

Beautiful Minds Challenge Elaine Kearney

What makes us human?

In order to answer this large, over-arching question, it must first be divided into smaller sub areas. In a biological standpoint, the majority of humans are similar, so what must be commented upon is more than a biological idea, but a philosophical and emotional one. How and why humans are different from other species must be noted. This study will focus on some of the main attempts to answer this question within society, such as the idea that certain abilities are what set us apart from the other species on our planet. This essay will mainly focus on expressions of creativity as a method at looking at the topic, as art is strongly intertwined with human emotion; on one hand, artists put their hearts into their art, making sure it is a representation of what they feel and think. On the other hand, most those who observe some form of art will feel some sort of emotion after they observe a powerful piece of art. Because art is a way to see the emotions and beliefs of others, the observers can see the feelings of the creator towards the question. For the sake of this essay, “art” is defined as any form of creative expression, such as music, literature, photography, paintings, etcetera. The works included in this study will be works that either confirm or reject a popular answer within society, such as the idea that thought, friendships, or love are what make us unique.

Love and Other Emotions-

One theory is that humans are human because of the emotions that they feel, namely love. This theory is an ancient one, but still a relevant idea and applicable to modern day society. The following examples are examples of love poetry from Ancient Rome. Even though these poems were written very long ago, they still have an incredibly powerful impact to modern day readers due to the raw emotion that is contained within them. One example of the prevalence of emotion can be seen in the works of Propertius, namely Elegy 2.7, in which he writes “unde mihi Parthis natos praebere triumphis? nullus de nostro sanguine miles erit. (. . .) tu mihi sola places: placeam tibi, Cynthia, solus: hic erit et patrio nomine pluris amor”¹ which translates as “Why should I beget children for national victories? There will be no soldier of my blood! (. . .) You alone give me joy, Cynthia, let me alone please you. Our love will mean far more than fatherhood.”² Here, Propertius discusses how his love for Cynthia, his girlfriend, means more to him than fatherhood. At the time, this was a radical idea, as in the society of Ancient Rome, children, and especially sons, were incredibly valued. Those who produced sons were honorable men, but here, Propertius is going against the grain on that idea, saying the his lover is all that he needs, and therefore his lover and the love he feels for her is more important than not only fatherhood, but all other ideas within society. This can be seen in another poet, Catullus. He writes about his lover Lesbia, saying “dilexi tum te non tantum ut vulgus amicum, sed pater ut gnatos diligit et generos”³ which translates as “I have valued you not only as a common man values his girlfriend, but as a father loves his sons and sons-in-law”. Here, Catullus is saying that he loves Lesbia in multiple ways, in a sexual way (seen in the term

¹ Propertius, “Elegae VII”. *The Latin Library*. Updated 2015. Accessed 9 November 2015. Web.

² Brusendorff et al., “Fertility, Contraception, and Childbirth in Ancient Rome”. *AFN*. Updated 2003. Accessed 9 November 2015. Web.

³ “Catullus”. *The Latin Library*. Updated 2015. Accessed 1 December 2015. Web.

“amicam” as it has a sexual connotation), but also in the sense that he wants to make a family with her (here he is insinuating that he wants to form a family, as there are not only allusions to the family but to sons). Again, here it can be seen that these poets both value love and the emotions associated with it, such as happiness, more than anything, and they believe that said emotions are what define them as humans.

However, there are weaknesses in this theory. In another poem, Catullus writes “Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris. nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior”⁴ or “I hate and I love. And perhaps, you will ask why. I do not know, but I feel it and I am tortured”. Here, we see a negative connotation. Hate is in exact juxtaposition with love, and it is considered incredibly negative, and Catullus himself explicitly states that the duality of feelings inside of him torment him, which poses the question “can something with negative byproducts define humanity?” This idea is seen again in the poems of Lygdamus (the works of Lygdamus are included in the body of works of another poet, Tibullus, as it is unsure to us whether Lygdamus actually existed or was a mere persona of Tibullus), where Lygdamus writes “Lygdamus hic situs est: dolor huic et cura Neaerae, coniugis ereptae, causa perire fuit.”⁵ or “Here, Lygdamus is placed: for this man pain and the care for Neaera, the stolen bride, were the cause of his death.” Earlier in the poem, Lygdamus wrote about his lover was stolen for him, and it is unknown whether she left him for another man or she passed away. Lygdamus then describes his funeral, stating that he wants her to be there grieving for him. In this quotation, the audience can see that in his opinion, his love for her and the consequent pain from the relationship were so powerful that they caused him to die. In this instance, we see another perspective which casts a negative light upon the topic of emotions within humanity. This negativity can be seen again in the works of Propertius, even though he believes that love is the most valuable thing in the world, he admits ““durius in terris nihil est quod vivat amante,”⁶ or “Nothing on the earth is more difficult than to live as a lover”. Here again lies the negativity that is associated with love and the emotions associated with it. The question arises again, can something negative define humanity?

