

media

MUSings

interviews With great Thinkers

OTHER BOOKS OF INTEREST
FROM MARQUETTE BOOKS

Ralph D. Berenger (ed.), *Global Media Go to War: Role of News and Entertainment Media During the 2003 Iraq War* (2004).*
ISBN 0-922993-10-6

Martha Douglas Harris, *History and Folklore of the Cowichan Indians* (2004; edited and introduction by Dr. Paul J. Lindholdt).*
ISBN: 0-922993-11-4

David Demers (ed.), *Terrorism, Globalization and Mass Communication: Papers Presented at the 2002 Center for Global Media Studies Conference* (2003).*
ISBN 0-922993-04-1

C. W. Burbank, *Beyond Zenke's Gate* (2004).
ISBN: 0-922993-14-9

Melvin L. DeFleur and Margaret H. DeFleur, *Learning to Hate Americans: How U.S. Media Shape Negative Attitudes Among Teenagers in Twelve Countries* (2003).*
ISBN 0-922993-05-X

David Demers (ed.), *Global Media News Reader*, revised edition (2003).*
ISBN 0-922993-02-5

Larry Whitesitt, *Northern Flight of Dreams: Flying Adventures in British Columbia, Yukon, NW Territories and Alaska* (2004).
ISBN: 0-922993-09-2

*Note: A portion of the proceeds from the sale of these books helps support the nonprofit Center for Global Media Studies at Washington State University.

media musings

interviews with great thinkers

John C. Merrill
Ralph D. Berenger
Charles J. Merrill

MB MARQUETTE
BOOKS SPOKANE, WA

Copyright © 2004 by Marquette Books

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, microfilming, recording, or otherwise, without permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Merrill, John Calhoun, 1924-

Media musings : interviews with great thinkers / John C. Merrill,
Ralph D. Berenger, Charles J. Merrill.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-922993-15-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Communication--Philosophy. I. Berenger, Ralph D., 1945-
II. Merrill, Charles J., 1950- III. Title.

P90.M454 2004

302.2'01--dc22

2004015005

MARQUETTE BOOKS

3107 E. 62nd Avenue

Spokane, WA 99223

509-443-7057

books@marquettebooks.org

www.MarquetteBooks.org

table of contents

PREFACE, 7

INTRODUCTION, 11

CHAPTERS

1. CONFUCIUS (551-479 B.C.): The Gentleman Communicator, 13
2. PLATO (427-347 B.C.): The Ideal Communicator, 23
3. ARISTOTLE (384-322 B.C.): The Virtuous Communicator, 37
4. AQUINAS (1225-1274): The Prudent Communicator, 51
5. IBN KHALDUN (1332-1405): The Collegial Communicator, 63
6. HOBBS (1588-1679): The Controlled Communicator, 75
7. LOCKE (1632-1704): The Libertarian Communicator, 85
8. ROUSSEAU (1712-1778): The Paradoxical Communicator, 97
9. HELVÉTIUS (1715-1771): The Contented Communicator, 109
10. KANT (1724-1804): The Principled Communicator, 117
11. J. S. MILL (1806-1873): The Utilitarian Communicator, 129
12. EMERSON (1803-1882): The Self-Reliant Communicator, 147
13. NIETZSCHE (1844-1900): The Existential Communicator, 157

14. MARX (1818-1883): The Revolutionary Communicator, 167

15. DEWEY (1859-1952): The Pragmatic Communicator, 181

APPENDIX

A. KAUTILYA (4th Century B.C.): The Unprincipled Communicator, 193

B. NINE MORE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION, 199

INDEX, 201

COVER PHOTO IDENTITIES

Top row (left to right): Locke, J. S. Mill, Helvétius, Confucius, Marx

Right column (top to bottom): Marx, Nietzsche, Ibn Khaldun, Dewey, Aquinas

Bottom row (left to right): Hobbes, Kautilya, Aristotle, Kant, Aquinas

Left column (top to bottom): Locke, Rousseau, Emerson, Plato, Hobbes

preface

This book is intended for general readers and university students who, while having an interest in philosophy, don't want too much of it. Especially it is aimed at journalism and communication students—and by extension to practicing mass communicators—who are tired of wading through gray fields of type and esoteric language to get at the essence of the ideas of great thinkers.

The format alone makes it a different kind of book. Interviews are best at gaining and keeping the reader's attention and injecting life to the narrative. We have tried, in this series of interviews with great philosophers, to present salient points and ideas of benefit and interest to the person interested in better public communication. We feel that these sages have much to say that can be adapted by mass communicators of the 21st century.

Admittedly we have simplified the ideas of these philosophers. In a way it is superficiality that we have sought, for from our own experience we know that unless seriously bitten by the philosophy-bug, the reader quickly tires of the soggy rhetoric and specialized language used by philosophers.

The reader of this book must suspend normal disbelief, get with the give-and-take of the interview form, and recognize that these philosophers can look back and into the future as they make their points. Time and

distance are irrelevant. Different languages pose no problem. Everybody in this book speaks English and is able to see reality across chasms of cultural differences. The reader may find the *form* strange, but he or she can feel assured that the fundamental presentation of the philosophers' thoughts is credible.

We hope that these interviews with some of history's greatest minds will be entertaining and stimulating to the communication-oriented reader. The book's production has been a lot of fun for us (and a bit of hard work and research), and has come into print by the publisher's willingness to let us break out of the usual mold and present a different kind of book.

The fifteen great philosophers presented on the following pages exemplify the perennial questions of philosophy and communication—mainly political and moral—that have haunted thinkers of all ages. In this book we are mainly interested in philosophers obsessed by such questions

In journalism and public communication today, the basic issues are still discussed and these interviewees can shed some light on modern dilemmas in communication. All interviews revolve around one central question: Should one have freedom or control—and how much? Some philosophers come down on the side of maximum personal freedom—men like Locke, Hume, and Mill. Others, like Plato, Hobbes, and Rousseau, see people as needing authority to control and restrain their freedom.

Along with this social and political question, one important to public communicators is the question of ethics. Among the philosophers in this book we find those who represent theories of all kinds—egoistic, utilitarian, social contract, and legalistic. If nothing else, these interviews should indicate that ethics is not absolute and universal.

Why did we select these particular philosophers? We feel they best represent the issues being debated here. They are generally considered outstanding in their place and time, and they represent various world regions and perspectives. And, in addition, they are some of our favorites.

Journalism and mass communication students generally know very little about the great philosophers that have provided the underpinnings for their field of endeavor. When we get past John Milton and John Stuart Mill, and perhaps a few other more recent persons like Marshall McLuhan, Robert Hutchins, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, most communication students know little or nothing. At least this little book

should give them an introductory glance at some of the most famous thinkers of all time.

Of course, we know these brief interviews are superficial, and serious students of philosophy will find flaws and gaps in these ideational profiles. But this little volume is exactly what we intended it to be: a fresh introduction.

The idea for the book came to us in Cairo (2003-04) when I was teaching at the American University. It was here that my fellow faculty member, Ralph Berenger, and I shared many hours of discussing these philosophers and decided to interview them. I am also happy that my son, Charles, a linguist and medievalist teaching at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Maryland, agreed to conduct one interview. Together we hope we have provided some light but substantive information about these intriguing thinkers, and have stimulated some catalytic questions for classroom discussion.

John C. Merrill
Professor Emeritus of Journalism
University of Missouri-Columbia
Summer 2004

introduction

For all their philosophical wanderings and special insights, the thinkers interviewed on the following pages basically fall into two main camps: (1) the *deontologists*, who are the hard-line moralists, the legalists, with their cold insistence on following rules, principles, and maxims—civil or religious—and (2) the *teleologists*, who are guided by their concern for consequences and who place pleasure and pain as the prime motivations for effective and ethical action.

Journalists and other media workers today are caught in one of these camps, or they are flailing about somewhere in between them. Of our philosophers Immanuel Kant typifies the first type—the legalist, with his deep concern for truth and his categorical imperative to guide him. John Stuart Mill typifies the second, with his utilitarian background and his deep concern for bringing about the best consequences. Helvétius, even earlier than Mill, also saw happiness as the key to ethics and politics.

Other philosophers, such as Confucius and Aristotle, stress the importance of character-building and virtue. Hobbes and Locke want a “contract” (for different reasons) to keep a society progressing. Thomas Aquinas believed that being in tune with God’s will was the answer to earthly problems and spun this central concern into a complex philosophy. Emerson and Nietzsche, both with individualist tendencies, would leave political and ethical actions in private hands as much as possible.

