

Being Human?

Nika Levikov virtually sits down with **Dr Sandro Lanfranco** to understand what it means to be human, how our understanding of humanity has changed over time, and whether any of it matters.

The question of what makes us unique as a species has taunted – or intrigued – humans for thousands of years. Many would agree that religions did a brilliant job of placing humankind on a pedestal, just below our gods. After all, we can reason, we wear clothing, and we have complex thoughts. Surely there are no other species that can do the same? I spoke with Dr Sandro Lanfranco about his recent piece in *Melita Theologica: Journal of the Faculty of Theology* titled 'Pavel Florensky and the Uniqueness of Man' to gain insight into just how much our understanding of humanity has evolved since our earliest philosophical and religious wonderings.

'WE'RE JUST APES'

'What makes us human is a set of arbitrary qualities that our culture has decided are the hallmark of humanity, for instance, having a moral code...ways of acting in public, etc., while other animals act in ways that come from instinct.' Outside of this construct we have created for ourselves comes a very simple fact: 'We're just apes.'

There it was, plain and simple: being human is being an animal. We behave and exist like other animals and subscribe to a category called 'species', which in itself is an

arbitrary label. But beyond this biological understanding, there is also a psychological one. Humans are able to develop a morality which other animals aren't capable of, at least not to the extent that humans are. Furthermore, we have consciousness (while some philosophers do argue that animals have a consciousness, it is still an open question). I asked Lanfranco if it was possible to define consciousness: 'Consciousness is a human construct... Being self-aware gives the capacity to invent concepts like consciousness which mean everything and nothing. It is not something that you can see or touch or measure.'

The core reason for defining humans and understanding consciousness for much of modern history has been political: to avoid chaos and to keep people in their rightful place through organised religion. 'Many creation narratives put humans as the pinnacle of creation, which of course they're not.' In fact, Lanfranco continued, the only way that we may be considered special is in our ability to destroy the planet at a rate much higher than that of any other species.

According to Lanfranco, philosophers of the past felt the need to explore the differences between humans and other animals to assert just how unique our species really is. For Aristotle, it was our rationality that set us apart, calling man



a rational animal. Descartes took this further, relegating animals to automata (complex machines). For Arnold Gehlen, it was our ability to adapt to various environments that sets us apart, while Cicero called it a 'divine spark'. And if holding ourselves under divine light was no longer an acceptable viewpoint, then there must be another way to feel special. It was found in the ability to use tools, not simply the existence of tools themselves. This was the crucial distinguishing characteristic. Yet theologians and philosophers alike soon understood that *Homo sapiens* were not the only species that could both use and make tools.

IT'S THE TOOLS, THE LANGUAGE!

What even is a tool? For Lanfranco, this was quite difficult to define. Is it the manipulation of an object? Just how much change or 'creation' is required for something to be considered a tool? Humans are capable of insight, and we learn how to improve. While a bird may make a nest as it is genetically programmed to do, a human can build a home based on complex thoughts, reflection, and ideas of how to improve the home through the act of building it. Perhaps it is this that makes the tools utilised by humans distinct from those used by other apes. Just when I thought I had arrived at

a point of clarity, Lanfranco reminded me that it is simply a higher brain capacity that gives humans this ability – and that is entirely unremarkable. What about language? Could the ability to develop a complex form of communication be the distinguishing factor? Of course other species have language, explained Lanfranco. I added the little known prairie dog to our list of species, a rodent that is able to describe threats in terms of size, colour, and other physical traits. Our quick agreement on the fact that other species possess language led us to discuss cognitive abilities. As Lanfranco notes in his article, it is the *degree* of cognitive abilities that sets us apart. But can we even go that far if we are not able to clearly define what language actually is? We can hardly agree on what makes something a tool and what doesn't. You can look at the degree quantitatively, Lanfranco told me, but not qualitatively. It might be impossible to look at tool use along a trajectory and pick the precise moment in which a particular form of utilisation becomes uniquely human.

