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“Classical Perspectives on the 21st Century”

by Stephen Bertman

Editor's Preview: By harkening back to the questions of “permanent relevance” once raised by the Greeks we can begin to understand our future. This address was presented at Hillsdale College on April 12, 1988, cosponsored by the Center for Constructive Alternatives and the United States Industrial Council Educational Foundation.

I hope my title intrigued you, for what I will try to do here is connect the ancient world with the world of the future.

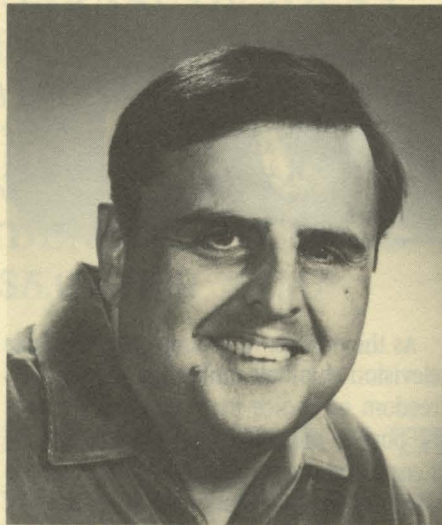
To begin, let us go back to the oldest work of Western literature that survives, the *Iliad* of Homer. In that story of war and human passion there is a scene that takes place on the blood-stained plain before the city of Troy. A fierce battle is raging between the warriors of Troy and their Greek enemies. To blind the Greek army so the Trojans can gain the advantage, Zeus, king of the gods, sends darkness over the battlefield. In the midst of that darkness, a Greek warrior named Ajax raises his voice in prayer:

Father Zeus, deliver us from the darkness and make the sky clear. Let us see with our eyes. Slay us in the light, if slay us you must. (*Iliad*, 17:645-647)

The warrior we meet is tormented by darkness. He prays for light, even if the coming of that light will ultimately mean his death. “If I must die,” he says, “let me die in the light.”

The Greek Way

Words such as these express an ancient Greek compulsion—the compulsion to see and under-



stand. Conversely, to be in darkness was to be in torment, to be in hell. The hunger for light, however, existed long before the Trojan War and long before the Greeks. It existed in prehistoric times when human beings, transcending their awe of the flame, used torch-light to banish the darkness of caves and overcome their fear of the unknown.

In the religion of ancient Greece the prehistoric torch was transmuted into Athena's lamp. Athena was the goddess of wisdom, and her gift to mankind was the olive—a source of food but also a source of fuel. From the beaten olive came forth oil that fed the lamps of ancient Greece. The light from those lamps could banish darkness and provide enlightenment to mankind.

It was the Greeks who created what we call philosophy, the rational search for truth. Philosophy sought, with the power of the mind, to replace the dark unknown with understanding. Though philosophers lived in many parts of Greece, no city

became as renowned for philosophy as Athens, a city whose very name echoed Athena's.

A man named Socrates once lived in Athens, a man who committed his life to the search for truth and who gave mortal witness to the importance of that search. Tried as a subversive because his interrogations had infuriated the pompous, he was offered his life in exchange for his silence. If he would only stop asking questions, they would leave him alone; but if he persisted, he would be executed.

Socrates' answer was that “the life which is unexamined is not worth living.” In short, if he couldn't be free to ask questions, then it wasn't worth being alive. What Socrates meant, and what he gave his life to prove, is that existence alone is insufficient; one must also have the freedom to examine one's existence.

Thanks to his disciple, Plato, Socrates lived on in a series of philosophical dialogues Plato wrote, the most famous of which is *The Republic*. In the seventh chapter, or “book,” of this work, Plato paints a picture, a picture of an imaginary cave. Facing the rear wall of the cave are people who have spent their entire lives in its darkness, bound in such a way that they can only look at the wall, unable to turn their heads. Since they have lived in the cave since childhood, that wall is all they have ever seen. Behind them is a blazing fire whose light is used by mysterious puppeteers to create shadow images on the wall. The prisoners believe these shadows to be reality, for the shadows are the only reality they have ever known.

Plato tells us the cave is a metaphor for our intellectual lives. All of us live in a cave, all of us are trapped by its darkness, and

we must somehow break free of the bondage of misinformation to find our way out into the sunlight of truth.

The Burden of Choice

Yet this is not my theme. Far from it! For I wish instead to present you with a radical proposal: that now, and for the rest of this century, and on into the 21st, the enemy will not be darkness, but light. Too much light.

