

# THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

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*Please join us for our discussion on Technology (or anything else for that matter).  
We will meet in Gamble, room 213 on Monday, April 11 at 7:30 pm.*

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## Nihilism and Defiant Grass

By Arthur Tanny

How does one begin to look for truth, meaning or authenticity in the modern world? One might say that the answer is obscured by our dependency on technology. This dependency is a product of an addiction to progress. I believe our relation to technology is more of the symptom than the disease. We are living in a day and age where the machine not only controls us but permeates our mode of existence. Modern life is utterly and rigidly departmental. Everyone and everything has a function and routine. We use to have responsibilities governed by morality. We now have tasks delegated to us by some informed group. In this sense, technology is an extension of our "self." Our gadgets aid us in our tasks. With them we become multifunctional, faster and able to handle more tasks. Essentially we become more like the efficient, technological environment than like the irrational, sporadic mortals that

we are. We alienate our humanity, our meaning, and our authenticity by functionalizing and consuming mass produced products and information.

Consider this. I go to work five out of seven days of the week at about 3:00 p.m. I clock out of work promptly at 11:00 p.m. I trade eight hours of my life for \$50.00. I do this five days a week that is 40 hours of my life for 250.00 a week. Let's say I pay half of that for food, electric ect, ect. I still have 125.00. But after a hard week of work, I am unhappy partly because by Monday the process starts all over again. More importantly, I spent 40 hours being some one that I am not. I had to be a happy XYZ employee as well as an efficient, functional member of the team. Does this routine give my life any meaning? No. I am nothing more than an interchangeable part, replaceable at any moment, rather than a unique individual. Because I lack meaning and control over my "self," I fill the rest of my time and money on insignificant things like Popcorn poppers, VCRs, and Palm Pilots. I attempt to translate the money, the residue of my lost time on

objects. The meaning of my life is translated into information on my possessions. I have x amount of cars, I have cable with the deluxe plan, I have x amount of property. The commodities that I earn from my daily routine mystify me or separate me from my humanity. In this situation truth is purely information much like how a computer gauges truth or importance.

The easy diagnosis is that my despair is brought on by seeing myself as the sum of my accumulated property. The remedy is for me to simply stop working. However, this is not practical because at some point I will have to eat. The problem is not really the gadgets and gizmos I fill my life with it is the routine, and necessity for functionality. The "everydayness" of life is filled with a banality that drains the meaning and authenticity out of my life. Society does not cultivate meaning or authenticity. It creates a nihilist structure opposed to meaning and individuality. Function and the maximization of production are paramount.

The question still stands. How do we begin to search for

truth, meaning or authenticity in the modern world? I will admit our routines and the social forces around us are strong and indifferent to our struggles but they do not control us fully. Consider a paved sidewalk. When it is first laid down it is even and flat but in time the roots of nearby trees break it up. Grass always finds a way to erupt to the surface. Our routines are those paved sidewalks. To subvert our alienation we must oppose it by existing in sporadic moments of irrationality. Is irrationality the essence of human? Who knows? But it is certainly in opposition to the banality that the modern world thrusts upon us.

“This crown of the laughter, the rose-wreath crown: to you my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter I have pronounced holy: you higher men, *learn –to laugh!*”  
--Nietzsche *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part IV.

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### From Technopoly by Neil Postman

Indeed one way of defining a Technopoly is to say that its information immune system is inoperable. Technopoly is a form of cultural AIDS, which I here use as an acronym for Anti-Information Deficiency Syndrome....More important, it is why in a Technopoly there can be no transcendent sense of purpose or meaning, no cultural coherence. Information is dangerous when it has no place to go, when there is no theory to which it applies, no

pattern in which it fits, when there is no higher purpose it serves.

Information has become a form of garbage, not only incapable of answering the most fundamental human questions but barely useful in providing coherent direction to the solution of even mundane problems. To say it still another way: The milieu in which Technopoly flourishes is one in which the tie between information and human purpose has been severed, i.e., information appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose.

All of this has called into being a new world. I have referred to it elsewhere as a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a improbable world. It is a world in which the idea of human progress, as Bacon expressed it, has been replaced by the idea of technological progress. The aim is not to reduce ignorance, superstition, and suffering by to accommodate ourselves to the requirements of new technologies. We tell ourselves, or course, that such accommodations will lead to a better life, but that is only the rhetorical residue of a vanishing technocracy. We are a culture consuming itself with information, and many of us do not even wonder how to control the process. We proceed under the assumption that information is our friend, believing that cultures may suffer grievously from a lack of information, which, of course, they do. It is only now beginning to be understood that

cultures may also suffer grievously from information glut, information without meaning, information without control mechanisms.

Technopoly is a state of culture. It is also a state of mind. It consists in the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology. This requires the development of a new kind of social order, and of necessity leads to the rapid dissolution of much that is associated with traditional beliefs. Those who feel most comfortable in Technopoly are those who are convinced that technical progress is humanity's supreme achievement and the instrument by which our most profound dilemmas may be solved.

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If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Chris Dunn or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for *The Philosopher's Stone*, please contact either of us (it doesn't have to be good, however it does have to be thoughtful).

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