

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Title: Summary and Review of Kieran Egan (1997): *The Educated Mind* - Chapter 5: Ironic Understanding (p. 137 – 171)

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Summary/ Abstract: This is a summary and review of Egan's (1997) Chapter 5: Ironic Understanding

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Summary and Review of Kieran Egan (1997): *The Educated Mind*
Chapter 5: Ironic Understanding (p. 137 – 171)

Egan's example of ironic understanding – paradox

- (1) All generalizations are false (p. 137)
- (2) All meaningful statements are either verifiable empirical claims or conceptual truths.
- (3) All knowledge is socially constructed.
- (4) Socrates is wisest / most knowledgeable because he realizes how little he knew (p. 142)
- (5) All systems are false (p. 147)

R: A deep and sophisticated chapter, starting from language paradox / irony. It is a western intellectual tradition (p. 138):

- p. 138 Rorty – contingency, liberal ironist
- p. 142 – 144 Kierkegaard's interpretation – "illusory knowledge"
- p. 144 Creation of God – seeing from above
- p. 145 – 146 MacIntyre – dominant narrative
- p. 146 Heller / Goethe / Constant – goals no longer exist
- p. 147 Schlegel / Victor Hugo: "all systems being false" (Romanticist)
- p. 149 Major scientific discoveries (1897 – 1915)

In 1895 Wilhelm Roentgen discovered X-rays. In 1897 Joseph Thompson discovered the electron. In 1898 Marie Curie invented the term radioactivity and isolated pure radium in 1910. In 1914 Ernest Rutherford discovered the proton and, with Niels Bohr, proposed models of a subatomic world whose behavior required different laws from those earlier considered universally applicable to the physical world. And Einstein disrupted the common sense of such foundational notions as time and space. Louis Pasteur meanwhile had exposed a world of micro-organisms whose behavior accounted for everyday phenomena in souring, fermentation, putrefaction, and disease. The message of this new science was that the world was *really* quite *unlike* what it seemed to our senses. Our senses provided only a very limited perspective on a superficial level of reality; who could tell how many levels the world inaccessible to our senses might dissolve into, or even whether it might dissolve infinitely?

p. 150 – 151 Nietzsche – The gay science

p. 152 Scottish bagpipes played in Hawaii photoed by Japanese tourists
“No cultural metanarrative governs its interpretation; rather, it is left open to the multiple perspectives of its witnesses”

p. 153 Sketching R Rorty

p. 156 Ironic understanding is progressive; it is moving forward:

The intellectual capacities that constitute Philosophic understanding enable us to bring very complex knowledge into coherent general schemes. The Philosopher tends to believe that general schemes can mirror reality and deliver a true account of the nature of things. What Ironic understanding will absorb of Philosophic understanding are those abstract theoretic capacities that can bring intellectual order to complex phenomena. What Ironic understanding will not absorb is the belief that general schemes can uncomplicatedly mirror the truth about reality. The Ironist can, say, support a neo-conservative or liberal or radical political initiative for its likely beneficial effects without becoming a neoconservative or a liberal or a radical;

p. 156 Lyotard (1979) self-refuting

When a postmodern theorist, such as Lyotard (1979), expresses incredulity in the face of metanarratives and frames a theoretically elaborate manifesto of systematic incredulity, his work begins to take the shape of a new metanarrative, running the self-refuting risks of this chapter's opening sentence. Ironic understanding embraces the irony of postmodernism but not its dismissive certainties

p. 157 Ironic understanding contributes by seeing inadequacy in philosophic understanding

The contribution of Ironic understanding is to keep constantly to the fore the inadequacy of the categories and their characterizations to the reality they try to represent, and the contribution of Philosophic understanding is to attempt constantly to capture as much of the complexity of that reality as possible within some coherent general scheme.

R: After all, ironic understanding is a further progress of human knowledge enterprises. Considering the infinite reality we want to capture in natural and human world, ironic understanding is an improvement over theoretic general schemes, challenging and making it even better. It's likely rationality will

improve in representation and will prevail.

p. 158 Marxism as an example of philosophic understanding and romantic understanding

Let me try to indicate how an accommodation may be reached by re-visiting the example of Marxism. Certain relatively simple forms of Marxism have involved straightforward Philosophic characteristics, in particular a clear general scheme. The survival of Romantic characteristics may be seen in the way that the convinced party member viewed Marxism not simply as a convincing analysis of social and historical processes but also as the object of a powerful affective commitment. Leading Marxists became imbued with more or less modified forms of heroic qualities. The idea of Marxism gathered around it in greater or lesser degree a modified sense of the transcendence earlier projected onto football teams or pop singers. But if romantic capacities are suppressed by, rather than encouraged to coalesce with, developing Philosophic capacities, the result will more likely be a doctrinaire, calculative, heartless, and arid ideology—as was too often the case.

p. 161 – 162 R: Egan proposed good vs bad irony in 1979!

