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19 September 2021

Exam 1

1. What is Collective Learning?

Collective learning is the idea that human beings have a special ability to convey ideas through language. Other living creatures on this planet can convey simple concepts, such as where to hunt or what not to eat, to their progeny but not much else. Humans, with their ability to convey concepts through language can store and pass on useful data, not only to their offspring, but to the rest of humanity. In this way human intelligence can not only survive the individual but also contribute to the collective intelligence of the world. This, in effect makes all the people who have ever lived and written down or passed on their knowledge in language like a giant brain. Each person contributing their own small (or sometimes large) well of knowledge to the pool of known things. This pool can then be accessed by others by reading or listening to the knowledge that came before them and building off it.

1. How does Collective Learning apply to any of the following? -- Language, Geography, Religion and Belief, Agriculture, Cities, Writing, the Rise of Civilization

Firstly, language is a vital component to collective learning, as discussed in the previous paragraph. Without that influential medium knowledge could not be passed from one human to another. We, like the animals would be stuck in a constant cycle of learning only the things which our immediate ancestors knew through direct experience. All the other things on this list, for example writing is only possible with a spoken language to write it down. An understanding of agriculture and geography also stems from an ability to learn as a group and pass on knowledge. Agriculture is a complex and variable process through the years, without language to pass on the fine details of that process it would never get past its initial stages.

1. What factors constrain the spread of culture? Think: Language, Geography, Climate, anything else.

One of the factors that stood out to me in the Burke lecture which was a constraint on some cultures was their religious practices. For example, Buddhism was a religion which was capable of mobility because their faith was not grounded in a specific location. In contrast to this a religion like ancient Judaism was strongly tied to the temple in Jerusalem because that is where the presence of God would reside. Other factors such as Climate and geography play a massive role in the spread of culture. For example, the Nile in ancient Egypt fixed the locals there to a single location because of the fertility of the soil. If food can grow better in the location that you live in than anywhere else that you know of it makes a rather good case for your people to not move elsewhere. Yet this also means that the culture rooted to that spot can serve as a growing and spreading point because of how large the civilization can get.

4. Briefly describe the story of the Buddha. How is it an example of Collective Learning?

The story of Buddha begins with a prophecy his mother received in a dream about his birth. It was translated as meaning that he would either be a great spiritual teacher or a great ruler of the nations. Shortly after his birth his mother died and left the Buddha with his father. Wanting his son to become the prophesied ruler, his father surrounded his son with the luxuries of the palace. Every desire which he had was filled for much of his life. Until one day the Buddha ventured outside the palace seeing all of the suffering of the world. He then decided to leave his wife and child and attempt to learn the answer to human suffering. This he did after many long years of trial and learning at the hands of himself and many teachers. This was an example of collective learning because of the way in which Buddha learned. Without the collective knowledge of the religious teachers he met along the way he could never have reached enlightenment so quickly. Being able to draw from religious experiences of thousands of people over thousands of years allowed for the Buddha to reach enlightenment through collective learning.

5. How and why did Buddhism spread across Asia and become the first world religion? (First 20 minutes of the Lancaster lecture are helpful for answering this question)

Firstly, the reason that Buddhism was able to spread so far across the world was that it was not a fixed religion. This means that it had no particular holy place or specific region where it needed to be practiced. This stands in contrast to ancient Judaism, for example, where worship and sacrifice was offered at the temple in Jerusalem and nowhere else. In Buddhism holy places are created by having a holy relic at the site. For example a cremated portion of the body of Buddha would make any building into a holy site for Buddhism.

6. What role did Emperor Ashoka play in propagating the spread of Buddhist culture?

Emperor Ashoka was an ancient Indian emperor who converted to Buddhism and repented of the bloody wars which he had taken part in. As an emperor of India he created holy sites for Buddhist pilgrims, along with roads and infrastructure for the people. He also created new rules for kings at the time and used Buddhism as a sort of moral compass for the kingdom he created.