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The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group

Mathematics and Philosophy

by Dr. Lesser

Dr. Larry Lesser is Associate Professor of Mathematics and the Arthur M. Gignilliat Jr. Professor at AASU. At Rice University, he took several courses in philosophy, and he has explored many of its aspects in his academic career, ranging from his teaching an interdisciplinary ethics module at AASU to teaching a full 3-credit course on the "Philosophy of Mathematics Education" for the University of Northern Colorado. Lesser will introduce several interesting and accessible foundational issues and examples of the interplay between philosophy and the content, practice and teaching of mathematics and statistics. Lesser will then facilitate a lively discussion (with no mathematical prerequisites!) of the ideas raised. Here are a few teasers to whet your appetite. Is mathematics created or discovered? What metaphysical assumptions (assumptions about the essential nature of reality) are implicit in a course on "Mathematical Modeling"? How is the 17th and 18th century epistemological schism between the rationalists and empiricists played out by today's statisticians? How does one's metaphysics of mathematics and moral values play out in one's teaching of mathematics? Is mathematics value-free? What ethical dilemmas might a mathematician face? What mathematical tools might help an ethicist?

If this topic and these questions interest you, please join the Philosophical Debate Group on Wednesday, October 10 for our discussion, led by Dr. Lesser. We will meet in Gamble Hall in the Honor's Lounge, at 7:30.

A Philosophical Fieldtrip!

On October 25 at 7:00 p.m., Dr. Nordenhaug is giving a lecture entitled "Reflections on Aristotle, Bureaucracy, and Terrorism: Where Has All the Virtue Gone?" for the Georgia Southern Philosophy Club, and the dauntless PDG is traveling alongside him. After the meeting, we will have dinner in the fine city of Statesboro and then return home. Anyone interested in going should contact Eric Verhine or Dr. Nordenhaug. We plan to charter the AASU van for this historic trip.

This is an important event, since Dr. Nordenhaug, Dr. Weiss (professor of philosophy at Southern), and I are attempting to establish some link between Georgia Southern's Philosophy Club and the bold PDG. A merger of such intellectually eminent groups would cause, I am certain, a grand stir in the Southeast. So come! Be part of Southern philosophical history!

Summary of the Previous Meeting

by Eric Verhine

On September 13, Dr. Nordenhaug led the Philosophical Debate Group in a discussion of modern technological society. He opened this discussion with a consideration of where this society may be going, and where it may be taking each of us. In order to understand his predictions, predictions which he did not put forth dogmatically or with certainty, one must first understand something of the perspective from which he approached the issue and ventured to understand it. I must endeavor to make this perspective clear, as it is not one which most people hold. (The following speculations on technological society are not primarily

my own, alas, but come mainly from the work of the French philosopher of technology Jacques Ellul.)

That we live in a technological society does not mean simply that we make use of machinery and computers and helpful gadgets; it is not simply that we employ tools. For, all societies have made use of tools. What is unique about our society is the commonness, the universality, the omnipresence of technology. Technology's ubiquitous and vast presence in our lives has made us think of it as an end, rather than a means, as such a significant and substantial reality that we must uphold and sustain it for its own sake.

It has become also an indicator or measure of progress, since we, like most strong societies of the past, identify our society as the norm to which others must advance. A "Third World Country" is classified as such because it is "underdeveloped," which means that it lacks the economic structure and wealth, the technological stockpile and prowess of our society.

But something is much more essential to technological society than even these obvious points. A technological society is one which quests for the most efficient method, means, or technique in every aspect of life. *A boundless multitude of techniques, applied to every aspect of human life, and a single, overpowering technical value – efficiency – dominates a technological society.* A technological society focuses primarily on achieving the best means in every field or facet of life. It insists upon being measured objectively by numbers or quantitative means. The sole, ultimate, and tyrannical value of technological society is efficiency, which assumes the place in this society of Plato's "The Good" and Calvin's "majesty and glory of God." Efficiency is the majesty and glory of God, which in our society is Technique.

Technological society thus eliminates or hinders spontaneous and

unconscious human behavior. It values, though implicitly, means over ends. It rejects and overthrows traditions in the inane quest for the single most efficient means.