Plato and Rousseau—and even Marx—saw a kind of social regimentation and socialization as the correct path. And, of course, there are the pre-Machiavellians: Ibn Khaldun, a moderate one from the Arab world, and Kautilya, a more strident one from ancient India, stressing success by any means. Dark symbols, yes, but their spirit still haunts many journalists and media people today.

It seems to me that the media worker of today, whether he or she knows it or not, is a little of all these philosophers, doing a little of this here and a bit of that there. But, for me, Kant and Mill best typify the two paths, at least for journalists. Should they be dedicated to *truth* or to *consequences*? Do they give the truth or do they modify it or tamper with it or hide it—all to bring good consequences? These are the big questions tackled in this book.

JCM

Chapter 1

CONFUCIUS (551–479 B.C.)

The gentleman communicator



Confucius was born in 551 B.C. in Lu, a province of Tsau (today's Shandong), China. He was given the name Kung Chiu. Later, in Lu and throughout China, he was known as Kung Fu-tzu (Great Master Kung). When the Jesuits introduced his works to the Western world, they Latinized his name into "Confucius." He became one of the world's most influential philosophers.

Master Kung was a practical man, giving advice to rulers and leading his followers on a moral path. He was not a spiritual leader, and Confucianism is not a religion. He tried to develop gentlemen and empathic and enthusiastic communicators. Confucius dealt with such subjects as good government, ethical behavior, loyalty, friendship, truth, and the meaning of life. His answers were wise and are still being followed in many countries of Asia. He taught leadership by virtue and acts of decency. People will imitate a good leader and will control themselves. He taught that one must earn loyalty by showing loyalty and respect and supporting the common good.

Confucius traveled throughout China, counseling rulers and spreading his ideas. He was honored everywhere as a great scholar and teacher. Toward the end of his life, he continued his dialogues with his students. The 6th century produced two schools of thought—that of

STRESS POINTS

Importance of Truth	Jen—Virtuous Men
Chun-tzu—Gentlemen	Importance of Learning
“Laws of the Heart”	Meritocracy
Leaders and Followers	Enthusiasm Loyalty
Professionalization	Majority First
The Skillful Communicator	Li—Proper Action (Ritual)
Avoid “Yes Men”	Humility & Humor

Confucius and that of Lao-tzu called Taoism (the “Path”). Lao’s philosophy was a kind of mystical escape from the world, leaning heavily on meditation.

On the other hand, Confucius preferred practical and active social participation. For example, Master Kung was a musician, a hunter, an archer, and a keen student of government.

Many of his most important ideas can be found in three of his books (compiled by his disciples)-- *I Ching* [Book of Changes], *Lun Yu* [The Analects], and *Chung Yung* [Doctrine of the Mean]. In the 4th century B.C., his thoughts were further popularized by his main disciple, Meng-tzu (Mencius).

The interview

This interview with Confucius took place in March 485 B.C. in the philosopher’s home town of Lu. John C. Merrill , the interviewer, and the Master Kung sat on a rustic bench beneath a small grove of trees.

The philosopher was about 65 years old and in good health and positive spirit. He appeared not tired at all, even though he and six of his

disciples had just returned from a walking trip to a neighboring province. Merrill refers to him as Master Kung in the following interview.

Note: The interviewer's questions and comments are *italicized*. The philosopher's responses are plain text.

Thank you so much, Master Kung, for talking with me today. I know you are extremely interested in communication. I will try to keep the questions on that subject, but I may get into other areas of interest also.

Very well, kind sir. I am happy to talk on any subject. As you know my interests are very wide-ranging.

In my day and country, we are concerned about public communication—about the media institutions that communicate with the masses of people. There is a seeming loss of faith by the citizens in these media—such as newspapers or information sheets. Will you comment on this problem?

Your newspapers, of course, are unknown to me, but I can imagine what they are. Even the simple one-on-one personal communication of my day is complex and difficult.

Your public communication must cause many problems for you. But basically all communication is dependent on several things, including enthusiasm, empathy, clarity, tolerance, and, probably most of all, truth or honesty. Do your public media have these qualities?

Some of the media try to have these, Master Kung. But perhaps they fall far short. Many communicators have a problem trying to reconcile empathy, for example, with truth. And we also have problems reconciling enthusiasm with dispassionate objectivity.

Empathy, although very important, is certainly a difficult concept. If I want to communicate successfully with you—to establish a commonness of understanding—then I must try to put myself in your position, in your frame of mind, in your circumstances. I cannot stay in my world—I must get into yours.

As you mentioned, truth can make this difficult. If the truth is that you are a vain person, or an evil person, or a dishonest person, or a scheming or abusive person—then of course I am going to have trouble trying to identify with you. It is very difficult to reconcile love and respect with hatred and disrespect.

And what about enthusiasm and dispassionate objectivity?

One cannot really be objective, but one can try to approach it. And one can be enthusiastic in such an attempt. Even when one fails, and one will, one should not lose a sense of enthusiastic seeking.

I know you are a philosopher of love, and that you desire that one should act toward others as one would have them act toward him. And you believe in jen and shu, a compassionate love for humanity. Can one always love?

No. And I never said that one can—or should—always love everyone. A virtuous and wise person would hate those who harm social order, do damage to other people, and act in immoral ways. Men of *jen*—virtuous men—can love people or hate people. And, as you probably know, I am in favor of punishment for the evil-doers.

Perhaps this is a good time to get your ideas about what you call “gentlemen,” or superior men. Of course, this concept can also be applied to women, although I recognize that you were writing at a different time.

I have called them superior men (or *chun-tzu*) or great gentlemen. I look at them as a kind of royalty among men—not based on birth or money, but on virtue and merit.

They should be the natural rulers and leaders of organizations. They are the noble men, those that can be trusted to keep public welfare as a main objective. They are the elite; they are people of wisdom and culture.

How do they get to be superior?

Mainly through education. Such people spend a lifetime studying the rules of ethical behavior and the rules of courtesy. Learning, learning, learning—I cannot emphasize that enough. They must gain knowledge—knowing why they know, and recognizing when they do not know.

Plato and the German philosopher Nietzsche also talked about superior people, the former referring to the Philosopher King and the latter to the Overman. Can you say a little more about your superior person?

They would be willing to accept criticism willingly and gratefully. They should obey basic moral rules—what I have called the “laws of the heart.” They should be loyal to family, to friends, and to fellow citizens. They will not trust in laws imposed from the outside to make themselves good.

They will have faith only in self-development, motivated by education. They will know much, and know the right things. They will not surround themselves with “yes men.” They will avoid brashness and arrogance. They will correct their own excesses. They will not talk a lot; but when they talk, they will say something important.

When speaking they will avoid vulgarity and slander. They will correct every mistake—and quickly. They will be humble and not belong to little cliques. They will shun people who care nothing about the truth.

They must remember that rotten wood cannot be carved. If people do not want the truth, the superior person will not waste his or her time trying to give it to them. They will not strive to be known, but should strive to know others. And they will work without complaining. If they cannot work contentedly in one place, they should leave and seek other work elsewhere.

Can you say a little more about education? Then we will get to communication in my day?

Education brings out innate benevolent attitudes—basic goodness. This will best assure a well-functioning civil society. It will instill loyalty—to those above you and below you in the social order. Ultimately

education is for the good of the collective society—the person is the instrument.

But everyone does not treasure education, and does not want to learn. What about those people?

Everyone *should* have a passion for learning and be a lover of knowledge. But you are right. Some people prefer ignorance—and, strange as it is to me, they may find happiness in such ignorance.

Now, Master Kung, let us turn to the public communicators of my day. They are chosen not by merit, moral standing, skill, or wisdom, but mainly by aspirations on their part and needs on the part of the privately owned public medium. Can you comment on this?

As you know, I am for meritocracy. People should deserve their positions—good or bad, higher or lower.

Your public communicators should, if at all possible, be superior persons. They should be well educated, should take rigorous exams for their jobs and certainly should be skilled and effective communicators.

Is it necessary for them to be good writers?

Well, yes, or good speakers. Preferably both.

As you know I haven't written much. My students and disciples have written down most of what I have said. I hope they have done a good job. They need to be good listeners, accurate note-takers and sophisticated writers and polishers. And they need to ask good questions.

Oral communicators require specific skills and writers require others. But they all must have knowledge, express themselves clearly and interestingly, be enthusiastic and try to provide as much of the truth as possible.

