



## "Are Human Beings Just Deluxe Chimps?"

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Some of my friends never tire of pointing out that human beings are just animals. People have been doing this for decades but recent work on human genetics has uncovered the final proof, if any were needed. Sooner or later in a conversation in the pub, or with friends in a restaurant, someone produces their trump card, 'The genetic make-up of a Chimp is 98.5 percent identical to a human being', they announce. 'Ta-raaa! You are just a deluxe chimp'.

I should warn you, no one ought to try this one out with me. I am ready for it!

I usually start by pointing out that human beings and mice share about 99 percent of their genes, so there's not all that much difference between Stuart Little and William Shakespeare, is there? While this is sinking in, I tell them about nematodes (one millimetre long soil-dwelling worms) that share 75 percent of our genetic material, so they are three-quarters of the way to becoming human! By this time, it is beginning to dawn on my poor friends that the science of genetics is subtler than counting up numbers of genes and calculating percentages.

Think of all the dogs you have ever seen. Selective breeding is capable of creating the tiny genetic variations that make the difference between a St Bernard and a Chihuahua. You won't be surprised to learn that human DNA and its chimp equivalent is organised very differently; for example, we have 23 pairs of chromosomes and chimps have 24. The result is two animals that are superficially similar but are, in reality, hugely different.

Stephen Pinker, the evolutionary psychologist, writes in his book, 'How the Mind Works' (Penguin, ISBN 0-14-024491-3, page 40):

'The outsize brain of Homo sapiens is by any standard an extraordinary adaptation. It has allowed us to inhabit every ecosystem on earth, re-shape the planet, walk on the moon, and discover the secrets of the physical universe. Chimpanzees, for all their vaunted intelligence, are a threatened species clinging to a few patches of forest, and living as they did millions of years ago.'

Pinker feels that this has all happened by accident via the process of evolution by natural selection. This is guesswork of course; whilst there is good evidence for small-scale evolution, he has no conclusive evidence for the evolution of hominids. Yet elsewhere in the same book he cites wonderful evidence for an alternative view of human origins, that of intelligent design. Here he is describing the human hand (ibid page 10);

'The hand can be configured into a hook grip [to lift a pail], a scissors grip [to hold a cigarette], a five jaw chuck [to lift a coaster], a three jaw chuck [to hold a pencil], a two jaw pad to pad chuck [to thread a needle], a two jaw pad to side chuck [to hold a key], a squeeze grip [to hold a hammer], a disc grip [to open a jar], and a spherical grip [to hold a ball]. Each grip needs the precise combination of muscle tensions that mould the hand into the right shape and keep it there as the load tries to bend it back. Think of lifting a milk carton, too loose a grasp and you drop it; too tight and you crush it; and with some gentle rocking, you can even use the tugging on your fingertips as a gauge of how much milk is inside! And I won't even begin to talk about the tongue, a boneless water balloon controlled only by squeezing, which can loosen food from a back tooth or perform the ballet that articulates words like *thrilling* and *sixths*.'

Wow! The Bible is powerfully illuminating on the differences between chimps and humans. Here is how it describes God planning the creation of your ancestors:

'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the

birds of the air, over the livestock and over all the earth' (Genesis 1:26)

'The image of God' is a phrase rich in meaning, and an important dimension to it is the ability to rule. Wherever human beings go they are able to do just that.

Now, there is no doubt that human beings are primates, members of the animal kingdom. The Bible points out that the first humans were made from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7 – the latin for soil is *humus* from which we get the word *human*), underlining the fact that we are made of the same stuff as the rest of the animal kingdom. Yet there are good rational reasons to believe that human beings are more than just animals, more than the sum of their genetic parts. The intelligent one, who created chimps, made us in his image; we share his nature. Which raises a question; are you living up to your true nature, or down to your animal one?