

What Does It Mean to Be Human?

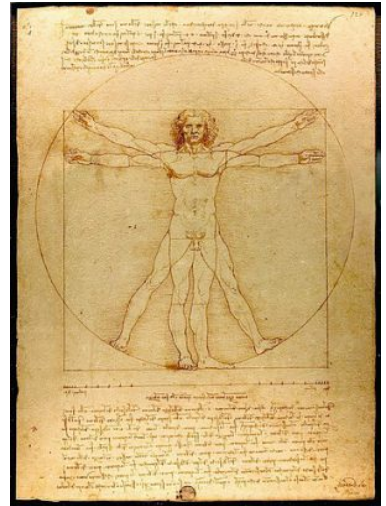
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Commentaries are brief opinion pieces that are intended to introduce an idea or identify connections between works which beg for deeper investigation and analysis. Explicitly not an account of a research project or a comprehensive investigative endeavor, a Commentary in Confluence is a snapshot, a single moment from the initial encounter with an idea or connection that suggests possibilities for interrogation toward new understanding. The Commentary is an appeal to think about an idea, to consider a question, and to take up in earnest the possible conversation toward which the Commentary points.

The claim that humans are superior to other animals is fraught with fallacies, and perhaps also entails more than a little arrogance. A more valid, and less egotistical, approach would reframe the statement to focus on specific abilities. In the performance of many everyday physical activities, such as running, jumping, smelling, seeing, and tasting, humans would not even rate a poor second when matched against numerous animals. Apart from physical skills, many animals are capable of devotion, loyalty, depression, joy, affection, and playfulness equal to, and at times exceeding, that of humans. Furthermore, animals' emotions typically are purer and less connected to ulterior motives than the feelings of humans.

Is there any basis, then, on which we humans can validly claim to be



distinctive from other animals? One obvious but important response is that only humans ask the question: What does it mean to be human? We alone think about our existence. We question the whys and hows of our lives. We wonder about our futures. We engage in countless relationships that define who we are, as well as our proper place in our family, our community, and in the world at large. We build libraries and science labs, and we fill them with books and experiments—all in the hope and expectation of discovering more about ourselves and about each other. Some of us attempt to transcend our earthly existence with spiritual thoughts. We create myths and poetry. Thus, we humans are distinct because we possess a sense of what Jonathan Marks calls “the fundamental human domain of kinship,”¹ which stretches far beyond the narrow, biological concept of kinship possessed by other animals.

My particular interest here is to look more closely at a specific consequence of the human capacity for kinship: cooperation. I should concede at the outset that many animals exercise cooperation in their daily lives. The worker bee, that paradigm of cooperation, is just one example. In addition, most mammals participate in some form of cooperation to facilitate critical activities such as hunting, raising young, and defending the group. However, to borrow Karen Rosenberg’s phrase, cultural behaviors and morphological adaptations in humans are “more elaborated than in other primates.”² Thus, humans alone have the ability to contemplate the needs of others who are out of sight, to consider how their own actions affect others, and to engage with others to establish normative standards of behavior. When humans choose to cooperate, their actions are a function of their sense of kinship.

In his keynote address to the 2019 Association for Psychological Science Annual Convention, psychologist and neuroscientist Michael Tomasello explained that although apes can perceive, remember, understand cause and effect, recognize individuals, form relationships, and comprehend the goals and emotions of others, “they are not built for human-like social coordination.” In contrast,

¹ Jonathan Marks, *Tales of the Ex-Apes* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 1.

² Karen Rosenberg, “How We Give Birth Contributes to the Rich Social Fabric that Underlies Human Society,” in James Calcagno and Augustin Fuentes, “What Makes Us Human? Answers from Evolutionary Anthropology,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 21, no. 5 (2012): 190.

children as young as nine months old are capable of “reference engagement” with another human; and by the age of three, children have the capacity to form a collaborative engagement with a partner. If one child breaks the agreement, the other will call her out using a normative standard, causing feelings of guilt in the transgressor. Thus, a three-year-old child understands respect, fairness, and normative self-regulation. She understands that the concept of “we” is greater than the concept of “me.”³

Anthropologists have offered many theories to explain this distinctive human characteristic and how it functions in the human adaptation. Benjamin Campbell stresses that our larger and more complex brains enable us to be more sensitive to our social environment, which in turn impacts our emotional life by facilitating social strategies. Campbell views humans as “inherently group beings with shared practices and beliefs.”⁴ Another evolutionary anthropologist, Robert Sussman, proposes that human behavior is characterized by three distinctive features: symbolic behavior, language, and culture. These qualities enable humans to ponder and imagine, as well as to create our own symbolic worlds and pass them on to others.⁵ The result, asserts Sussman, is kinship, that key human attribute that Jonathan Marks extols throughout his book *Tales of the Ex-Apes*. A sense of kinship enables us to see ourselves in relation to others and to care about the welfare of others.

Kinship is also a significant aspect of Sarah Hrdy’s revolutionary research into alloparenting. As she describes in her “cooperative breeding hypothesis,” long before they acquire language, human infants possess “other-regarding aptitudes,” such as the desire to share and to assess each other’s thoughts and intentions, which in turn make possible the pursuit of common

³ Michael Tomasello, “Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny,” May 23, 2019, Washington, D.C., 59:48. [Youtube.com/watch?v=BNbeleWvXyQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNbeleWvXyQ).

⁴ Benjamin Campbell, “A Neuroanthropological Perspective,” in James Calcagno and Augustin Fuentes, “What Makes Us Human? Answers from Evolutionary Anthropology,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 21, no. 5 (2012): 187.

