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Upon the conclusion of the human nature honors course, multiple texts have been read and discussed. Each work’s themes and objectives differed slightly and thus a wide repertoire of knowledge and opinions were discussed. The writings of Ridley, Edson, Truitt, and Capon further enhanced the classes’ ability to demonstrate critical thinking skills and open their minds to different world views. Coupled with the knowledge already derived from the study of Pinker, Ehrlich, and Morrison, students were able to delve into the study of the behavioral and emotional make-up of human beings.

Steven Pinker, author of *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, suggests theories and philosophies as a basis for his opening discussion; he then uses refutation as a means of exemplifying his views. He discredits three main metaphors: the blank slate, the ghost in the machine, and the idea of the noble savage. He believes humans are born with an innate basic knowledge of the world around them. Although he believes the innate knowledge is added to and develops as we grow, within his book, he also alludes to the fact that human nature is slightly influenced by culture and experience. Nevertheless, Pinker is an outspoken supporter in the nature vs. nurture debate, citing nature as a greater influence than nurture.

Though there are commonalities between Pinker and Ehrlich’s views Ehrlich illustrates the importance of language between a people. Without language; memories, experiences, needs, wants, hopes and fears, would never have the chance to be articulated. Without knowledge of past experiences, mistakes and hardships would constantly be repeated. No one would be aware of the events that took place before their existence. Additionally, communication connects people on a primitive level. It is an essential tool for the growth and expansion of civilizations as well as a needed function of the human condition.

Morrison eludes to the fact that history and experience drastically alters the persona of an individual. One could argue that although Sethe was born with no innate freedom, she was born with the same knowledge and skill as her white comrades. However, her tragic experiences as a young woman destined her life to be one of hardship. Demoralized, defeated, and left with three children to care for, Sethe’s outlook was bleak. “And no matter, for the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was self-made its home” (140); “Now she is crying because she has no self” (123). Without these tragic circumstances, Sethe’s psychological state would not have caused her to murder her child.

In Ridley’s *The Origin of Virtue*, the author suggests one universal truth of humans; we work together in order to benefit ourselves; nevertheless, we do have virtuous traits which are revealed through individual experience. A focus of his novel is the research and explanation of a “selfish gene”. According to the view, “individuals do not consistently do things for the good of the group, or their families, or even themselves They consistently do things that benefit their genes because they are all inevitably descended from those that did not the same” (17). Because of the process of natural selection, genes are forced to take advantage of the system and use “selfish” motives in order to achieve success.

Ridley illustrates his thinking by providing an example of the power of “selfish genes” through a presuming unselfish act; a mother protecting and nourishing her baby in the womb. Despite the mother’s attitude and feelings toward the baby, her genes dictate the care for it; by producing a healthy baby, the mother’s genes are ensured to live on through the offspring. The strongest and most desirable traits will continue to influence lives for many years and the adverse traits are able to be lost. Nevertheless, the mother is not the only individual taking advantage of the system; the baby also demonstrates innate selfish tendencies. The fetus’s livelihood relies on the actions and health of the mother. The fetus “consumes” as much nutrients as it desires despite the need for the mother to use it in order to assure both her safety and that of her unborn child. However, the fetus’s natural instincts could potentially jeopardize the safety of the mother. Ridley describes the relationship as followed; “the fetus and its slave, the placenta, act more like subtle internal parasites than like friends…” (23). According to Ridley, the relationships we once thought to be altruistic are nothing more than an example of parasitism at its finest.

Though not thought of as a selfish act, cooperation in the context of this novel is said to have been derived. In regards to reciprocal cooperation, Ridley points to the fact that “reciprocity has a hard enough time producing cooperation even within a pair: the pair must be able to police their contract by being sure of encountering and recognizing each other again” (80). After absorbing and understanding Ridley’s point, people are able to point out situations regarding the need for humans to cooperate with people who are willing and able to eventually return favors and offer guidance. Ideally, this theory works best between a pair of people; if a large group tries to implement this theory there is a serious possibility that the group members could develop an “I don’t care” attitude. Without a direct reward for themselves, people are often less apt to cooperate with others.