You are often considered a communitarian by writers of my day—even a founder of the group-related emphasis. Would you consider yourself a communitarian?

I don't use that term. But presumably it refers to a person who values community. So I must be one.

For me a well-run, virtuous community is our ultimate social goal. I care deeply about the individual person, but believe that he or she should be one dedicated to the good of all. Comradery, relationships, solidarity, cooperation—these are all essential concepts.

You would apply such thinking to a social institution such as a newspaper?

Certainly. Newspaper workers should be harmonious, proud of their unity, eager to progress cooperatively. And they should respect and be loyal to their leaders.

Of course, the leaders owe them respect and loyalty also. The leaders should always be an example for their followers.

I do want you to say a little more about truth in communication. Will you, please?

For good communication truth is essential. Especially for superior people. It is the moral and linguistic glue that holds society together. It is a basic need.

I refer to it often in my dialogues—in what you call my *Analects*—as “rectifying the names.” This really means being authentic and telling the truth, calling things by their proper names.

Language must accord with the truth. Any institution that refuses to face the truth or permit its members to tell the truth—like your public communication medium—is in for hard times and probably doomed to failure and decay.

But can journalists, for example, tell the whole truth?

Of course not. But they should if they can.

The transcendental or metaphysical truth is beyond any of us. But journalists can tell the truth as they know it. And the serious and skilled journalist can present more of it than the mediocre or careless or lazy one.

What can be done about the careless and lazy, or inferior journalists? We have many of them.

Get rid of them. They don't merit their job. There must be plenty of other well-qualified communicators who could take their places.

But getting rid of them would not be easy. Maybe we could do it if we had tight entrance requirements for them—maybe if we made journalism a true profession with minimum entrance requirements, licenses, expelling mechanisms, a code of conduct, common morality and group pride. What do you think of that?

I am in favor of anything that creates group-feeling and assures meritocracy. Anything like a profession that instills pride in a community of virtuous and like-minded workers is a good thing. From what you have said about a profession, I would be in favor of it.

I take it that you are for firm discipline and stability.

You are right. I am for order and rules—not laws, but customs and right practices. Individuals must take responsibility for order through family and education. Social stability is most important.

Doesn't this discourage individuality and creativity?

I doubt it, but when it does, so be it. The majority comes first.

The individual and the minority have rights, but not if they harm the majority in the total society. Individuals must mainly conform. Too much freedom is bad. When individuals step over the proper ethical line, a sense of shame should restrain them. If not, they should be restrained and punished by society.

I think the hour is late, Master Kung, and we should stop. But I wish you would say a few final words about the nature of a good communicator.

First, they are good people—or at least aspire to be good.

Their goodness—morality and integrity—will be reflected in their speech and writing. They will be interested in the subject of discourse, tolerant—but not too tolerant—of others. They will be skilled in rhetoric. They will make every attempt to be understood and to understand. They will try to keep their biases under control, but they will generally speak with honesty and conviction.

They will not resort to anger and name-calling. They will love people who are lovable. They will tell the truth even when it pains them. They, of course, will be knowledgeable, sincere, and skillful in their writing and speaking. And they will be careful and serious readers and listeners.

Thank you very much, Master Kung, for this interesting interview. You are a most revered teacher and have made a lasting mark on history. Goodbye, and I wish you every happiness and a long life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Q1. Confucius says he has a compassionate love for humanity, but he believes evil persons should be punished. He also says that one could do to others what one would not want done to him. Is this contradictory?

Q2. If a journalist is a “gentleman” of the Confucian type, can he or she do a good job of reporting? How can Confucius’s love for the truths and belief in using honest language be reconciled with empathic and tolerant communication?

Q3. If journalism were a true profession with Confucian values and requirements built into it, how would it affect media diversity and freedom?

Q4. Discuss how the Confucian Superior Man or Gentleman is similar or different from Plato’s Philosopher King or Nietzsche’s Overman (see later chapters in this book). If journalists conformed to these types, how would journalism differ today?

Q5. What do you think of majoritarianism in society and in media management?

FOR FURTHER READING

Cleary, Thomas. *The Essential Confucius*. San Francisco: Harper, 1993.

Confucius (Kung Fu-tze) *I Ching* (Book of Changes)/*Chu Ching* (Book of History)/*Li Chi* (Book of Rites)/*Lun Y* (Analects).

Jaspers, Karl. *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus: The Paradigmatic Individuals*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985.

Palmer, Joy. *Fifty Major Thinkers on Education: From Confucius to Dewey*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Shih, Ching. *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*. London: Faber, 1974.

Smith, D.H. *Confucius*. New York: Scribner, 1973.

CHAPTER 2

PLATO (427–347 B.C.)

The ideal communicator



Plato was born into an aristocratic family in Athens, or perhaps in Aegina, about 427 B.C. It is believed that his name was really Aristocles and that Plato was a nickname (meaning “the broad”) because of his athletic build. His father probably died when he was a youth, and Plato most likely grew up in the house of his stepfather, who was his mother’s uncle (yes, she married her uncle).

As a youth, Plato, like other young boys in his class, probably had political ambitions. A conservative group urged him to enter political life, but he held back and was appalled by its members’ violent acts. Plato was mentored by the great Socrates, and after his mentor’s death by the State on charges that he corrupted the Athenian youth, Plato started his own school, the Academy, in 385 B.C. Aristotle was Plato’s most famous student.

Plato went to Sicily in 367 B.C. to tutor the new ruler, Dionysius II, in the art of governance. Plato was a strong and active person, who looked more like a soldier, which he had been, than the famous philosopher that he was. Plato wrote more than 30 dialogues, *The Republic* containing the most famous of them.

Plato’s thoughts greatly influenced many early Christian philosopher-theologians, among them Clement, Origin, and St. Augustine. He also had a significant impact on many Islamic thinkers of the Middle Ages. He is

STRESS POINTS

Theory of Forms	Knowledge and Opinions
Reality and Images	Style
The State's Segments	The Guardians
Truth-Seekers	Anti-Public Journalism
Knowing the Good	Dialectic
Morality and Happiness	Words and Things

unquestionably among the world's greatest philosophers and among the top rank of writers. Plato died in 347 B.C. at the age of eighty.

The interview

This interview with Plato took place in Syracuse, Sicily, on July 7, 365 B.C. and was conducted by John C. Merrill, as he and the philosopher walked about the palace gardens.

Note: The interviewer's questions and comments are *italicized*. The philosopher's responses are plain text.

There are so many questions, Plato, that I want to ask that I hardly know where to start.

Why not just start with the first question? That always works.

That's good. I've always heard that you had a great sense of humor. I, too, enjoy humor, and even am fond of puns.

Puns, eh? My friend, Mobitichus, insists that punning is the lowest kind of humor, but I still love them—the more ridiculous the better. We should climb that hill over there, and then we could move this interview to higher ground.

That's good! But I will resist punning if you will, and we can cover more ground. My first question is this: Mass communicators—and I am more interested in a genre called journalists—say they are interested in giving the people the truth. Is that a worthy goal?

You get to the extremely hard questions quickly. But I guess that is all right, although in a short interview, perhaps the question should be a little better focused.

Not only journalists, but everybody should try to be truthful. But the problem is that they cannot really be. The truth of anything is what I call a form, or a metaphysical idea, that your journalist cannot comprehend.

The reporters can give a shadow of the truth, but the truth will always be beyond them. The event the journalist describes is simply a manifestation of the ideal event—a specific and representational image of the event's metaphysical and perfect form.

Then, you would say that there is no need for journalism since one cannot reach the truth?

No, I would not say that. Just because we cannot be perfect, or because we cannot provide a perfect picture of anything doesn't mean that we should not try.

Your journalists or mass communicators can *try* to find the truth and report it. I believe that they should be unwearied and disinterested seekers after truth.

You mention that journalists should be disinterested. Should not they be very much interested in getting to the truth?

I mean by “disinterested” that they should be dispassionate, unbiased, unemotional. I do not mean that they should have no interest in the truth.

My Guardians or philosopher kings, of course, can come close to discovering the truth, but your mass communicators are not in that class. They are what I call in *The Republic* “auxiliaries in the society.”

But many of them are quite serious and interested in intellectual matters. They, in short, philosophize.

Well, everybody philosophizes in some minor way, but they are not philosophers. Men in general are incapable of philosophy. That’s all right. Don’t pity them. Just accept them for what they are. They can contribute their part to the society and the state. And they can be happy in their jobs.

