Introduction

Homo rudis

We call our species *Homo sapiens*, man of reason. That can be discussed, if we look at the many shortcomings of civilization through history. We reason, but not always that very well. Nonetheless, our species is one that constantly analyzes the world, and reaches conclusions about it. We are a reasoning species, and have been so, as long as we have had this strikingly over-dimensioned brain of ours.

Anthropologists tell us that the human brain started to grow beyond the size of other primates at least two million years ago. Its original size was 400 cc (cubic centimeters), about the same as for a chimp, and the present size is around 1400 cc. It was 1200 cc, which is within the variations of present day brains, more than a quarter of a million years ago.

So, it is safe to say that we have been thinking and reasoning for very long. Most of this time was before we had any more knowledge of the world and ourselves than other animals did. We had neither telescopes nor microscopes. We did not even have an alphabet by which to write down discoveries made, so that following generations could profit from them. Writing is believed to have appeared around the 4th millennium BC, actually with the need of accounting.

I call the primeval state of mankind *Homo rudis*, ignorant man. Their brains were as big as ours, but they had

nothing else to work on than what they could see and hear and touch in their environment. For most of the time from the dawn of our species until the present, they did not even have a language capable of transmitting thoughts as sophisticated as their brains could come up with.

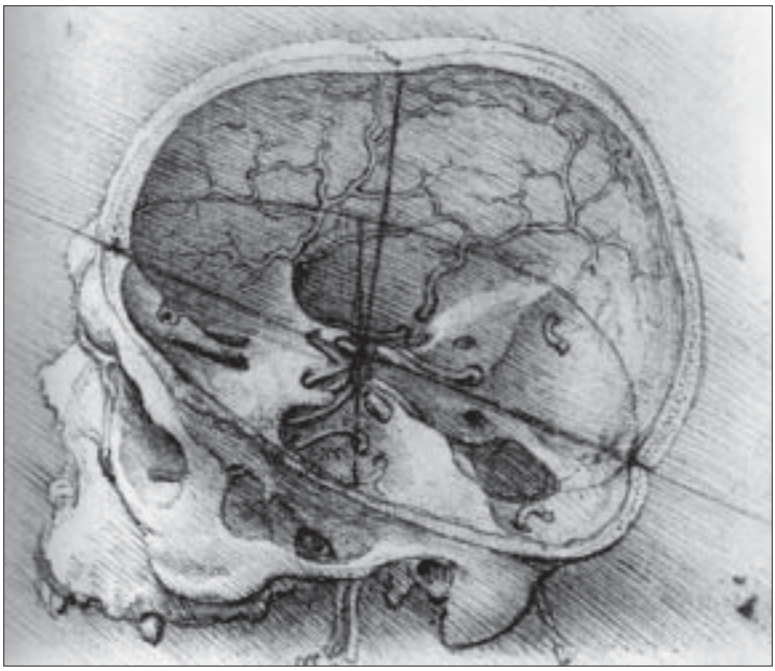
Actually, we still often find ourselves at a loss for words to describe what goes on in our minds. The Greek philosopher Gorgias (483-378 BC) stated the limits of human knowledge very bluntly: Nothing exists, and if anything did exist, it could not be known to do so, and finally, if it could be known to exist, that knowledge could not be communicated.

Homo rudis was not only unable to transmit complex thoughts, but also lacked the knowledge and science to reach such thoughts. Did he still come up with them? I am sure of it.

That big brain had to do something. Homo rudis speculated at length about the world, life, and everything else that he observed around and within himself. What he could find out depended on how much of previous human knowledge was accessible to him, and what tools he had at his disposal to analyze the world – but he certainly reached conclusions.

This is evident when we study the remains of ancient cultures, as well as the many different cultures existing on the planet today. People have always come up with theories and explanations, and trusted these as much as their own experience allowed.

Bronze Age (c. 1500-500 BC) rock carving, petroglyph, from Sweden.



Skull. Drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519).

Life and death

So, let's start like Homo rudis, and ask what we can find out about ourselves. In short: We are born, we live for a while, and then we die. This we know, although we are not that clear about what it implies or signifies. Yet, we are mortal, and we know it.

Without death, we could probably not be aware of being alive. Maybe there could be no life at all. But there is death – whatever that is – so we can investigate life, and wonder about its essence.

As far back as we can trace human thought, it has been greatly occupied with this question: What is life?

The mover

Ancient speculations have mostly treated life as signified by movement. What moves may somehow be alive, but what moves of its own will is certainly a living creature. When that creature stops moving, it is no longer alive. So, many thinkers of old have wondered what makes us able to move.

