

Exercise 3

Writing MCAT Questions

Imagine that you are an MCAT writer. As a generative exercise for creating the Verbal Reasoning section, read the passage below and review the questions which follow concerning the passage. Write one correct answer and one incorrect answer for each question. Try to make the incorrect answer a tricky one.

Modern anthropology has discovered the fact that human society has grown and developed everywhere in such a manner that its forms, its opinions and its actions have many fundamental traits in common. This momentous discovery implies that laws exist which govern the development of society; that they are applicable to our society as well as to those of past times and of distant lands; that their knowledge will be a means of understanding the causes furthering and retarding civilization; and that, guided by this knowledge, we may hope to govern our actions so that the greatest benefit to mankind will accrue from them. Since this discovery has been clearly formulated, anthropology has begun to receive that liberal share of public interest which was withheld from it as long as it was believed that it could do no more than record the curious customs and beliefs of strange peoples; or, at best, trace their relationships, and thus elucidate the early migrations of the races of man and the affinities of peoples.

While early investigators concentrated their attention upon this purely historical problem, the tide has now completely turned, so that there are even anthropologists who declare that such investigations belong to the historian, and that anthropological studies must be confined to researches on the laws that govern the growth of society. A radical change of method has accompanied this change of views. While formerly identities or similarities of culture were considered incontrovertible proof of historical connection, or even of common origin, the new school declines to consider them as such, but interprets them as results of the uniform working of the human mind. The most pronounced adherent of this view in our country is DR. D. G. Brinton, in Germany the majority of the followers of Bastian, who in this respect go much farther than Bastian himself. Others, while not denying the occurrence of historical connections, regard them as insignificant in results and in theoretical importance as compared to the working of the uniform laws governing the human mind. This is the view of by far the greater number of living anthropologists.

This modern view is founded on the observation that the same ethnical phenomena occur among the most diverse peoples, or, as Bastian says, on the appalling monotony of the fundamental ideas of mankind all over the globe. The metaphysical notions of man may be reduced to a few types which are of universal distribution; the same is the case in regard to the forms of society, laws and inventions. Furthermore, the most intricate and apparently illogical ideas and the most curious and complex customs appear among a few tribes here and there in such a manner that the assumption of a common historical origin is excluded. When studying the culture of any one tribe, more or less close analoga of single traits of such a culture may be found among a great diversity of peoples. Instances of such analoga have been collected to a vast extent by Tylor, Spencer, Bastian, Andree, Post and many others, so that it is not necessary to give here any detailed proof of this fact. The idea of a future life, the one underlying shamanism; inventions such as fire and the bow; certain elementary features of grammatical structure--these will suggest the classes of phenomena to which I refer. It follows from these observations that when we find an analogon of single traits of culture among distant peoples, the presumption is not that there has been a common historical source, but that they have arisen independently.

from Boas, Franz, *Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology*
1896



Review the following questions concerning the above passage. Write one best and one second best (incorrect) answer.

Which of the following is consistent with how the author might view a study presenting similar creation myths as evidence of trade routes between two ancient peoples?

According to the author, how would the anthropologist Bastian interpret the similarity between clan organization in a Native American tribal society and a Germanic tribe.

How would the author likely interpret the similarities in marriage customs between two tribal societies living in adjacent areas within a geographic region?

The passage suggests that the author believes the study of anthropology to be important because it: