



Huw Spanner

Thoughts into words,
ideas into action

Welcome

Curriculum Vitae

Interviews

Columns

Scripts

Contact

On knowing who and what we are

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I don't know who decides these things, but today, apparently, is World Animal Day. We're being encouraged to think about and celebrate our relationship with animals. But perhaps that should be 'with other animals'. Our culture seems to be very confused about where the borders of the animal kingdom lie, and whether we human beings live inside them.

Well over a century has passed since Charles Darwin showed that we're related to chimpanzees – as Desmond Morris famously put it, that we're naked apes. And other scientists since have gone much further: not only are we merely animals, some say, but – like all living things – we're merely machines built by DNA, with no other purpose than to replicate our genes.

But even as such ideas have been letting the air out of all our grand illusions, we've been pumping them up even harder. Now that we no longer see ourselves as created beings, we seem to have redefined ourselves almost as gods. If the universe is governed only by the laws of physics, then our capacity to imagine, to invent, even to comprehend how the universe works, seems almost supernatural.

And the more extraordinary our powers seem, the less accountable we feel for how we use them. We feel entitled to do what we like, to other species and to the Earth, simply because we can – as if our ability to do it is all the licence we need.

In a way, this deep confusion about who or what we really are has its answer in a paradox in the Book of Genesis. There we read that Adam was formed out of the dust of the earth – a fact we remember in our funeral services – and yet the breath of life that quickened him came from the mouth of God. We are, it seems, both nothing much and something special. We are animals, but we are not merely animals.

That's not to say that we're unique in that respect. As a Christian, I don't believe that my dog is 'merely' an animal. Nor is the fox who breaks into my garden every night, or the frogs that have taken up residence in my son's old sandpit. Nor is the chicken that ends up on my plate, or the snails I seem to tread on every time I go out after dark. None of these is 'merely' anything at all.

All of them, I believe, share with us this distinction, that they were imagined into being by a Creator, who still looks at everything he has made with pleasure. Simply to

Knowing who
and what we are

Giving peace
a chance

The death of
a hippopotamus

The IRA's
apology

Progress –
and the reverse

Playing God

Evil in ourselves

How we treat
other creatures

The six billionth
human being

Learning from
history

more...

be an animal is to be a subject of God's love.

The problem is that, until we recognise who and what *we* are, it's difficult for us to see the true worth of our fellow creatures.

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[Back to the top](#)

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