

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

Category: Psychology

Sub-category: Human Understanding

Code: Psy 03-014

Title: Summary and Review of Kieran Egan (1997): *The Educated Mind* - Chapter 4: Philosophic Understanding (PU) (p. 104 – 136)

Year Written: 2022

Summary/ Abstract: This is a summary and review of Egan's (1997) Chapter 4: Philosophic Understanding

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Summary and Review of Kieran Egan (1997): *The Educated Mind*
Chapter 4: Philosophic Understanding (PU) (p. 104 – 136)

(A) Background

In this chapter, Egan outlined “philosophic understanding”; he also called it “theoretic understanding”. It is the next stage of late teens (adolescents) following romantic understanding of early teens (childhood). So it looks similar to the Piagetian stage of formal operations and adolescent thought. As before, Egan took a different route and told the story from cultural history.

(B) What is Philosophic Understanding

- p. 104 – 105 “The central feature of philosophic understanding is systematic theoretic thinking and an insistent belief that truth can only be expressed in its terms.”
- p. 105 15 July 1662 founding of Royal Society of London. Basically Egan retold the story of science / rational thinking:
 Greek → Renaissance → Enlightenment → Reason
 Orality → literacy
- p. 105 Scientific thinking by Pythagorean Community (p. 106) as “the aggressive program of a particular group of intellectually talented people” (p. 105) in ancient Greece.
- p. 106 Literacy made possible “abstract” concepts such as “good”. Hippocratic practitioners: rational, proto-scientific approach to medicine.
- p. 106 – 107 “Undermine the authority of tradition.”
- p. 107 Rationality in Weberian sense:
 “Oral discourse about written text” ——— develop modern, skeptical, interpretive, thought.
- p. 108 Herodotus: “Romantic” history writing presents accurate narrative plus “general truth about the historical process” cf. Gibbon on Roman Empire (p. 114)
- p. 108 – 110 History, medicine, Aristotle (philosophic understanding)

(C) Modern Development of Philosophic Understanding

- p. 111 – 112 Descartes – death in Sweden
 Bacon – bribery case
 Printing press and “Virtual” (reading) community
- p. 113 French Encyclopedic
 Edinburgh Review
- p. 114 J.S. Mill on science
- p. 115 Comte’s positivism (but underneath Christianity and romanticism)
 Shelley’s Defence of poetry
- p. 116 The “unnatural”: Nature of science
- p. 117 Tough-minded scientific understanding to replace previous worldviews

The polemical accompaniment to the development of Philosophic understanding represents the new form as sweeping away the insubstantial folk knowledge, the emotionalism, the metaphor-induced confusion, the glittering superficiality of its predecessors, and replacing these with cold, hard factuality and sharp-edged theoretical truth. This is the stance of the self-consciously tough-minded.

- p. 118 R: Even today, philosophic understanding is not dominant

Systematic development of Philosophic understanding seems at present normal for only a smallish proportion of the population—those who enter and interact with communities that support this kind of thinking, such as some academic streams in senior high schools and in colleges and universities, and who also have adequately accumulated Mythic and Romantic capacities.

- p. 119 16th century French language lacked words for:

Lucien Febvre (1878–1956), co-founder of the French *Annales* school of historians, pointed out that the sixteenth-century French language lacked words for “absolute,” “relative,” “abstract,” “concrete,” “intentional,” “inherent,” “transcendental,” “causality,” “regularity,” “concept,” “criterion,” “analysis,” “synthesis,” “deduction,” “induction,” “coordination,” “classification,” “system,” and a range of terms that the Philosophic programs of the next century would use prominently. According to the data banks of the American Research on the Treasury of the French Language, the word “société” was used 620 times in the century before 1700 and 7,168 times in the following two (cf. Gordon, 1994).

p. 120

Vague terms become “objects”

“Society” is no longer a vague term used by adults to refer to an amorphous, indistinct concatenation of houses and services and politicians but becomes the name for the general entity that encompasses all those bits and pieces. It is as though an object has been discovered—a very complex one, but one that can be grasped by means of the portmanteau term. We can commonly note words like “nature,” “culture,” “the environment,” “system,” and “process” being used to refer to a theoretic world whose abstract inhabitants begin to emerge as clear, definite, real things. “Society” might be an enormous generalization but, to the Philosophic mind, it refers to something real;

seems prone to this displacement, taking the very general concepts as though they refer to something tangible. But they will appear so only to those whose thinking is excessively “Philosophical.”