They cannot actively seek happiness, but happiness will come to those who participate in a good state. The idea of “good” is built on harmony—harmony among classes, social duties and individuals. A willingness of everyone to be satisfied with the part he plays in the social structure. A good state should bring happiness.

How could this relate to communication?

The individual can seek harmony with his family, friends and group. The group would seek harmony with the state, and leaders of the state with the sub-groups of the society.

Your mass media, for example, would try to have a collaborative relationship—or at least a harmony—with the state. Then your media people will be happy, the audiences will be happy, and the state will be happy.

But are not you saying that the individuals should submit themselves to the state—to the philosopher kings? That sounds much like the German philosopher of the early 19th century named Hegel. He thought the state was sacred and that one should immerse oneself in the spirit of the state and in a sense become part of the state.

I don’t know your Hegel, but he is right about the importance of the state. Of course, this importance is dependent on the goodness of the state, and this goodness is dependent on the wisdom and morality of the

philosopher king. The ideal state, of course, is a good one—one of perfect social harmony.

What is your conception of the good and perfect state?

As I have said elsewhere, what I call the Higher State is one in which there are no marriages, where no person calls anything his own, and where kings are philosophers.

And what would be the Higher Mass Medium in my world?

One in which the various kinds of workers are harmonious, where the progress and welfare of the medium is the goal of everyone and where the medium's leaders are trying to obtain the wisdom and morality of a philosopher king.

How can a journalist in my world be a just person in his work?

Justice is a difficult concept. As you probably know, there are many like the well-known sophist Thrasymachus in Athens who believe that it is defined by those who have the power or the might.

If I am one of your journalists and I think a certain story is just, then it is just. A simple solution. But wrong. Justice must have nothing to do with the might or power of the leaders, but something that transcends the situation at hand.

The king, if he is a true philosopher, will know when justice is served. So will the serious, philosophically concerned editor. The good newspaper, like the good state, is the reality of which justice is the ideal.

Would you say something about the proper education of a mass communicator?

I have written much about education, and I invite you to read it. But I will say something related to your communicators. They must be vitally interested and trained in what I call “dialectic.” That is the art of conversation—of question and answers.

I would think your journalists, for instance, would think this is their great need. Let me emphasize that dialectical skill is the ability to pose and answer questions. Good questions get good answers—or tend to—and poor questions get poor answers.

In my world of the 21st century, we have people called “communitarians.” They want to democratize journalism and other social institutions. Also they want the public to become participants in mass media decision-making. Do you think this is a good idea?

And what do you mean exactly by the mass media? I think I know. You have been using the term, and I have formed a crude impression.

The institutions in my world—journals and electronic organizations—send out messages to large, heterogeneous, scattered and anonymous audiences. They have their own staffs of journalists—reporters and commentators—to select and spread this information.

I understand.

And do you agree with the communitarians—in the mass media those who are often called “public journalists”?

Not at all. Journalists should do journalism, not the public.

Journalists presumably are trained—or educated—in their craft. The public is not. Physicians treat illnesses, not the public. Masons build bridges, aqueducts and walls. Philosophers philosophize. Rulers rule. Musicians play music.

Journalists communicate to mass audiences. People should do what they are trained to do.

But don’t you think every citizen should be involved in the total society’s work?

Yes, but in their own specialized area, and not crossing into the business of other citizens.

Government officials should not try to farm, or to go into battle. There are trained people for these tasks. You may recall that in *The Republic* I emphasized the need for special groups for an ideal society—a philosopher king, government workers, soldiers and so on. And even these classes can be further specialized for the smooth working of a society.

You are in favor of specialization in our mass media, then?

Certainly. You need editors of various kinds, reporters with specializations, printers and designers, and so forth. But these must merit their positions. I surely believe in meritocracy. It is really the only way for a society to survive and thrive.

But in my day and country we have journalists and other mass communicators with no special training or education in the field. Some have only a very basic education.

What a pity!

But many of them do all right in their jobs.

All right is not good enough. If they were well educated—especially in their kind of work—they would do much better.

The world is too full of ignorant and half-educated people, especially in governance, who through personality or intrigue rise to important positions. I am sure that is true in your mass media organizations.

But many well-qualified media people are supervised by less-qualified people.

I am not saying the world is fair. But it is a real tragedy, it seems to me, for a reporter to work for an editor who does not really merit his position. Merit, and nothing else, should determine rank.

But will that not lead to a hierarchical society and relegate democracy to the sidelines?

You are correct. As you know, I have little faith in democracy.

The one in Athens put my great teacher, Socrates, to death. The “people” are likely to be more tyrannical than any autocrat.

But don't you believe people are—or should be—equal?

Of course not. Where that ridiculous idea came from I do not know. Thank Zeus, people are not equal.

But I mean they should have equal opportunity.

Impossible. Therefore it is not even realistic to talk about it.

Blood lines or genetics, I think you call it, native intelligence and the like, immediately make a mockery of equal opportunity. Wealth—or the lack of it—and family status affect opportunity. And the smart ones will always have an advantage over the stupid ones. Doors open to some, not to others. And this is natural.

True, this can be lamentable—especially if some incipient leaders are kept from realizing their potential success. But it's life. Opportunity does not knock on every door.

But even so, should not even the dim-witted or “stupid ones,” as you call them, have an equal chance for success with others?

Your question is really not a good one. The dim-witted simply cannot have an equal chance for success with others, so why talk about whether they “should” or not.

Beyond native capacity differences, there's the matter of class, economics, race, education, physical differences, motivation, kinship, political connections—on and on. No. Equal opportunity is a false dream for the naïve.

Many editors in my day wish to treat all job applicants alike—to give them equal chance for a reporting job, for instance.

Some applicants can simply observe and write better than others. Obviously this affects their opportunity to succeed. Others, of course, may get a job, but it will be undeserved.

But we have many poor or mediocre reporters who are in higher positions in our media than the superior ones you mention.

Oh, yes. They achieve their prominence and power, not by merit as I have said, but for some other reason—like being related to, or friends of, the editor. Or by some kind of political maneuvering, or through being obsequious.

Let me change the subject. Well, not quite. I am still interested in your thoughts about the reporter and reporting

I surmise that your reporter wishes to present a realistic description of an event to the audience?

That's right.

That cannot really be done. The story will be no more than shadows on the wall. But I'm sure you have read my "allegory of the cave." There is the real and there is the image. Your reporter can provide at best a fairly accurate image.

Is this what you meant in your writings by the "idea" or the "form"?

No. The "idea" or the "form" is not even the real as the reporter might see it. The idea exists beyond the physical thing, event or person. The form is constant and true.

Unlike the concept of old Heraclitus, it is a reality that is not constantly changing. It is the perfection—it is ideal reality. It is the "father of the thing" we see on earth. In other words, the man you see is an *example of*, or a specific instance of, the ideal man.

What does that have to do with the reporter's inadequate portrayal of an event?

The reporter is actually three times removed from the objective event when he reports it.

What do you mean?

First is the “ideal” event. Then comes the phenomenal or physical event, and thirdly comes the reported image of the event provided by the reporter.

Then we can say that the report is simply a poor caricature of the event?

Yes. And then it gets more abstract as the reader reads it. The reader becomes for the story what the reporter was for the physical event.

I think I understand that. It shows that journalistic objectivity is really impossible.

That’s correct, and I doubt if we human beings would really want—or could assimilate—objective reports even if we could get them.

You have said that words are like images. Why is that?

Words don’t have *meaning*. They simply trigger meaning in the minds of people.

Also it is important to realize that words are not things. This is common sense, of course, but many people don’t understand it.

The word is to the referent as the image is to the real thing—the form. We must be careful not to react to the word as if it has any substance or ontological property.

Let me change the subject again and get back to our talk about authority, control and freedom.

Good.

Freedom of the press is a hot topic—very important—in my day. It is the defining issue of 21st century journalism. And it is extremely problematic.

This is too vast a subject to be dealt with here. But I will say that your media need—and will have—an authority of some kind to control them. It matters not what kind of government we’re talking about.

So you would not be in favor of press freedom?

I am in favor of wise and moral control of social institutions. I see no reason for news media to be exceptions.

Would you call yourself an authoritarian? Some philosophers in my day, people such as Karl Popper, have called you that—even suggesting that you are the “Father of Authoritarianism.”

How interesting! Yes, I am an authoritarian—meaning that I respect merited authority.

