

# Who Am I? From Life to Human

*An edited transcript of an interview  
with Dr. Brian Swimme*

So what does it mean to be a human, especially in the context of evolution?

One of the most penetrating theories of the birth of the human has to do with a sense of timing. We're very similar to the chimpanzees, for instance. Genetically, we're almost 99% identical. This is astounding. There are forms of yeast that are more distinct from one another than we are from chimpanzees. So how do we make sense of that?

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One theory is that there was a subtle mutation in the genes that control the rate of development. The rate of development was slowed down for the human. Now, if you slow down the rate of development of a salamander, it might remain in that early phase of its life as a tadpole, right?

But if you slow down the rate of development of a mammal, what's interesting is that you can remain in a playful stage. Every mammal has a certain period of play. It is a time where there isn't any fixed genetic program. So there's a

freedom. That's the theory of what happened in terms of the genetic mutation that gave rise to the human. Biologically, we slowed down our development to remain in that stage of freedom and curiosity. That may well be the defining characteristic of what it means to be human.

The implications I think are immense. It means that the humans in a real, deep way, don't know what to do. Meaning that we can't rely upon our DNA to tell us how to respond.

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Instead of our DNA telling us what to do, what did happen then, is that the early humans became profoundly fascinated by existence. If you have a raging forest fire, all the animals know what to do. And that is to flee. But there's a new possibility for the human. The human might become so fascinated that it might even go toward the fire, rather than away from it. There was a moment when life gave birth to a being that could give itself over to play, curiosity, wonder, awe, fascination. Everything follows from that capacity to be astounded.

So the human is an intensification of feelings. We can become astounded by fire, the forest fire. But it could be a sunset, or sunrise. We could stay thinking about the sunset long after it made any sense for another animal. Or death.

Or birth. All of the aspects of the Universe were astounding to us.

The response on the part of the human community was to invent a way of actually sharing these deep experiences in consciousness. The mode of doing this is language. Language is a way in which the inner experiences of one person can be actually be transmitted to another - conveyed to another. So we have the growth of these language groups, and this is a development that is as significant as the beginning of life. Because now, learning can become part of the ongoing evolution of a particular species.

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Look at any other species. They rely upon their DNA, or what they might have learned in their own lifetime. But, with the human, we not only can rely upon our DNA and what we learned; we can rely upon what was learned in the past. Because of this ability, using language, we can actually bring what we have learned into a form that is physical and that can endure through time. So that what was learned becomes a permanent possession of the human community.

In this sense, the very process of evolutionary dynamics, change, and now experience, individual experience, can become part of the guidance system of a species. One way to think about this is that the human, then, is not an individual. We are individuals in a sense. But, our minds are actually created and supported by 200,000 years of human

experience, to the degree that that experience has been expressed in culture.

With our libraries, and now with our computer chips, we have amassed an immense body of knowledge. Our evolutionary experience has created an animal that can actually draw upon a long extended period of learning. Each of us has a mind that is 200,000 years in the making.