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Pilgrimage, Threshold Concepts, and the Afterlife

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THE GAP:
The Science of What Separates Us from Other Animals
By Thomas Suddendorf

In this book loaned to me by my English department colleague Bill Aarnes, Suddendorf raises this question: Since humans and other animals share a common ancestor, why does there seem to be an enormous gap between the capabilities of human minds and those of even our closest evolutionary relatives, the great apes? Citing a number of studies on human and animal cognition and emotion, he concludes that two uniquely human characteristics are the drivers that evolve animal capabilities for memory, communication, and empathy, as well as foresight.

Pilgrimage, Threshold Concepts, and the Afterlife

We asked physics professor Susan D’Amato ’77 what books are currently inspiring her.

“WHY DOES THERE SEEM TO BE AN ENORMOUS GAP BETWEEN HUMAN MINDS AND THOSE OF OUR EVOLUTIONARY RELATIVES?”

THE GAP

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE
By Samuel Scheffer

In January, I joined an ongoing philosophy reading group coordinated by Jim Edwards, one of Furman’s emeriti professors of philosophy. Jim proposed
Scheffler’s book for summer reading and discussion. Scheffler defines “afterlife” as the collective life experience of the humans that will come after us. He asks: If we knew that all human life would cease a short time after our personal death, or if we knew that, at some near future date, no more human children would be born, how would that knowledge affect us in the here and now? If it affects us profoundly, in what particular ways does it affect us, and why? The philosophers in our reading group say that this is an entirely new angle from which to consider the issue of what we value in our individual and collective lives.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO STUDENT UNDERSTANDING:
Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge by Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land, editors

I added this book to my summer reading list after Diane Boyd in the Center for Teaching and Learning introduced me to the notion of threshold concepts (the ideas in each discipline that are both challenging and central to students’ understanding of a body of material). In physics, quantum mechanics is a subject that plays just such a “challenging and central” role, so I am hoping that this book will provide some insights that will help when I teach that topic in two physics courses this fall.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PHYSICAL SCIENCE
By Arthur Stanley Eddington

Eddington was a British astrophysicist of the early 20th century. A brilliant mathematician, he was quick to understand Einstein’s theory of relativity, and his speaking and writing talents were such that he was able to help others understand it, as well. A lifelong Quaker, Eddington took a pacifist stance in World War I, and after that war, he worked to help mend the rift in the science community caused by allegiances to opposing sides during the war. I became interested in Eddington because he seemed to be equally at home in the scientific worldview of his academic profession and in the mystical worldview of his religious community. Scholar, mystic, writer, educator, and philosopher of science—he is a fascinating person to study and learn from.

THE ART OF PILGRIMAGE:
The Seeker’s Guide to Making Travel Sacred by Phil Cousineau

The idea of pilgrimage has received a lot of interest in popular culture in recent years, such as in Emilio Estevez’s movie The Way, which stars Martin Sheen as a father who decides to walk the Camino de Santiago in Spain in honor of his deceased son. The concept of a purposeful journey that has a definite goal in mind but is open to unexpected detours (and events) along the way is appealing to me. That the journey is made partly alone and partly in the company of fellow travelers—and that a pilgrimage promises the traveler a chance to better understand oneself, others, and the world—make it a rich experience for college students and for reflective adults of any age. Furman has connections to pilgrimage: the Cothran Center for Vocational Reflection has sponsored alumni pilgrimages in Spain, Ireland, Scotland, and it is considering a May Experience pilgrimage course targeted at graduating seniors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR  Susan D’Amato ‘77 joined the Furman faculty in 1983. She teaches introductory physics, a course on relativity and quantum mechanics, and a senior-level course on quantum mechanics. In addition, through her association with the Cothran Center for Vocational Reflection, she teaches a seminar titled “Finding Your Life Purpose” in Furman’s Engaged Living program.