Ridley believes it is important for society to have an understanding of the primitive motive of cooperation. An applicable situation which demonstrates this theory focuses on the lives of baboons. The primates group together in order to attempt to “steal” the female baboon from another male. This feat could not be accomplished single-handedly; the group had to be formed in able to achieve the goal. Nevertheless, every member of the group is not rewarded; whichever baboon is first to capture the female’s attention is the winner. The rest of the group is left with nothing to show for their efforts. This illustrates the selfish nature organism’s possess. Though the group cooperated to achieve a goal, they weren’t equally rewarded. Baboon behavior is similar to human behavior in that each organism is more willing to offer assistance to those who have helped you in the past.

“Selfishness is almost the definition of vice. Murder, theft, rape and fraud are considered crimes of great importance because they are selfish or spiteful acts that are committed for the benefit of the actor and the detriment of the victim. In contrast, virtue is, almost by definition, the greater good of the group” (38). Though virtue is less frequently demonstrated in today’s world, it is a positive attribute to the human species. Rather than focusing on the evil and inherent selfishness in the world, Ridley suggests, “the thing that needs explaining about human beings is not their frequent vice, but occasional virtue” (38). One could argue that virtue is a force to be recognized because of the rarity of the acts. Because we, according to Ridley, are innately selfish, there are obviously going to be more selfish offenses taking place within our lives. However, we as humans must strive for virtue; it is not a naturally occurring reaction and thus when it is exhibited it is much more valuable.

Though *The Origins of Virtue* didn’t directly tie to the other second-half of the semester books, it did share one major common point with Pinker’s *The Blank Slate*. Each text illustrates that genes have a significant part in our development as a human being. Genes incline us to act or behave certain ways; including displaying selfish tendencies in order to further ourselves. Pinker points out that the genes are innate and immediately start uncovering our hidden personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and talents. Though neither author discredit the role experience has on the human condition, both point to genes as the main influence on the advancement of humans.

In Capon’s work, *Between Noon and Three*, the mystifying subject of grace is explained through the use of parables in order to illustrate the power it contains. Grace is the unconditional acceptance of our transgressions and shortcomings as human beings. First and foremost, Capon draws on the fact that “grace cannot prevail until law is dead. There is no way of seeing clearly the freedom to which we are being driven until morality has been bound, gagged, and stuffed unceremoniously in the trunk” (6). Despite the provisions the Koran, the Bible and society specify, nothing done by humans can cause grace to be revoked. For most it is a foreign concept; we were always taught that “bad” behavior prompted punishment and the need for redemption. However, Capon believes grace is unprompted and equally available to all persons regardless of the offense.

Human beings have a difficult time accepting grace; this may be partly due to the fact that laws have dictated the behaviors we are allowed to exhibit. According to Capon, “The church, by and large, has had a poor record of encouraging freedom. ..{the church} has been so afraid we will lose sight of the laws of our nature that it has made us care more about how we look than about who we are”(149). Capon poses an enlightened question at the beginning of the book; what would you do with freedom if you had it? Because we as humans have never ultimately experienced freedom, we tend to imagine the worst of people when given the chance to have supreme power and choice. With no consequences or higher power to answer to, the actions of humans are limitless.

Though the majority of Capon’s thinking demonstrates an unmerited acceptance of grace, he does address common misconceptions regarding the complete dismissal of law. He says, [It seems] “to be implied that I, by titillating, and more seriously, God, by being gracious, run the risk of giving the impression that there is no longer any objective law against anything” (146). A truly inherently evil person would not need to wait for grace in order to carry out their malicious motives. Instead, they would carry out their actions and find a justifiable reason for doing so at a later time. “They will hunt for permission high and low until they find it, because they are engaged in an endless frantic struggle to think well of themselves by believing that some authority thinks they are not a menace” (147). This misuse of the concept of grace is what often creates hesitancy within a population. Despite Capon’s stance on the indisputability of grace, he wanted to make it clear that “grace doesn’t make evil good” (165).