But surely I am not authoritarianism’s “father.” Perhaps the first authoritarian resides on Mt. Olympus. I really wouldn’t know.

Well, Plato, I think we should be getting back. But let me ask a quick question: If you were to set up a hierarchy for a mass medium, such as a newspaper, what would be the three segments or classes?

As you know, I have proposed three segments for the ideal state. They are the Guardians, the Auxiliaries, and the Producers. Let me relate these three groups to the newspaper.

First the publishers or top-editors would be somewhat parallel to the Guardians or philosopher kings. Then would come the sub-editors, reporters, and other editorial staffers, the real workers, who would be the rough equivalent to my Auxiliaries. And then would come the Producers who would be the printers, compositors, delivery personnel and security guards.

What are you basing this triadic classification on?

I am basing it on innate intelligence and on the varying degrees of philosophical concern. They are all important to the good newspaper, and their ability to work together in harmony will lead to a successful product and a happy staff.

Well, we're back at the palace. But I should ask you one more question. Can you briefly describe the ideal communication situation or form?

Oh yes, *my* form. People of like mind, education, and interest, sitting together in a stable and free situation, sharing information on a common interest.

These are skilled rhetoricians who are knowledgeable, tolerant, and able to eliminate semantic difficulties and understand exactly what the others are saying. That is the communication “form,” but it is impossible for us to fully achieve.

Thank you very much, Plato, for your interesting insights and sharing your valuable time with me.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What case can you make that Plato was an authoritarian? Is his opposition to public journalism and communitarianism consistent with his opposition to democracy?

2. How do Plato's thoughts about ideal communication parallel those of today's German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas? Can such ideal communication have any relevance to the mass media?

3. Discuss Plato's concept of ideas or forms as related to a reporter's job. In the Allegory of The Cave, the shadows on a cave wall would be symbolic of what aspect of a reporter's work?

4. Is Plato's social structure based on innate intelligence a valuable model for a mass medium such as a newspaper? What would be Plato's feeling about a democratic newsroom?

5. How does Plato's emphasis on "harmony" relate to his social hierarchy and his ethics?

FOR FURTHER READING

Hare, R.M. *Plato*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Melling, David. *Understanding Plato*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Phillips, Christopher. *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002.

Phillips, Christopher. *Six Questions of Socrates: A Modern-Day Journey of Discovery through World Philosophy*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.

Plato. *The Republic/The Laws/Death of Socrates*. (Many eds.)

Rice, D.H. *Guide to Plato's Republic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Chapter 3

aristotle (384–322 B.C.)

The Virtuous Communicator



Aristotle, along with Socrates and Plato, formed the foundation of Western philosophical thought that continues over 2,300 years to this day.

Aristotle was born in the summer of 384 B.C. on the Chalcidic peninsula of Macedonia in Northern Greece. From the beginning he was connected to the Macedonian power elite through his physician father, a social association and intellectual stimulus that would serve him well in life. In all likelihood, he would have continued in his father's profession as a healer and medical scientist, but fate intervened.

Shortly after his father died, the 17-year-old arrived in Athens in 367 B.C. to study at Plato's Academy to which the rich and privileged students of the day were sent to learn from the disciple of Socrates. Aristotle would spend the next 20 years at the Academy learning philosophy, rhetoric, ethics, history, and sharing his knowledge of medicine and science with other students, such as his best friends Xenocrates of Chalcedon and Theophrastus of Eresus.

When he failed to be named Plato's successor upon the philosopher's death in 347 B.C., Aristotle left Athens for a dozen years, taking some of his friends with him to open an academy at the newly built town of Assus on the Asian side of the Aegean. At Assus he wrote the first 12 chapters of *Politics*, which forged the link between philosophy and politics and

STRESS POINTS

Nicomachean Ethics	Golden Mean
Syllogisms	Logic
Cultural Imperialism	Globalization
Episteme	Doxa
Rhetoric	Virtue and Goodness
Money and Wealth	

touted the perfection of the Greek city-state over all other forms of governance.

In a lost work, *On Kingship*, Aristotle clearly breaks with his mentor by asserting that a philosopher-king was undesirable to a king who reigned with good works rather than good words. Several other works of a biological nature emerged during this period, as did his reflections on the human soul, which again diverged from Platonic writing.

In 343 B.C., at the age of 42, Aristotle was invited by Philip II of Macedon to tutor his 13-year-old heir, whom the world would remember as Alexander the Great. Nearing 50 years of age, Aristotle returned to Athens in 335 and opened the Lyceum, a rival institution to the Academy. He died in 322 at Chalcis at the age of 63.

His intellectual legacy is large—and much of it has survived the medieval purges of Greek writers—with such works as *Ethics*, *Topics* and *Rhetoric*, in which he outlines his thoughts on logic and introduces us to syllogistic reasoning, one of the foundations of Western lineal thinking.

In *On Philosophy*, Aristotle entered the world of metaphysics and sufficiently demarcated his philosophy from that of Plato. Few subjects were beyond his interests, and he made major contributions to latter-day disciplines of philosophy, religion, psychology, law, medicine, biology, economics and political science. To emulate Aristotelian intellectual diversity was the goal of European 17th- and 18th-century-Renaissance men and women.

The interview

This interview with Aristotle took place under unhappy circumstances in August, 323 B.C., in a small, open-air room on the edge of the Athenian Agora. The philosopher-scientist invited Ralph D. Berenger for this brief interview.

In his late 60s, Aristotle looked little like his statues, which showed a robust man. Rather he was spindly and slightly hunched with age. He wore an expensive robe and new leather sandals, and gold rings adorned fingers on both hands. His white hair was combed forward, covering growing baldness.

He spoke in a surprisingly gentle voice—and with a lisp. Throughout the interview, Aristotle occasionally stood up and walked around, mildly complaining of a chronic upset stomach.

Note: The interviewer’s questions and comments are *italicized*. The philosopher’s responses are plain text.

I wish this interview could have taken place in happier times, master. News arrived only days ago of the death in Persia of your prize student, Alexander of Macedon. He was only 32 and died weeks ago. In two millennia, the world would have heard of his death sooner, in a matter of minutes, not weeks, because of global mass media.

While some think Alexander was the first to conquer the world known to his people, he was the first to practice something we call globalization and what critics call “cultural imperialism,” the imposition of one culture over another. In my time he would have been a controversial figure.

And in my time he is, too. But do not expect me to mourn Alexander of Macedon.

He was a disappointment. He rarely heeded my advice, often violated the principles for which Greek culture stands, and his rule spread the seeds of my current predicament.

Then you would be in favor of globalization and cultural imperialism?

Yes. If that culture is as virtuous as the Greek ideal.

Alexander's dilemma was that he was neither Greek nor sufficiently influenced by Greek culture. I counseled him against marrying non-Greeks, which he did—the daughter of his enemy Darius—for political reasons. And he encouraged his soldiers—many of them Greeks—to do likewise.

I advised him to follow the city-state model of politics, which he ignored. He surrendered to the cultures he conquered, even naming himself pharaoh in Egypt after visiting the Oracle of Siwa and openly accepting the Egyptian gods as his.

He also silenced his critics not with logic but with the sword. My own beloved nephew, Callisthenes of Olynthus, was borne false witness and executed in Persia by Alexander. Callisthenes was a chronicler—what you call a reporter—who was guilty of nothing more than observing and writing truth. All he did was talk with—interview—one of Alexander's enemies, and Alexander called that treason.

Reporting has always been dangerous business and journalists are still dying in Persia today as they try to find the truth. It sounds to me that you support journalism—reporting and disseminating information to mass audiences.

Mass audiences? Do you mean that everyone in a society receives this information without regard to station or purpose?

Yup.

Then I reject it. What use would a slave have for information about how to govern? What use would a servant have of higher mathematics and exercises in logic? What use would a woman have of information on the art of a just war?

There is more to mass communication than disseminating information. One its functions is entertainment, and the masses in most rich countries all have access to mass media and in my day enjoy television immensely.

You would be surprised to learn that critics of television often cite your mentor, Plato. Critics say television transmits shadows on the wall, which need to be interpreted, or as we say, mediated. Television news is but a reflection of reality. Like slaves chained in Plato's allegorical cave, today's television audiences seem unable to turn their heads and see the real world outside their caves.

The televised shadows on the wall—especially if they are entertaining—are too beguiling. In my time, people spend a third of their day watching television, a third of their day working, and a third of their day sleeping, sometimes less.

