

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Title: Egan's Ideas: Contribution and Significance

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Summary/ Abstract: My first comment on Egan's contribution and significance

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Egan's Ideas: Contribution and Significance

(A) Egan vs. Piaget

- (1) Piaget talked about child development in stages and Egan talked about child understanding in stages. So who is right? The case is that the two have different starting points and reach somewhat results that can complement each other.
- (2) Piaget starts from experiment, then he theorizes about psychology and philosophy (genetic epistemology).
- (3) Egan starts from readings of classics, psychology and Vygotsky. Then he theorizes about education and psychology.

(B) Egan against Mainstream

- (1) Egan (2002: Chapter 5) is critical of "research finds that....." — too trivial, with poor starting point.
- (2) Egan works on CRT; he tried to unearth culture (orality → literacy → thinking) and make up a theory.
- (3) Egan's theory of understanding comes from language, psychology and classics. How scientific and how useful remains to be seen. He is a rebel against mainstream, but does not seem very successful.

(C) Significance of Egan

- (1) He pieced together and theorized (outlined) stages of understanding in human cultural history.
- (2) These stages appear similar to stages of children learning.
- (3) Children growing into adults may persist with and will continue with earlier stages of understanding.
- (4) That explains why adults with disciplined mind (Gardner's term) fall back to unschooled mind (Gardner's term); another way of putting it is cognitive bias or pitfalls discovered in 1970s to 1990s.

(D) Implication of Egan's "findings"

- (1) The cognitive tools in mythic understanding or romantic understanding are useful in teaching.
- (2) Pushing further is the urge for imagination. This he tried to pursue.
- (3) Many adults in social life keep at the stages of somatic or mythic understanding, explaining the rise of ideology and the dilemma of democracy. A successful democracy requires well-reasoned collective participation, but this is hard to achieve. Dewey saw it as the goal of education.
- (4) Intellectuals with philosophical understanding are very few, again divided by subjects and disciplines. Ruled by "philosophy king" looks like an ideal — may be realized by AI!

For me, Egan's ideas, noted, will be put alongside Piaget — another way to support stage theory. Egan cannot substantiate his theory; a courageous rebel against mainstream, Egan saw the shallowness of empirical research, but his ideas were not new enough to be paradigm-shifting.