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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

Higher Education: Practically Useful or Existentially Meaningful?

"I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up." H.D. Thoreau

Untold semesters and even quarters ago when I began my college career, as it has come to be, I was a snobbish freshman at the University of Georgia. Those were the days of long ago, grim, inconvenient days of the early nineties in which most people were bereft of access to the internet. Thus, registration for classes was a gruesome, all day venture in which the prospective student had to actually write – yes write, by hand on paper! – what classes he or she wished to take and then stand in a line that stretched long in the ireful summer sun over those steep Athenian hills.

As I stood in one of those lines awaiting my turn to be told, "Sorry, all the classes you signed up for are closed," I noticed an older man trying to make eye contact with me, in

order to start a conversation, I supposed. Being a good freshman, I ignored him. How could I risk the humiliation of having my future classmates think I was talking to my dad? But this did not deter my friend, inclined as he was to conversation. He soon spoke to me, asking me all the usual questions. Then the topic turned to my major. I told him, "I'm majoring in German." "Wow," he said, "that's ambitious. But yeah, I got some friends who do business in Germany. Good business there too." To this my pompous freshman mouth replied, "I wouldn't know anything about that. I'm majoring in German Literature."

Then he asked me the questions, those questions which every person pursuing studies in the humanities must and will encounter: "Why? What are you going to do with that? What *can* you do with that degree? Are you gonna teach?" Soon he lost interest in me, and as I listened to his conversation with a future computer programming major in front of me, I learned that he was himself a businessman. How unanticipated. The young computer programming major stunned my former friend with

his business instinct, his contacts, and his prospects. Then he announced to us both – I was partially included in the conversation – what he anticipated his starting salary, four years from then, would be. Ecstatic at the numbers, my older friend said to the future computer programming genius, "Goodness! Don't tell that to this poor guy!"

I was "this poor guy," and as my older friend introduced the future computer programmer to his daughter, the thought of how different I was from these two shiny men impressed me. What differentiated us mainly were our respective assumptions about the purpose and value of education. To these men, so it seemed to me then, and so it seems now, the purpose of education was to provide the student with the training necessary to get a high-paying job. The value of education derived from its function as a means of acquiring the greater ends of monetary wealth and financial comfort.

At that time in my life, I loftily disdained such views of education, but, I must admit, I did so more because I wanted to seem an intellectual than because I actually understood the inherent purpose and value

of education. (Unfortunately, many of our scornful opinions come not from genuine understanding, but from an ignoble ambition to conceive of ourselves as superior to others.) Now, however, having at last reached the end of my undergraduate education, I have reasons to replace my pride.

Authentic education is useless. It is not merely a step to a job or promotion; it does not pay in dollars. It does not submit its neck to quantification and numerical measurement. It has nothing to do with grades or awards or credit hours. Authentic education cannot be written down on a piece of paper; it cannot be proved by a certificate. It is not a respecter of institutions; colleges and universities may significantly facilitate education, but they are not requisite for it to occur.

Authentic education is the unending development toward a higher understanding of oneself and one's world and toward a higher understanding of how and why to live in the world. Education is a process learning oneself and how one is to be oneself in the larger world of other selves and things. Plato's *Phaedrus* best clarifies the meaning of this definition of education. Early in this dialogue, Socrates and Phaedrus are discussing the truth or falsity of their common Greek mythology when Socrates breaks off the conversation, saying, "Now I have no time for such

enquiries. Shall I tell you why?" His answer to why he has no time to discuss mythology is among the greatest statements of the meaning of education: "I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; to be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. And therefore I bid farewell to all this... For I want to know not about this, but about myself. Am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a diviner and lowlier destiny?"

If this definition of education is correct, then education seldom happens at Armstrong. What happens in most classrooms at this and other universities is a tedious training for examinations. Moreover, most of the knowledge disseminated in classrooms has nothing to do with oneself or one's life, but with dull facts about the world. The quest after the self and after the good life is wholly absent from our classroom and after-class discussions, and if someone ever does pose a problem that has real meaning for our actual lives, both professor and students nervously seek a hasty return to the "material to be covered in class."

In ancient Greece, according to Socrates, what diverted men from authentic

education was their education in mythology. In modern America, what chiefly diverts us from authentic education is our educational mythology: that education is a means to wealth and social success, that it can be measured numerically and certified by a piece of paper, that it happens every day. This mythology is not so much false as it is existentially meaningless.

Please join the PDG on Thursday, October 17th for our discussion on the nature and value of education. This article is intended only as an instigator of philosophical discussion, though it is my sincere view of education. But please bring your own view (B. Y. O. V.). As always, we meet in the Honor's Lounge in Gamble Hall at 7:30.

If you have any comments, questions, or criticisms regarding "The Philosopher's Stone" or the Philosophical Debate Group, or if you would like to submit a topic or article for debate, please contact either Eric Verhine or Dr. Erik Nordenhaug.

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