

Since Mark-Twain impersonator Wm. McLinn came to see me (July/81), I've been more M-T-aware. This thinksheet grows out of a comment MT made as an old man: He could understand history, biography, fiction only after his years as² Mississippi riverboat captain because he'd met everybody--all types of humans--"on the river." Here're a few musings on this:

1. Education shouldn't be wasted on children, who don't yet have (Plato says) the "receptacles" for receiving-recognizing reality, "the world," even themselves. In a time of authority-breakdown, the medical model of education ("Take this; it's good for you.") won't work. Nor will the anticipation model: "This will make sense to you later, so learn it now." The latter model is like dumping a load of loam on property whose owner doesn't know what to do with it. (This analogy comes to mind because we've just had ten cubic yards dumped at our house: we know exactly what to do with it, in greenhouse and garden.) Tuesday (16Feb82) my cont.-ed. clergy group spent an hour on ministry in the town situation of a drunk-dead 17-year-old: they had personal/ministerial categories for knowing what to do with it. Children should learn tools (1) by intriguing them into it or (2) by forcing it on them (chiefly, the latter, since few teachers are capable of the former, which is greatly to be preferred). But interpretation (including theories, such as "evolution") should be left till a latter life-stage. The fact that social arrangements for this would be difficult is no argument against its ideality.
2. In addition to being an individual, everybody's a type. This fact sits astride the underfact that everybody's categorical (the category "human," + the subcategories of sex, race, class, nation, place, age, time). In a current expression that revolts me, we should try to understand "where s/he's coming from." This includes a third breakdown or typology, viz., perspective or angle of vision or coign of vantage or point of view--as shaped by will, as shaped by desire, as shaped by nature and experience and commitments. Fourthly, intention: everybody, whether or not conscious of it in a particular instance, is always up to something.
3. One inference from (2) is that, given the complex reality of each human being both constitutionally and situationally, intelligent communication is improbable. On the minimal definition of "communication," viz. interaction, it's inevitable: humans quickly break down without it. This means that most communication-instances are unintelligent. If we could agree and act on this, we would be more gentle with each other and more suspicious of our own and others' overclaims to understanding. "I understand" would be nailed for the arrogant statement it usually is. A humble openness would characterize our dealings.
4. Another inference is paradoxical: The more we "put people in categories," the more intelligent and loving our treatment of them can be. I put "put people in categories" in quotes, because so often I've heard it to be something naughty (as, in prejudice, it can be). As intelligent, it comes under sociology of knowledge; as loving, it's good religion and humanity. But the religion of "the person" (i.e., the self-standing "individual") considers it evil; and much of secular and religious liberalism is under this illusion.
5. The biblical context for all this is that God, not "the individual," is the Alpha/Omega for seeing-loving-understanding human beings. The loss of this context explains the anticategorical illusion.