity we must consider other types of evidence – historic documents about Jesus that constitute the New Testament and the experience of Christian people throughout history. Christian faith means more than being intellectually convinced of the existence of God and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ – it also entails a volitional dimension, as the individual surrenders to God's will, and an experiential dimension, as they are embraced in God's love – but it certainly does not mean less than this. Christian faith is not anti-rational and anyone concerned with asking 'why' questions about human existence should seriously consider the possibility that the answers are found in Jesus.

Conclusion: why does it matter?

I have not discussed in this article the question of how human beings came to be what we are today – whether through the process of gradual evolution over long periods of time, or through some other process such as special creation. There is a diversity of views on that question among Christian people.⁴⁸ Rather, what I have sought to do is to describe our current understanding of human nature, to show that we are indeed a unique species, and to suggest that the Christian story makes sense of our existence. I believe this to be important for two reasons: firstly, because of its implications for our behaviour, and secondly because of its implications for our destiny.

Considering our behaviour, the Christian story offers a different definition of human personhood and dignity than atheistic naturalism. Atheistic naturalists do not always follow the logic of their position to its

⁴⁸ For my discussion of the alternative Christian views on creation and evolution see my article 'Let There be Light!', available on the Apologetics page of my website (www.paulcoulter.net).

true ethical conclusion. If human beings are different from ape species only because we have ‘theory of mind’ this means that human individuals who lack ‘theory of mind’ (including people with autism and intellectual disabilities, young infants and people with advanced dementia) are not fully human persons and that their value is no greater than that of an ape. Peter Singer represents this logical conclusion in his statement that “Killing a defective infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Sometimes it is not wrong at all.”⁴⁹ Singer bases this view on his definition of a ‘person’:⁵⁰

I use the term "person" to refer to a being who is capable of anticipating the future, of having wants and desires for the future. ... I think that it is generally a greater wrong to kill such a being than it is to kill a being that has no sense of existing over time. Newborn human babies have no sense of their own existence over time. So killing a newborn baby is never equivalent to killing a person, that is, a being who wants to go on living.

By contrast, the Christian worldview sees the dignity of human beings as a matter of purpose. We are special because we were created by God for a purpose and human personhood is an innate quality of every human individual descended from our first ancestor. Personhood is not defined by abilities or stage of development – it is defined by our God-given purpose as God’s image bearers. No individual human being attains to the fullness of what it means to reflect God’s likeness, in part because we are all fallen and marred by sin, but also because it is only together as a community in cooperation that we can reflect the nature of the God who exists eternally as three persons in loving harmony of purpose. Care for those who are vulnerable is an essential value for Christians because it reflects both God’s will for us and the character of God that we are intended to reflect. We are never more God-like than when we care for the most vulnerable among us and our compassion on the least among us pales into insignificance in comparison with God’s love for us. I have written elsewhere of the implications of this perspective for Christian position on issues such as euthanasia and abortion.⁵¹ Many (probably most) people instinctively recognise that the most vulnerable in our society deserve special care, but the atheistic naturalistic worldview provides no logical basis for such a belief. The Christian story, by contrast, does – it recognises them as ‘one of us’, an individual created in God’s image and loved by God.

The other reason why it matters which story we believe relates to our destiny. I believe that the Christian metanarrative explains human experience in a way that neither atheistic naturalism nor any other alternative account of human existence does, but I am not simply claiming that it makes sense. I maintain that the Christian story is not just plausible, I maintain it is true. I am convinced that Jesus Christ, the man who lived 2000 years ago, was none other than God incarnate and that He had a unique authority to explain ultimate truth and to reveal God to us. I believe that His death and resurrection were the turning point of human history, having a spiritual significance that spans across all of human history. I believe that the biblical story tells us not only where we have come from, but where we are heading to, and that it tells us what is required for us to be included in God’s glorious plans for the future. I believe that to discover Jesus is to discover the true purpose of life and to reject Him is to miss the real reason for existence. I believe that human experience cries out for God. In the words of Augustine of Hippo, who converted to Christianity in the fourth century: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” I hope I have convinced you to at least consider the possibility that the Christian story may be true, that the God who “provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (words of the apostle Paul, recorded in the Bible, Acts 14:17) can be known through Jesus Christ.

⁴⁹ Singer, Peter (undated) ‘Peter Singer: FAQ’, *Princeton University*. Available: <http://www.princeton.edu/~psinger/faq.html> [accessed 15 May 2015]

⁵⁰ Singer, ‘Peter Singer FAQ’.

⁵¹ See the Ethics page of my website (www.paulcoulter.net).

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