

Homo sapiens, A Whimsy

Let's be Honest – and Change Our Name



With an obvious lack of humility, we have named our species *Homo sapiens* – the wise man. My dictionary defines sapient as: possessing great wisdom and sound judgment. With even less humility, we name the subspecies of modern man *Homo sapiens sapiens*. I guess we consider ourselves “doubly wise”.

I suggest that biological variation distinguishes our species from all others far more than does any claim we may have to “wisdom”. We may be the most variable species on the planet. We come in a variety of colors – several shades of black, brown, red, yellow and white. Our hair varies from almost none through many shades and textures. The tallest man was almost 9 feet tall; the shortest is less than 2 feet.

Disregarding these individual extremes, Tutsi males average 6 feet tall, while Mbutsi males average 4.3 feet.

But our cultural diversity surpasses our anatomical variation. Humans live in all sorts of ways in very many environments. Our life styles, food habits, social organizations, clothing, tools and infrastructure vary to extremes - from the arctic to the tropics, from the seashores to the mountains, and from primitive to advanced and technological. We have created all sorts of religious explanations for the creation and the creator. And as for physiology – probably no two of us are *exactly* alike.

A contender for most variable species on the planet would be *Canis domesticus*, the domestic dog. However, this contention only serves to prove my point. Dogs have been selected and bred only to satisfy the highly variable needs of humans. Most breeds would not last on their own.



Those who prefer the specific name *sapiens* may argue that we really are quite smart compared to the rest of the animal kingdom. True. Our brains are complex and large, though not the largest among mammals. Still, the most notable characteristic of human intelligence is its great variation. The brightest and dullest among us are far apart on several different scales that might be used to accommodate and measure our diverse abilities. Further, our intelligence is as much a product of our diversity as has our variation resulted from our intelligence. These characteristics evolved hand-in-hand as adaptations to diverse environments. Neither intelligence nor diversity

predominate as the most primordial characteristic of our species.

Smartness, or intelligence, may not equal wisdom and sound judgment. During recent history, supposedly when we have been at our most intelligent, the recurring growth and decline of civilizations suggest we have not acquired much wisdom. We continue to fail in confronting the historic demises – disease, war, overpopulation and exhaustion of resources, and perhaps vulgar ostentation and wasteful production fueled by selfishness and greed.

Present trends offer no comfort. We spend billions on weapons. Wars are being fought to determine “whose God is greatest.” Meanwhile research and education are underfunded. There is comparatively little effort to alleviate disease and suffering among our conspecifics. We are destroying the biosphere, our own life-support system. Efforts are inadequate to prepare for the most serious threats to persistence of civilization – worldwide pandemic or a cosmic collision with an asteroid or comet. I see little sound judgment being exercised by the present conveyers of our species. Rather, complacency abounds.

Hubris is not very attractive. We’d be honest, and a little wise, to change our name to *Homo variabilis*. Perhaps, if science would acknowledge our species’ great diversity with a name change, it would help us to recognize and celebrate our many differences – and we’d all get along a little better.

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