There is Something Uniquely Human About... 

Some Things to Consider... 

What is understanding? Can understanding be defined? Can animals truly understand anything? Is understanding merely the ability to relate concepts to each other, or is it something more? Can logic be used to explain the universe, or do parts of the universe defy logic? Can we ever know anything beyond our own perception? Can we really know anything that we receive through perception? Is perception colored by our preconceptions, and if so, how does that affect the objectivity of information we perceive?

Highlights From the Last Meeting... 

Do you think that understanding is a space time event? It certainly cannot exist without space and time, but does it somehow go beyond space and time? Walker Percy, among many others, would say that it does.

Models of understanding that attempt to explain it in terms of space and time have two options: either the concept of understanding will be phased out completely or it will be redefined in physical terms. Would either be an adequate theory? Would they be able to capture the essence of understanding or would they be leaving something out?

What is meant by understanding? It is not physical, and it does not have anything to do with response. It doesn't direct you toward anything. Or, is understanding simply linking concepts together and not going beyond them?

There is something uniquely human about naming things. Naming goes beyond just letters in a word; we are assigning meaning to be connected to a space-time event.

Is a name merely a sign? That would depend on whether we want to say that we are active or passive in understanding. If we call words "signs" then we are passive; our understanding is simply a reaction. If understanding is something beyond a space-time event, then we are active participants.

John Locke suggested that the mind is a passive receptor of information. But Immanuel Kant used the idea of math to show that the mind is actively putting categories of space and time into the world. For him, reality is that stuff that is there prior to our imposition of categories on it, but we cannot know of it until the categories have been imposed. He affirms that the event of connecting and understanding is active; reason is us forming our experiences.

How does the physical model of the universe account for the immaterial aspects?
The Nature and Essence of Evil

The word "evil," which derives from the Old English *yfel*, has stronger negative connotations than the word "wrong." We can do something wrong without having consciously intended to, but an evil action is a wicked deed committed by a moral agent, one who is aware of the distinction between right and wrong, and includes consideration of the consequences of that action. This is called a moral evil. The other kind of evil is natural evil, which refers to negative consequences incurred from natural forces.

Why do we call a natural evil "evil"? We might say that this designation is inappropriate to a circumstance that was neither intended nor controlled, for example, an earthquake. But if we believe in a god, then we believe that they are controlled. By using the term natural evil, are we not implying that God is an evil agent, and then isn't a natural evil also a moral evil? Leibniz, in his *Theodicy*, points out that although it may seem to us that God did not choose the best course when we see evil in the world, it may be that the avoidance of evil might not be the best course, as we are viewing a limited picture, and "it is possible that evil may be accompanied by a greater good."

Evil presents us with an ethical problem by its presence in our lives, but also sticks us with a theological dilemma in that we observe its existence at all. Hmmm...

Bergen Evans, in his *Dictionary of Mythology*, makes an interesting note in the entry on Loki, the Norse god of evil and destruction. By virtue of his affiliations, he was not subject to the scrutiny of the other gods; he was free to raise hell as he pleased. Eventually, he caused so many problems that the other gods bound him in a cave wherein he was kept by a great venomous snake. Evans adds that Loki is fascinating for several reasons. He says that in the Old Testament, Satan was seen as controlled by God. In the New Testament we see an increase in Satan's power, but he is still subject to the will of God. Zeus plays a similar role in Ancient Greek mythology; he controls the actions of the other gods. These other gods are not evil, per say, and they can only cause suffering as far a Zeus, or Fate, will allow them. But Loki is evil.

Evans states: "And in the realization, which Loki personifies, as it were, that evil is inextricably intertwined with good, that the two are, indeed, often indistinguishable, and that good by its very goodness, its generosity, its sense of honor, its keeping of its word even to its own disadvantage, contributes to its own destruction--in this there is a strength in Norse mythology, for all its innocence and naiveté, which makes it in some respects superior, in its poetic insight, to Greek or Christian beliefs" (182).

St. Augustine says that, contrary to what we think that we observe in the world, evil does not exist. For him, in so far as anything exists at all, it is good because it is made by God. Evil, then, is the act of the will pulling away from God. We would agree that a thing itself cannot be evil; an object can, however, be used in an evil manner contrary to its intended use. It is in the will of the user that we find evil. Weapons, for example, although created with the intention of causing harm, are not evil in themselves, though some would say that they are.

Augustine not only says that evil does not exist, but also that all things that are good are corruptible, and that anything corruptible is good. In the center of the extremes are the degrees of goodness. This is the realm of change and the human will. At the top and the bottom of the hierarchy are the supremely good and the concept of that which is in no way good, respectively. Neither is corruptible, but only the supremely good exists, for in so far as a thing exists it is good, and hence something that has no goodness can have no existence.

Here we see Plato's influence on Augustine. For Plato, evil is an absence of knowledge of the Good, and the Good is permanent, below which is a hierarchy of degrees of Goodness. For Augustine, however, the good is God rather than the Form. Also, Augustine focuses on the role of the will.

St. Thomas Aquinas has an argument similar to Augustine's. In his fourth proof of God in his *Summa Theologica*, he states that: "among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like. But 'more' and 'less' are predicated on different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maxim... Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection."

If, however, we adopt a naturalistic view of the universe, what happens to the problem of evil? Does it no longer exist? Would we still want to maintain a qualitative difference between "wrong" and some stronger notion--and an "evil," not as sin, but as a
quality of character of one who consciously commits wicked acts that he or she, as a moral agent, knows are "wrong"? It seems that the problem of evil taken in a theological context causes us great difficulty in explaining the simultaneous existence of God and evil. Taken outside of that context, the heaviest problem is the ethical one, and inevitably it becomes a discussion of human nature.