Alienating irony vs sophisticated irony

This alienating irony rejects the validity of any perspective, believes in no metanarratives, sees all epistemological schemes as futile; in short, it doubts everything

Sophisticated irony is different in that it succeeds in achieving reflexivity without suppressing Mythic, Romantic, and Philosophic understanding. By preserving the earlier kinds of understanding as much as possible, we may develop a kind of irony that enables its users to recognize validity in all perspectives, to believe all metanarratives, to accept all epistemological schemes, to give assent to every belief. Well, that puts it simplistically, of course. This openness to possibility is not credulity or simplemindedness but, rather, the result of a flexible, buoyant recognition of a multivocal world, within and without.

But the sophisticated ironist enjoys an abundant consciousness of varied ways of understanding, and can appreciate a varied spectrum of perspectives while concluding that some are better or more valid or more helpful or more beautiful than others in particular circumstances and for particular purposes.

Openness and avoid self-contradiction

p. 162 - 170 Somatic understanding again

R: Egan read about Merlin Donald's book (1991) and makes use of it in somatic understanding.

R: After his elaboration on ironic understanding as the cumulative human development of understanding, Egan came back to the beginning, "the first being last." (p. 163) Quite miraculously somatic understanding may go beyond, or at least hand in hand, with ironic understanding. Here Egan picked important ideas from Merlin Donald's work (1991) on pre-linguistic thinking, understanding in "the individual's own body". (p. 164) Egan summarized it as

Mimicry (animal, parrot)	→	Imitation (feature recognition)	→	Mimetic skill ("conscious, self-initiated, representational acts that are intentional but not linguistic") (p. 164 quote of Donald)
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Egan (p. 164 – 165) picked his ideas from Donald as somatic understanding with

- Intentionality – children learning from parents
- Generativity – practice, rehearsal
- Communicativity – social group
- Reference – distinguish play vs real fight (mental representation)
- Unlimited objects – so long as physical / concrete
- Autocueing – autonomous mental world

p. 165 Egan: somatic understanding makes us distinctly human

It is a survival strategy based on a set of cognitive tools developed and deployed long ago and adopted in somewhat different ways by young children today. Most of these tools develop in young children as a result of genetic action and, once developed, they yield a particular kind of distinctively human, nonlanguage understanding, whose characteristics are intentionality, generativity, communicativity, reference, and so on.

p. 166 Egan tried to revise "essentially linguistic" (Gadamer, 1976) and "no prelinguistic consciousness" (Rorty, 1989: 21) to "largely linguistic"

p. 167 Baby development shows:

“... language development does not make some distinct beginning of that individual person; rather, language allows each individual a new kind of expression.” (p. 107)

p. 169 Quotes of Donald on role of language

Certainly language tends to be given the paramount position in many modern models of human cognition. As Merlin Donald puts it: “Language is usually placed at the top of the cognitive pyramid; but language evolved in, and continues to be employed in, a wider cultural context. . . . In human culture . . . language is not used equally in all areas of activity, nor is it the only means of communication and thought. It is possible that language is a ‘dedicated’ system, that is, a specialized system for special applications, rather than a general-purpose device” (1991, p. 201).

Comments

- (1) In this chapter, Egan interprets, I think rightly, the development of postmodernism in philosophy in 20th century. He called it ironic understanding, which has its roots in ancient Greece (Socrates).
- (2) His main points are that ironic understanding goes beyond philosophic / theoretic understanding by reflecting and refuting on itself. So I think the power of ironic understanding lies in the reflectiveness, and self-reflectiveness on language and arguments. Is it the paradox of meaning, reality or language in mirroring itself or reality?

Change is eternity / permanence

Contingency is certainty

- (3) But he insisted, I think again correctly, that ironic understanding is a progress, an embodiment of all former mythic understanding, romantic understanding, philosophic understanding, even somatic understanding.
- (4) If 19th century is a century of reason and rationality, 20th century is a century of language.
 - Saussure (father of linguistics)
 - Rorty (mirror of nature)
 - Donald (pre-linguistic thinking)
 - Wittgenstein (language game)
 - Chomsky (language acquisition device)
 - Gadamer (essentially linguistic)
 - Fodor (language of thought)

- (5) Ironic understanding and postmodernism is not as negative as it appears. It moves forward by challenging philosophic understanding / theoretic thinking, discovering paradox in understanding and reality. Egan himself saw it this way because his theory is a general scheme subject to scrutiny of ironic understanding. The real paradox is that ironic understanding goes back with somatic understanding, the most advanced in hand with the most basic / essential / primitive one.
- (6) My salute to Egan: he did a difficult job in the sea of education and philosophy as he formalized his system. As early as 1979 he had thought of irony – alienated and sophisticated irony (p. 161). That he narratizes history and philosophy, from science to religion, structuralism to Marxism, mythology to cognitive psychology, traversing from ancient Greece to 19th century Nietzsche. His understanding from Renaissance to Cartesian philosophy, from romanticism to contemporary philosophy. Is a breadth hard to attain.