

# The Philosopher's Island

<http://pages.potTables2.nfl.gov.uk/pmpercival/philosophy/>

In this volume of *Analytic Teaching* we begin a new regular feature: A review of websites that promote philosophical inquiry. The sites reviewed in this column have one thing in common - they are designed to encourage and promote the activity of philosophy amongst students of all ages. While principally designed for use in schools, many of these sites provide wonderful resources that can also be used to initiate philosophical inquiry between parents and children or between groups of friends.

It has often been noted that the global nature of the web throws the possibilities of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding wide open. Many of the sites we will be reviewing here have been developed (and funded) with the express purpose of building inquiry across national and cultural borders.

Other sites we will be reviewing reflect the local and particular; they are tied to an individual school, teacher, or group of children. In sharing their resources through the web, these people have provided us all with a rich set of materials that may prompt us to begin our own philosophical inquiries. In prompting us to post our own replies, these sites too open the possibility for ongoing dialogue and cultural exchange.

*Jen Glaser*

## THE PHILOSOPHER'S ISLAND

<http://pages.portables2.ngfl.gov.uk/pmpercival/philosophy/>

This site was created by Phillip Percival together with students aged 7-11 at Middleton Cheney Primary School, England. The participating students were part of a philosophy club begun by Phillip at the school.

*You wake up. You are feeling cold, wet and very tired. You stretch out your hand and find sand beneath your body. You can hear the lapping of waves and the cries of seagulls. You look up, the sun makes you blink. Your head hurts. You cannot remember who you are. Questions start to flood into your mind.*

What kinds of questions would they be? Matthew Lipman and Richard Paul both point to the strengthening of imagination as an important element in the development of critical thinking. One of the most

appealing features of Philosopher's Island is the way in which it invites us to engage in imaginative play as well as make reasonable decisions. This imaginative play is strengthened as the reader is addressed in the second person as if they are the one going through this experience.

Philosopher's Island is primarily an exploration of social and political philosophy and the development of culture. The eight episodes build on one another as we follow the main character (played by ourselves) from the moment we wake up on the island; through to the arrival of others (with the issues of leadership and communal organisation which quickly follow); the establishment of culture and demarcation and valuing of different forms of work. Scattered amongst these themes are other philosophical questions that, while less germane to the development of the whole, invite us into further realms of philosophical inquiry.

The engagement in political philosophy begins with the discovery of a crown and a locked box containing a blank parchment with the heading 'rules'. Is there a need for rules when I am the only person on the island? Can they play a role in self-regulation? What is the significance of the crown? Does its discovery lead me to assume the posture of monarch? The question of rules also raises the question of ethics - are their rules that express universal or absolute values? It is this question that occupied the Middleton Cheney group, and they invite us to share in their conclusions by clicking on the cue: «to find out what we discussed click here.»

What significance does the fact that I was on the island first have? Does it give me any authority? What has changed by the sheer fact that I now share the island with others? How will we divide goods on the island? What happens when people don't pull their weight or play harmful pranks on one another?

The themes concerning knowledge and certainty raised in episode one re-emerge in episode five when Descartes is washed up on shore. Descartes arrives in the form of a computer (or is it a person communicating with them through the computer?). Here we are asked to establish a set of questions that would determine whether Descartes was person or intelligent machine. While questions concerning artificial intelligence and personhood are tangential to the story's main development, I have often found such questions intrigue children of this age (7-11).

While the final episodes of the philosopher's Island are more sketchy, their lack of polish does not detract from the possibilities for philosophical inquiry they offer. These episodes deal with (i) the nature of culture and art (a woman opens an art gallery on the island) and, (ii) the demarcation and valuing of different forms of work. As jobs become increasingly specialized, is someone who calls themselves a philosopher contributing to the kind of work that needs to be done on the island? How about artists - are the builders correct when they claim that people who create pictures and songs are wasting their time?

Overall, I think this site is both engaging and original, raising traditional questions of philosophy in an inviting way. The detail offered in the earlier episodes (student's comments, discussion plans and

summaries) provides enough of a structure for teachers and students to get a sense of the further development later episodes require in order to be equally engaging. I see this need for further development as a strength rather than a weakness - for the sketchiness of the final episodes reminds us that the story itself was being developed at Middleton Cheney alongside its use. In this way it may encourage us to stay true to the original concept and continue the construction of the story for ourselves in light of our own deliberations.

While the children who took part in the development of this site have clearly moved on (it was developed in 1998), it would be very simple for teachers or parents to explore and develop this site in parallel with another group by using the prompts left by Middleton Cheney as a cue for exchanging their own responses via email.

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