R: Less true, Plato / Confucius all deployed abstract terms!

p. 121

R: Here Egan gave a list of Fundamental historical questions:

This perception gives rise to new questions about the nature of the historical process. Is it an ameliorative one, in which the nasty, brutal, and short life of our savage ancestors gradually became a harmonious, healthy, intellectually enriched experience? Or perhaps it is a tragedy, in which things began to fall apart for humans with the invention of agriculture, which led to private property, population explosions and social disruption, surpluses and hierarchies—as Rousseau and St.-Simon viewed it. Or perhaps the agricultural utopia was destroyed by the discoveries of metallurgy, which led to hierarchies, hereditary secrets, a primitive bourgeoisie, greed, and war—as V. Gordon Childe presents it. Or perhaps the invention of writing was the cause of all our woes. What are the laws that determine the natural world? What is the truth about society? What is natural human behavior? What—the unsophisticated philosophic mind accepts as a meaningful question—is the meaning of life?

p. 121

Comparing Romantic understanding and philosophic understanding in politics.

p. 122

Egan’s dispute of research

- (1) Words change meaning – defy measurement
- (2) No theory to guide tests

p. 122 Egan on Piaget's adolescent thought (on truth) and his philosophic understanding.

His notion of "formal operations," while problematic and the subject of much controversy (see for example, Modgil and Modgil, 1982; Siegel and Brainerd, 1978), does reflect a common recognition of the construction of a theoretic realm in academic students in later adolescence. Piaget focused on a set of internal, spontaneously developing, logico-mathematical structures that are paradigmatic Philosophic entities: immensely abstract, largely inaccessible, and containing *the truth* about the process of development. What I describe in general terms as a characteristic of Philosophic understanding—that students increasingly identify the truth as belonging in this theoretic realm—Inhelder and Piaget described as

Egan (General Scheme)

Piaget (Possibility)

p. 123 Truth → ideology → "powerful magnet" → imagination

The mind was filled with somewhat inchoate but enticing images of infinite space, endless numbers, and eternal duration. As Kant argues, this use of imagination leads us beyond what is accessible to the senses, but also toward the realization that there is *something signified* by these concepts that we can express but somehow cannot grasp, though we can grasp *toward* them.

The move from Romantic to Philosophic understanding follows the stretch of the imagination and the subsequent construction of the linguistic and conceptual tools required to secure the mind's hold on what the imagination grasped toward.

R: The only time in this book to refer to Kant!

(D) Characteristics of Philosophic Understanding

R: Egan on characteristics of philosophic understanding

- (1) The craving for generality (p. 118 – 123)
- (2) From searching truth to social agents (p. 124 – 126)
- (3) Certainty (p. 127 – 129)
- (4) Anomalies (p. 129 – 131)
- (5) Flexibility (p. 132 – 135)

p. 125

R: Egan's philosophic understanding can explain youth idealism – the start of seeing a world with truth / laws / and one's role in history / society, a new sense of self and potency. Thus

If students perceive themselves to be parts of natural, social, historical, and other processes, their understanding of themselves and their roles in the world depends on their knowledge of how these processes work. During the years from about fifteen to the early twenties, then, students will characteristically search for or attempt to sustain a conception of the truth about human psychology, the laws of historical development, and the truth of how societies function.

Let us return to Marxism as an example. Here the student is directed to search out knowledge and perform actions that will point to the contradictions of capitalism, hinder the aims of reactionary bourgeois ideas and activities, and further the cause of the proletariat. (How old-fashioned this language has rapidly become.) The general scheme, that is, points the mind precisely toward particular knowledge that can support or challenge it, and toward behavior that brings it more evidently into reality.

Establishing the truth about history, society, and the cosmos is serious business. When Philosophic understanding dominates the mind, it can work with powerful intensity.

p. 126

Egan putting progress of understanding in student development

Educational development, I am suggesting, is a process whose focus of interest and intellectual engagement begins with a myth-like construction of the world, then "romantically" establishes the boundaries and extent of reality, and then "philosophically" maps the major features of the world with organizing grids. In this "philosophic" activity, students recognize themselves as parts of complex processes; they set about establishing the truth concerning them with some psychological urgency because in doing so they will discover the truth about themselves.

Narcissism – wanting to know "self" and putting one in a "tradition" for "future possibilities – which the past has made available to the present."

p. 127

Overclaims of truth

That is, it is assumed that the truth of a general scheme is a function of the truth of the facts and events themselves and that the selection and organization of facts and events can be neutral or "objective" if appropriate care is taken. Failure to recognize that a general scheme involves reducing the diversity of the world can lead to a common overestimation of the security of one's general scheme and the nature of the truth that such schemes can claim.

