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A Review of Kieran Egan's The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding

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Let me first say what I like about this fine book. Most books on education are stupefyingly boring; this book is anything but that. Egan is fun to read. The writing is lucid; the book is full of "deep" background research which bolsters the main argument and often is interesting in its own right. The argument is puissant and persuasive. And then there is the irony. Those who know Egan will recognize it as his own voice—the argument forever at risk of falling off the track into quiet belly laughs. The book exemplifies the argument; the writer acts the role of the ironic understander.

Egan postulates five types of understanding which at least some cultures have achieved over much time—Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic and Ironic. Individuals, he believes, can make the same voyage. The beauty of this theory is that it is not a causal theory à la Piaget, Kohlberg, and others. It is an epistemological theory—the story of an increasing degree of understanding of the possibility of and constrictions on our ability to know our world. My interest here is to unpack ironic understanding and consider what it might imply for those of us who are interested in promoting critical thinking in education systems.

It is not easy to give a brief account of Egan's notion of Ironic Understanding. I have found about twenty quotations which seem to be important ways in which he characterizes it. These I place into two categories: features which are definitive and claims about such matters as the benefits and risks of achieving Ironic Understanding. I sketch these below.

The three defining characteristics are "reflexiveness of language and consciousness," radical epistemological doubt (based, ironically enough, on a sophisticated understanding of epistemology)—both combined with a Socratic temperament. The life of an Ironic Understander, thus, comprises a complex set of logically differentiable "things": a recurring *activity* ("accumulating reflexiveness of language and consciousness"), an *effort* ("keep one's irony pervasively skeptical") and two *attitudes*, being skeptical and being jaunty in a world lacking any *telos* other than our own. This is, of course, an ideal. Presumably, Ironic Understanding can be achieved only in and by degrees. I would guess that not many people have achieved or can achieve Ironic Understanding.

The necessary foundation for ironic understanding (where "necessary" means "logically necessary") in Egan's contemplative account (an Ironist can't have a "theory," I take it) is a proper working one's way through Somatic, Romantic, and Philosophic understandings. "Proper" here means saving the best of each while moving on to the next and better type of understanding. There must be many ways to fail. One sophisticated type of failure would, I take it, be becoming a neoconservative—perhaps, à la Newt Gingrich. Gingrich could be said to have worked his way fairly well into "philosophic understanding—he is some sort of historian. But if I were an Ironic Understander, I might, with thanks to Star Trek, regard Gingrich as a failed Carbon

Unit. This is because Gingrich exemplifies a "tendency to overconfidence" (127) and, even worse, an "earnest" ideology (132) which any half-formed Ironist would regard as absurd or, in Gingrich's case (until very recently), horror.

What does ironic understanding make possible? Two chief things: (1) "Philosophic understanding can be deployed by Ironic understanders with greater flexibility . . . without the ironic understander's making a commitment to the truth of any of them, but rather selecting among them on aesthetic, utilitarian, or other grounds" (157); (2) An "openness to possibility [that] is not credulity . . . " (162). Again, we have a doing (deploying philosophic understanding) and an attitude—but the doing can occur only with the attitude. The attitude is the crux. It is not, in fact, simply an attitude; it is a temperament which involves not only a way of understanding but a way of regarding that understanding and of acting through it. I will return to this later.

The term understanding is not, perhaps, the one most apposite. Understanding is an epistemological concept and, as with knowledge, is always decided on *public* criteria even when the P who is said to understand is the person who says it. While it is difficult, as it is with the concept of knowledge, to spell out exactly what the criteria are by which we judge even our own understanding, it is not difficult to get a rough idea. We use different kinds of criteria, depending on what it is we purport to understand. There are, it seems to me, four paradigm uses of understanding (excluding the notion of 'the understanding'):

U1. Empathetic sense	I understand how x feels.
U2. Subject sense	I understand astronomy.
U3. Explanatory sense	I understand why x does y.
U4. Linguistic sense	I understand passage x.

U2 and U3 have similar types of criteria, essentially deriving from canons of evidence and research or, in the case, for example, of types of works of art, from canons of form and structure. The criteria are basically 'intellectual,' 'academic,' or 'structural.' With U4, the criteria are the conventions of the language. For any ordinary language, those criteria are numerous and complex. With U1, we usually demand that the person claiming it has had experiences like those that X is going through or has been through. In education, this is reflected in the widespread belief on the part of teachers that only another teacher can understand what it is like to be a teacher.

