

Defining ourselves | New Philosopher

by New Philosopher, 3 February 2019

By Ai Weiwei

Many of the problems in the world today, when one reflects upon them, call for an answer to an ancient question: *What is it to be human?*

I believe there is no single immutable answer. We humans are what we conceive ourselves to be, by which I mean two things: what we will ourselves to be and what we say we are. Our self-conceptions are, in turn, responses to conditions that we encounter in our environments, and those conditions constantly change with time and place. The only way to answer this question is to examine how a person sees himself or herself and others within the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions of their time.

There is no such thing as a human being in the abstract. Only when we see people as embedded in their experiences – their own social positions, their educations and memories, in pursuit of their own ideals – can the question “What is a human being?” fully make sense.

Everyone seems to agree that we live today in a completely distinctive time. We may use different labels for it – the era of globalisation, of the internet, of late capitalism, of the collapse of Cold War ideology – but all such terms seek to describe the world’s new situation. The most striking feature of that situation is that we are much freer than ever before in our access to information, knowledge, and the assistance of technology.

At the same time, the forces that tend to constrict our personal freedoms – states, religions, ethnic identities, economic interest groups, and others – are both dissolving and reorganising. Some are dying while others are growing extraordinarily strong.

Such changes can be mind-boggling. They can make it hard to remember where home is, to recognise language and customs that we once took for granted and to figure out where we now belong. The question “What is a human being?” or “What does it mean to be human?” gets an entirely new face. The answers today will have to be different from the answers of the past.

Our resources for seeking answers to this question also vary inevitably with our personal experiences. To me, for example, it is obvious that my passage through different social, political, cultural, and economic backgrounds – as an artist in China, as a political prisoner, and now as an expatriate – has obliged me several times to alter and adjust my understanding of what a human being is.

Simply to avoid the question is a terrible mistake. We must ask it, and we must do so repeatedly. The debates and judgments that led to human wisdom in the past were responses, each in its time, to essentially the same question, asked in the political and social context of that time, and it is relevant at every social level: individual, community, family, and

nation. Many of the political and cultural disagreements that we see in the world today arise from a reluctance to face this key question squarely, and to arrive at clear definitions with regard to it.

Humankind includes every single one of us. No matter how fearsome the political and cultural affronts that history produces might become, our last, irreducible possession, which would be plain to us if we were suddenly placed upon a barren desert, is respect for human dignity.

Everything hangs on how we define ourselves and how we treat those with whom we share our surroundings, which are teeming with different ethnicities, religions, and cultures. We are doomed if we lose independent thinking, lose the ability to freely evaluate and define ourselves.

In my view, self-definition must be each individual's final and most sturdy principle. It is the iron undergirding of morality, aesthetics, and practical philosophy. If it slips away, even for a moment, then the answer to the question, "What does it mean to be human?" will be: "Nothing."

From the 'Being Human' edition of *New Philosopher*, produced with *The New York Times*. To join the discussion from February 4-8 about this article on *The New York Times* Australia Facebook group, [click here](#).