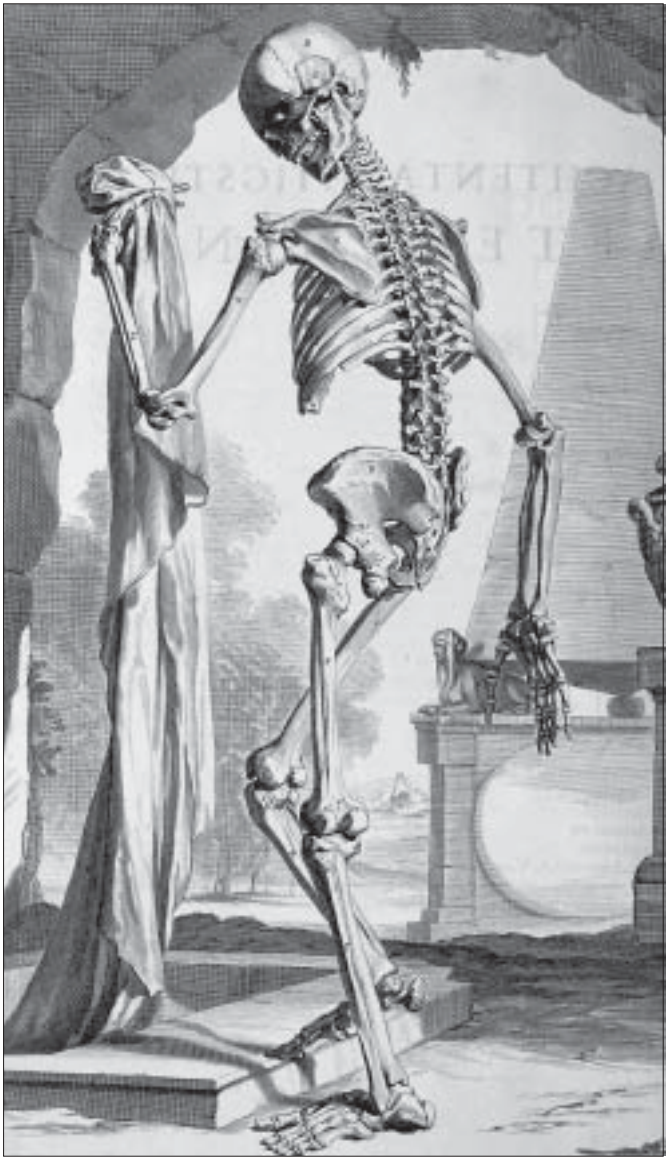
They did not seek the answer in anything like modern biochemistry or anatomy, since they could not imagine mechanical processes that give the illusion of a conscious will. Instead, they searched for how the conscious will could control and operate the body, which would otherwise be just a corpse, as still and non-responding as a rock. How could they think in any other way? They ordered their legs to move, and they walked. If they did not give the order, their legs would not take one single step.

And why would their bodies walk at all, if there was no mind to tell them where to walk, and why? Homo rudis could perceive no other source to the body's movement than the mind, so the mind must be the originator.

The mind was the mover, and the body was what moved. For that, the mind must have some kind of power by which to make the body move. Since movement was the expression of life, this power was a life force at the mind's disposal. There must be a life force at play in anything alive, and that force must be the very essence of life.

If the mind was what exercised this life force, then the mind might be identical to it, in which case the mind was simply the will to move – somewhere, for something. Or the mind was separate from the force, commanding it, in which case the mind was in itself independent of it, and therefore neither alive nor dead, but simply otherworldly. When it ceased to move the body around, the mind went elsewhere, doing other things.

Ancient humans pondered both these possibilities.

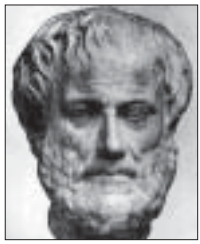


Skeleton engraving by Gérard de Lairesse 1690, from a book on anatomy by Govard Bidloo.

Prime mover

Whether the mind was identical to the life force, or something separate from it, the mind could not have come into existence later than the body did, since it was what gave the body meaning and life. The body must have appeared out of a purpose, because that was how it was brought to life, and the purpose could be nothing but the mind, since it was the mind that made use of the body.

The body was a vessel for the mind, which governed it but was still completely dependent on it to reach its means.



Aristotle (384-322 BC, see the image), the Greek philosopher who was so formidable at finding the root to any problem, regarded living beings as those who moved out of their own will. Still, he found them all to have been originally put in motion by a force, a will, outside their own, such as their parents giving birth to them.

So, he wondered if there was a prime mover, one whose movements had not been initiated by someone or something else. Such a prime mover, then, would have been the one to commence also the movements that lacked a will of their own, like the planets in their orbits.

We would call that prime mover god, but Aristotle was reluctant to speculate much more about the nature of this entity.

Aristotle lived when the human civilization had progressed for quite a while. His questions, and some of his answers, had been put forth by people already many generations before his – though not always as sharply.

The seemingly endless chain of generations was obvious also to Homo rudis. The cyclic nature of life, where each generation begets the next, was clear to see among humans as well as among any animals – also, though not that clearly,

The Temptation, by Hugo van der Goes, c. 1470. The snake (still with arms and legs) lures Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.

among plants. Primordial man must have wondered if there might have been a very first couple of the species. If so, how did they appear on Earth? What gave them life?