As we continued our conversation, I found myself wondering, what's the point of all this? We can comfortably say that a power drill is a more sophisticated tool to make a hole than jabbing a pointy rock at the wall. And surely the words in this article contain a richness and meaning that goes ▶

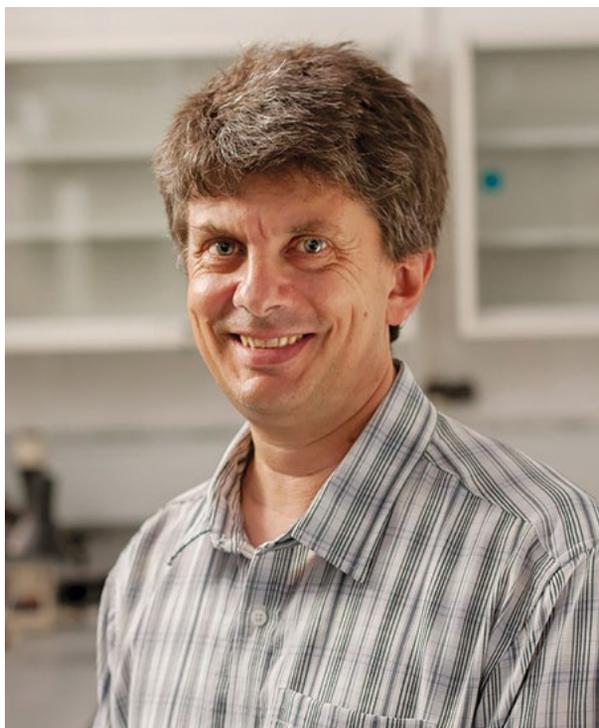


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far beyond an alarm call of 'male human, green, tall' when warning other members that a predator approaches. Lanfranco brought me back to a simple truth: we're not special. Perhaps it would be better to recognise and be amazed by all the ways in which we're not special – that prairie dogs and chimps and countless other species are existing and doing things in very similar ways – than to strive to arrive at some kind of measurement or concrete idea of how we are different.

YOU'RE NOT SPECIAL

Lanfranco's article delves into the Enlightenment period, when people started drawing the conclusion that we are not special at all, and in fact, the Earth and the galaxy aren't either. I asked him about this shift, admitting that the thought of humans and all life being rather insignificant was humbling, but also terrifying. How can we have meaning if everything is meaningless? Lanfranco smiled and offered an alternative viewpoint, that not being special is separate from having no purpose in one's life. Meaning, like consciousness, is something we create and depends highly on context. So I'm not special, I thought to myself, but I matter – not to the universe, but to a handful of people who themselves are not particularly remarkable. 'We have the same DNA that every animal has; we're made of the same molecules; we breathe the same air, eat the same food... We live on a planet that is unremarkable, orbiting a star that is unremarkable, which is located in an unremarkable corner of space.'



Dr Sandro Lanfranco is a Senior Lecturer of Biology at the Faculty of Science. Besides questioning what it means to be human, his research also dives into aquatic biology and ecological habitats as well as understanding how to best conserve local biodiversity.

Photo by Edward Duca

So, if we are floating around in non-special ways within a non-special universe, what are the consequences of feeling superior to other species? 'We're not entitled,' Lanfranco firmly proclaimed and returned to an earlier point, that the one thing we may confidently say we've excelled in as a species is, ironically, destroying the very environment that sustains us. It might be tempting to point towards the advancement of civilization as the hallmark of human achievement and success. If by success we mean expansion, aggressiveness, and a focus on profit, then yes. However, it is worth considering that perhaps these should not be our yardsticks. Of course, many of us are not thinking about success in this way; it's much more natural to manipulate – and decimate – our surrounding environment simply because we *can*.

It's important for people to feel special, Lanfranco continued. What if we found a way to understand our place in the world by investigating other forms of intelligence in different species, I asked. It's important, no doubt, but for Lanfranco, the cold reality of research priorities is hard to ignore. We want to be healthy; we want medicines that cure diseases. This priority will always override a curiosity as to whether a goldfish feels pain and how. Funnily enough, explorations into consciousness or how plants may display intelligence might still end up serving humans' selfish desire to advance the economy and health. It's impossible to escape.

We can only go as far as our own minds, and for Lanfranco, that is a beautiful, extraordinary, and unremarkable limitation. **T**

Further reading:

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