Edson’s play, “Wit” is a superb piece of theatrical literature which not only entertains an audience, but also makes them stop and think. In the play, fifty-year-old Vivian Bearing is diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer and must seek treatment. Throughout the remaining scenes of the play, the audience is able to view the effect the terrible disease has on her body but more importantly on her spirit. In the beginning, Vivian is a sharp, dedicated 17th century poetry professor who delights in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne. Dr. Bearing’s biting sarcasm and wit are present through the first half of the play. This is evident immediately with the character’s first monologue; …“I have been asked ‘How are you feeling today?’ while I was throwing up into a plastic washbasin. I have been asked as I was emerging from a four-hour operation with a tube in every orifice, ‘How are you feeling today?’ I am waiting for the moment when someone asks me this question and I am dead” (7).

Nevertheless, this humor and unconcern for her medical state does not last. It is interesting to view the change in her personality from the time she is diagnosed to her death. Once a carefree and brave individual, the imminence of death overtakes her senses and she loses her composure, “I can’t figure things out. I’m in a…*quandary*, having these…*doubts*…I’m scared” (52). Though this may seem out of character for the strong Vivian we were introduced to at the beginning of the show, isn’t it normal for this reaction to occur to all people when faced with a tragedy such as this? People’s personalities do change when circumstances change within their lives. This concept is similar to that which Ehrlich presents in her novel. The experiences she gained from ranching and farming in Wyoming drastically altered the remainder of her life. New and unforeseen circumstances add color to a person’s life and illustrate a new way of thinking which can change the basic beliefs of a person.

An example of this occurs in the play; only a few days before her death, she reflects back on her actions as a teacher. One particular instance that stands out in her mind is that of a student asking for an extension on a paper due to the fact that her grandmother died. Dr. Bearing had denied the extension and looking back, is appalled by her choice. This play deals with several issues which could possibly change one’s outlook; the impending death of the main character is used as a cornerstone to examine other changing traits.

Connections can also be drawn from the film, *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*. In the movie, the Grape family’s way of life was drastically changed after the death of their father. Each member deals with the sorrow in a different way; the eldest sister throws herself into her work, the mother stays indoors and uses food as an escape from the emotional pain seething within her. The protagonist, Gilbert deals with the loss of his father by disassociating with his family. He is longer invested in their well-being and only looks out for his best interest. For the majority of the movie, he remains static and unwilling to acknowledge his wrongdoings. Nevertheless, after Gilbert witnesses his younger brother Arnie, overcome his fear of water, he understands the change that needs to be made within himself. In the final scene of the movie, this change is portrayed to the audience; Gilbert protects his mother and family from the criticism of the outside world.

Edson also used pride and a key characteristic in this play. In earlier readings, one drew from Pinker’s text that pride was something unavoidable to humans. Regardless of the attempts of humility and modesty, there was a desire within every human to gain praise or recognition for their work. Throughout her hospital stay, Dr. Bearing often commented on her career as a professor. She believes she was the “best” at what she did. [Upon her death] “Well, first my colleagues, most of whom are my former students, would scramble madly for my position. Then their consciences would flare up, so to honor my memory they would put together a collection of their essays about John Donne. The volume would begin with a warm introduction, capturing my most endearing qualities. It would be short. But sweet” (29). I think her pride was something she clung to, it helped validate her as a person. By talking about the articles she wrote and alluding to the fact that her class was one of the toughest of campus, she was able to measure her ability and gain a reward for all of her hard work. “And I know for a fact that I am tough. A demanding professor. Uncompromising. Never on to turn from a challenge” (13). Her life consisted of her teaching; that was the legacy she was going to leave behind and she wanted others to understand her dedication to the craft.

