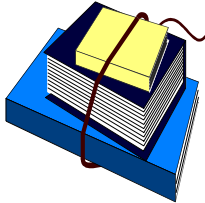


# The Philosopher's Stone

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group



## Our Ongoing Education

—pdg

Some of education's earliest roots stem from religion. Almost 2500 years ago, when China was racked with crime and political intrigue, Confucius taught standards of behavior and morality as part of an overall educational system. And from ancient Egypt to ancient India, the task of education often fell to priests, who taught writing and mathematics, along with their religious instruction. Of course, education in its broadest sense belongs to all humans as they teach their children, to all cultures as they impart their values and traditions to their young. More narrowly, education means literacy, at which point that education ceases to belong to everyone. It becomes the providence of the classes which own and control it. At least, this has been the Western experience.

Today, we expect both less and more than the ancients. On the one hand, most secular universities and secondary schools have little interest in

furthering the moral and ethical values of any particular religion. In fact, our Constitution demands a separation of Church and State. On the other, the task of conveying values, in whatever fashion or form, haphazard or no, often falls to the educational system in competition with a bewildering variety of influences from the media. It is an overwhelming responsibility in combination with the systems' primary educational goal of creating well-informed and literate citizens.

People who study literature, for example, often assume that it can contribute to the moral foundation of a reader, that it can make readers feel better about themselves, that it can heal psychological wounds, that it can mend history. But is this the case? Is the purpose of education simply to prepare students to take a place in the workforce? Or is it to prepare them to question the system itself? Or to find meaning in their individual lives? What *are* the benefits of an education? Should the benefit be primarily to the individual or the state?

Marshall McLuhan has even commented at length on the damaging effects of western literacy itself. "There is only one phonetic alphabet," says McLuhan, "in which semantically meaningless letters are used to correspond to semantically meaningless sounds." Such a division McLuhan calls 'crude

and ruthless, culturally speaking." The technological superiority of the western worlds stems from its alphabet. For McLuhan, the phonetic alphabet, the basis of what we now mean by education, the medium through which education comes, is the source of the western cultures' greatest flaws, as well as its strengths, although it is only the strengths that we examine.

We might ask ourselves a number of questions about education at the next meeting. Neil Postman has demonstrated that in the 19th century literacy meant much more to many more people than it does now. Given our economic and technological advantages, why should this be the case? Most people in college seem to seek only degrees that will earn money. Consequently, one might ask if contemplation and studying the arts, have languished, even among those who major in the humanities? Has our distrust of the culture that produced literacy led to a distrust of literacy itself? Have standards really fallen, as so many lament? And what is a standard anyway? Is a literate, educated populace somehow a better populace? Will they make more rational, more moral choices?

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Come to Gamble Hall, Room 213 (Honors Room), on Tuesday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, at 8:00 p.m. and share your ideas.

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## Quotations

The school system, custodian of print culture, has no place for the rugged individual. It is, indeed, the homogenizing hopper into which we toss our integral tots for processing.

### Marshall McLuhan

The only fence against the world is a thorough knowledge of it.

### John Locke

Education is the art of making man ethical.

### Georg Hegel

The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.

### James Baldwin

The liberally educated person is one who is able to resist the easy and preferred answers, not because he is obstinate but because he knows others worthy of consideration.

### Allan Bloom

## Notes from the Last Meeting

The February 16<sup>th</sup> meeting on media and their relationship to ethics began with a discussion of how ethical issues are affected by popular media. A number of questions were raised. Are the popular media really as influential on public ethics and morals as is generally supposed? What evidence exists, other than anecdotal, to support the general claim that personal responsibility has deteriorated in the last thirty years? If a concern for ethical issues has indeed declined in recent history, what are the causes and how strong (or tenuous) is the connection between this decline and the rise of media?

Furthermore, are there positive effects of media on the general population? And whatever the answer to this question, what should, if anything in a free society, be done to foster possible positive effects of media and protect against their dangers? More subtly, what are the effects of habitually watching television or film, whatever the program's or film's subject matter? Does the very act of passively viewing, rather than actively reading, make viewers more pliable more ready to be shaped by collective needs? And can we change?

## Meeting Times for Spring Semester

All meetings are at 8 p.m. in Room 213 (Honors Room) in Gamble Hall.

Tuesday, March 9  
Tuesday, March 30  
Tuesday, April 20

## Contributions

The PDG is always open to new ideas. If you've got any submissions or suggestions, please e-mail us at one of the addresses below or drop a note in the thought box in the Writing Center in Gamble 109.

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