

Lesson 2: Subject vs. Objects

PURPOSE

To enable students to accurately recognize when their human dignity and that of others is respected and when it is not respected, both on an individual and a social level.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand that persons should always be treated as subjects, and never merely as objects.
2. Understand that societies violate human dignity when they treat persons as mere objects and recognize the historic violations of human dignity and rights, such as slavery, racism, antisemitism, caste system, etc.
3. Learn about two examples of persons who stood up in defense of human dignity: Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Mahatma Gandhi: excerpt from the Speech at Tanjore
- Martin Luther King, Jr.: I Have a Dream
- Violations of human dignity in the school table

VOCABULARY

- Treating persons as subjects: valuing persons for their intrinsic worth
- Treating persons as objects: using persons for personal pleasure or benefit

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Review the previous lesson. Show students the empty [Hierarchy of Being](#) table and ask them to recall the powers all living beings share, those only animals and humans share, and those which only humans have. Highlight the powers to think and choose and mention in which situations they are most explicitly used. Recall the definition and three characteristics of human dignity.

Step 2: Introduce the subject-object distinction. Explain that objects are used as means to achieve specific goals or ends. On the other hand, subjects cannot be used as mere means. Objects are used, while subjects are valued for their dignity.

All non-living beings can be classified as objects (things, technology, tools, etc.), and to a certain extent, plants and animals as well (even though not in the same way as things). Human persons are in the category of subjects rather than objects.

Introduce the idea that because persons have dignity, they should always be treated as subjects, and never merely as objects. Persons should never be treated merely as objects and valued simply for their usefulness or the enjoyment they may bring. Highlight that whenever a person is treated as an object, this violates their dignity.

Write on the board:

Treating persons as subjects: valuing persons for their intrinsic worth

Treating persons as objects: using persons for personal pleasure or benefit

To treat another person as an object is to use them for personal pleasure, advantage, or benefit. Rather than recognizing what would be good for that person, when people treat others as objects, they focus on what the person can do for them. When people use other people merely to get what they want rather than caring for their well-being, they are treating them like tools, such as cell phones and hammers. This way of treating human beings goes against their dignity.

To help students reflect on concrete examples of treating others as subjects and objects in their immediate surroundings, divide students into groups and ask them to fill [Violations of human dignity in the school table](#). Afterwards, ask the groups to share their conclusions with the rest of the class and lead the discussion with the whole class.

Step 3: Highlight that human dignity, as a special value of each human being, should be a foundation of a free and just society. A society, to be truly just, needs to respect human dignity. In terms of importance, human dignity comes before society. For this reason, no human community can grant or rescind that dignity. [Human dignity is not given to people by society, people have it because they are human persons](#). For this reason, no society can take away dignity or decide that some groups don't have human dignity.

Nevertheless, it sometimes happens that societies do not respect human dignity. Explain the subject-object distinction in the context of social systems:

Societies that treat persons as objects...	Societies that treat persons as subjects...
Treat them only for their use	Respect and value them for their dignity
Use persons as means for the goals of society	Use the society to serve the good of the persons
Manipulate	Ask for their opinion
Dispose of elderly, sick, vulnerable	Care for elderly, sick, vulnerable
View human life in economic terms	Understand that human life is priceless
Own, buy and sell them	Understand that persons cannot be owned
Get rid of when no longer useful, productive	Protect when they can't do it themselves
Treat some groups as having less dignity than others	Recognize that everyone has equal dignity
Separate persons from the communal ties needed for their flourishing (family, friends, Church, associations)	Support the communal ties needed for human flourishing (family, associations, Churches...)

Some social systems treat persons as objects and in this way, violate their dignity. Ask the students if they know of historical situations when a society disrespected human dignity by treating certain people as objects. Human dignity cannot be granted or rescinded by society. Nevertheless, has a society ever tried to rescind human dignity from a certain group of persons?

After students share their opinions, have them recognize some of the biggest historical injustices:

Slavery
 Racism
 Anti-Semitism
 Eugenics
 Caste system, etc.

Through the discussion, have the students recognize why each of these systems was unjust, i.e. because it treated the persons as objects by:

Owning, buying and selling them and viewing human life in economic terms (slavery)
Treating some groups as having less dignity than others (Black people, Jews, lower castes in India)
Disposing of elderly, sick, vulnerable, viewing human life in economic terms (eugenics)

Lead the students to conclude once more that human dignity must be a foundation of every society which aims to be free and just.

Step 4: Ask the students if they know some of the great persons who stood up to the mentioned injustices of slavery, racism, caste system etc. Explain that today they will learn about two such persons:

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was an Indian lawyer and political and spiritual leader who was leading an anti-colonialist movement fighting for India's independence from British rule. He led non-violent protests to advance his cause.
Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) was an American Christian minister and activist for the rights of African Americans. He was among the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968. He advanced civil rights through nonviolence and civil disobedience, inspired by his Christian beliefs and the nonviolent activism of Gandhi.

