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# The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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# The Philosopher's Stone

September 22, 2016

Philosophical Discussion Group

Volume 19, Number 1

The 1<sup>st</sup> Cave meeting of the PDG will be Thurs. 9/29 @ 4pm in G 106

## ***Would you like some ideology with those Fries?***

By Austin Freeman  
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A monk silently prays before the image of Christ. A comrade raises a banner with the sickle and hammer amidst the crowd gathered in Red Square. Casual shoppers peruse among the Belks and Game Stops of the malls. A



gamer emblematically impresses herself into a virtual world with an avatar. What binds all of these people together? They are all relating to symbols that make up their universe of meanings. Granted, all of these symbols mean different things to the various people involved, but why do humans feel this need to infuse meaning via symbols into their mental and visual environments?

"ON THE INTERNET, WE'RE ALL BODILESS, SYMBOLS SPEAKING TO SYMBOLS IN SYMBOLS."

-NICHOLAS CARR, *UTOPIA IS CREEPY*

Should we not wonder how symbols happen in the first place? How might the production of symbols have changed over time, and if so why does that change matter? Clearly at different points in

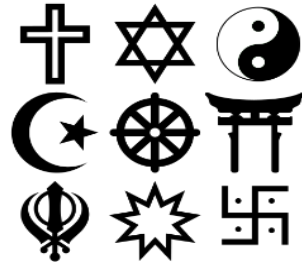
history, cultures have had different relations to symbols. For example, in Europe during the middle ages one would rarely see images outside of a church or the residence of the extremely wealthy, thus giving those images much more power and weight by their rarity. In contrast, in the digital world one can demand any image at any time thereby destroying the image's gravitas. This

"...ALTHOUGH SYMBOLS, ESPECIALLY IMAGES, ARE ENDLESSLY REPEATABLE, THEY ARE NOT INEXHAUSTIBLE... THE MORE FREQUENTLY A SIGNIFICANT SYMBOL IS USED, THE LESS POTENT IS ITS MEANING."

– NEIL POSTMAN, *TECHNOPOLY*

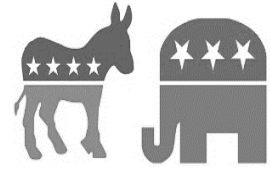
suggests a distinction between symbols that are naturally, or at least spontaneously, occurring and those that are self-consciously manufactured for the most efficient psychological impact and economic effect. Neil Postman argues in his book *Technopoly* that with the advent of new technology, symbols can be given new meanings at such a fast, massive and expedient scale that what is actually occurring is the stripping away of all meaning in what he calls "the great symbol drain".<sup>1</sup> If this is so what does that mean for our digital age? Given the plethora of memes, it certainly seems that symbols can be endlessly given new meanings which then spread prolifically.

Why do humans seek to surround themselves with images that are infused with meaning? Do we create the meanings we attach to these images or is meaning somehow inherent in the symbols themselves, perhaps derived from nature? Are there symbols given by God? If so, how are they distinguished from the ones we make or those that emerge from our evolutionary past to survive? What is the meaning of all this meaning?



Moreover, symbols appear to affect us and our identities just as much, if not more so, than we affect the symbols. How does living in these worlds of symbols affect the persons living there? As Turner states, "Symbols too are crucially involved in societal change- the symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends and means, aspirations and ideals, individual and collective whether these have to be explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from

other behavior."<sup>2</sup> So perhaps our very identity is both shaped by and shaping the symbols that exist around us. If this is so then what does this mean for the self? Is the self merely a product of society and the symbols it identifies with? Am I really just ordering fries, or do the golden arches symbolically change at a deeper level who I am?



#### Notes

1. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 164.
2. Victor W. Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology* (New Delhi: Concept, 1979), 13.

Symbolically speaking, will you risk following these symbols to Gamble Hall 106 on Sept. 29 @ 4pm? Do you worry about your symbol dependence – possibly the strongest addiction of them all? Non-symbolic free pizza and drinks are provided along with free symbolic meaning.

–Dr. Erik Nordenhaug, PDG Faculty Advisor

## A Thought Experiment: Can We Receive Messages To Ourselves Through Others?

**"We Live Forward and Learn Backward." – Søren Kierkegaard**

Armstrong Philosophy Students From the past twenty years were asked the following:

If you could send a message about philosophy back in time to the "YOU" that attended Armstrong way back when, what would you tell yourself? What message would you like our current impressionable philosophy students to know about the value of philosophy outside of academia in real life?

**"If there is one thing I could say to my former self - an idealistic, neurotic student in pursuit of philosophy and literature - I would say this: remember that the tension afforded by the deeper questions you ask is the key to sustained freedom. This complacency and comfort which is espoused by the crowd and the onward march of technique - it is really nothing but despair, the worst kind of despair. If you want to make it out or through alive, live in the freedom of the tension and don't shy away from the cliffs. The world around you is screaming at itself for release, and the pursuit of truth is the only way out."**

**-- Evan Dixon, class of 2011, Graduate student in English Education**

[A new message to ourselves will be shared in each new issue as voices from Armstrong's past become present.]