

It seems that we can't understand ourselves without some help.

There's nothing we want more than our freedom.

Our dreams keep us going. They are our momentum.

Whose idea of the body will win? Who will get to determine the body's meaning?

We know how good it could be, but we don't know why it never is.

So what are we to make of this 'life'?

My stuff is an extension of myself. To steal my stuff is to violate me.

Let's start with a story. It's the story of the man named Job.

It's loathsome to waste it and painful to kill it. Time is money.

It's got me thinking about human beings. Who are we really?

This may not surprise you, but You are alive.

To be a man or a woman is first and foremost a matter of being human...

you: an introduction by michael jensen

Why should we accept the way other people want to define us?

We do not trust words because we do not trust the people who use them.

I think we should just calm down. Here are two reasons why.

It matters because here was human life as it ought to have been lived.

Who are **You** really?

What are **You** supposed to be like?

What—or whose—purpose do **You** serve?

It's never been more complicated—or more confusing—to be a human, and it's never been harder to answer the question of who **You** are.

But in *You: An introduction*, Michael Jensen sets about doing just that. In his exploration of some of the different facets of the human condition (**You** are alive; **You** are free; **You** are a child), we soon discover that the question of who we are is essentially bound up with the question of who Jesus is ...



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you

an introduction

MICHAEL JENSEN



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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

You: An introduction

Second edition

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First published 2008

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

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Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com

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ISBN 978 1 925424 16 4

Cover design and typesetting by Matthias Media.

For Catherine

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what, anxious? me?

As I write this, we have come to that important time of the year again: the *Bachelor* season. The human zoo is open for inspection. The usual bunch of annoying but oddly fascinating wannabes are about to become as familiar to us as the people we live with. We see them from every angle. We speak of them by their first names and instantly know who they are.

It's got me thinking about human beings. Who are we really? What are we supposed to be like? What—or whose—purpose do we serve?

These are good questions—ones each human person has to answer in one way or another. And You aren't any different. Who are You? It's the question Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* has to answer and finds so hard:

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

“Who are *you*?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

“What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar,

sternly. “Explain yourself!”

“I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, Sir,” said Alice,
“because I’m not myself you see.”¹

If you had to explain yourself to a large caterpillar sitting on a mushroom smoking a Turkish hookah pipe, what would you say? I know I’d be confused...

It isn’t as easy as it used to be to answer the question of You. French talking head Michel Foucault remarked in the 1960s that he could foresee a time when “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”² Has that day arrived? Is it now impossible to know who You are?

We used to be able to point to our race, class, gender, occupation or family status for an answer. There were boxes you could fit into and locate your identity in. Now, one of the ways in which we live is in rebellion against the boxes that others try to fit us into. That’s fair enough: why should we accept the way other people want to define us? But now that we are left to ourselves to define who we are, we find that it isn’t that easy. It is an anxious business, being a human.

There are at least seven points of anxiety for modern human beings that I can think of:

1. On the one hand, we speak of the ‘human being’ as a biological thing—an organism in an environment, a creature of instinct, a package of genes and DNA, a clever animal. The culmination of evolution. The naked ape.

But on the other hand, we also feel that human beings possess certain qualities that are unique. Human rights, for example. Dignity. Reason. Freedom. Article One of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”³ We instinctively value human life above the life of other beings, too. For most of us, if our house was burning down, we would rescue Granny and *then* the cat.

2. On the one hand, we live in a narcissistic age. In other words, we are in love with ourselves as creatures. We idolize/idealize the human image. Has any culture spent more time looking in the mirror? The photograph and various telemedia have allowed unprecedented scrutiny of the human face and body. Our heroes are models and sports stars.

But, on the other hand, with this narcissism has come a lot of hatred of our bodies. Having a body has never been so difficult. Even (maybe even especially!) celebrities get eating disorders.

3. On the one hand, we are in a time of increasing analysis and ‘discovery’ of the self. We are self-obsessed. That’s why we (well, okay, I!) love those personality tests because you (I) can talk about yourself (myself), and other people can talk about themselves at the same time. It’s magic.

But on the other hand, we live in the age of the disappearing ‘I’. We delight in the faceless interface of the internet—the creation of masks—of new characters and roles to play. As Demi Moore’s character says in the film *Disclosure*:

We offer, through technology, what religion and revolution have promised, but never delivered: freedom from the physical body, freedom from race and gender—from nationality and personality, from place and time... We can relate to each other as pure consciousness.⁴

And yet, our age is also a time of yearning for a physical experience. Our virtual profiles are full of photos of our

physical experiences—beautiful food, amazing travel destinations, unique tats, gym-sculpted bodies. Our social media is a canvas on which we paint the self so that we can make it unique—just like everyone else.