Aside from love and other emotions, there are other interpretations as to what can define the human experience, perhaps “love” is a relationship that is too risky, but humanity can be seen in platonic relationships.

Relationships with Others -

Another theory is that humans are unique because we can form bonds with other beings that are outside of our social groups and our families. Throughout many works, the idea of a bond can be seen. One example can be seen in the popular anime series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, which was written by Gen Urobuchi. In this fantasy series, beings called “magical girls” fight against witches to protect humanity. A character named Kyubey wants to turn a middle-schooler named Madoka into a magical girl, as he believes she would be the strongest magical girl in all of history, but Homura, a stranger to Madoka, strongly urges her against making this contract. As the story develops, Madoka and Homura become closer and Homura reveals why Madoka would be so powerful. She tells her friend how she can manipulate time,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Tibullus 3.2: Latin Text”. *The Latin Library*. Updated 2015. Accessed 30 November 2015. Web.

⁶ “Propertius 2.17: Latin Text”. *The Latin Library*. Updated 2015. Accessed 30 November 2015. Web.

and she has come from an alternate timeline (in which the two girls were best friends) to protect Madoka from an untimely death once she makes the contract with Kyubey. It is unknown exactly how many times Homura travelled back in time only to face the same results, but it is stressed in the later episodes that she does this over and over and over again to save her friend Madoka. Through this story, it is clear that the creators of the series are producing a commentary on the value of friendships, stating that the will to unstoppably protect your friends is something that sets mankind apart from other beings, in context of this story, apart from Kyubey and his alien species. A similar example of relationships can be seen in the novel "Bridge to Terabithia" by Katherine Paterson. In this work, a boy named Jesse becomes friends with his new neighbor, Leslie, and the two create an imaginary magical kingdom called Terabithia. The novel comments on the character development of Jesse, as he goes from being somewhat cold, an outsider, depressed, and angry into a creative, strong, independent, brave, and mature individual after befriendng Leslie. Through this work, the value of friendships is seen once again, and the positive impacts of these friendships are seen in Jesse as a character.

However, there are weaknesses in this argument as well. In "Bridge to Terabithia", towards the end of the work, Leslie attempts to cross a river to get to the area which they called Terabithia when she hits her head and is knocked unconscious. She passes away, and Jesse is unaware of this at first. After the death of Leslie, Jesse goes through various stages of grief, originally believing that everyone was lying to him, progressing to destroying the gifts that Leslie gave him, and later falling into depression. In this example, we can see that the relationships amongst humans can also cause horrible agony. Though not every relationship ends in this way, this poses the question once again, "can something negative define humanity?"

Again, this theory does show promise, however, there are other options which must be considered. Perhaps the term "relationship" is too oversimplified, and it is in fact the emotions and thoughts associated with said relationships that are significant.

Thought -

One common belief is that humans are different because of the ability to think, not only about their day to day lives but about more complex issues, such as mathematics, politics, the science of climate change, philosophy, and more. This concept goes back to the musings of Aristotle, wherein he expressed the idea that humans are different as they can think upon advanced concepts and seek to flourish in their understanding of them.⁷ Similar ideas on thought are seen in modern day society. In the popular song "Car Radio" by twenty one pilots, the speaker expresses this idea, saying "to be awake is for us to think and for us to think is to be alive and I will try with every rhyme to come across like I am trying to let you know you need to try to think"⁸. Here, the speaker expresses the idea that the ability to think is so powerful within us as a whole to the point where thinking is our very existence. This idea can be seen again in the song "Nine" by La Dispute, wherein they discuss how humans will be remembered by others. In this song they express the idea that "it's not the petty imperfections that define us but (. . .) the way we hold our heads"⁹. In both of these examples, it can be seen that they place an

⁷ Gilkey, Charlie. "The 3 Key Ideas from Aristotle that Will Help You Flourish". *Productive Flourishing*. Published 29 February 2008. Updated 2 November 2014. Accessed 1 December 2015. Web.

