

The Great Debate: What does it mean to be human?

Jon Bryan reports on the proceedings of a discussion held at Newcastle Playhouse
Thursday 22nd May 2003

Mo Lovatt introduced the panel of speakers and outlined the context of the discussion - the issues that had been raised by the play. She identified two key questions raised by the play which warranted discussion:

1. What are the differences between human and animals?
2. What level of communication is possible between humans and animals?

David Glass began the discussion by focusing on what he was trying to do with the play. He approached the question from a slightly different angle to the one which the chair had outlined at the beginning; he emphasised that theatre can use a variety of methods to get its message across and that theatre has something to say, particularly on the issues surrounding the relationship between humans and chimpanzees.

Glass feels that we are living in a culture which is sapping the rest of the world with avarice. He implied that our approach to animals and humans needs rethinking.

He had met Washoe last year and had been completely amazed at what he saw. Glass explained about how he remembered Washoe from his childhood and how he recalled reading about him and his abilities. It was this that had inspired him to write the play.

When Glass met Washoe, he had had a conversation with him - they were talking about some simple ideas. Washoe's own son could also speak American Sign Language (ASL) and he had passed on 250 words to him. Glass explained some of the tests used to ensure that the chimpanzees had really learnt sign language and outlined how they were tested over a period of time to show that the chimps were not simply mimicking but actually knowing what something means.

David Glass's emphasis was very much on the similarities between humans and animals, with Washoe being a clear example of how similar chimpanzees are to humans. They can communicate in a way that we perhaps find difficult to imagine and/or believe.

Professor Burn began with congratulations to the writers and performers of the play, saying that he had found it excellent and incredible. However, he did want to speak about some negative things which he felt the content of the play brought to the discussion.

Burn argued that brain size is not the issue when making a comparison between chimpanzees and humans, even if they had the same size brains as us it would not imply that they have the same ability to use them. He compared his own use of a golf club with the way in which Tiger Woods uses a golf club - having something the same as someone else does not imply equal ability to use it.

Burn went on to say that, contrary to Glass's claims, although as individuals brought up in a city we may be outclassed by chimpanzees in the jungle, this is not true of all people - human

beings are able to adapt to any environment and are definitely better than chimps when it comes to survival more generally. He also took up the notion that speech is pivotal to our humanity. Burn believes that, rather than speech being central to what makes us human, it is a symptom of our humanity, nothing more.

Professor Burn wanted to make it clear that, whilst there are clear similarities between humans and chimpanzees, there are also clear differences. You have to draw the line somewhere, and while chimps may have some degree of consciousness, we are a distinct species.

Caspar Hewett began by saying that whilst he really enjoyed the play, he believed that it expressed a rather dark side of human nature. All the chimps in the play, for example, seemed to be the ones who were compassionate and had feelings, rather than the humans.

Hewett felt that the work of Fouts was extremely important and useful, but that there was always going to be a limit to the communication possible between humans and animals.

As an aside, Hewett said that PACE (People against Chimpanzee Experiments) were here earlier with a stall expressing their views, and that they were supportive of the experiments that Fouts had been engaged in.

Hewett said that, getting to the level of a three-year old (which Washoe had done with ASL) is impressive, BUT, this is not comparable to an adult human being. Society does not accept that a three-year old and an adult human being are the same, and this is illustrated by the wide range of things which we do not allow children to do - voting in elections being one example.

Caspar Hewett ended by saying that one of the things which distinguishes us from animals is that we use rationality and we plan ahead. We invent morality and are subjects. We may be part of the animal kingdom, but we are distinct from the rest of the animals.

The final speaker was David Large, a philosopher, who began by saying that philosophers tend to ignore biology, but that the play and the questions in this discussion raised many issues for us which needed to be addressed.

Large began by comparing Science and Philosophy. While they are both questioning, scientists tend to test hypotheses, whereas philosophers tend to be more sceptical.

Large asked us, for example, about what it is like to be a bat. The answer is we have no idea, because the key part of the question here is a metaphysical one. We cannot answer it because the question asks us what it's 'like'. There is no way for us to get inside the mind of a bat and find out.

Continuing along this theme of it being difficult for us to know about things and for us to get inside the minds of animals, Large paraphrased a comment from Wittgenstein; 'If a lion could speak, we wouldn't understand it.' Again, this is a metaphysical difference. The point here is that we have different lives, he argued, and that for us to understand the other is very difficult and not something that we can easily find out.

Large moved on to look at the methodological difficulties that there are in answering these questions about the differences between humans and animals. The point here, he argued, is that there is no clear defined research programme about how you could actually test this idea. Can we actually know what the answer is?

David Large finished by asking the rhetorical question about animals - 'Do they want to be like us? Maybe they can't tell us!'

The chair then opened the discussion out to the panel to respond to each others comments.

Professor Burn asked Caspar Hewett about his comment about a three-year old not being the same as an adult human being. Is a three-year old not a human? Hewett replied that it was, but that you would not define what makes us human by reference to what the characteristics of a three-year old are. He said that he may not agree with where the line is currently drawn between what is a child and adult, but the point is that there is a line to be drawn somewhere.

In response to a question from the floor enquiring whether someone with special needs was a human being, Hewett gave a similar response. He said that while you would obviously say that someone with special needs is definitely human, you would not take someone with special needs as being typical of what a human being is.

A further comment from the floor stated that we were rushing headlong into self-destruction with our speciest attitude. The speaker commented on their own vegetarianism and spoke of the need for society to change the way that it is heading. He implied that we needed to rethink our attitude that humans are better than animals.

Final comments were made by the speakers and David Glass said that we tend to concentrate too much on what we say we do, which is a distraction from what we actually do. Professor Burn said that humans seem to be in an orderly retreat in the world. While we are animals, we do have the capacity to reflect on what we are doing. Caspar Hewett said that we need to be more positive about humans and that there is too much of a tendency to downgrade ourselves. David Large finished the debate with a rhetorical question - 'If you're not going to be speciest, how are you going to live your life?'