

Beardless

The subject of this essay is “Why do men shave?” and “Why women do not grow beards?”. These are not deep philosophical questions about happiness, truth, governance, or the meaning of life. This is just another puzzling inquiry on the light side. I do not claim to have an answer, only some musings.

The first question can be re-phrased as “Why do men even have beards?”. The facial hair on males is just some of the body hair. There is hair all over the human body- thicker in some places and just “peach fuzz” in others. The difference with facial hair is that it continues to grow, just like hair on top of the head. Hair on other parts of the body do not continue to grow without bound, but just exist at a fixed length. So the facial hair on men and the scalp hair seem to have something in common.

We could posit that the hair on the head was intended to be an insulator from cold and retain the heat to that important organ. That would be an evolutionary adaptation to cold environments. But what about tropical climates? Males in the tropics also grow facial hair. Evolution progresses at a biological pace and humans have been moving about the planet faster than evolutionary changes, so that leaves that question unanswered. Now hair on the top of the head is a good thing since it protects the skull from cold, heat stroke, and physical trauma, but hair on the top is not the topic of this paper. The facial hair may not only protect from cold, but is a pretty good indicator of sex. Since we all wear clothing most of the time in public, the facial hair allows for a quick and positive way of identifying male versus female. I remember a bus driver conversing with a passenger years ago during the 1960's when unisex dressing and long hair was in vogue. He said that if it has a beard, then it's a male. So a beard could be a “de facto” indicator of gender.

We could look for reasons in prehistoric ancestors, like from the great apes. Present apes have plenty of body hair, but nothing substantial on the face that looks like a beard on humans that continues to grow. So what do we make of this observation? Probably nothing. Ancient humans probably had

some facial hair, but we do not know how much nor if it grew to the length that we see today. So that brings up the question of “How long can human beards grow?” The answer is “very long”. That would be a hindrance to movement and in battle, because an enemy could grab that long beard and manipulate it to his advantage. So it makes sense to assume that prehistoric male humans grew long beards and somehow removed most of it with a sharp blade of some kind. This is all just speculation and I invite comments.

Next, we could look to genetics. The growth for male beards could just be a coincidence of that trait being close to the Y chromosome that determines male development. When the chromosomes split and the fetus gets a Y chromosome, then it also gets the beard growth chromosome. Nice theory, but there is no evidence to support it. There certainly is something in the genetic makeup that determines a male versus a female and more likely, the male will grow a beard whereas the female will not. We males have no control over that process, but we do have control to remove it. So why do we shave?

One reason could be culture, society, or habit. My father shaved, so I should also. That could have started it, but why continue? Maybe my partner likes it clean shaven, or maybe my partner likes it scrubby. Maybe I don't like the hairy feeling. Maybe for hygienic reasons so food or insects do not accumulate in the hair. If I were a military service member, then clean shaven is not only a matter of hygiene, but also dictated by regimen. The absence of a beard allows food to enter the mouth without the need to negotiate that hairy obstacle. Maybe my unconscious mind forces me into some instinctual behavior pattern. Maybe just for looks. Maybe the man wants to be like the women and more accepted by her. A lot of maybes, which indicates that clean shaving, or partial shaving, is a personal choice for each man, with perhaps some female input.

Then there are the variable hair growth patterns in other races. White males grow hair profusely. Asians not so much. Africans grow a different kind of hair on the face and top of the head. So what can we make of this? It states that facial hair growth is not only gender specific and genetic, but racial also. Nothing more to say about that.

The second question in this essay is even more interesting to speculate - which is “Why are women beardless?”. Well, women do have facial hair, just not as coarse and not as long. The real question is why do women not grow beards like men do. The answer could be in genetics also. The female XX chromosome pair may reject the facial hair growth program.

The lack of beards on women could have something to do with child bearing and child rearing. That is an activity, not exclusive the domain of women, but dominated by the mothers. I do not see the connection, but worthy of a sociological study. Other species have male – female differences. This is evolutionary and tied to reproduction. The difference may be for identification and selection for mating. An interesting concept and worthy of a joke, told to me by my female barber.

A scientist, a Muslim, and a Christian were debating the reason for beards on men. The scientist spoke first. He concluded that there was no valid reason at all for the fact that men have beards and women do not. It was just a coincidence of evolution and the difference in chromosomes. The male receives a Y chromosome, to which is attached the gene for beards. The female gets two X chromosomes, so she does not grow a beard. It had no function and therefore a fluke of nature.

The Muslim was adamant that the Koran required men to grow and nurture beards. It was a religious dictate and to not have a beard was sinful. It was also a convenient way to identify the female fully clothed in the Muslim dress.

The Christian said that both of you are wrong. God created women to have a pretty face, beautiful legs, shapely bodies, and no beards so that the man would love her. God then looked at the hairy barbarian male, watering at the mouth, eager to begin the business of lovemaking, and saw that this won't work. He then then turned to the woman and made her stupid, so that she would allow the man to love her.

Don't take that too seriously. It is just a joke.