

HUMAN CONFIGURATIONS

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Lesson #1

The Rational View Of Man

Concepts:

Self, human nature, cause/effect, intention

Skills:

Problem-solving Analysis

Vocabulary Words:

Medieval, rational, Renaissance, dialogue

Objectives:

The student will...

1. Read the Introduction and Problem Focus to Part One.
2. Write a summary statement of the Problem Focus.
3. Prepare a summary statement of “the rational view of man” and give three reasons for holding this view.

Procedures:

The teacher will...

1. Review the Problem Focus and Introduction to Part One.
2. Share objectives of this lesson with students.
3. Provide background on medievalism and the Renaissance.
4. Engage students in oral and written activities.
5. Close this lesson by relating its conclusions to Lesson #2.

Questions:

1. What is meant by “rational” and “rationalism”?
2. What is Plato’s concept of “self”?
3. Why are intentions important to Plato’s concept of self?
4. What is the purpose of the story about the amputee?
5. What does it mean to **cause** something to happen?

Inquiry Lesson: The Rational View of Man

In September, Dr. Fortner’s humanities class was assigned the question “What is human about humans?” Their goal, during this school year was to define what is meant by “human nature.” In this way they hoped to be better prepared to answer the question.

After several days of general discussion, the class finally settled on a topical approach. They came up with five different topics, assigned these to groups in the class, and Dr. Fortner instructed them to review certain assigned readings and major theories.

Beth was in the group assigned “The Rational View of Man.” Her teacher had advised her to first review Plato’s theory because it had become the foundation of later theories found in medieval and modern thinkers. She told Beth that many of the early Renaissance thinkers had reacted negatively to Plato and that to find out why would assist her with her own investigation.

PART TWO:

Being Human

Problem Focus: “Is a ‘self’ more than a bundle of perceptions?”

The history of modern philosophy begins with Descartes’ proof of the self as a conscious subject. For Descartes, the existence of this self cannot be doubted. His statement, “I think, therefore I exist,” proved for him at least, he was a “thing that thinks.” This proof seemed to ensure the existence of a rational self, that is, until David Hume laid down the principle that every idea (in the brain) comes from some sensory impression. When Hume was asked from what impression the idea of the self could originate, he answered that he had found none.

It was David Hume who first questioned the basic principles of medieval science. The medievals had claimed that the “idea” of *substance* (that non-observable ‘clay’ that holds all else together), either spiritual or material, lay behind sensation and reflection. Because *substance* could not be sensed there could be no impression of it and, hence, no idea of substance. For Hume, if an idea could not be traced to a sensory impression — to direct experience — it was no part of knowledge. Hume said,

When we run over our libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hands any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, ‘Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?’ No, ‘Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter or factual existence?’ No. Commit it to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

—*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

For Hume, if a book was not mathematical (quantity and number) or scientific (matter and factual experience), then it was worthless. He says:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call **myself**, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at anytime without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.

For Hume, if there is no mental knowledge of the self, then there can be no idea of the self. For there to be an idea of self, there first must be an impression of a “self-thing.” For Hume and the empiricists who would follow, an impression is necessary for having an idea. Hume concludes that he has no knowledge of a self. On the other hand, he does have knowledge of his own sensations. They come to him all the time in no orderly manner. Hume concludes, therefore, that what we call “self” is nothing but a “bundle of perceptions.”

But is Hume correct? Where does his argument go wrong? The solution is not an easy one. The problem arose as what we call “psychology” was being born. Ask yourself what it is we refer to when we speak of “not being *ourselves* today.” This was Hume’s problem. It is the problem for any person who seriously believes there is more to life than that which can be seen. Obviously, it is also the problem which focuses on the question of **mind, self, or soul**. These are the traditional names which we have given to that mysterious substance which we claim organizes our experiences. Because Hume could not sense such a substance, he denied its existence.

Introduction: The Concept of Self

Plato, writing in his dialogue, *Timaeus*, gives us a physical theory of the universe. He includes, in his description, its origin, contents, evolution, and present condition arrived at through a sound formulation of scientific questions.

Plato did not think his theory was based on religious authority or that it was absolutely true. Rather, he calls his description a "likely tale." In it he gives only probable or hypothetical knowledge. What this means is that the truth of what Plato writes depends on other things being true. We can say that "if X is true, then R, S, and T are also true." To say this in another way we can claim that "X implies R, S, and T." We can also say that "R, S, and T depend for their truth on X."

For Plato, there are two kinds of truth. There are truths based on reason and truths based on fact. Truths of fact have as their subject matter the physical world, including human beings. They are always hypothetical. Therefore, we can never be absolutely sure about them because physical nature is always changing. For Plato, physical things are only transient copies of eternal ideas, ideas which have shaped and moulded the universe.

It is the permanent, eternal ideas that are known by reason. Plato assumed that truths of reason are always and universally true regardless of the changing universe. These ideas are not hypothetical, but are necessarily true. For Plato, mathematics has this characteristic. Thus, $2 + 2 = 4$ will always and forever be true, even to a blind person. Its truth is known by reason.

The soul cannot be seen, but, for Plato, it is the rational and eternal component of a living being. The soul is what gives vitality to both living plants and living animals. Within the soul lies our knowledge of eternal ideas.

From the days of Plato, scientific inquiry has been one way in which individuals have acquired what seems to be reliable and useful knowledge. But the scientific method has not always been based on experimentation and the application of mathematics to organize and predict what patterns appear. From ancient days many methods have been used by individuals seeking knowledge, from prayer to divination, revelation, mystical illumination, commonsense, and popular opinion.

Even as late as the seventeenth century, Robert Boyle (1627-1691) recommends the placing of moss in the sufferer's hand to cure a nose bleed. Even the great William Harvey treated tumors by the laying on of dead hands. Although the Renaissance scientists had broken with science as a combination of faith and reason, their experimental methods were still in their infancy.

It was Descartes, following the lead of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, who developed a mechanistic and materialistic conception of nature, including human nature. The decisive assumption underlying Descartes's physiology is the clearcut distinction he draws between life (motion) and soul (mind). Descartes denies that animals have a soul because animals do not move by the powers of judgement. Without reason, animals are purely instinctual.

Descartes' separation of life from soul signals the broken relationship of the Renaissance with Plato's theory. Plato's word for soul is "psyche" meaning "life-soul." For Descartes, the soul does not move the body. The movement of the body is determined by the universal laws of mechanical motion, the same laws that move the wind and the rivers. His idea of soul is one that lives in a body, that thinks, but does not cause the body to move. The relationship of body with soul was left to others to work out.