4. On the one hand, I want to be me: a free, one-of-a-kind individual—free to create my own human being. We want to be free to be artists of the self, curators of our instagram accounts.

But on the other hand, we are lonely because this freedom costs us the joy of other people. Never have so many people lived alone in all of history. The 2016 Australian census showed that 24.4 per cent of households contain only one resident.⁵ According to the Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of people aged 20–29 living alone nearly doubled over three decades from 1971—to 7.1 per cent in 2001. This is true in other Western countries too: “This is part of a wider trend, with the proportion of people living alone increasing in each of the five-year age groups, from 20–25 years to 60–64 years, since 1971”, the report says.⁶ We are attached to detachment.

5. On the one hand, we live to consume. In fact, we are what we consume. A guy called Walter Truett Anderson says, “Consumption is now inseparable from identity”.⁷ Our individuality and freedom is most enjoyed in our freedom to choose in the shopping mall (although, you have to admit, the freedom to choose in the shopping mall is not really freedom to choose, now, is it? We are made to believe we are choosing when, in fact, the choice has already been made for us, depending on our demographic). We construct our very identity by choosing brands and products. Coke or Pepsi? Apple or Microsoft? The advertising industry has turned us into market segments in increasingly narrow demographics.

But on the other hand, in support of consumption, work now consumes us. It demands more and more of our souls as well as our bodies. Back when I was a kid in the 70s, I remember seeing a TV programme about the future—the ‘future’ being the year 2000 or so—the future now past. One of the amazing prophecies (along with trips to Mars and computers the size of apartment blocks) was the idea that we would only work 20 hours a week and spend the rest of the time hanging out. We called it ‘leisure’ back then. How much more wrong could that programme have been! People work far longer hours than they ever did. Labour-saving devices produce... more labour, funnily enough. We have decided that we love to live to work. What we do may be our favourite answer to the question “Who are you?”

6. On the one hand, freedom is what we want to express our humanity, the authentic me. We see this in sexuality. We want freedom to choose whom we have sex with, and when. Freely available contraception has made this seem like a possibility (well, most of the time).

But on the other hand, the freedom we want is not the sort of freedom we are prepared to give to others. We don’t want the pedophile or the rapist to share this freedom. The media fans a general moral outrage against pedophiles (which I like to think comes from the fact that we don’t like the inconsistency we see when our own sexual ethics are exposed). Back in May 1968, there was this student revolution in Paris. One of their slogans was “It is forbidden to forbid”, which expressed the ultimate rejection of biblical thought (especially in the sphere of sexual behaviours). However, at the same time, the Revolutionary Pederasty Action Committee, a group of pedophiles, produced a manifesto promoting their cause in line with the new spirit

of acceptance and tolerance. Strangely, they didn't win many fans or much tolerance. I don't know why; at least they were being consistent...

7. On the one hand, we delight in increased choice and rapid change—like pigs in mud. We get bored if things don't revamp or grow. We crave the stimulation of the new.

But on the other hand, when experiencing this rapid change, we feel anxious, confused and out of control. We want to take back control of ourselves. One Australian columnist has written, "Control. That's the holy grail [of the times] simply because so many of us feel that life has raced beyond our control."⁸

What these seven tensions or anxieties begin to show is that it is an anxious time to be a human being. I am not saying that being human was easier way back in some golden age; it's just that these are some of the things that make it an anxious business to work out who You are today. It isn't easy to see clearly what it is You are made to do or be. These are general patterns that you can see played out over whole cultures and nations, but they actually affect each one of us as we search to know who it is we are and what it is we are supposed to do with ourselves. On the whole, I think we are struck by what an amazing thing it is to be a human being—to be alive and to be in possession of a body and a mind capable of all the exhilarating experiences of living. But we are also a confused race, unable to master our own power, unable even to know ourselves, bewildered by our own destructiveness.

A GREAT PLAY

The point of this book is to ask what the Bible has to say about You, and to compare it to some of the current alternative views

of You. What I am saying is this: You are a 'You' in relation to other Yous—especially in relation to the one who made You in the first place. I want to show how the Bible provides compelling and convincing ways of explaining how things are. Does the Bible say anything to clear up the confusion about who You are? Well I think so.

The Bible is a very old (and sometimes odd) book. The newest bits of it are more than 1,900 years old. But it has a lot to say about You, and it speaks with a remarkable freshness and clarity into our confusion. Frankly, given how hard it is to know ourselves, we need guidance from somewhere...

The Bible doesn't come to us as a set of rules, nor is it set out like a New Age self-help book. It tells a tale. We could say it is the script of a great play. Its dramatist is the one who made everything (we use the word 'God' to refer to this person)—including the human beings who are its actors. It is a love story—a true love story. It tells how this God loves people, and though they reject his love, he goes to extraordinary lengths to win them back.