Is it possible to assert the existence of an objective good without acknowledging the existence of God? For David Hume, morality is based on human nature and on the relative circumstances of our lives. Yet although we see a diversity in ethical and moral views, Hume observes that we consistently have ethical and moral views. In other words, there is some "sentiment" ingrained in human nature which serves as an objective foundation subjectively applied to cultural circumstances.

The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy states that for Hume, "reason is perfectly inert,' and hence our practical, action-guiding moral distinctions must derive from the sentiments or feelings provided by our moral sense" (345). Reason is "inert" for Hume in moral judgment because we cannot know another's motives or character. For Hume, evil would be consciously acting against that inner moral sentiment. But why does this occur, and how is it possible?

And then there is Immanuel Kant. For him there is an objective good defined by the laws of reason. If a good is to be objective, then it must apply to all people. Therefore, acting against a universalizable maxim is evil.

A pragmatist, such as William James, would say that evil is a relative term that we conveniently apply where we believe it will be advantageous for us to do so. Does our basic concept of what evil is change over time?

Now I leave you with several questions to consider for the next meeting: Can an extremity of good be considered evil? If we observe a duality in man, a tension between good and evil, is there some overall balance that is reached in the struggle--some larger picture? In this age of technological advancement, with its focus on progress and efficiency, are we becoming less aware of right and wrong, or good and evil, and depending more on laws and codes to make our decisions for us? In Evans's above quoted comparison of the Norse to Greek and Christian beliefs, what really are the differences among the three that he is pointing out? Which do you think is "superior" and why? If we see good and evil as relative, what meaning do those terms then have? (I.E., if a word can mean one thing for you and another for me, how can we communicate?) And, the regents' test question of the day: Bad people do bad things and good people do good things. But bad people do good things and good people do bad things. Explain.

The Myth of Silly Us

The day is bright and cheery and the brown fox jumps over the fence to see the animals in the zoo play with the pumpkin-faced little boy who sits under the weeping willow tree by the babbling brook that cries out something about the cloud overhead that looks like the sickle of the Grimm reaper and the birds all sing. The same monotonous tune about the farmer who put out the scare crow and went out into the field one night and had a heart attack when he saw it blowing in the wind and the boy begins to throw rocks at the animals who cannot throw them back because they bounce out of the cage and there are no other rocks behind the bars with them but the boy will get bored soon and he goes to chase the fox who jumped the fence and as he jumps the fence after the fox the rain begins to fall and the thunder rolls in the distance but the animals are happy because the ugly boy has left the tree and will not be back until he gets bored the next day and the boy finds the fox and somehow manages to corner him against a bunch of rocks and the fox gets scared and angry and attacks the boy who does not know how to defend himself and the fox kills him and then the fox goes to the willow tree to tell the other
animals
that he has killed the boy that
threw rocks
at them so he won't be coming back
anymore
and the animals are happy but the
fox starts to wonder
why the boy would do such a thing
so he picks up a rock
and throws it into the trees as far as
he can
and he accidentally hits a bird and it
cries out
and falls and he goes to it and eats it
but he thinks
that it was fun and more efficient
than hunting
so he tries it again
but he cannot hit another bird so he
goes
to the willow tree and tries to
practice his aim
by throwing rocks at trees
but this is far to easy so he thinks
that if he practiced on the animals
in the cages
that he could learn to throw rocks
better than the boy
had done and he begins to throw
rocks
and the animals cry out
but the fox thinks
that he really doesn't have any
sympathy
for these creatures behind the bars
and that if he had had any pity
on them
he would have killed the boy
for them
but he did not;
he only killed the boy out of
self-defense
and then he came back to tell
the other animals
so that they would think of him
as a hero
and would applaud him but he
doesn't really need
their applause if he
can get pleasure
out of them

this way
and this is how
the fox became
human.

We are all invited to
a social gathering on
Saturday,
November 1st,
at 7:30 p.m. Costumes
are optional
(but encouraged. . .)
Dinner will be covered
dish; please let us know
what you will be bringing
or contact us for more
information . .

Announcements!!!

Congratulations to Dr.
Peter Mellen, in the English
Department, for winning the
collection of books, tapes, and
CD's which we raffled off on
AASU Day.

We made $89.75 toward
sponsoring a speaker in the
Spring, Dr. Ann Hartle, and
for the awards for our
Philosophical Essay Contest,
also in the Spring. Thank you
everyone for your
contributions!!

Special thanks to our
sponsors for the raffle:
Books-a-Million, Media
Play, and Shaver's
Bookstore.

The Thought Box is located
in The Writing Center,
Gamble Hall. It is there for
convenient submission to The
Philosopher's Stone,
suggestions for future topics,
requests to be on our mailing
list, or any thoughts that you
would like to share with us.

Submissions to The
Philosopher's Stone may
address any philosophical
issue, compare philosophical
ideas, propose new topics for
discussion, or address any
previous newsletter article or
topic. Works should be
limited to 250 words or less
and include name and phone
number.

Visit Our Website!!!!
http://www.armstrong.edu/
Activities/Clubs/pdg/

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Erik
Nordenhaug, 921-7322. E-mail:
nordener@pirates.armstrong.edu
Student President: Tiffanie
L.C. Rogers. 1-888-964-9543.
(punch in your # at the beep)