From what you describe, I would have little regard for television. Eight hours a day in self-amusement is excessive, and does not seem to contribute to a good life. Everything should be in moderation. I cannot imagine sitting in the amphitheater for eight hours watching a comedy by Aristophanes or a drama by Aeschylus or Euripides. Why do people allow this to happen to them?

Good question. They obviously find pleasure in it. Our universities constantly conduct studies to understand why people use media and why. We call those uses and gratifications studies.

Our mass media are market-driven, and some tend to report salacious and sensational news and give inordinate coverage to celebrities and pseudo-events held solely for publicity purposes. They argue they are only giving the public what it wants.

What about giving the public what it needs? From what you tell me, mass media companies have grown into powerful states. With power comes a responsibility. I wrote in *Politics* that a leader must show compassion and understanding, and that he does so to gain the love of his subjects. When that love is gone, the ruler should leave and be replaced by another who is better loved.

In my day that would be called a benevolent despot, and that might apply to our better-known media owners such as Rupert Murdoch, Ted Turner or Sumner Redstone, and especially to Silvio Berlusconi, the leader in Italy who is also a mass media owner.

But one rule still applies: Give the public what it wants. Television ratings are watched carefully. Once programs are no longer loved by the masses, they are replaced. I am talking about a television program and not a ruler necessarily—but the same principle applies.

It sounds to me that television is your master and you are its slave. How did it become so?

In a word: money. Mass media companies are among the wealthiest in the world. They are very profitable.

I have written in *Ethics* that money is unnatural because it is unnecessary for a man's fulfillment. While I disagree with my teacher, Plato, about ownership of property—he said rulers should not own property and property owners should not rule—I find private property preferable to communal property in nearly all instances.

That would mean you would not want state-owned media companies over privately owned ones.

Private property is superior on five grounds: progress, peace, pleasure, practice and philanthropy. Seems to me mass media provide pleasure. But not all pleasure is good. I cannot address the other grounds since I do not have the knowledge.

Private ownership versus public ownership of media is a big issue in my era. Many media critics complain that media companies are too profitable, too consolidated; that they make too much money and do not give audiences what they, the critics, think is important.

Many mass media corporations are philanthropic in funding schools of journalism, various prizes that reward excellence, and some foundations help the public better understand mass media.

Again, individuals (and companies made of up individuals) can acquire external goods such as money as long as that acquisition is done ethically and allowed by law. Remember, virtue brings with it its own rewards, namely happiness and self pride.

You've described a company, but what virtuous qualities should a reporter, broadcaster or journalist possess?

I have written that virtues are those good traits admired by good people. Virtues help us perform our natural functions as social and political beings. There are two kinds of virtues: virtues of thought and moral virtues.

I think journalists—the chroniclers of my age—need both to be good individuals. In *Rhetoric* I said the forms of virtue are justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence and wisdom. Individuals must be virtuous intellectually by acquiring knowledge to aid their comprehension of the world around them while they develop character that can be admired by others.

The second thing reporters need is moral virtue, which can only be learned by practice. I have written, “We become just by doing just actions, brave by doing brave actions.”

May I ask you a different question? I have noticed an increase in anti-Macedonia sentiment in Athens. Some people are even calling for your arrest and trial because of your links to the Macedonian power elite. We would call that an expression of public opinion. Will you heed it?

Of course. It is always prudent to heed public opinion. We call it *doxa* and I will heed it by leaving Athens this week for my mother's home in Chalcis on the island of Euboea, lest Athens sin twice against philosophy.

You are, of course, referring to the vote by Athenians to condemn Socrates for corrupting the thinking of Greek youth. Cannot someone make the same claim against all educators? Don't we do the same thing as Socrates by challenging our journalism, public relations and advertising students to think beyond even our limits?

Thinking is the most godlike activity, and leads to the highest order of virtuous life: a life of understanding. All students should aspire to this with the help of a teacher. A life of understanding is better than a life in

public service—something my enemies often forget as they spread lies about me and the Lyceum.

They think they are doing a public service while failing to understand what we hope to accomplish as educators. By their nature, people choose to be virtuous or not, and live good or bad lives. Public passions can be stirred easily to the benefit of charismatic leaders over what is good and virtuous.

Journalists often report the opinions of the masses, giving public opinion polls the credence of fact over opinion. Public opinion, as measured by the polls, often impacts public policy and laws. In my world, public opinion polls have become one of a journalist's most powerful tools to explain issues, very close to the direct democracy of Athens.

That is one reason democracy contains within it the seeds of its own destruction. While the polités, or citizens, is vital to democracy, the important societal decisions must be left to an enlightened king.

Not a philosopher?

Good works are more important than good words.

You would be surprised to know that good words often survive good works. Thanks to you and other Greek thinkers, Western thought dominates the world.

In fact much of what we know today about the Greece of your day comes from writings that have survived wars, censorship, disasters and neglect over the millennia. To a great extent you have Alexander to thank for that.

Why?

A few years from now a new city will emerge on the Mediterranean in Egypt. And in that city will be the world's first and biggest library, the Biblioteka of Alexandria, which will become the center of learning for centuries.

Very interesting. Maybe I will donate by personal library to the Biblioteka. I have collected several thousand scrolls and tablets.

Speaking of your love of words, it has been reported that while Plato read his Phaedo about the death of Socrates, you were the only student who remained until the very end, and that you wept.

Ah, that old story. I thought journalists valued accuracy above all else. I do not recall the event that way. My fellow students were all interested in what the master had to say.

As an educator, what do you think of the idea of journalism and mass communication schools that train reporters and editors?

What is the epistemological basis of journalism? If that question cannot be answered adequately, then it should not be part of the Academy or Lyceum, any more than sandal making, weaving of baskets or laying of bricks should be taught.

Unless you can tell me the historical origins of journalistic thought and how it has evolved and grown, then I would say you are trainers—not educators—of tradesmen or craftsmen. Journalists, if you equate them with chroniclers and scribes like those in Babylonia and Egypt, are merely perfunctories since they record ideas not create them.

That seems a harsh assessment. Today most journalism and mass communication majors are within a school of humanities or social science, and cannot be accredited unless most of their courses are taken in the social sciences and humanities. The goal is to give journalism students a broad intellectual foundation to draw from when they report the news in their communities.

Then why not concentrate their efforts in the social sciences and physical sciences completely? Would not the students be more valuable to a mass media company if they had greater knowledge of a large number of fields? Cannot they acquire the writing and reporting skills they need while working?

That certainly is an argument that still rages in my day. Is journalism a profession or a trade? No easy answer satisfies everyone.

You speak kindly of Plato, yet you left the Academy when you were not appointed his successor. Some say the reason you started this Lyceum was to compete with the Academy, so you must be in favor of competition not only of educational institutions but mass media ones as well.

Again, I must caution you as a recorder of history to be more accurate and love the truth.

What is the truth about why you left the Academy upon Plato's death?

Some have said I resented Speusippus (Plato's nephew, who became head of the Academy). I, too, have heard the stories repeated around the Agora by idle thinkers. Truth is far less interesting.

Because Philip destroyed Olynthus (a Greek city-state in 348 B.C.), citizen passions were aroused against all Macedonians living in Athens at the time. In addition, as a resident Macedonian, by law I could not head the Academy. Besides, Hermeias of Atarneus had asked my beloved Xenocrates—the inventor of *logos*—and me to start a model academy at Assus to bring the ideal of the Greek city-state to Persia and the edge of Asia. I met both my wives there, and my son, Nicomachea, was born there.

Ah, that's where Nicomachean Ethics, the title of your important book on ethics, comes from. You named it for your son. But was the anti-Macedonian public opinion greater back then or is it stronger now?

I was younger then—and a student at the Academy. I was beginning to develop my thinking on the Golden Mean, and I determined that courage was halfway between cowardice and foolhardiness. Cowardliness meant I would have fled; foolhardiness meant I would have fought against overwhelming odds, possibly risking injury or death; courage was to stay and temper my words and actions. I chose the middle path.

Sometimes journalists have the same decision to make. Do they risk their lives for a story? Is any story worth that risk?

Of course each person must decide which path to take. But as a general rule, caution is better than a foolhardiness that increases the likelihood of bodily harm.

What some might call cowardice, I would call prudence. But now I am different. I am older, in ill health; and a Greek, not a Macedon, will rule Athens after Alexander. I'm afraid I will not find pleasure if I stay here in these times.

I have so many questions on so many different subjects, but I see you are weary and in need of rest before your trip.

