

What Does it Mean to be Human?

Thoughts by Caspar Hewett

On the question of what level of communication is possible between humans and animals I think that it will always be extremely limited. There are certain fundamental aspects of human beings and our methods of communication that create this situation. For one, there is a lot of evidence that we have a 'hard wired' ability to intuit grammar from spoken language - a structure that is central to our ability to communicate complex ideas. Having said that work such as that done by Roger Fouts is extremely valuable. It helps us to understand more about ourselves and our closest cousins. We agreed that PACE - People against chimpanzee experiments have a stall tonight & I'm sure they'll contribute to the discussion later, but I would like to raise the question of whether PACE are against this type of research.

On whether what we learn about animals can tell us more about ourselves I have no doubts that it can. I have a strong interest in evolutionary theory which has largely been driven by my belief that understanding more about our origins as a species reveals things about what we are. However this is always tempered with a recognition that more can be learned about what human beings are by studying people than by studying animals!

On Fouts's work I think what we need to be careful of is not to anthropomorphise Washoe. It is a staggering achievement for an animal to reach the language level of a three year old human child - this is indeed a high level of communication. However, there is still a huge leap between a three year old and an adult human - think about the difference in sophistication, ability to solve complex problems, act socially, plan ahead and take responsibility. There are good reasons why we don't give children complete freedom. In this society we consider anyone below the age of 18 to be in need of our protection, to not be responsible for their own actions and to be insufficiently mature to vote

This brings me the main question of tonight's discussion - what does it mean to be human? I would argue that only the qualities associated with adulthood should be considered when we attempt to answer this question - As adults we have AGENCY - we play an active part in our destiny and are RESPONSIBLE for our actions. We use RATIONALITY and PLAN AHEAD. Communication and language are, of course, an essential backdrop to this, but are far from being the whole story - our big brains have provided us with unique abilities such as the ability to ABSTRACT and to invent SCIENCE and MORALITY. They have taken us to every corner of our planet and beyond. Because we ADAPT OUR ENVIRONMENT rather than adapt TO it we are a uniquely successful type of being.

Yes, we are OBJECTS of nature as any animal is, but we are also SUBJECTS who make choices and ACT for REASONS.