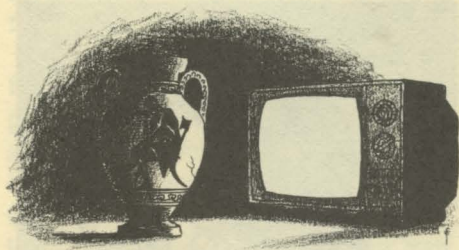
While the history of technology can be traced along many lines, one of the most intriguing lines of development is that of phototechnology, the technology of light. From the prehistoric invention of fire to laser beams and fibre optics, light has continually occupied the minds of inventors. Their inventions fall into two categories: the use of light to aid vision and, more fascinatingly, the use of light for purposes of communication.

The use of light for communication is one of the major directions that technology has taken since the middle of the 19th century. From still photography to motion pictures to television (with a progression from black-and-white to color imagery in each), phototechnology has had a profound effect upon mass communication and mass education. Unlike the printed word, visual images have more impact because they are more immediate: They simulate reality in a way that the printed word cannot. Unlike alphabetic shapes, they are not abstract; unlike words, they require no symbolic interpretation by the mind. Coupled with the widespread and uniform dissemination of such images, phototechnology affects the thinking of vast audiences and shapes their perception of reality.

Ironically, this was all anticipated by our friend, Plato, for the prisoners in the cave are not conditioned by darkness per se but by images projected through the use of

light. Nor should the prisoners be termed a captive audience only. So conditioned are they by their lifelong education, they would challenge anyone who denied their shadowy truth. And if somebody went into that cave and tried to free them and pull them from their seats and bring them into the sunlight, they might even kill such a person, Plato says, recalling the fate of his very own teacher, Socrates.

Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, millions of Americans are simultaneously affected by the commercially-inspired electronic manipulation of artificial images. We call it "entertainment" and can't wait to get more. Lest the shadows slip through our fingers, we set our VCRs to record what we "missed."



As the number of commercially available television channels multiplies, the viewer's freedom of choice increases, but so does the burden of that choice. Increasingly he is confronted with multiple stimuli and is asked to make instantaneous choices of growing complexity—all in the name of personal fulfillment.

More significantly, the ease and rapidity of mass communication has created a regenerating supply of information greater than can readily be absorbed. Inundated by a surfeit of information, the individual struggles to swim through a sea churning with random data.

Though "decision stress" and "information overload" were identified almost two decades ago by Alvin Toffler in his book, *Future Shock*, they continue to be symptomatic of our social condition.

In the face of overstimulation, the distinction between what is more important and what is less important can easily be lost. But just as threatening are the mechanisms that have been developed, both personal and social, to protect the psyche from this overload. Forced to handle too much data, the individual may practice "psychological absenteeism": avoiding responsibility and decisions, chemically insulating his psyche from reality, and

seeking various forms of sensual gratification and substitutes for understanding. Just as the pupil of the eye contracts in response to excessive light, so the receptors of the mind contract in response to excessive information.

In addition to these mechanisms, there is also the tendency to deliberately oversimplify, to jettison data because there is simply too much on board. In mass communications, such simplification can soothe the harried brain. The use of the "happy talk" format for local television news, the minimal treatment of world issues on such programs, the reduction of complex stories to headlines and captions, and the rise of the picture-oriented newspaper, "USA Today," all illustrate this phenomenon. The nourishment given by such superficial images cannot sustain the health of a democracy.

Eden's New Apple

The desire for simplification also explains the computer. Having invented the means for the instantaneous collection of information, human beings discovered that such technology produces impulses too many and too rapid for the human neurological system to absorb. Long regarded by many as a danger because of its alien and remote nature, the computer has become personal, user-friendly, and a part of our everyday lives. Though many once looked upon it as a monster, others now see it as a savior. In reality, of course, it is neither. Like technology itself, the computer is a tool that can be used for purposes both evil and good. The computer cannot "solve all our problems," for we must first define what our problems truly are, and which of them can be addressed meaningfully in quantitative terms.

In 1928, before the computer age had dawned, American poet Archibald MacLeish wrote the following lines:

We have learned the answers, all the answers; it is the questions that we do not know.