⁵ Robert Sussman, “Why We Are Not Chimpanzees?” in James Calcagno and Augustin Fuentes, “What Makes Us Human? Answers from Evolutionary Anthropology,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 21, no. 5 (2012): 185.

goals. In her 2010 address to the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Hrdy compared apes and human children, noting that the main difference in their behavior is that human children possess a “theory of mind”—they understand others’ intentions, a capacity which forms the building blocks for cooperation. Baby chimps can also cooperate, explains Hrdy, but on a much lower level, which actually wanes at twelve weeks, when the chimps lose interest in cooperative activities. In contrast, human babies, as they get older, actually become more interested in cooperative behavior and more aware of their relationships with those around them.⁶

In her short essay responding to the question of what makes us human, Hrdy explains: “communal nurturing of young has been a precursor to higher forms of cooperation.”⁷ Indeed, the ability to cooperate was a matter of survival for young hominins, whose skill at reading the mental states of others would increase their chance of being better cared for, better fed, and therefore better able to survive.⁸ In her groundbreaking book *Mothers and Others*, Hrdy reveals that, contrary to long-held misconceptions that hunter-gatherer families lived in patrilocal societies, expectant parents were in fact flexible, often relocating to be near the mother’s mother to better ensure the availability of alloparenting from a trusted and experienced relative.⁹ Karen Rosenberg points out that this cooperative arrangement, in which the mother receives help from alloparents during and after pregnancy, is the direct consequence of the human birth pattern. The special conditions of human childbirth require solid cooperation before, during, and after delivery, with the result that strong emotional bonds are formed among the participants.¹⁰ Kristen Hawkes goes a step further by focusing on the crucial role of grandmothers in intensifying selection on infants’ abilities to socially engage, which

⁶ Sarah Hrdy, “Mothers and Others,” March 18, 2010, London, UK, 30:03. [Youtube.com/watch?v=XsuuPMUIMEE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsuuPMUIMEE).

⁷ Sarah Hrdy, “Comes the Child Before Man: Development’s Role in Producing Selectable Variation,” in James Calcagno and Augustin Fuentes, “What Makes Us Human? Answers from Evolutionary Anthropology,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 21, no. 5 (2012): 188.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Sarah Hrdy, *Mothers and Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 238–245.

¹⁰ Rosenberg, 190.

she views as the “foundation of our moral faculties.”¹¹ Hrdy reinforces this idea by pointing out that postmenopausal females have historically been “unusually altruistic,” raising cooperation to an art form with their sensitivity to infants’ cues, skill in childcare, and sharing of useful knowledge.¹²

Thus far, I’ve characterized cooperation as an evolutionary adaptation with exclusively positive ramifications. However, I must also acknowledge a negative aspect of the willingness of humans to cooperate. As Matt Cartmill and Kaye Brown reveal in their insightful essay on being human, “the human capacity for seeing things from the other fellow’s perspective” has a dark side. Although cooperation can foster compassion, it can also be the basis for sadism,¹³ as well as a whole host of morally repugnant actions. The pages of history are filled with accounts of wars of aggression, acts of terrorism, poison gas attacks on civilian populations, Fascist and Nazi atrocities, organized crime, mass exterminations—in fact, an almost endless list of moral violations (dare I mention “quid pro quo”?)—all of which required intense levels of cooperation among many participants. Surely no animal on Earth aside from humans has ever demonstrated such a talent for evil, and institutionalized evil could not thrive without human willingness to cooperate.

A news story that made national headlines in the summer of 2022 is an apt example of how cooperation can accomplish both reprehensible and commendable ends. You may have read about a breeding/research facility in Virginia that housed more than 4,000 beagles who were victims of maltreatment and negligence. Running that inhumane facility certainly required strong cooperation from many people. Fortunately, the story does not end there. An undercover operation revealed the squalid conditions, and the facility was shut down. So, what happened to the 4,000 rescued beagles? They were the recipients of another form of cooperation from

¹¹ Kristen Hawkes, “Grandmothers and Their Consequences,” in James Calcagno and Augustin Fuentes, “What Makes Us Human? Answers from Evolutionary Anthropology,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 21, no. 5 (2012): 189.

¹² Hrdy, 2009, 267.

¹³ Matt Cartmill and Kaye Brown, “Being Human Means that ‘Being Human’ Means Whatever We Say it Means,” in James Calcagno and Augustin Fuentes, “What Makes Us Human? Answers from Evolutionary Anthropology,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 21, no. 5 (2012): 183.

another group of humans. Teams arrived to rescue the dogs, shelters throughout the country offered to take in as many as they could, volunteers stepped in to open their arms to these needy animals, and financial donations poured in to help pay for food and medical care. Before long, thanks to hundreds of people, many of whom would never see the beneficiaries of their cooperative efforts, these beagles were able, for the first time in their lives, to walk on grass, to play with toys and with each other, to be held and comforted. The dogs are all now in loving homes, including one lucky dog who was adopted by Prince Harry and his wife.

In writing this essay, I intended to show a link between the human capacity for kinship and cooperation and to suggest that these characteristics have formed the underpinnings of that most laudable of human traits: altruism. Working together toward a common goal has inspired humans across the globe to reach out to help others in need, even those whom they will never meet. We donate to unknown victims of tsunamis, famine, disease, war, and religious persecution. We support humane missions to rescue abused children, spouses, and animals, whether in our community or far away. This spirit of altruism, which I view as cooperation in the service of good, merits an essay of its own.