Divide the students into an even number of groups. Half of the groups will receive a [speech from Mahatma Gandhi](#) and the other half will receive one from [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) Students should read the speeches and discuss their questions in groups.

After all groups finish reading and discussing, they should present the conclusion to the rest of the class. The teacher should highlight the most important points from the texts.

Step 5: Summarize. Recall the subject-object distinction and highlight that persons should always be treated as subjects, never merely as objects. Recall how societies can treat persons as objects and how they can treat persons as subjects. Recall some historical violations of human dignity on the social level. Highlight most important ideas expressed by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

Mahatma Gandhi: excerpt from the Speech at Tanjore¹

Delivered on 16 September 1927.

I had hoped on coming to Tanjore today to discuss the Brahmin–non–Brahmin² question here and I had the pleasure of having a brief discussion with some of the friends this afternoon. [...]

They seemed to think that I had identified myself with the notion of inherited superiority and inferiority. I assured them that nothing was farther from my thought and told them that I would gladly explain my meaning of *varnashrama*³ more fully than I have done in order to remove the slightest misunderstanding as to this question of superiority. In my opinion there is no such thing as inherited or acquired superiority. I believe in the rock-bottom doctrine of Advaita⁴ and my interpretation of Advaita excludes totally any idea of superiority at any stage whatsoever. I believe implicitly that all men are born equal. All – whether born in India or in England or America or in any circumstances whatsoever – have the same soul as any other. And it is because I believe in this inherent equality of all men that I fight the doctrine of superiority which many of our rulers arrogate to themselves. I have fought this doctrine of superiority in South Africa inch by inch, and it is because of that inherent belief that I delight in calling myself a scavenger, a spinner, a weaver, a farmer and a labourer. And I have fought against the Brahmins themselves wherever they have claimed any superiority for themselves either by reason of their birth or by reason of their subsequently acquired knowledge. I *consider that it is unmanly for any person to claim superiority over a fellow-being*. And there is the amplest warrant for the belief that I am enunciating in the Bhagavad Gita⁵, and I am therefore through and through with every non–Brahmin when he fights this monster of superiority, whether it is claimed by a Brahmin or by anybody else. He who claims superiority at once forfeits his claim to be called a man. That is my opinion.

But in spite of all my beliefs that I have explained to you, I still believe in *varnashrama dharma*. [...] *Varnashrama dharma* is humility. Whilst I have said that all men and women are born equal, I do not wish therefore to suggest that qualities are not inherited, but on the contrary I believe that just as everyone inherits a particular form so does he inherit the particular characteristics and qualities of his progenitors. [...]

1 Mahatma Gandhi: The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 1958.

2 Brahmins were the highest of the four social classes in Hinduism, specialising as priests, teachers, and protectors of sacred learning

3 The organization of society into four castes, and the division of life into four stages

4 The view that the *atman*, the self in man, is not distinct from the Brahman, the Absolute; literally, 'non-dualism'

5 Holy book of Hinduism, part of Mahabharata

And if you accept what I have ventured to suggest to you, you will find that the solution of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin question also, insofar as it is concerned with the religious aspect, becomes very easy. As a non-Brahmin I would seek to purify Brahminism insofar as a non-Brahmin can, but not to destroy it... I would not touch his great learning wherever I see it. And whilst he may not claim superiority by reason of learning I myself must not withhold that need of homage that learning, wherever it resides, always commands. But I must not go deeper into the subject before a large audience of this kind.

After all I must fall upon one sovereign remedy which I think is applicable for all the ills of life. And that is, in whatever fight we engage, the fight should be clean and straight, there should not be the slightest departure from truth and ahimsa⁶. And if we will keep our carriage safely on these two rails you will find that our fight even though we may commit a thousand blunders will always smell clean and will be easier fought. And even as a train that is derailed comes to a disastrous end, so shall we, if we be derailed off these two rails, come to a disaster. A man who is truthful and does not mean ill even to his adversary will be slow to believe charges even against his foes. He will, however, try to understand the viewpoints of his opponents and will always keep an open mind and seek every opportunity of serving his opponents. I have endeavoured to apply this law in my relations with Englishmen and Europeans in general in South Africa as well as here and not without some success. How much more then should we apply this law in our homes, in our relations, in our domestic affairs, in connection with our own kith and kin?

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) was an Indian lawyer and political and spiritual leader who was leading an anti-colonialist movement fighting for India's independence from British rule. He led non-violent protests to advance his cause.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

Does the doctrine of inherited superiority recognize persons as subjects or as objects? Why does Gandhi not accept it?

