



What Is Our Real Knowledge About the Human Being?



Working Group 4-6 May 2006 – The Working Group on *What is our Real Knowledge about the Human Being?* will reconsider this perennial question, which was formulated by King David when he asked: ‘Yahweh, what is man, that you care for him?’ (Ps 144:3). Science does not provide the sole answer to this question and we believe that in this scientific age a dialogue between science and the humanistic tradition is required for its effective exploration. In the interest of a balanced quest, which can lead to a fuller understanding of the critical issues that currently confront us as regards our real knowledge about the human being, we need to re-examine the historical relationship between philosophy and science, and more specifically between the humanistic tradition (which has its roots in philosophy) and the scientific tradition. Today, it seems, there is a great need for reconciliation between these two traditions. Indeed, ever since Galileo launched the modern scientific revolution these two traditions have become progressively detached from one another and appear, as science has grown ever more specialised and complex, to have reached a point of inflection which offers a new horizon of mutual comprehension. In this endeavour it is helpful to revisit the thought of Greek (Plato and Aristotle) and medieval (St Thomas Aquinas) philosophers, as well as that of modern philosophers (Hume, Kant, Hegel), on the one hand, and the thought of modern scientists, on the other, for the light this philosophic and scientific background sheds on the identity of human beings, who share their bodies with nature but also emerge from nature (as the philosopher Anaxagoras was the first to observe when he argued that intellect is not mixed with matter). We can then turn our attention to some central problems presented by science today, as well as to the opportunities provided by science for rethinking philosophical and theological views on human beings and their place within the Creation. The issues being probed by cognitive science, with its new language of neurons and synapses, in relation to the classic language of intellect, desire and emotion, are central to our topic. So, too, are the ongoing discoveries about our genetic inheritance, which pose questions about free will and the connection between evolution and creation. Lastly, there are anthropological (and moral) questions that relate to the time before a person’s birth and to the state of death. It is our hope to forge, through a profound and interdisciplinary discussion, greater understanding of these three clusters of issues as we use them to clarify our central question: what is our real knowledge about the human being?

This colloquium is a joint meeting and has been organised by the John Templeton Foundation’s ‘Humble Approach Initiative’ and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The choice of the meeting place, the Academy’s headquarters at the Casina Pio IV in the Vatican gardens, given its illustrious scientific history, reflects our wish to contribute to the creation of a new relationship between these traditions, and prompts us to ponder what role religion can play in achieving such a synthesis, in particular in relation to the anthropological question. This villa, which in the sixteenth century was a summer residence of Pope Pius IV and a meeting place of great scholars, in 1923 became the seat of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, whose origins date to the founding of the Academy of the Lynceans, the world’s first scientific academy, by Prince Federico Cesi in 1603. Galileo, the father of modern science, was a founding member and its acknowledged leader. As can be seen from the list of participants, science, philosophy and theology are well represented at this joint meeting, and it is thus our hope that this colloquium, which is based upon an interdisciplinary approach, will constitute an

important contribution to answering today's central anthropological question: what is our real knowledge about the human being?

+ Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo

Participants

Prof. Nicola Cabibbo

H.E. Msgr. Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo

Prof. Evandro Agazzi

Dr. Berhane Asfaw

Prof. Antonio M. Battro

Prof. Enrico Berti

Prof. Alison Brooks

Prof. Franco Chiereghin

Prof. Felipe Fernández-Armesto

Dr. Charles L. Harper, Jr

Prof. Luca Illetterati

Prof. Peter Van Inwagen

Prof. Malcom Jeeves, C.B.E.

Dr. Hideaki Koizumi

Dr. Mary Ann Meyers

Prof. Jürgen Mittelstrass

Prof. Thomas Nagel

Dr. Janet M. Soskice

Dr. Fernando Vidal

Prof. Jean-Didier Vincent