It would be hard to fathom the human mind as the originator of itself, or of the life force as such. It made better sense to think of the life force as something separate from the mind, but put to use by it, like the body. Minds differed, but life and the ability to move did not. So it seemed plausible with a general life force for the individual minds to make use of. That life force, then, had to be as ever-present as the air each living creature inhaled and exhaled.

Then, the life force might actually be the air, or something within it.

Air

The element most frequently connected to ideas of a life force in ancient traditions is air. This is the case with the Chinese *qi* (see the image of the pictogram), the Indian *prana*, the Hebrew *ruach*, the Christian *spirit*, and on and on. It is of no surprise.

The manifestation of life is movement, but its counterpart death is firstly noticed by halted breathing. The one who has stopped breathing is no longer alive. Also, the living ones easily discover the necessity to breathe, just by pausing it intentionally for a while. After mere seconds, the body screams for air. It was evident to Homo rudis that breathing is crucial in order to stay alive.

Therefore it is likely that very early ideas about a life force linked it to air, this invisible substance that no one could live without, circulating through one's lungs by constant breathing. Primeval man was unaware of oxygen, which was not discovered until the 18th century, but he was aware of air or something in it being essential for staying alive.

Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier (1743-1794) and his wife, by Jacques Louis David, 1788. Lavoisier was one of the discoverers of oxygen. Some of his laboratory equipment is on the table.

I do not think that Homo rudis made any distinction between the air and what might be a component of it. To him, it was enough that air was needed, so it either contained the life force, or was identical to it. All of the old words for this kind of life force, mentioned above, are originally also synonymous with air and wind.

Wind is the tangible manifestation of air. When it is still, it is hard to notice, but when it whirls in a wind, its force becomes evident. There is also a kind of wind from the mouth or nose, when we exhale. So, the air is noticed when it moves, and the essence of the life force is that it accomplishes movement.

Homo rudis must have been convinced that air and the life force were just about one and the same. Its importance was obvious for any animal on land and in the sky. But what about the fish in the sea? They were alive, since they moved about, and seemed to do so of their own will – for example in fleeing predators, or floundering when grabbed or speared.

To the fish, the element of life must be water. That was easy to deduct from the fact that they soon died outside of it. So, air was a life force, and water was, too. This must have led Homo rudis to the idea that the life force was not identical to air or water, but something present in both elements. Since life as movement seemed quite the same in fish and in land animals, the life force was probably the same in both air and water.

Thus, the life force must be something other than air and water, although present in both.

Still, the difference between air and water dependent animals made primeval man regard them as different creatures altogether. This is evident in many creation myths of old origin, where the animals of the land and the air are given other modes and times of their creation than the fish.

Often, the creation of fish is not mentioned at all, as if they were believed to preexist in a primordial sea.

The difference can be seen also in modern thinking, where fish are in many cases treated separately from other animals, for example when it comes to animal rights, or the fact that many vegetarians still allow themselves marine food.

We may have other reasons for this division than primeval man did, but the tradition remains and is probably very influential also in modern attitudes. Fish are not regarded with the same respect as air breathing animals.

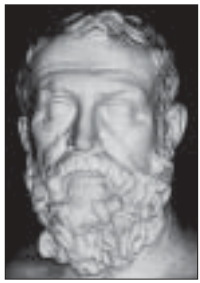
Still, water has also always been regarded as an element of great significance in the world. For example, its mighty presence has made it the most common primal element in creation myths, a primordial sea out of which the rest of the world emerged. And it is far from the only fluid given extensive importance in the ancient thoughts about life and its sustenance.

Bodily fluids

In traditional medicine, as far back as it can be traced, the bodily fluids have been given the most attention. Of primary conceren was the blood, since the loss of much of it would lead to death. Also, its distinct color must have made an impression on Homo rudis, as well as on each generation of mankind ever since.

Bloodletting (see the image of a medieval illumination) was the primary treatment of just about every illness in the Western medical tradition, all the way to the 19th century. And the doctors paid great attention to the hue of its color, its thick-

ness, how fast it coagulated, and so on. Modern medicine, too, pays great attention to the blood, testing it to trace a vast number of maladies. It is indeed of massive importance in living bodies.



Traditional medicine also examined the other bodily fluids. Hippocrates (460-377 BC, see the image), the father of Western medicine, counted four of them: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. He claimed that they had to be in balance, or the body would suffer some illness.

In other traditions, additional fluids have been given significance. For example, the tears were proof of human superiority over the beasts in the Christian tradition, since man seemed to be the only animal capable of weeping. Menstrual blood was regarded with awe, if not outright fear and condemnation, in many cultures – at least by their male population. Semen, on the other hand, has often been regarded as a substance of almost sacred might – again mostly by the males. Urine has been observed and utilized in traditional medicine and many household cures. And so on.

The importance given all those bodily fluids is probably linked to their motion. Life is movement, and Homo rudis could observe that the fluids moved constantly, so they had to be particularly enriched with life force, although not necessarily identical to it. They were carriers of it, in intricate patterns of streams inside every living body.

So, Homo rudis would easily come to the conclusion that the life force entered the body through the air, and then moved around in the body, carried by the bodily fluids. A dynamic system of movement, just as a force of life must behave.