Egan's "ironic understanding" does not neatly fit any of these. Philosophic understanding would easily fit as some combination of U2, U3, and U4. The reason ironic understanding does not fit is that understanding is only part of what is needed; the other part is having an ironic disposition toward the world. He distinguishes two variants of this attitude: (1) "alienating irony . . . [which] rejects the validity of any perspective, believes no meta-narratives, sees all epistemological schemes as futile; in short, it doubts everything" (161) and (2) "Sophisticated irony . . . [which] succeeds in achieving reflexiveness without suppressing Mythic, Romantic, and Philosophic . . . " (161). This is the

Socratic attitude. Knowing all too well of our plight, a sophisticated Ironist will nonetheless hold some variant or other of the following:

Well, it's all we can do.

Well, it's all we can do and thank something that we can do at least this.

Well, it's all we can do but isn't it a great joke that somehow we can do this at all!

Some writers on education adopt a related but different view, expressed perhaps as, "Well, it's all we can do; how wonderful!" They celebrate the death of foundationalism and the long-awaited wonders of total relativism![1] And to make matters worse, they are very earnest in their celebration. It reminds me of the saying I heard somewhere that "Those who welcome death have tried it only from the neck up."

I have an interest in finding ways of teaching critical thinking. With this in mind, I want to ask, "How would a program for ironic understanding compare with, add to, or be related to, a program to promote critical thinking?" I assume one can be a critical thinker only if one has reached philosophic understanding. But ironic understanding seems to require something more. What is the more?

1. An exceptional understanding of epistemology. A person with this understanding recognizes the unassailable tentativeness of our claims from an empirical, moral or whatever other point of view we adopt. Note that here we are not talking about a particular epistemology. The carpenter knows how to make a room square; the scientist carrying out a series of research studies understands her work as a scientist, understands the criteria for success in the enterprise of a complex community of which she is a member. Scepticism here is limited to the enterprise—an attitude which demands careful consideration of method, concept, evidence, and so on. This is not the general scepticism which defines ironic understanding—the ironic sceptic is thinking of our overall uncertainty in any of our ideas about what is true.

2. A set of habits of mind which, in spite of epistemological angst, would have us adopt—well, no, one can't "adopt" a belief; one has to "come to it," or "arrive at it," —a Socratic jauntiness.

What do these mean for educational purposes?

I see critical thinking as having at least these three features: 1) it is done for the purpose of making up one's mind about what to believe or do, 2) the person engaging in the thinking is trying to fulfil standards of adequacy and accuracy appropriate to the thinking, and 3) the thinking fulfils the relevant standards to some threshold level. Fulfilling relevant standards in thinking is, of course, not an all-or-nothing affair. This being the case, we sometimes talk about good and poor critical thinking to indicate the degree of fulfilment of relevant standards. When someone's thinking is very poor we may simply say that the person is not thinking critically, even though he or she may be striving to fulfil the relevant standards."[2]

We often learn what counts as good thinking in an area of enterprise by engaging in that enterprise. The teaching of critical thinking has three dimensions: tasks that provide the impetus and context for critical thinking; getting students to possess relevant background knowledge plus knowledge of the principles of quality thinking and of critical concepts; and possession of a repertoire of heuristics necessary to complete the task and meet the criteria and standards

required by the enterprise. The teaching task must be something like tasks from an enterprise and must require reasoned judgment and assessment. Which knowledge and which attributes are necessary depends upon the context; a challenge in physics demands different background knowledge than does one in city planning. Critical thinking also demands possession of such attitudes as respect for high quality products and performances, an inquiring attitude, commitment to the task, and open-mindedness. In most accounts of critical thinking the tasks and mind sets praised are taken to be very earnest ones. Critical thinking is at heart a serious enterprise. Is there any sense here of irony? Yes, there is—a sceptical attitude. To do critical thinking properly one must be sceptical, though not necessarily a sceptic (*skeptikos*-reflective, *Gage Canadian Dictionary*, 1997). And successful achievement of a sceptical attitude is no doubt part of ironic understanding. But how do we get to Socrates? Let us consider who might be the candidates for ironic understanding.

Who would it be sensible to try to help move from philosophic understanding to ironic understanding? Not, I think, your ordinary high-school student, nor even most university students. I find it hard to believe that most of these people are likely to be able to—more importantly, have the motivation to—become ironic understanders. I base these opinions on anecdotal observation from my own teaching career. Of most of the high school and university students I have met, I would conclude the following:

1. Addressing general epistemological questions is a virtually unheard-of feature of either their background or their interests. The former is probably a function of the curriculum to which they have been exposed and to the teachers they have had. Public school teachers or university teachers typically have neither the knowledge nor the inclination to deal with general epistemological questions. This is not to say they do not have views on epistemology—they do—in my experience, usually either naive foundationalism or unenlightened scepticism. For example, I have never (well, hardly ever) run across any student in classes, or workshops who could explicate the differences between belief and knowledge or inference and implication, let alone what counts as an argument. It may be that if we followed Egan's recommendations the students and their teachers would be better than I have mordantly concluded. