

PART AND THE WHOLE

This session has been put together by Oliver Leech and is closely related to 'The Meaning of Ant Life' in Peter Worley's *The If Machine*.

PHILOSOPHY

This session introduces a discussion of purpose in the context of the concept of parts in their relation to the whole. We think of parts as serving a purpose, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, as fulfilling a function within a greater whole. For example, a spoke has a function within a wheel and a wheel a function within a bike. There are many examples available and easy to understand which illustrate the relationship (glass > window > classroom > school; petrol > engine > car). The philosophical question arising is as follows: if parts have purposes/functions within a whole and if that whole has a purpose/function as a part of a greater whole and so on, is there an infinite series or is there a whole which is of intrinsic value and thereby does not draw its value from a whole greater than it.

Below are several examples of stimulus material. It is not intended that they all be used. One should be quite sufficient.

Stimulus A

- ✓ **Write the letter 'i' on the board on its own and ask what it is, what it means, what its purpose is.**
- ✓ **Write 'hobb' before the 'i' and 't' after it and ask again what it is, what it means and what its purpose is.**
- ✓ **Write above the word 'hobbit' 'In a whole in the ground lived a'. You now have the first sentence of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. (With a sentence we now see for the first time a meaningful proposition.) Now ask if this sentence is a part of something else or is it complete in itself.**
- ✓ **There is no need to write more but you might move on at the prompting of the class to 'paragraph', 'page', 'chapter', 'book'. v. Now the deeper question. Is a book a part of something else. If any responses are given (e.g., library), then ask of the suggestion whether it too is a part of something greater. And so on.**
- ✓ **Wider problems may emerge. Is it the case that everything has a purpose/function is a greater whole or are there exceptions? What about humans? Do they have a purpose? Are they parts of a greater whole? If so, can the same question be asked of that?**

Stimulus B

- ✓ Hand out copies and read aloud the poem 'Talking Down'.

TALKING DOWN

I said to an atom, 'You're ever so small.

I don't think that you have any purpose at all.'

'Hey, you!' cried the atom. 'You blab like a fool.

Don't you know I'm a cog in a big molecule?'

Next I put to a molecule,

'I can't deduce how a bundle of atoms can have any use.'

Said the molecule proud, 'Any schoolboy can tell

I'm a working man and my job's in a cell.'

Now I'd heard once before there are cells galore

but I hadn't a clue what a cell was for.

So I asked one who answered, 'I play my part.

I'm a cell of blood and I live in your heart.'

I questioned the heart so gluttoned with blood

if it thought its existence did any good.

*The heart all indignant, disdainfully said,
'Unless I'm at work, mate, your body is dead!'
So, it came round to me, the next one in line,
and I asked of myself what purpose was mine.
Am I part of a something much greater than me,
as a star is a part of a galaxy?
And does this one serve a greater one still
who allotted a purpose for me to fulfil?
Does the universe onion have hundreds of skins
that never can end and never begins?
This is what happens when questioning starts
about infinitesimal physical parts.
'So if you don't want to be puzzled at all,
then never ask questions!' said atom so small.*

It may be helpful to give definitions a few words in the poem (e.g., 'indignant', 'disdainfully', 'infinitesimal') in advance or, better, after the first reading. The philosophical point of the poem may take some teasing out until the children see the pattern of part and whole (atom > molecule > cell > organ > body and, later, star > galaxy > universe) and confront the distinction between the instrumental and the intrinsic. Responses stimulated by this poem to the question of ultimate human purpose have included: to look after and save the earth, to keep the species going, religion, to have fun.

Stimulus C

Another way of introducing the topic is to use the proverb 'For want of a nail'. It might be short enough to write out in full on the board. Here it is:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.

For want of a shoe the horse was lost.

For want of a horse the rider was lost.

For want of a rider the message was lost.

For want of a message the battle was lost.

For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.

And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

(This proverb is an interesting example of the way a philosophical discussion may use material in a way that is different from the more familiar classroom experience. I should imagine that it has been presented to classes for generations to convey the sound moral teaching that neglecting to give proper attention to detail may have disastrous, long-term and unforeseen consequences.) In the context of this particular philosophical topic the value of the nail consists in what it contributes to the horseshoe and so on through the items in the proverb until we come to 'the kingdom'. The question now arises as to the value of the kingdom: is it of value in itself or by virtue of being a part of a greater whole?

A set of Russian dolls as a visual aid reinforces the written stimulus material (and the dolls are not too much of a distraction for some of the children).