A Piece of Your Mind: Ancient Texts Foster the Seeds of Western Thought In Printed Books, 1488 - 1912

A.M. Todd Rare Book Room
Upjohn Library
Kalamazoo College

August 18 to September 6, 1994
A Piece of Your Mind: The Relationship Between Ancient Philosophy and Printing

The Collection

A Piece of Your Mind:

Ancient Texts Foster the Seeds of Western Thought in Printed Books

1488 - 1912

An Exhibition

John Lobur, K'95, Student Curator

A. M. Todd Rare Book Room
Upjohn Library, Kalamazoo College
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 18 to September 6, 1994
A Piece of Your Mind: The Relationship Between Ancient Philosophy and Printing

The Collection:

The A. M. Todd Rare Book Room holds a variety of rare texts by ancient philosophers. The printing dates of the editions themselves span nearly five centuries, a few texts being classified as *incunabula*, or books printed prior to 1501. The books vary in regard to their printers as well, some of them having been produced by such famous workshops as the Plantin Press in Antwerp, Froben’s press in Germany, and even Benjamin Franklin’s press in Philadelphia. Moreover, sometimes the editors, compilers, translators, and commentators on the texts are fairly well known men, such as Justus Lipsius, and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

This collection illustrates how books themselves change through time not only in regard to the technological level of the printing process, but also in regard to their purpose and the conception of what a book should be for the audience. For example, the collection’s earliest *incunabula* editions look almost like manuscripts, and indeed they contain a great deal of rubrication. Almost all of the early editions are written in the original language of the text - Greek or Latin - and clearly exist for the educated elite of society, both religious and secular. Later on, as interest and audience
changed, and everyone on the whole was better educated and more literate, and as the colloquial instead of the classical tongues became the languages of learning, one starts to see editions printed in the vernacular. Even the content of editions changes - certain parts of different works viewed as morally inappropriate at a given time are cut out of some editions. The affordability of books changes as the readership expands. Earlier, the only people who could read were generally the rich elite or the clergy, whose education and access to books was made possible by the immense resources commanded by the church. At this time books were expensive and often lavishly embellished.

Finally, one should note the philosophers themselves whose works these volumes contain. A chronology and basic outline of these giants, on whose shoulders Western civilization stands, may prove helpful.

**Ancient Greek Philosophers:**

The first selection, and the most numerous selection of editions exhibited, contains the works of Plato. Plato (ca. 429 - 347 B.C.) was a student of Socrates and the founder of the Academy, a philosophic school in Athens. His early works are primarily concerned with portraying the character of Socrates, and they search for the answer to such questions as "what is virtue." They usually end in admitted ignorance, but Socrates’ interlocutors, after their theories have been thoroughly destroyed by his unyielding method of argument, at least end up knowing that they do not know what they thought they knew. In his later works, instead of pursuing the nature of beauty, justice, etc., Plato tends to inquire about the nature of forms themselves. For example, when we call particular things by common names - such as when we say that a person, act, or thing can be "just" - what is that thing by virtue of which all those different things are just? Plato wishes us to stop looking for answers in sensate particulars as they are imperfect representations of the truth. Rather, he wishes us to seek knowledge in the very forms of things, which are only grasped by the mind. Perhaps no single person has contributed as greatly to Western philosophy as Plato, and many questions brought up for the first time in his works are still being dealt with today.

**Aristotle (ca. 384 - 322 B.C.)** was born at Stagira in Chalcidice. He entered the Academy at age seventeen, leaving upon the death of its founder, Plato. After some travel, he was hired as tutor to Alexander the Great in the Macedonian court of Philip, and legend has it that he even gave the future conqueror a sound spanking. He returned to Athens in 335 B.C. to found his own philosophic institution, the peripatetic school. Here he collected manuscripts, maps, and even a small museum of objects. Upon Alexander’s death in 323 B.C., he left Athens, having been charged with impiety, and he died a year later.
His method of philosophy was fundamentally different from that of Plato. Unlike his mentor, he believed that one should search for the truth as instantiated in the sensible, and not outside of it. One finds in his work a strong desire to understand natural phenomena, and his topics range from biology to politics and from physics to poetry. His commonsensical method of argument, moreover, makes him a very persuasive arguer. There are two marked characteristics of his style and intellect - his love of moderation in all things and his devotion to order. Another philosophic giant, he ranks on par with Plato as one of the most influential ancient thinkers.

**Ancient Roman Philosophers:**

The third philosopher featured in this exhibition is Marcus Aurelius. Born in 121 A.D. of a Spanish family of Roman consular rank, he became emperor in 161 A.D. and spent most of his relatively successful reign stemming the tide of barbarians that threatened to crush the empire. His one philosophic work, the *Meditations*, was composed during these campaigns. It is a medley of his own reflections on Stoicism and an important source for our understanding of that ancient doctrine.

Ancius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca. 480 - 524 A.D.), the son of a consul, became one himself in 510 A.D. Theodoric the Ostrogoth, who then controlled Italy made him *magister officiorum*, an important administrative post. Eventually, he fell from favor, was imprisoned, and executed. It was during this imprisonment that he wrote his philosophic work *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, conceived as a dialogue between himself and philosophy personified, and written to console himself in his troubled times.

Marcus Tullius Cicero, born in 106 B.C., was the best Roman orator of his day and a writer of many speeches, letters, and philosophical tracts. He had a profound admiration of Plato and Aristotle, and wished to give the Romans a philosophical literature to replace that of the Greeks. He, for the most part, follows Greek doctrines, yet often alters them to suit his own tastes. Cicero's influence on European thought and literature is immense, and he is credited with formulating a philosophical vocabulary in Latin. Such words as "quality" find their origin in his invention. He was consul in 63 B.C.

Lucius Anneus Seneca was born in Spain in 4 A.D. of a family of consular rank. In 49 A.D. he was appointed tutor to the notorious future emperor Nero. Upon Nero's succession, he became the ruler's political advisor and minister, and thus probably one of the three most important men in Rome at the time. He later fell from grace, however, and was coerced into suicide by the mad emperor in 69 A.D. This he did, nevertheless, with the amazing coolness and courage so often praised in his philosophy. Seneca's work is an important source for the history and doctrines of Stoicism. The bulk of it consists of moral exhortation in highly unique and effective language.
Lucretius (94 - 55 B.C.) was a Roman poet and philosopher, and very little is known about his life. His only work is the *De Rerum Natura* - a didactic poem in six books which expounds the Epicurean philosophy. It promotes an atomistic view of nature in which neither the immortal soul, divine intervention, nor an afterlife exist. He sought to free the human race from superstition, religion, and fear of death.

Perhaps one of the nicest features of this collection on display is that in it one may see the pivotal role played by these ancient authors not only in the development of Western thought, but also in the development of the book itself. Before books as physical objects can develop, there must be something to print. After the Bible and other religious texts, these philosophical texts represent a significant portion of the material printed in the early history of printing with moveable type. Moreover, these texts contain the seeds of modern scientific, philosophical and literary development. The fact that many of these works existed in manuscript or printed form for some 1500 years or more says something for their content as well.

Books on Exhibit:


8. Boecius. *De consolatione philosophiae*.


Rare book exhibitions are made possible by the support of the A. M. Todd Rare Book endowment and the continuing generosity of friends of the College.