Yes, we do have the answers, lots of answers, more answers than we know what to do with. Our computers are crammed with answers. But what is the question, the question that will endow those random facts with significance, with purpose? Like orphaned keys found in an attic drawer, facts by themselves are useless, however bright and shiny they may seem.

(continued on page 4)

About the Author

Stephen Bertman is Professor of Classical and Modern Languages, Literatures, and Civilizations at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada. With a Ph.D. from Columbia University in Greek and Latin, he also holds degrees in Near Eastern and Judaic studies and in ancient Greek and classical civilization. Dr. Bertman's latest book is *Doorways Through Time; The Romance of Archaeology* (St. Martin's Press).

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

July 8, 1988

Give to the College a Choice

by William E. Simon

Popular wisdom has it that Lenin said, "The capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them." Yet, I doubt even Lenin himself dared to dream that American business would donate the funds to finance the destruction of freedom here at home.

But we are doing so. The American business community all too often goes AWOL in the struggle to defend freedom where it is under siege every day—not just in Congress, but in the academic institutions of this country.

How ironic that academic America could be transformed into a great bastion of intellectual rigidity and reaction, and that this reaction could be rooted not on the right, but the left, as encrusted elites become more belligerent—at times, hysterical—in their determination to dominate the ivory towers of our leading colleges and universities.

Intolerance is un-American—period. Men and women of enterprise must stop capitulating and insist that the great values of Western civilization receive a full and fair hearing on the campuses of their alma maters. Otherwise, we will have nobody to blame but ourselves for permitting the largesse of private enterprise to subsidize the slide into statism.

Those at the Top

Recent events at two of America's most prestigious schools illustrate that the assault on freedom may not only be condoned by, but even directed by, those at the top.

For many years, Stanford University has waged war on the quasi-independent Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, finding its scholarly balance out of place at a school now dedicated to a narrow creed of collectivism and pacifism.

In its latest volley, Stanford voted to forcibly retire Hoover's highly successful but independent director, W. Glenn Campbell, presumably to find a replacement more amenable to Stanford's diktats.

Stanford's pattern of scholastic bias and academic double standards is, by now, well-established. In 1983, the school expelled a scholar from the Ph.D. program for documenting the Chinese policy of massive, coerced abortions. Earlier this year, it removed several books from its core Western civilization reading list because of the sex or race of their authors.

And, while Stanford's president, Donald Kennedy, campaigned openly in 1986 for Rose

Bird, the leftist chief justice of the California Supreme Court who was later voted off the bench, Hoover fellows who contribute research and writing to the public debate are termed unduly "political."

Dartmouth College, not to be outdone, recently took aim at one of the most sprightly, provocative college newspapers in the country, the *Dartmouth Review*, expelling several of its editors when the paper reported on a music professor's classroom behavior. The *Dartmouth Review's* article, backed up by a transcript of the professor's class, detailed his windy political diatribes, routine use of obscenities, demeaning references to women, and characterizations of various individuals as "honkies . . . racist dogs . . . and scum of the earth."

When the paper's editors approached the professor, offering him a chance to reply, he exploded in a tirade of screams and obscenities and struck one of the editors. Yet at the hearing that followed, it was the students who were accused of harassment, denied any legal counsel and summarily prejudged and expelled by Dartmouth's president, who refused even to meet with them.

Stanford and Dartmouth are not alone. In scenes reminiscent of the '60s, colleges are, once again, becoming a battleground—and an uneven one at that—with radicals trampling the right of free expression and bullying those who do not share their zealotry to place ideology over the pursuit of truth.

In recent years, former U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick has been silenced at Berkeley, Smith, the University of Minnesota and Barnard. My own school, Lafayette, approved the awarding of an honorary degree to Mrs. Kirkpatrick in 1987. But, after the faculty took it upon itself to stage a vote to convey its displeasure, Mrs. Kirkpatrick, feeling unwelcome, declined the invitation.

Then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, invited to address a Harvard Law School forum in November 1983, was repeatedly interrupted by hecklers who threw bags of red dye and screamed insults, calling him a war criminal.

Contra leaders Eden Pastora and Adolfo Calero were prevented from speaking at Columbia in November 1983 and Harvard in November 1987, respectively.

I have always believed, but never more than now, that we in the American business community have a right and a responsibility to steer our gifts to institutions committed to maintaining freedom.

This is not to suggest that business people, any more than government or anyone else, have a right to dictate what our universities teach. But we most certainly do have a right to defend freedom when the left, under the sheltering arm of tenure, is so clearly tilting many schools toward Marxist teachings, even as their model is retreating across the world in intellectual, political and economic disarray.