Thank you for an afternoon of conversation. As you can tell, few people, except my persecutors, want to be seen talking to me in public these days.

Yes, but history has forgotten their names, while the name of Aristotle lives on.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Q1. Aristotle's break with his teacher, Plato, came over a metaphysical definition of the soul (spirit) and its relationship to the physical world. How did this break influence Christianity, Islam and Buddhism regarding the nature of man and his relationship to deities?

Q2. Though Aristotle seems flexible in his thoughts of right or wrong, he did not practice situational ethics. He clearly had views of what was right and what was wrong. Which philosopher seems to draw on this concept more than any other? Which philosopher breaks with Aristotelians over the idea of right and wrong? Discuss.

Q3. In Aristotle's view, the purpose of language is to express the feelings and experiences of the soul, and words are signs or symbols that express ideas. How would Aristotle think about propagandists' deceptive use of language to sway public opinion?

Q4. Aristotle seems unbothered by globalism or cultural imperialism as long as the imperialist is virtuous. Can any mass media corporation be virtuous if its main reason for being is to generate a return on investment for stockholders? What would Aristotle say?

Q5. Aristotle invented the syllogism as a form of argument. A syllogism consists of three parts, two premises and a conclusion. For the conclusion to be true, both premises must be true. Example:

Every Greek is a man.
Every man is mortal.
Therefore every Greek is mortal.

Look at a controversial issue a columnist might write about, and formulate a syllogism that would strengthen his or her argument.

FOR FURTHER READING

Lloyd, G.E.R. *Aristotle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Barnes, Jonathan. *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Grimaldi, William M.A. *Aristotle, Rhetoric II, A Commentary*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1988.

Judson, Lindsay. (Ed.) *Aristotle's Physics: A Collection of Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Lear, Jonathan. *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

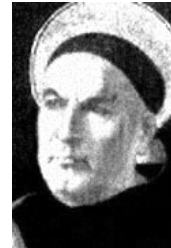
McKeon, Richard. (Ed.) *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York: Modern Library, 2001.

Rorty, Amelia. O. (Ed.). *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Chapter 4

aquinas (1225–1274)

The Prudent Communicator



Thomas Aquinas was born in 1225 at his family’s castle of Roccasecca in the Kingdom of Naples. After studying at the newly founded University of Naples, he joined the Order of Preachers, or Dominicans, against the wishes of his family. He taught at the University of Paris, at the Dominicans’ houses of study in Rome and Cologne, at the papal court in Orvieto, and at the university in Naples. He died on the way to the second ecumenical council of Lyons, on March 7, 1274.

Thomas’ most famous works are the compendious *Summa Against the Pagans* and the *Summa of Theology*. A *summa* is an extended treatment of doctrine in an orderly fashion. He wrote dozens of other works, including the beautiful Eucharistic hymns “Pange lingua” and “Sacris solemniis iuncta sint gaudia.”

Aquinas is famous for using the philosophy of Aristotle to understand and explain Christian doctrine. He was, however, critical of Aristotelians, called Averroists, because they regarded the Muslim thinker Averroes to be Aristotle’s perfect commentator. The Averroes held that Aristotle’s philosophical teaching was true even when it contradicted Christian doctrine, which they also regarded as true.

At the same time Aquinas affirmed the value of studying Aristotle against the Christian thinkers who considered such study to be useless or pernicious. These thinkers, generally in the Platonic-Augustinian tradition,

STRESS POINTS

Truth, Knowledge, Teaching
 Practical Reasoning
 Virtues: Studiousness,
 Prudence, Art, Justice

Human Debility
 Goals, Ends, Objects
 Basic Human Goods

tended to see this world as contemptible or merely symbolic of ultimate reality, and held that it was the Christian's task to shun and escape it in favor of his true home in heaven.

Aquinas affirmed the reality and goodness of the sensible world of human experience, and while he agreed that humankind's true home is heaven, he insisted that this world is valuable in itself, and not only as symbolic of a higher reality. God's revelation and grace, as mediated to us by the Church and its sacraments, are necessary for us to live in this present world as we ought, and without them we cannot achieve our ultimate goal and final home, which lie beyond this mortal coil. But this world, Aquinas held, is a good place.

Thomas Aquinas was canonized in 1323, and declared a Doctor of the Universal Church in 1567. His feast day is January 28.

The interview

St. Thomas Aquinas spoke to the interviewer, Charles J. Merrill, in May, 2004, in the town of Frederick, Maryland. The saint, on temporary leave from his homeland, seemed to be in very good health, and completely at ease in his surroundings, though they must have been strange to him. The conversation was held in Latin and Italian and then translated into English, not always felicitously, by the inexperienced interviewer.

Note: The interviewer's questions and comments are *italicized*. The philosopher's responses are plain text.

Brother Thomas, thank you for agreeing to leave your eternal abode, which must be quite a bit more comfortable than this place. I hope you'll excuse the dust and disorder. I must tell you, though, I was reluctant to take this assignment, and I won't blame you if you're not interested in discussing the mass media and journalism.

Why do you think I wouldn't want to talk about those subjects?

Because you were a monk, and a medieval Christian, and an other-worldly philosopher-theologian, and I can't imagine that the reporting of current events in 21st century newspapers and newscasts or the journalists who do the reporting can seem interesting to you.

You've drawn a false inference from muddled premises. First of all, I was a mendicant friar, not a monk. I didn't live in a self-sufficient monastery remote from the concourse of civil society, but in a friary, in cities like Naples and Paris and Cologne, where my brothers and I depended for our sustenance on the charity of the people among whom we lived. And my order of friars was dedicated to teaching and preaching, activities which pertain to the active life as well as to the contemplative.

Secondly, although I died centuries before you were born, both of our life-spans fall within the same age. You, Ted Turner, Rupert Murdoch, William Lloyd Garrison and I all live in the time of Grace, unlike Moses, Plato and Aristotle, who lived in the time of the Law. The fact that you and I and Walter Cronkite live after the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity and the sending into the world of the Third makes us closer together than our being born 725 years and a continent apart may suggest.

Furthermore, even if I were from another essentially different age, might I not still have something to say to yours? I studied and learned from Moses and Aristotle, after all, and agreed with them in more fundamental philosophical points than I did with my medieval fellows Siger of Brabant and Averroes. And I feel a great admiration for some of your contemporary thinkers, such as Germain Grisez and John Finnis.

Thirdly, I was a philosopher and a theologian as you say, but the word “other-worldly” is not appropriate. I lived in no other world than this one, the same world in which newspapers are published and news programs are broadcast.

I don’t regard true religion as a means of escape from the world. This world is good insofar as it is; that is to say, simply because it has being. God created it and sustains it in existence. Men are indeed fallen from the state they are meant to be in, and we need to return to it by regaining our lost reality.

This we must do in the world, embracing natural reality, living here and now in the conditions we find ourselves in, while resisting the temptation to find ultimate meaning in intermediate ends. Not that this is easy, or even possible for that matter, without divine grace. But the struggle to live well in this world is related to the practice and product of journalism, so I am indeed interested in the subject, and I’m happy to talk to you about it.

But doesn’t philosophy deal with important, essential truths knowable by reason, and theology with divinely revealed truths related to our eternal salvation, whereas journalism is the reporting of the ephemeral and the contingent?

The proper object of everyone’s intellect—philosophers’, journalists’, and newspaper readers’—is truth. Reasoning, the activity of the intellect, can operate speculatively, in its orientation toward the intellection of truths of the speculative order, or practically, insofar as it is concerned with truths about what actions we should take or omit in our quest to become what we are meant to be.

Philosophy is concerned with both speculative and practical reasoning. Journalism, though it is not a branch of philosophy, is concerned with practical reasoning, with helping people make informed decisions about how to live, in particular about how to live in society. Nothing is in the intellect that is not first in the senses, and journalists serve as the eyes and ears of society, providing images and information that human agents can utilize in their deliberation about how to act for the good.

Of course the “news” is ephemeral; but that doesn’t make it useless. As my religious order is particularly devoted to preaching the Good News, we are bound to take an interest in every kind of news about the world created for us to live in.

I see. But then you think that only Christian believers should be journalists, and that they should write and broadcast only for other Christians? If news is to be understood in light of the Good News, mustn’t that be the case?

Not at all. Although much or most of the journalists’ readers or auditors or viewers will not be Christian, they will all be human beings capable of and called to take action in harmony with their rational human nature, and to shun acts that are irrational. Journalists, whether or not they are Christians, are not preachers, and need appeal only to their audience’s reason, not to their faith.