How would Gandhi resolve the Brahmin and non-Brahmin question?

What kind of approach does he advise when defending or promoting some cause?

6 Principle of avoiding violence towards all living beings.

Answer Key for the teacher

- 1. Does the doctrine of inherited superiority recognize persons as subjects or as objects? Why does Gandhi not accept it?** This doctrine treats some persons (non-Brahmins) as objects because it treats them as having less dignity than others (Brahmins) simply for the reasons of birth or acquired knowledge. Gandhi believes that there is no such thing as inherited or acquired superiority. He believes that all men are born equal. All - whether born in India or in England or America or in any circumstances whatsoever - have the same soul as any other. And because he believes in this inherent equality of all men, he fought the doctrine of superiority in South Africa and he has fought against the Brahmins themselves wherever they have claimed any superiority for themselves either by reason of their birth or by reason of their subsequently acquired knowledge. Gandhi believed that he who claims superiority at once forfeits his claim to be called a man.
- 2. How would Gandhi resolve the Brahmin and non-Brahmin question?** Gandhi believes that we should reject the doctrine of superiority of some people over others, but at the same time pay respect to someone's learning when he or she deserves it: "As a non-Brahmin I would seek to purify Brahminism insofar as a non-Brahmin can, but not to destroy it... I would not touch his great learning wherever I see it. And whilst he may not claim superiority by reason of learning I myself must not withhold that need of homage that learning, wherever it resides, always commands."
- 3. What kind of approach does he advise when defending or promoting some cause?** Gandhi says: "After all I must fall upon one sovereign remedy which I think is applicable for all the ills of life. And that is, in whatever fight we engage, the fight should be clean and straight, there should not be the slightest departure from truth and ahimsa. And if we will keep our carriage safely on these two rails you will find that our fight even though we may commit a thousand blunders will always smell clean and will be easier fought. And even as a train that is derailed comes to a disastrous end, so shall we, if we be derailed off these two rails, come to a disaster. A man who is truthful and does not mean ill even to his adversary will be slow to believe charges even against his foes. He will, however, try to understand the viewpoints of his opponents and will always keep an open mind and seek every opportunity of serving his opponents."

Martin Luther King (Jr.): I Have a Dream⁷

Delivered on 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds.

7 Martin Luther King (Jr.): "I Have a Dream" Speech, 1999.

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day... one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last!

Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

How were black persons treated as objects in America? Why does Martin Luther King believe America has failed its promise?

How does he advise his people to conduct the struggle they are facing?

What is his dream about?

Answer Key for the teacher

1. **How were black persons treated as objects in America? Why does Martin Luther King believe America has failed its promise?** Black persons were treated as objects in America by the denial of certain fundamental rights (such as the right to vote and of election to public office) and by being treated as unequal to white people. Martin Luther King says:

“When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the “unalienable Rights of `Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness`. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’”

2. **How does he advise his people to conduct the struggle they are facing?** King was a strong believer in non-violence and hatred toward none. He says:

“But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.”

3. **What is his dream about?** King describes his dream in the following words:

“It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day... one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Violations of human dignity in school

Think about one example in which persons are treated as objects or their dignity is disrespected. Explain why this situation is not respectful of their dignity. Propose a solution for how the class should deal with this situation.

Description of the situation	Why is it not respectful of human dignity?	Possible solutions

Violations of human dignity in school – Example

Think about one example in which persons are treated as objects or their dignity is disrespected. Explain why this situation is not respectful of their dignity. Propose a solution for how the class should deal with this situation.

Description of the situation	Why is it not respectful of human dignity?	Possible solutions
<p>A student who is not very outgoing and who studies hard is often called a “weirdo” and teased by other students. A group of “cool” guys from our class and some other classes are often making fun of him in front of others. Sometimes this also turns into bullying and some form of physical violence (e.g. slapping him, throwing his things around). Most of the other students are usually just standing by not doing anything. Some laugh, some definitely feel uncomfortable but nobody says anything.</p>	<p>Because the person who is studying hard is not treated as a subject with dignity but as an object: he is used as an object of making fun, his feelings are disrespected and he is not shown empathy by others, but the group of “cool” kids doesn’t care how he feels. They are also not talking to him, but at him, and are not trying to develop a relationship with him.</p>	<p>Those who stand by and watch a student being bullied should stand up and say that what’s happening is not right.</p> <p>They should also report to educators if the situation continues to happen.</p> <p>Those in the group of “cool” kids who feel that what they are doing is not right, should motivate the group to find another kind of amusement which will not be disrespectful of anyone’s human dignity (e.g. sports, dance, physical exercise etc.).</p>