⁸ twenty one pilots. "Car Radio". *Vessel*. Track Five. Fueled by Ramen. 2013.

⁹ La Dispute. "Nine". *Here, Hear III*. Track One. Better Living. 2009.

immense value on the ability to think, and that these complex thoughts are what separate humankind from all other species on earth.

However, at the same time, there is somewhat of a risk portrayed to observers, in that too much thinking can actually be detrimental to an individual. To use “Car Radio” as an example again, the speaker says “oh dear, I don’t know if we know why we’re here. Oh my. Too deep. Please stop thinking.”¹⁰ Here, the speaker explicitly begs himself to stop thinking about philosophical questions which are unable to be answered. This, alongside a syntax change from full sentences and thoughts beforehand into short, almost panicked sentences (seen in “Oh my. Too deep.”) create a panicked tone and throw some doubt upon the idea that our ability to think is what makes us human, as can something negative define humanity? Another refutation of the idea that thought is what makes us human can be seen in the popular song of the one-hit-wonder rock band Zager and Evans from the 1960’s. In the song “In the Year 2525”, there is a subtle warning that eventually, our thoughts and consequent developments in technology could one day lead to the downfall of man. From the very beginning of the song, they create an ominous tone, as the first line is “in the year 2525, if man is still alive”¹¹. Here, they are casting doubt upon not only the future prosperity of mankind but also the outright existence of mankind. They also create dark, post-apocalyptic imagery in the song, expressing ideas like “in the year 5555 your arms are hangin’ limp at your sides, your legs got nothin’ to do, some machine’s doin’ that for you”¹². Here, they are discussing that as thought develops the creation of technology, we as a species may take it to terrible extremes. The most powerful lines of the song are seen at the end, wherein they say “I’m kinda wonderin’ if man is gonna be alive; he’s taken everything this old earth can give and he ain’t put back nothing. Now it’s been ten thousand years, man has cried a billion tears (. . .)now man’s reign is through”¹³. Here, they discuss the carelessness of mankind in regards to our environment, despite our advanced capabilities of thought, almost blaming said capabilities for their hypothetical debilitations of society. In total, this song briefly discusses the potential negativity of thought, which forces the question “can something negative define humanity?” once again.

Another issue with the idea that thought makes us human is the question as to whether it is scientifically accurate to say that humans are the smartest species out there. Many scientists are unsure of this, with one writing “humans often take pride in their large brains (. . .)Brain surface has valuable properties - and whale brains have more convoluted surfaces - and a much larger surface area - than human brains. (. . .) [whales] are probably much smarter than we are”¹⁴. This source suggests that because of the size of the brain, it has more capabilities as it is easier to form neural pathways. Once again, doubt is reasonably cast upon this theory, as humans at this point are unable to see the thoughts of other species.

¹⁰ twenty one pilots. “Car Radio”. *Vessel*. Track Five. Fueled by Ramen. 2013.

¹¹ Zager and Evans. “In the Year 2525”. Track One. RCA. 1968.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tyler, Tim. “Whales Are MUCH Smarter Than We Are”. *LAL: Lotus Artificial Life*. Published 12 April 2009. Accessed 1 December 2015. Web.

Though the ability to think quickly and on advanced concepts is a possibility as to what makes us human, this argument does have some weaknesses in it, which leads to the exploration of other possibilities.

Even though these three theories are arguably the most popular, the original question of what defines humanity still remains.

What makes us human?

This is a huge question. It has many sections. It has involvement of various areas of knowledge. Art. History. Experience. Emotion. It is a question which is incredibly difficult to answer, but I have my own theory. I believe that we cannot accurately capture a truth as to what it means to be human. I believe that the terms "humanity" or "human" have to be defined in regards to the individual. Each and every single individual has their own thoughts, their own emotions, their own story. To generalize humanity by defining it in a simple theory or a simple definition is to go directly against what we all are, individual.

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