In Anne Truitt’s writing, *Daybook: The Journal of An Artist*, Truitt details the unselfish motives and freedom the life of an artist elicits. Her solace is found through the creation of pieces of art. She is able to capture the depth of her feelings and emotions not in words, but rather through the display of inventive works of art. A definitive purpose for her life is exhibited which not only benefits the community, but it benefits her emotional self as well; “I have a place but am not outstanding in any way. This is a feeling I have enjoyed enormously. It heals me in some subtle way” (22).

Truitt believes the title of an artist is vastly different from that of a lawyer or doctor; “I refused, and still refuse, the inflated definition of artists as special people with special prerogatives and special excuses. If artists embrace this view…they have to live it out.” If they do not believe in this wholeheartedly, “Their time and energy are consumed for social purposes. Artists then make decisions in terms of a role defined by others, falling into their power and serving to illustrate their theories” (23). According to Truitt, producing art to fit and conform into society is the exact opposite of the purpose of creating. It should be a unique and individual experience which is meant to heal the artist, rather than continue to silence their innermost feelings. “It is taxing to think out and then maintain a view of one ’s self that is realistic. The pressure to earn a living confronts a fickle public taste. Artists have to please whim to live on their art” (24). Though society does occasionally dictate the success of artistic works, a true artist is grateful for the opportunity to create and “maintain a position between care for themselves and care of their work in the world…” (24).

One of the greatest advantages in creating art, whether through a visual, musical, or dramatic medium, is the complete freedom the artist has in shaping the final product. Though often times, we as artists build upon something preexisting, it cannot be deemed art until it is individually altered. The musicality or artistry which makes the piece unique is solely a vision of the individual’s mind. Truitt appreciated the individuality of the subject, “This satisfaction with being solitary was a tremendous source of freedom for me. It implied a delight in self and affirmed my own obsessive sieving of experience” (32). Creativity is understood to be essential in the lives of humans as a way of expressing ones true self.

The freedom artists experience can be compared to the freedom Capon believes all people are privileged to. In a perfect world, there would be no higher power or authority to answer to. Individuals would be free to live the life they chose and learn from personal mistakes rather than those established by society. In this case, experience could be classified on an individual basis and one would develop with no outside influence. In terms of the development of humans being based solely on experience, ultimate freedom would allow and individual to truly reach their given potential. Nevertheless, according to Ridley and Pinker, genetics would dictate development.

Both Ridley and Capon’s texts challenged my belief in humanity. The ideas they proposed make one question the depths of their soul. It is hard to think of yourself as innately selfish person because in truth, we would all like to believe we have at least some true or innate goodness within our being. Capon’s writing especially elicited questions regarding the laws of society and religion I greatly enjoyed Edson’s play. The transformation of the “immoral” protagonist resonated and promoted hope that humans are capable of positive change. Likewise, Truitt’s work was especially interesting to me. It addressed human nature in a vastly different setting than any of the semester’s previous readings did. Because of the commonality of art I share with the author, it was especially interesting and insightful to see how the process of creativity shaped her.

I had hoped I would have a solidified definition of what human nature was at the conclusion of this course. However, though I feel I have studied in-depth multiple views regarding this issue, I cannot definitively give an answer, but rather offer various viewpoints regarding the study of the human condition. In regards to the issue of the development of humans being based on genetics or nature, I trust humans are influenced by both factors. I believe that the laws implemented in society limit the potential of our growth as humans. Despite our desire to each display an unseen individuality, I think society has too great a hold on people for this to become a reality. Our need of acceptance alters our innate tendencies. While I believe there is a definite selfish tendency in the human race, I don’t believe all actions are met with selfish motives; there is genuine motive and love in the world. Above all, I believe we as humans are not static beings; we have countless opportunities to change. Though we do not always take advantage of these occasions, in our lifetime, we are more likely to side with the greater good and be contributing members to society.