What Makes Us Human: A Neuroethical Challenge

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It is often claimed that by providing knowledge of the structures and functions of the brain, neuroscience will further our understanding of what "makes us human". In addition to enriching our knowledge, neuroscientific advances are also expected to be crucial in the development and applications of neuro-technology to alleviate symptoms or even enhance the human brain, which could make a significant impact on how we understand humanity in general and on the identity and personhood of specific individuals (e.g., patients who undergo invasive treatments such as deep brain stimulation, or other forms of brain computer interfaces) in particular. A debate regarding the ethical implications of the latter has taken a prominent place within neuroethics, while concerns about the potential impact of certain neurotechnologies on what makes us human have reached the general public as well.

The plausibility of the relevant discussion rests on a notion, "humanity" that is generally difficult to pin down. A comprehensive approach to addressing people's expectations and concerns, therefore, requires a conceptual examination of this notion. This is the task I pursue here. In particular, I want to address the following question: what view of humanity might plausibly underlie the belief that neuroscience will help us uncover it? I believe that an answer to this might also shed partial light on the issue of how to understand people's concerns about the potential impact of neurotechnology on our humanity.