

We're Only Human Apart from the Animals

There must be something about us that makes us unique.

by Paul Chance

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There is one question about human nature that interests all of us. The barber, the baker, the undertaker; the teacher, the preacher, the innkeeper; the worst, the best and all the rest – all of us want an answer. We want to know what it is that separates us from other animals.

No one denies, of course, that we humans differ in degree from other animals in a variety of ways. Most of us, for example, are more intelligent than the apes. But intelligence is not a uniquely human characteristic. We want to know what there is about us that we can point to and say, "This is true of us and of no other creature on Earth. This is what sets us apart from the beasts of the fields, the slimy things that swim in the seas and the creepy things that hide under rocks."

People have offered answers to the question for at least a couple of thousand years. The ancient Greeks defined us as the reasoning (not to say reasonable) animal. It was the Greeks, after all, not a troop of chimpanzees, who invented logic. This claim to uniqueness satisfied most people until psychologists came into being, about a hundred years ago, and started studying the matter in a systematic way. They soon found that animals can do many of the same things that we take for evidence of reasoning in humans. Chimpanzees, for example, can figure out how to solve a puzzle on their own, seem to do so in much the same way as humans and, like humans, will do it for no other reward than the satisfaction of having done it. Humans may reason better than other creatures, but they don't hold a patent on it.

Some, in searching for the uniquely human, switched their attention from reasoning to creativity. In the 1950s a few troublemakers placed paper and paint before chimpanzees and

obtained a collection of scribbles that some art critics admired. But judgments about art are very subjective. One might place some tubes of oil paint on a blank canvas, put the whole works on the fast lane of the Pennsylvania Turnpike and come up with something that an art critic would like. This would do nothing to prove that cars are creative, however, so the scribbles of apes and, more recently, pachyderms, pose little threat to creativity as the defining essence of human nature. However, in the 1960s, psychologists found that porpoises could be trained not only to perform tricks but to invent tricks of their own. The psychologists began by providing fish whenever the porpoises performed a requisite stunt, such as a backflip. Then they began providing food only when the animals did something novel, something they had not been trained to do. The researchers soon had a pair of finned Baryshnikovs, leaping, spinning and cartwheeling their way into the human world of creative endeavour. In the process they killed the idea that creativity was the private property of people.

A lot of folks had high hopes that the distinctly human characteristic would prove to be our ability to make tools. Other animals might use tools, but only humans actually make them. Unfortunately, the perceptive animal behaviorist Jane Goodall saw a wild chimpanzee take a twig, strip it of leaves and use it to retrieve ants from a nest and make a meal of them. We may look down our collective noses at the the chimp's taste in uncooked foods, but we cannot deny that the animal modified a natural object to perform a task. And that's toolmaking.

Many scientists, especially linguists, felt that the human gift for language was our

crowning glory and our one sure claim to uniqueness. Parrots can talk, of course, but they do not use speech as people do when they produce original combinations of words to express an idea. Language appeared to be the wall the animals couldn't climb when, in the 1950s, psychologists failed miserably in their attempts to teach a chimpanzee to speak. After years of living in a nice, middle-class home, the object of doting parents, the best the ape could muster was a few grunts that some people thought sounded vaguely like words. But a decade later, two psychologists in Nevada began teaching a chimp named Washoe the sign language of the deaf. Not only did Washoe come to understand hundreds of signs, the animal used them in original ways to express new ideas. Since then, other psychologists have taught sign language to other chimps and to a gorilla and an orangutan. The great apes, it turns out, lack the biological equipment to speak but not the brains to use language. Some experts still wonder whether apes really know what they're talking about, but the case for language as the defining characteristic of humankind seems crushed.

After so many setbacks, it was finally proposed that the search for the distinctly human had been conducted on too high a plane entirely. We had failed because we had focused our search in the humanities and fine arts departments when we should have been looking in the prisons. We were, these cynics said, the only animal to rape, murder our own kind and go to war. While it is arguably true that humans rape, murder and make war with greater diligence and efficiency than any other species does, these are not uniquely human acts. Male apes have been seen forcing their gonadal attentions on unwilling females of their kind.

Apes have been known to attack and kill members of their own troop, as well as outsiders, sometimes for trivial reasons. And Goodall, that troublesome ethologist, has even observed organized battles between rival troops of chimpanzees that can justly be called wars. So much for the proud title *Homo violentus*.

The failure to find some trait that clearly separates us from other beasts has not diminished our determination to find such a trait, though we seem to have directed the search toward more trivial distinctions. We read, for example, that we humans are the only animal that cries, that blushes, that gambles and so on. What is most fascinating, though, is not the question of whether some uniquely human feature will ever be identified but the fact that we persist in the search. We seem determined to find some quality we can point to and say, "This is what separates us from the animals. This is what proves that we are, somehow, not really animals at all."

We have overlooked the obvious. The answer to the riddle "What makes humans different from other animals?" lies buried in the question. We are, so far as anyone can tell, the only creature on Earth that tries to prove that it is different from, and preferably superior to, other species. No ape has ever used its new language skills to ask, "How am I different from all other creatures?" No porpoise, so far as we know, has ever interrupted its acrobatic gyrations to ponder whether it is the only species that breathes through the top of its head. Only we humans ask such questions or, for that matter, show any interest in the answers. As unique qualities go, ours leaves much to be desired. But when you're looking for unique characteristics, you can't be too choosy.

Article Study: We're Only Human

1. According to the author, what is the one question about humans that interests us all?
2. Why is reasoning no longer viewed as a uniquely human trait?
3. Why is the case for language no longer viewed as a uniquely human trait?
4. Why must the argument that humans are the only animal to rape, murder our own kind and go to war be rejected?
5. According to the author, what is the answer to the question you identified in question #1?