No other society in the world has given greater liberty to those who are so contemptuous of that liberty as has America. Nor has any other society reached such heights of prosperity for its citizens, and yet raised an entire, new class of people who are hostile to the very institutions that made that progress possible.

For too long, too many alumni have avoided facing these unpleasant facts. But the situation will not improve until more of us shed our ambivalence, renounce any posture of passivity, and wade in as aggressive participants in the great battle for the ideas that will shape our future.

Nesting Place for Scholars

Alumni can work positively and constructively for their ideas and ideals. We can take the time to identify, reach out to and support scholars and intellectuals who are committed to freedom, men and women who understand the nexus between economic freedom and political freedom, the link between capitalism and democracy, and who also know that intellectual job that needs to be done.

Today, publications like the *Dartmouth Review* dot dozens of campuses. One gift of \$100,000 would more than triple most of their budgets.

Rather than blindly tossing \$1 million into a general fund, concerned alumni can work to create a nesting place in their schools for brilliant scholars whose research and teaching would otherwise be rejected by academic chic.

There is a choice and we need to choose wisely, because too many on the left are forsaking the age-old and honorable pledge attributed to Voltaire: I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

Unless we wake up, America may well learn the hard truth of Thomas Jefferson's warning: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

[Mr. Simon, former secretary of the Treasury and president of the John M. Olin Foundation, serves as a trustee of Hillsdale College.]

Better to have a lock without a key, a puzzle in steel to solve, than keys to nothing.

Yet, knowing how many people hunger for answers to make them feel secure, I hasten to provide a brief list:

- | | |
|--------------|-------------|
| 1. Yes | 6. Never |
| 2. Always | 7. False |
| 3. No | 8. Everyone |
| 4. Sometimes | 9. No one |
| 5. True | 10. 17.236 |

All of the above are guaranteed to be correct, even the last. There is not a single wrong answer here.

The Right Questions

And yet all of these answers by themselves are useless, for the value of any answer is proportionate to the significance of the question that generated it. And when more than one answer is possible, power reverts to the human spirit to choose, to reflect, to mediate. But reflection and mediation are modes of operation antithetical to the very nature of the computer, to its mandate from society, and to society's own pace.

Ours is a quantitative age in which even quality has been quantified. Instant answers are what is needed, and the sooner the better. "We don't know where we're going but we're on our way," sings Carl

Sandburg's song about Kalamazoo. In such a world, contemplation is so much useless "down-time."

To help ourselves we can turn from the world of the present to the world of the past, to the thoughts of the ancient Greeks. I don't mean to suggest that the Greeks had the final answers to things. They didn't. But they did pose the right questions.

They took being human very seriously, and it is their impassioned concern for the human enterprise that commands our attention. In seeking to understand life, they articulated what Moses Hadas called "momentous questions of permanent relevance" that endure in the writings they left behind.

Some of these questions they were never able to answer themselves; these they have left as a legacy to us. Even in their failures they inspire us to go on.

Though acutely aware of their own fallibility, they yet dreamed of realizing their potential. Quick to see the sides of any argument, they relished debate. Embodied in their heroes and heroines are alternatives of action and consequences of character that can sensitize us to choose our own paths with greater wisdom. Though more than two thousand years separate the ancient Greek world from ours, it is precisely this separation that allows their voices to resonate with such power and

clarity, free as they are of the prevailing values that would otherwise muffle their sound.

To See Clearly

Forty years ago, when I was a boy, I sat fishing by the edge of a small lake near my home. A bright summer sun shone on the waters of the lake. As I sat there, an older fisherman approached holding something in his hand. "Here, son. Why don't you try these?" he said, offering me a curious pair of glasses. "Try 'em on and you'll really see something," he said proudly.

As I put them on, the glare on the water suddenly disappeared and I could see big fish gliding slowly beneath the surface. The polaroid lenses (a newly invented marvel then) had banished the glare of the sun and allowed me to see the very fish I sought, hidden until then by the sunlight.

Literature, especially from another time, can be like these glasses of my boyhood, filtering out the bright light of current trends, permitting us to see beneath the glaring surface that many call reality. Looking into ancient books can disclose unexpected truths about our world and insights into ourselves.

Armed with such vision we can live bravely, not die, in the 21st century's light.



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