- p. 128 - 129 Overconfidence of adolescents
- p. 129 – 131 A theory was constantly challenged by anomalies
(R: basic idea of Kuhn)

(E) Philosophic Understanding: Function, Reality, Linkage, Liberation

- p. 132 Philosophic understanding’s negative connotations

Philosophic thinking has given us those fashionable villains “technical rationality,” positivism, behaviorism, the bomb, genetic engineering, with their ardent promoters reeking of hubris.

- p. 134 Function of philosophic understanding

Philosophic thinking exercises and develops the capacity to see patterns, search for the recurrent, perceive processes, look for essences, and make ordering principles and theories. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that Philosophic thinking *generates* the patterns, recurrence, processes, essences, ordinary principles, and theories.

It leads to “increased pragmatic control over the world.”

Reduced representation of reality

We make reduced representations of reality in mind stuff, in concepts, but these reduced representations are precisely what we can deal with effectively. If we learn to make them well, we can remove all the irrelevant and confusing contingencies of reality and focus on a neat representation of the essence of something, or an underlying process, or a pattern of occurrences. The person who is skilled at Philosophic thinking often seems the most effective at getting to the heart of the matter, at being able to think about an issue clearly and then act on it decisively.

Philosophic understanding makes explicit romantic understanding, mythic understanding

In the development of Philosophic understanding, implicit features of Mythic and Romantic understanding become explicit, bubbling, as it were, to the surface of consciousness. Indeed, the *recognition* of general schemes is a central feature of Philosophic understanding; they are there all along, now clearly recognized for what they are (like Hayek’s “operations of thought”).

Philosophic understanding liberates us

The ability to generate schematic conceptions of reality can liberate us from the constraints of the conventional ideas, beliefs, general schemes into which we grow up. Such conventions appear no longer as the unquestionable frame of conventionally perceived reality but, rather, as general schemes that, like others, are vulnerable to anomalies and revisable.

- p. 135 Critique of philosophic understanding as technical rationality without affection

A plethora of critiques currently focuses on what has been lost in, or sacrificed to the gains of, Philosophic thinking. The past few decades have been noisy with complaints about the damage done by “the scientific world view,” “technical rationality,” and so on. The main loss stems from the Philosophic tendency to embrace a narrow, disembodied rationality, which links itself with the cognitive but distances itself from the affective. It encourages a division between the cognitive and the affective, and the mind and the body, in which rationality is connected with the former. The imagination is conceived as playing no significant role in cognition, and the emotions are considered likely only to infect it with confusion. This rationality is a hard, calculative, dehumanized, arid form of thought, inhospitable to myth, romance, and the body.

- p. 136 R: Egan himself is general scheme building

My scheme, however, is a cumulative one; it does not chuck overboard Philosophic understanding and its ambitions, its excitement, its capacity to search out patterns and generate laws, and its distinctive construction and revision of general schemes. (In a book building a general scheme, you will not expect that.)

(F) Review

- (1) Readers may be disappointed after reading this chapter. Egan did not offer latest development / study in philosophy / science. It did not shed light on how philosophy develops in 20th century to answer questions like:
 - (a) What's truth?
 - (b) Nature of philosophy and its method.
 - (c) Success and constraints of scientific method
 - (d) Rationality: nature and limit

- (e) Science and mathematics – symbiosis
(Physics asks question and mathematics formulates mathematical / logical model to show probability / impossibility and physics experiment on it.)
 - (f) Philosophy of mind, thinking
 - (g) Philosophy of language
 - (h) Philosophy of biology / evolution
 - (R: He answered them in ironic understanding)
- (2) Growth of thinking in stages (Piaget) and growth of understanding in kinds (Egan) are important facts, whether recapitulation theory is valid.
- (3) Similar to Kohlberg's morality, many people don't reach the third stage of understanding (philosophic understanding).
- (4) But his theory seems to be able to explain why
- (a) Children like stories
 - (b) Children are tuned to rhymes
 - (c) Children use binary opposites
 - (d) Imagination prevails and drops.
 - (e) Children enjoys heroes / finds extremes
 - (f) Adolescents / ideology (e.g. Marxism) / revelation / truth
- (5) When scientific thinking was born in ancient Greece in certain circumstances, it did so in the East too.