

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

**Category:** Education

**Sub-category:** Educational Ideas

**Code:** Edu 03 – 009

**Title:** Egan's Critique on Plato, Rousseau and Dewey  
Summary of Chapter 1 and Afterword: *The Educated Mind* (1997) (Chapter 1: 1 – 28; Afterword: 278 - 279)

**Year Written:** 2021

**Summary/ Abstract:** Egan has critique Plato, Rousseau and Dewey on education. Based on my understanding knowledge of Plato and Rousseau, I held a different view. Both make important progress and contribution, but are limited by history——historical context of their times.

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**(A) Egan's Concluding Remarks on Three Masters**

This passage appears next to Egan's summary of his own theses, at the end of his book. He meant to compare his ideas with these master thinkers but he discussed only casually.

**R's Critique**

- (1) Plato knew little about evolution, his student Aristotle began to study Biology.
- (2) Rousseau, like many thinkers of 18<sup>th</sup> century, idealizes state of nature and believes society corrupts the young mind.

All major educational thinkers have recognized the problem created by the influence of evolutionary pressures to adapt to conditions that are no longer those with which we are faced in modern, highly literate societies. The theorists did not put it in these terms, of course. Plato offered a fifty-year curriculum of increasingly abstract, disciplined knowledge. While that certainly seems a part of the solution, by itself it seems too fragile, too rigid, and ultimately an act of insufficiently warranted faith. Rousseau offered the more radical recommendation of trying to starve the early rapid learning of anything to work on—by keeping the child away from society and away from words, words, words as much as possible—thus leaving the later learning capacity with nothing to undo. While this is an acute suggestion, it seems in the end simply unrealistic—the child deprived of so much early learning would not likely develop the later richness of understanding Rousseau assumes will be possible. John Dewey characterized the problem in terms of “natural” or “incidental” and “formal” learning (1966, pp. 6–9), and proposes as a solution making the latter as much like “natural” learning as can be contrived. This, too, is an important insight, but it seems in the end inadequate because it does not recognize that the dynamic of “natural” learning is available to us in significantly diminishing degrees after about age five. (p. 278)

- (4) Plato's curriculum / education is to create an utopia, *Republic*, of how society should set up ideally. It needs a class of philosophers (knowledge professionals) to keep and manage the state with value! Interesting enough, Plato's abstract thinking fits well in Egan's 5 understandings.
- (6) This is not Dewey's main ideas. Egan criticizes too casually. Dewey stressed interest of the child.

- (3) Contrast of oral and literate society is a good concept, probably started in 19<sup>th</sup> century
- (5) Rousseau proposed natural unfoldment to avoid 'bad influence' from society. He didn't starve early learning; he didn't propose for no-language learning. He offered autonomous discovery and environment adjustment to bring out natural development. Egan misinterpreted what Rousseau did.

**(B) Egan Putting Three Ideas Under Them (Chapter 1, p. 12 – 28)**

| Durkheim  | Plato  | Rousseau   |
|---|--|--|
| Socialization   | Truth / Knowledge  | Natural Development  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Useful knowledge</li> <li>● Social skills</li> <li>● Character building (p. 12)</li> <li>● Useful citizens and jobs (p.11)</li> <li>● Changing social needs computers (p.12)</li> <li>● Education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child, from the beginning, the essential similarities that collective life demands. (p.11)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Excellence in education (p. 15)</li> <li>● Persisting value (p. 14)</li> <li>● Conversation with past (p. 14)</li> <li>● Academic curriculum (p. 13)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learn how to learn (p. 16)</li> <li>● Critical thinking (p. 16)</li> <li>● Education as experience</li> <li>● Discovery learning</li> <li>● Project work</li> <li>● Exploration and discussion (p. 17)</li> </ul> |

**(C) My Reading of Plato**

(Point 9) My reading of Plato is like this. He has two important ideas:

(1) Pursuit of truth

- Geometry (Math)
- Overcoming appearance
- Platonic circle
- Rational mind
- Transcendental underlying reality
- Realism

(2) Elitist Society

- Against democracy
- Ruled by the wise
- Hierarchical society
- Solution to justice / power / equality question
- Orderly
- A just, harmonious society of well-defined roles

R: In this sense, Plato is supporting socializing in education, in creating a hierarchical ‘just’ society ruled by the wise. It is not a truth-led society. Surely, truth / rationalism will find its way in Plato (All western philosophy is footnotes of Plato) but modern society has gone much further and in opposition to Plato!

(Point 10) Egan reinterprets Plato in education as **cultural transcendent conversation** with human past. (Oakeshott, 1991)

R: That's a very poor contemporary lens mis-representing Plato's ideas.

- (1) Plato is bound by transcendental realism and the political view of ruling by the wise / harmony / hierarchy
- (2) Plato didn't seem to concern about dialogue, debate, but rather supported the position of an established truth, quite unlike his mentor Socrates.

(Point 11) Egan puts Plato as "essentialist / culturalist"

### (D) My Reading of Rousseau

(Point 13) R: Rousseau is insightful but crude



- (1) Child ≠ little adult
- (2) Path of child's growth
- (3) Natural unfoldment



- (1) Human nature is good
- (2) No empirical study of stage of development
- (3) Society is corrupt

Careful observation and study of students, recognition of the distinctive forms of learning and sense-making that characterize different ages, construction of methods of teaching that engage students' distinctive forms of learning, emphasis on individual differences among learners, the encouragement of active rather than passive learning, the insistence that a student's

R: May need to re-reading of Emile to evaluate.

### (E) From Plato to Modern Democracy

(Point 17) R: Plato is in fact a reformer, aiming at a harmonious hierarchical society ruled by the wise. Truth / realism is a regulating concept and principle of governance.

Socialization goes on all the time in our history of education. Medieval society is like a Platonize Republic, ruled by the theocracy with virtue, hierarchy and harmony, (cf. Durant). In modern western society, socialization of democracy and liberty values is so deep-seated that school is just one agent of socialization. The treasured values of western societies, such as

'critical thinking', freedom of speech (criticism of the status quo), respect of difference in opinions and competing for truth claims is part of socialization, which is not in opposite of Platonic truth or conversation with human culture. We nurture critical citizens.

"This kind of consciousness has not often been greatly valued by those who govern societies because it is a disruptive force" (Egan, p. 18), but political leaders can't change cultural values. Regrettably Egan took a poor starting point!

## **(F) The Values and Limits of Plato and Rousseau**

(Point 21) Both make important progress and contribution, but both are limited by history – historical context of their times.

Plato –     against democracy  
              build an elitist society  
              knowledge / hierarchical citizens

Rousseau –     Enlightenment  
                  Idealizes human nature as good, nature as adorable  
                  Seeing vices of society  
                  Social contract and modern chains  
                  (modern myths as much as Christianity)

Egan taking their views as today's battleground is off the mark.

(Point 22) R: The real issue – what and how should a society / nation socialize its citizens?