But I don’t think journalists consider themselves to be appealing to anyone’s reason.

What journalists do, or at least can do, or at any rate *ought* to do, is to report on events that happen in the world and to inquire into the causes or reasons for those events. The product of their reporting and inquiry is information, which is knowledge, truth, and wisdom.

Journalists aim to inform, explain and enlighten. They practice the art of knowing how to get at the truth and then knowing how to report it. In all this they are teachers, and teachers appeal to their audience’s reason.

Philosophers and theologians are teachers who impart to their students the fruits of their meditations on being and on the scriptures. Journalists impart to their readers and viewers the fruits of their investigations into what is happening in the world. All of them, philosophers, theologians and journalists, strive to use language as clearly and precisely as possible. And the goal of them all is to bring their students to the truth.

And do you think journalists often achieve this goal?

All too often they don't. Although journalists want to know and to disseminate knowledge, and although they're ontologically oriented to their own true happiness and the common good of the community, they are also human beings who suffer the consequences of their race's primeval fall from original justice.

Their intellects are obscured, making it hard to see the truth, their wills are debilitated, rendering difficult the pursuit of the good, and their senses fail to be subject to their reason. The wounds on their nature cause them to overemphasize the insignificant and to ignore the truly meaningful. Therefore much of what is published or broadcast is misinformation rather than real news, sometimes because journalists are intentionally lying, or exaggerating, or suppressing the truth, sometimes because their distorted faculties lead them to perceive distortedly and report misleadingly.

And then an enormous amount of what is printed and broadcast is true, but only trivially so, responding to the audience's curiosity, a vice opposed to the virtue of studiousness. A studious person wants to learn everything necessary and useful to true fulfillment, whereas the curious person squanders his time and energy on the pursuit of trivial and superficial facts.

The river of knowledge is so copious that it is foolish to try to drink it all. Our good does indeed consist of the knowledge of truth, but more specifically in the knowledge of sovereign truth, not of trivial detail. Do we need to know how much weight Oprah has gained or lost? Is knowing what kind of shoes Mary Kate and Ashley wear of any import to the realization of our potencies?

Furthermore, much of what appears in the mass media, when it's not trivial and superficial, is salacious, appealing to the audience's lower instincts, or scandalous, leading them to spiritual downfall.

Another problem: All too often reporters and editors write in the service of power—governments, political parties, ideological sects—rather than of truth. Journalists must take the truth as their only master. When they don't, they lose sight of their proper object, which is to inform and enlighten, and are deflected from their true good, and they deflect their readers from it too.

And what is their true good?

Everyone's true good, end or goal is happiness, the integral realization of what they are called to be. Everything in the universe, in fact, has an end or goal.

Inanimate and irrational beings are moved toward it by Providence, but rational beings move toward their end by freely acting for it. They may misapprehend the means to happiness, and live as if wealth, power, pleasure or any other instrumental good were their final goal. But their true fulfillment can only be the full achievement of their proper good, and not just their own, but the good of the whole human community.

Certain intelligible human goods are principles of our total fulfillment, and we rightly act toward them as toward the final goal; happiness or beatitude is a kind of synthesis of them. Human life and health, for instance, and marriage, and the good of knowing the truth about God, are all ends toward which we are naturally inclined.

Of the basic goods, the ones of especial interest to journalists are living in friendship with others, or peace and harmony in society, and practical reasonableness, or the good of intelligently ordering one's emotions, choices, and actions. These are the goods that journalists can help their audiences to participate in.

And you think that this applies if the readers and viewers are not Christian, or even religious?

It applies if the readers and viewers are beings who are composites of souls and bodies, endowed with reason, will and memory. Such beings naturally live in society, the end or purpose of which is a virtuous life. The mass media can make them more virtuous.

And is virtue the same as goodness?

Not really. Virtues are operative habits or dispositions for acting well, for acting for the good. They can come from nature, or be acquired by exercise, or be infused by God. The four cardinal, moral or political virtues are prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude.

And which of those virtues do journalists and other mass media professionals need?

As humans they need them all, of course. But journalists find certain virtues especially important.

Obviously they need prudence, which perfects the practical reason and helps us choose the particular actions that lead to the perfection of every virtue, and on which all the other virtues depend. Everyone must be prudent to be good at anything worthwhile.

But to be a good journalist one must have a virtue, which is not properly speaking moral, namely art. While prudence directs us to doing things rightly, art directs us to making things right. Journalists cultivate art when they learn and practice the skills, crafts, techniques and specific abilities that make reporting the news possible. A journalist who has not learned the art of journalism is of no more use than a poet who has not learned the art of poetry or a carpenter who can't hammer.

So prudence and art are the two necessary virtues?

I already mentioned studiousness, which is annexed to temperance. By this virtue we apply our mind closely to what ought to be learned. The soul naturally wants to know, and the body naturally is lazy, and avoids making the effort necessary to learn.

Studious journalists resist both the urge to know everything, even the trivial, the scandalous and the scabrous, and the temptation to shirk the effort they must expend to get their stories right.

Curiosity, as I said, is a vice contrary to studiousness. Among the vices contrary to prudence ever to be avoided by journalists are (1) hastiness—not making sufficient inquiry before acting, or writing, or broadcasting; (2) negligence—the want of readiness in putting into execution the resolutions of judgment; and especially (3) slyness—using false and deceitful means to attain an end, whether the end is good or bad.

The virtues that reading newspapers and hearing or seeing broadcasts are meant to inculcate, on the other hand, are primarily prudence and justice. People need prudence to choose the appropriate acts for the good in concrete situations and circumstances.

The media inform them about these circumstances, which no one can make prudent decisions without knowing. And justice is the virtue that relates most specifically to the good of living together harmoniously in society. It is a disposition to do the right thing in our dealings with others.

It involves the application to social life of the natural law, that law which is dictated by natural reason. The media are the means by which information is disseminated within society, and that information bears on deciding for just actions and against unjust ones.

Journalists should beware of certain vices that are opposed to justice: defamation, which draws attention to what detracts from a man's character for no just cause; whispering or gossip, which aims to cause dissension among friends; and lying, by which one speaks or writes or broadcasts what one knows is not true.

What about the theological virtues? I take it journalists don't need them?

Faith, hope and charity are infused in baptism, and belong to the order of grace rather than the order of nature. While man may attain his end in natural society by acting in accord with moral virtue, he attains his true and ultimate end only by acting in accord with the divinely infused theological virtues.

Journalists who are not baptized may still be good journalists, at least up to a point, since their activity and goals lie primarily on the plane of nature. As regards the supernatural, they must always observe the negative precept of not leading their readers and viewers away from the true religion, and when possible they should promote life in accord with holiness and divine love.

All good journalism, whether or not it is Christian, can have as its goals to broaden, enlarge and open the mind, making it more capable of grasping the truth about what is to be done; to strengthen the will in its determination to do good; to help the readers and viewers see their duty, and to do it; to present the spectacle of human misery, calling upon charity to alleviate it; and to encourage involvement in human communities and their problems, rather than flight from them into apathy and pleasure-seeking.

Thanks again, Brother Thomas, for taking a few minutes out of eternity to hold this conversation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Q1. Discuss Aquinas' conception of "truth" and give his reasons for believing that truth is of utmost importance to the mass communicator.

Q2. Aquinas says that journalists should appeal only to their audiences' reason, and that their religious faith has nothing to do with their journalism. Do you agree or disagree with this? Why or why not?

Q3. Journalists, according to Aquinas, are people with "obscured" intellects and with senses that fail to subject to their reason. What do you think this means and how can it affect their daily work of communicating to the masses?

Q4. What is the difference between what Aquinas calls the "studious" person and the "curious" person? Do you feel the mass media provide knowledge of truth or of "trivial detail," as Aquinas puts it?

Q5. Aquinas mentions some "basic goods" that the journalists can help their audiences participate in. He names at least five of these. Do you think they are reasonable expectations? How does Aquinas differentiate between virtue and goodness?

FOR FURTHER READING

Clark, Mary T. (Ed.) *An Aquinas Reader*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.

Copleston, Frederick C. *Aquinas*. New York: Penguin, 1956.

Davies, Brian. *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Finnis, John. *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Gilson, Etienne. *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*. South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1994.

Gilson, Etienne. *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*. New York: Dorset Press, 1924.

McDermott, Timothy (Ed.). *Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1989.

UNDESIRABLE DISCUSSION