

STUDY GUIDE : To BE HUMAN

By Dr. Joshua M. Moritz

VIDEO SUMMARY: The species *Homo sapiens* has often been captivated by reflections on its own uniqueness. From the biblical psalmist pondering, “What is humanity, that you are mindful of them?” (Ps. 8:4) to the declaration of philosophers that “man is the measure of all things,” many have reflected upon what fundamentally defines the core identity of human beings. One central question that emerges from considerations of human nature is: what exactly makes humans unique? Many have claimed the existence of behavioral and physical characteristics that are “unique” to humans but the “uniqueness” of these characteristics has not been supported by careful scientific scrutiny. Instead, the bulk of the evidence places human behavior, morphology, and physiology on a *continuum* with other animals. At the same time, scientists have discovered that for all their diversity, living human populations have vastly more genetic similarities than differences.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Frans de Waal is the Charles Howard Candler professor of primate behavior in the Emory University psychology department in Atlanta, Georgia, and director of the Living Links Center at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center.

Dr. Georgia Dunston is the chair of the Department of Microbiology and the founding director of the National Human Genome Center (NHGC) at Howard University.

Dr. Richard B. Potts is a paleoanthropologist and the director of the Smithsonian Institution Museum of Natural History's Human Origins Program. Prior to joining the Smithsonian Institution, he taught at Yale University and was its Peabody Museum of Natural History Curator of Physical Anthropology. He has been involved with early human excavation sites in Africa and Asia.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How would you answer the question, “What does it mean to be human?”
2. What are a few books (biblical or non-biblical literature), artistic works, or other influences that have shaped how you respond to Q1? How might science come alongside these other perspectives and inform your own?
3. Do you think that being human is primarily a matter of our biology? Why or why not?

In this film, Dr. Frans de Waal discusses how capacities like face recognition, tool use, tool making, and morality were once thought to be uniquely human characteristics. Now however, these capacities have been found to some degree among many non-human animals. De Waal and other scientists have similarly discovered that self-awareness, empathy, higher order thinking (metacognition), culture, and language are present to varying degrees among non-human animals.

4. Consider the similarities between animals and humans. Do you think the discovery of such similarities make humans less unique? Why or why not?
5. Reflect on your own experience with animals. Have you even been surprised by any humanlike qualities or actions of animals? Please explain your answer.
6. Do you think human dignity rests on human uniqueness? Why or why not?

Dr. Rick Potts says that the difference between humans and other animals is due to quantitative differences of degree rather than qualitative differences. He explains that “we owe a lot of our unique qualities as matters of difference in *extent* from other primates rather than differences of *kind*.”

7. Consider the differences between a human infant and a human adult. Would you say the differences are a matter of degree (quantitative) or kind (qualitative)?
8. What do you think it means for humans to be made in “the image and likeness of God” (or imago Dei)?

9. Do you think other humanoid species such as *Homo habilis*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, or *Homo neanderthalensis* possessed the “image and likeness of God” according to the biblical meaning of that phrase? Why or why not?

Dr. Georgia Dunston explains that humans are all one family and that the data from the genome “bears out that literally we are one brotherhood, sisterhood.” Recent studies have shown that there is more genetic diversity within a group of chimpanzees on a single hillside living less than a mile apart than in the entire human species. (See for example, Bowden et. al. “Genomic Tools for Evolution and Conservation in the Chimpanzee,” *PLOS Genetics* 8:3 (2012))

10. Do you think the genetic discovery that all humans are literally “one family” has ethical implications? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
11. What are the theological implications of the scientific finding that humans are “one family”?
12. How might the science that Dunston described inform or encourage efforts of social justice and racial reconciliation?

FURTHER RESOURCES & SUGGESTED READINGS:

Online resources:

- Video: Alister McGrath, “What are we to make of Adam & Eve?”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL5su0zmpKM>
- Video: Cara Wall-Scheffler, “The Origins of Humanity: Cultural and Religious Development”
<http://downloads.sms.cam.ac.uk/1781053/1781058.m4v>
- Video: John Walton, “Human Origins and Genesis”
<http://downloads.sms.cam.ac.uk/1792956/1792961.m4v>

On human uniqueness, evolution, and theology:

- Ray Anderson, “Theological Anthropology,” in *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, Gareth Jones, ed. (Blackwell, 2004).
- R. J. Berry and Malcolm Jeeves, “The Nature of Human Nature,” *Science and Christian Belief* 20:1 (April 2008).
- Phyllis A. Bird, “Theological Anthropology in the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, Leo G. Perdue, ed. (Blackwell, 2001), 260-261.
- Helen De Cruz and Yves De Maeseneer, “The *imago dei*: evolutionary and theological perspectives,” *Zygon* 49:1 (2014): 95-100.
- J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Eerdmans, 2006).
- Malcolm Jeeves, *The Emergence of Personhood: A Quantum Leap?* (Eerdmans, 2015).
- Malcolm Jeeves, ed. *Rethinking Human Nature: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Eerdmans, 2011).
- Joshua Moritz, “Evolutionary biology and theological anthropology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*, Joshua Farris and Charles Taliaferro, eds. (Ashgate, 2015).
- Joshua Moritz, “Human Uniqueness, the Other Hominids, and ‘Anthropocentrism of the Gaps’ in the Religion and Science Dialogue,” *Zygon* 47:1 (March 2012): 65-96.
- Joshua M. Moritz, “Evolution, the End of Human Uniqueness, and the Election of the Imago Dei,” *Theology and Science* 9:3 (Aug. 2011): 307-339.
- Joshua Moritz, “Does Jesus Save the Neanderthals?: Theological Perspectives on the Evolutionary Origins and Boundaries of Human Nature,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 54:1 (Spring 2015): 51-60.
- Gregory R. Peterson, “The Evolution of Consciousness and the Theology of Nature,” *Zygon* 34:2 (June 1999).
- Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray, eds., *The Believing Primate: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
- John Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (InterVarsity Press, 2015).

On the theological meaning of human kinship with other species:

- David Clough, *On Animals: Volume I: Systematic Theology* (T&T Clark, 2012).

- Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough, eds., *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals* (SCM Press, 2009).
- Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming* (Eerdmans, 2014).
- Michael J. Gilmour, *Eden's Other Residents: The Bible and Animals* (Wipf and Stock, 2014).
- Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (Bloomsbury, 2013).
- Andrew Linzey, *Creatures of the Same God: Explorations in Animal Theology* (Lantern Books, 2009).
- Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (SCM Press/University of Illinois Press, 1994).
- Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology* (Bloomsbury Academic, 1997).
- Joshua Moritz, "Animals and the Image of God in the Bible and Beyond," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48:2 (2011): 134-46.
- Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton, eds. *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

Joshua M. Moritz, PhD, is Lecturer of Philosophical Theology and the Natural Sciences at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, adjunct professor of philosophy at the University of San Francisco, and Managing Editor of the journal *Theology and Science*. He is author of *Science and Religion: Beyond Warfare and Toward Understanding* (Anselm Academic, 2016) and *Research Perspectives in Science and Theology* (Brill, 2017).