

The Naked Darwinist (first few paragraphs of this book) Elaine Morgan 2008

Imagine you are a student revising for an exam on human evolution and wondering what questions you might be asked. It suddenly occurs to you that you cannot remember why human beings lost their body hair. It sounds just the kind of topic on which they might give you a quote and then say: "Discuss" - and the answer has gone right out of your head. You cannot even remember the point being raised, and the exam is tomorrow. What can you do?

You can relax. That question will not appear on the exam paper. It never does. It is as if there was an unspoken agreement between the people teaching this subject and their students to the effect that if you don't ask them that question they will never ask it of you either.

If you think I am exaggerating take a look at the reference books on human evolution which have to be compiled every decade or so to provide students with the most up-to-date information. In 1992 was published. It was over five hundred pages long and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Human Evolution* gave comprehensive coverage of all other aspects of the subject but it nowhere referred to the fact that humans have lost their body hair. An accidental oversight perhaps? In 2004 a completely new reference book appeared entitled *Principles of Human Evolution* compiled from scratch by different editors. It too was 500 pages long. It made the same omission.

If the entire contents of these books could be beamed up to one of those mythical life-forms on some distant planet the aliens would be left with the mistaken idea that we are just as furry as our nearest relatives.

On the face of it it seems a bit odd. If you ask anyone with an unsophisticated mind - say a nine-year old child - to name differences between a man and a chimpanzee the list will certainly contain somewhere in the top five the facts that a man walks upright and a chimp goes on all fours that a man can talk and a chimp can not and that a chimp is hairy but a man is not. You cannot fail to notice that last one. It hits you in the eye. Yet somewhere on the long road between ignorance and specialisation its perceived importance in the evolutionary story dwindles away until finally it sinks without trace.

You may think this is a fuss about nothing. Assuming that all the other features distinguishing man from the other apes have been explained how much does it matter if we cannot quite account for this one little aspect of it? But that is not quite how things stand. There is no agreed explanation for *any* of the anatomical features distinguishing humans from their nearest relatives. Not one. Take bipedalism for example. The text books will give you a list of possible reasons that have been suggested as to why *Homo sapiens* is the only mammal that walks upright. None of these is convincing enough to be acclaimed as the right answer but they are all worth bearing in mind. The only difference between the attitude to this and the attitude to hairlessness is that in the latter case they don't offer you the list.

There is one other question that you are not encouraged to ask. In its simplest terms it is "Why only us?"

We are told that all these changes happened to our species because the ancestors of chimps and gorillas stayed in the trees and our ancestors came down to the ground. But they were not the only primates to leave the trees. Think of all the baboons and the geladas and the vervets and the patas monkeys and the Barbary apes and the Hanuman langurs. If we rose up on two legs because it was faster or more efficient or enabled us to see further why didn't any of the others do the same? Not even one of them? If we became naked because of over-heating in the chase why didn't all the animals we were running after and all the ones we were running away from become naked as well? They were moving just as fast under the same hot sun. If we became the sweatiest animal in the world in order to cool down why did the camel protect itself against over-heating by hanging on to its woolly coat and reducing its sweating to the barest minimum? Why did our ancestors so often respond to exactly the same problems that confronted other animals by adopting diametrically different strategies? There may be good answers but I don't hear them and it is not because I have not been listening.

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