The climax of the play is the entry of Jesus of Nazareth onto the stage. By anyone's standards, Jesus' life was one of the great human lives—the greatest out of all humans who have ever lived—full of wisdom, compassion and wit. But of course, we always execute our best, and that's what happened to Jesus too: they nailed him. This, says the Bible, is where God was winning us back: Jesus' death marked a great defeat of evil—on a cosmic scale, but on a personal level too.

Yet there is more to the tale. There is more to come. It hasn't ended yet. The Bible claims that Jesus will return to rule the world. In the meantime, you are played into the story as a character. This is your cue: what are you going to do? How are you going to respond?

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Essentially, this book is about You: it's about being a human person. As you'll see, in each of the chapters I explore a part of being human. Now, the list that I have come up with isn't necessarily a complete one, but it does give you an introduction to some of the things about being a human being that we just can't avoid but which we always find so complicated. There isn't a particular order to the chapters (apart from the last three) so feel free to read them in the order of your own choosing. Overall, you will find that the book runs roughly from the beginning of life, through its middle and towards what happens at the end of life, and even after. You'll also see that the last three chapters are meant to come at the end, and that they do make sense in the order that they are in.

There's something else you should know about this book before you read on. At the end of each chapter, you'll find some comments and discussion from various people. Some of these comments agree with me, some add things that I haven't addressed, some ask me to be clearer, and some outright disagree with what I have written. Originally I wrote this book as a blog and invited people to comment—which they did. (I got some spam, too, of course!) Some of the people I know personally; some of them I have never met. Some of them are Australians like me; some of them come from—well, they could come from anywhere in the world. But the comments were often so thought-provoking and stimulating, I thought it would be good to include the best of them here. My hope is that they get you thinking as much as they got me thinking.

what You are not

Let's start with a story. It's the story of a man named Job. It appears in the Old Testament. Job is a rich man and a righteous man. He has family (seven sons and three daughters) and possessions aplenty. He goes around to his sons' houses in turn, and feasts with them. Sounds like a beautiful life! To complete the picture, the Bible tells us that Job makes sure he purifies his children by offering sacrifices on their behalf in case they have sinned by insulting God unintentionally (Job 1:5).

Only in heaven, at the same time, Satan asks the Lord a question. It is about Job, and it's a pretty good question: "Does Job fear God for no reason?" (Job 1:9). Satan continues: "After all, he's got it all pretty good. It's easy to be pure when everything is sweet. Are you up for a little game? Why not take away his possessions and see what he does then?" (my paraphrase).

And so an agreement is struck between God and Satan. Satan goes out and does his worst: Job loses all his possessions, his family is killed and his flocks are destroyed. He is struck by wave after wave of calamity. Job grieves his losses, but does not turn on God and blame him.

The Lord then gloats to Satan: "Did you notice how Job is still righteous now, Satan?" So Satan ups the ante: "All that

a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face” (Job 2:4-5). God agrees to let Satan do as he will, so Satan inflicts on Job painful sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

Job goes and sits on the local rubbish tip, and takes a piece of broken pottery to scrape the pus off his weeping sores. Even his poor wife comes and says to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? [i.e. what’s the point?] Curse God and die” (Job 2:9).

Three friends of Job come out to sit with him and comfort him: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite. They weep for Job’s pain and loss, and tear their clothes and sprinkle dust on their heads. No-one says a word for seven days and seven nights.

But then Job speaks up and curses the day of his birth: “Why was I ever born? It’d be far more relaxing to be dead right now than to have suffered my agony” (Job 3:3-13).

Job’s friends are well-meaning but hopeless. I once went to the house of a shocked and grieving family. Their relatives were there saying things like “He’s in a better place now”, or “God meant this for good”, or “It’s all for the best, you’ll see”. It probably made the people saying those things feel better, but it was terrible for me, witnessing people in real pain having to listen to such rubbish. Job’s friends were a lot like those relatives: well-meaning but hopeless. They offer Job page after page of useless advice and cold comforts—some of it quite impeccable theology and beautiful poetry: “Why don’t you just pray about it?” “Bad things don’t happen to good people, you know.” “Your children must have sinned.” And they go on. And on. And on.

It makes you want to vomit.

But it all gets quite heated. Job keeps saying to his friends, “How can you argue with God? Wouldn’t he just crush you? Isn’t he a cruel and distant God—just, but unmerciful, silent and hard? Isn’t human life a miserable thing when doing good doesn’t even seem to bring rewards? What have I done anyhow? What did I do to deserve this punishment?” But most of all, it is God’s silence that disturbs Job: why won’t he say anything?

