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A Modern Deity

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Recommended Citation

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University, "A Modern Deity" (2001). *The Philosopher's Stone*. 22.

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group

A Modern Deity

by Eric Verhine

That technology has remade the physical world in which we live no one doubts. That it has made possible the production of vast quantities of material goods no one doubts. That technology, with its air conditioning, internet, and airplanes, has eased and softened life no one hesitates to affirm and enjoy. That technology, in producing nuclear and of late biological weapons of complete destruction, has yielded to humankind the ability to commit mass suicide no one can dispute. That technology has touched every aspect of our external lives few would question. But what has it done to our inner lives? How has technology altered the way we think, the way we conceive of things, the way we relate things and relate to them, the way we experience our own and the emotions of others, and, most generally, the ways in which modern human beings engage the world?

Dr. Nordenhaug, teacher of philosophy at AASU, considers these types of questions to be of utmost importance. The importance of these questions regarding the relation between technological society and human valuing and thinking prompted Dr. Nordenhaug to design a course called "Technology,

Society, and Human Values." In an interview with Ann Stifter of the Savannah Morning News, Nordenhaug says, "how technology alters mentality is one of my favorite courses to teach. People treat technology as simple machines. They think because there's an off switch it's not affecting them." On September 13, Nordenhaug will lead the Philosophical Debate Group in a discussion of how technology has affected human thinking, addressing questions like the ones I raised in the opening paragraph.

As Nordenhaug notes, "people" – that is, of course, most people most of the time – do not think about how one of the most significant components of their lives, technology, affects them mentally and emotionally. At first thought it may seem odd that people miss something so significant. But, in fact, technology is one of those realities and structures of their experience so common and, in a sense, so near to them, that reflecting on it rarely occurs to people. Technology is now a constant, pervasive, usual element of human life, and thus seldom draws forth any consideration of itself as a unique and somewhat strange element. In a highly ironic sense, technology stands in the same relation to the thinking of most moderns as God did to those who lived during the long period when Christianity

dominated the West: as an assumed, unquestioned, omnipresent reality that structures all experience of the world. Few people, that is, think about their televisions unless they show static, or about their high-tech sound component unless it fails to damage the hearing of friends who have come over to watch a movie.

Walker Percy, the novelist and philosopher, was not such a person, though he was an avid television viewer. (Percy enjoyed doing odd things like turning off the sound while he was watching television. This is an interesting game to play. After a while, all the scenes begin to seem absurd, as does, to borrow from Albert Camus, the fool ranting in a phone booth whom one is watching but cannot hear.) Percy, who admitted that he enjoyed the "Shakespeare series on PBS but also *The Incredible Hulk*," was interested in figuring out "the nature of the effect television has had on people's consciousnesses." For example, Percy wanted to know how watching sitcom after sitcom would affect a viewer. As he points out, most sitcoms have "a predicament and a resolution," all presented in a nice half-hour package. Percy continues, "now, if one sees maybe six such resolutions per night and thirty or forty a week, surely the concept must be formed in the viewer's mind that this is the way life is

supposed to be. So what happens when kids grow up with the idea that life is supposed to have this form?"

Reflections such as this just get us started. This particular consideration of the effect that sitcom viewing may have on consciousness one might call a narrow and pointed instance of a vast phenomenon that reaches perhaps every aspect of human life. Nordenhaug suggests a broader and substantially more significant example of how technology has affected and still affects human consciousness when he says in his interview, "we think of people as technical problems to be solved." To understand this phenomenon requires more reflection.

Human beings, whether in poems, theological treatises, political tracts, or common parlance, have always had ways of conceiving of themselves: metaphorical perspectives that highlight, make sense of, and actually communicate certain human qualities. Before the advent of technology and the Industrial Era humans often, for instance, conceived of themselves in terms of the natural world. A fine example of this is *Song of Songs*, a book from the Old Testament canon in which one lover describes another in terms of the physical world he or she encounters. For instance, the female's flowing hair is described metaphorically as "a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead." I could pile up countless instances of pre-technological humans conceiving of themselves and their fellow humans in terms of nature, or in terms of a

heavenly realm (i.e. "angelic"), or in terms of music.

After the advent of technology, humans began to conceive of themselves in terms of technology, drawing on the new material devices and structures around them and on the ways of thinking that produced these things. (I should note, of course, that much of this conceiving of self was and is done unconsciously and that humans usually do not realize that they are thinking in metaphorical perspectives.) Thus, in psychology, people began to think of human beings "as technical problems to be solved." This way of conceiving of the human self had real practical impact: it lay the conceptual foundation for treating humans by technology, by such horrors as electric shock therapy and the lobotomy. This approach to correcting human behavior is what Ken Kesey satirizes and criticizes in his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

But there is still so much more to consider in this fascinating area of inquiry. For instance, Nordenhaug likes to point out that the way in which many conceive of the progress and course of their individual lives – as getting this (a degree) to get to that (a job), and that to get to this (financial security) – is itself a "technological way of thinking." And then there is the effect of impersonal means of communication – the printing press, the television, the telephone, the internet – on human relations. And there is the effect of quick and easy travel on people's notions of place and home. And do cameras preserve

or do they take away our experience of the world? And is it really good that humans live longer considering that the average person spends 10 years of his or her life watching television? And has the appearance of the word processor produced worse writers? I will stop here, but I hope you will bring your own questions to the meeting. Or has technology altered your consciousness so much that questions without answers, problems without solutions, conditions without cures, and predicaments without resolutions simply do not register on it anymore?

On September 13, the Philosophical Debate Group will meet to discuss this issue of our modern technological mentality. Dr. Nordenhaug will lead this discussion. The meeting will be held in the Honor's Lounge on the second floor of Gamble Hall at 7:30 p.m.

If you have any comments, criticisms, or contributions for the Philosopher's Stone, please send them either to me, Eric Verhine, or to Dr. Nordenhaug. Or if you are interested in writing for the Philosopher's Stone or helping with the PDG, please contact either of us.

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