Some examples will make the preceding paragraphs clearer. Religion is ideally conceived as a spontaneous and experiential response to God of the individual in a dynamic and personal relationship with the Deity. The religion of technological society (and I am in particular thinking of Christianity) is not marked by this quality. The concentration of Christian churches today is on technique. Note the techniques that Christian churches employ: Sunday School, altar calls, prearranged revivals (which is a contradiction in terms), "Visitation Teams" which have their techniques for performing house calls, various "Programs" for drawing children and youth and singles, forms of advertisement such as marquees, a glut of "church growth" books and seminars and videos. Technique consumes modern Christian churches (the church visible, of course). Moreover, the measure of success for the Christian churches of today is numbers. How many members does a church have? A great church is synonymous with a large church. And the individual, and her communion with the Divine, and her attainment of genuine religious affections, and her increase in holiness are at best secondary concerns, at worst, nonexistent ones.

Also consider sex, perhaps the most spontaneous, unconscious, and pleasurable of all human activities. Walk through Barnes and Noble, and you will quickly come across so called "sex manuals." Just imagine, a technique, a manual for performing the most intimate act of your life! With the provided techniques you can produce orgasms as efficiently as you can produce a salad with the Salad Shooter Plus!

And what about friendship? Well, for friendship there are the "How to Win Friends" books, which provide a set of techniques for manufacturing a friend. Read them, and you will have numerous friends and the knowledge for making more at your will.

You see, technological society sucks intimacy, spontaneity, intuition,

abandon, and uncalculated experience out of life, and replaces them with means and methods for attaining the most efficient operation in each sphere of experience.

Having set forth this theoretical background regarding technological society, I can present what Dr. Nordenhaug calls "The Great Design for Humanity by the Technological Society." This type of society, Nordenhaug asserts, will eventually produce three basic kinds of human beings with four basic duties.

The three types of human beings are as follows. First, there is the perfectly adapted human: from youth she will be trained and adapted to the requirements of the smooth functioning of science and technological development. Second, the fascinated human: he will be more intellectually transcendent, but fascinated by the marvels of science and technique and by the ever growing opportunities of human life. He will analyze those opportunities and live with the hope that technology will make life better. And third, there is the diverted human: games, gadgets, and distractions of all kinds will occupy his mind and spirit. He will flutter around the many brilliant lamps and possibilities of escape.

Four basic duties will be required of all groups as technology alters inner understanding. The first and chief duty is to work well, painstakingly, and punctually. The second is not to allow collective matters to bother or concern oneself, not to become involved, to leave things to those who are qualified (the specialists) to operate them: politicians to govern, doctors and hospitals to see to the sick and elderly, churches to dispense tranquility. Each is to have her own sphere, follow her own function, and "do her thing," leaving all the rest to be taken care of by the collective. The third duty is to be a good consumer, to have a good wage and to spend it, since consumption is the only absolute and imperative duty. And the fourth duty is to follow the opinions propagated by the media, to adopt the information and themes for reflection that are proposed and not to seek further afield.

When Nordenhaug had finished presenting his material, discussion began. Several persons made

objections to Nordenhaug's bleak prophecy. One person stated that the predictions are too broad and do not admit of individual anomalies. This is true, but one must realize that no holistic picture can account for all persons and duties and actions. Of course there will be exceptions. The point is that the exceptions are becoming fewer and fewer, and their voices quieter and quieter. How many of you are actively and attentively challenging your duty to be a consumer? This absence of challenge to consumerism is not, as Marx would say, a result of necessities imposed by capitalism. Rather, it is a result, as Ellul would say, of the mastery of *human* technique, methods and means and devices (television, advertising) for creating, cultivating, and controlling human desires, fears, and "needs" and for moving masses of individuals.

Everyone felt the problem, and one of the overriding concerns for the remainder of the meeting became escaping or halting technological society. If it is indeed what Nordenhaug says it is, as well as Ellul and Martin Heidegger, how can we stop it? How can we escape its negative influences upon us and once again gain control of technique?

Ellul takes up this question in the preface to the American edition of his book *Technological Society*. He says that there are three possibilities. First, thermonuclear war could occur; humanity could destroy itself. Second, God could "intervene" in history (Ellul was a Christian). And third, a great number of individuals could realize the dangers posed by technique, and raise up in rebellion against it. The third is the most optimistic, and, I would say, least likely. And I don't believe in God.

If you have any comments, criticisms, or contributions for the Philosopher's Stone, please send them either to Eric Verhine, or Dr. Nordenhaug.

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