It’s a good point. In the end, the platitudes of Job’s friends (and even those of a young guy called Elihu who pops up somewhere in the middle) ring hollow. They cannot answer the question, “Why won’t the Lord answer Job?”

I haven’t had great suffering in my life. But sometimes I feel like Job. My pleas for some explanation for human life seem to echo off the sky. So much suffering seems pointless and undeserved—random, even. What has God got to say about the chaos and mayhem we have to live in? What does he have to say to the family of the boy I knew who lived all of his 18 years under the shadow of cystic fibrosis but struggled on anyway, winning friends and completing his final high school exams, but dying horribly in the months just after graduating? If there is a mighty being at the helm, what has he/she/it got to say?

The question hangs there in the book of Job for 37 chapters or so until we read the most bizarre words: “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1). The Lord proceeds to give poor miserable Job a thorough grilling by asking him the kind of questions you would never want to see on an exam paper: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding” (Job 38:4). Clearly Job has no idea. God asks,

“Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,

that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?” (Job 38:12-13)

(“Um... well, not lately”, you can almost hear Job thinking.)
And God almost gets cheeky with him: “Tell me, if you know this... surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years (not)!”

All of this teaches us two remarkable things about ourselves as humans. Firstly, Job is told what you and I should learn: *God is God and you are not*. Can you claim to have spun the globe like a top, or to have moulded Sydney Harbour with the tips of your fingers? Did you stitch together the kangaroo on your mum’s sewing machine? Where are the creatures you have made? Where are your valleys and hills? Where are the stars you placed in the sky? Stop kidding yourself that you have godlike powers. Stop pretending that you can live independently of your creator. Stop acting like you are wiser than he is. We human beings, great and wise and beautiful though we are, are still creatures—limited in understanding, weak in muscle and prone to getting it wrong. The Lord is God; you are not.

Secondly, the Lord is more powerful than we are. He can blot out Job in a second. But he doesn’t. And this is the point: *the Lord is gentle with Job*. He jokes with Job, and even pokes fun at him. He talks with him. There is definitely a wink in God’s tone in what he says to Job. We are not God, but we humans have a creator who is gentle and compassionate. We have a God who stoops—a God who stoops to talk to us and listen to us. He does not remain a mystery; he answers us.

The end of Job’s story is that he is restored to fortune and family after he repents of speaking beyond his knowledge (Job 42). The answers to all of Job’s questions to God are not

answers, but more questions. But this time the questions are directed back at humans like you. Could you challenge God to a debate and expect to win?

3 COMMENTS

- Byron I've heard it suggested that the problem with Job's friends was lack of prayer. They seemed to know *about* God, but they didn't really *know* God. An interesting thought...
- Craig It never occurred to me that God was gentle with Job. I thought he was pretty vigorous.
- Michael Well, he doesn't seem that vigorous in the light of the fact that he didn't need to talk at all. He is actually pretty beautiful and amusing in his speech. It is a chiding more than a stern rebuke. Actually, this is a good point to introduce the next chapter which is about God's great gift to human beings: life itself.

endnotes

- 1 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, Penguin Classics, London, 1998 (1865 and 1872), pp. 40-1.
- 2 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Vintage, New York, 1994, p. 490.
- 3 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, viewed 7 February 2007: www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html
- 4 *Disclosure*, motion picture, Baltimore pictures, Washington, 1994. Distributed by Warner Bros, directed by Barry Levinson and starring Michael Douglas, Demi Moore and Donald Sutherland.
- 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016', ABS catalogue no. 2071.0, Canberra, Australia, 28 June 2017, viewed 30 August 2017: www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2071.0
- 6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Census of Population and Housing: Selected Social and Housing Characteristics, Australia, 2001', reissue edn, ABS catalogue no. 2015.0, Canberra, Australia, 28 October 2003, p. 3, viewed 7 February 2007: www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2015.02001
- 7 Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World*, Harper Et Row, San Francisco, 1990, p. 7.
- 8 I think Hugh Mackay said this in a newspaper article.
- 9 Christian Wienberg, 'Goldfish in blenders cause outrage', *The Independent*, 14 February 2000, viewed 7 February 2007: www.independent.co.uk/news/europe/goldfish-in-blenders-cause-outrage-724729.html
- 10 Aristotle, *Politics*, Book III, chapter 6, trans. Benjamin Jowett, NuVision Publications, Sioux Falls, 2004.
- 11 *Alive*, motion picture, Film Andes S.A., 1993. Distributed by Touchstone Pictures and Paramount Pictures, Burbank and Hollywood, directed by Frank Marshall and starring Ethan Hawke, Vincent Spano and Josh Hamilton.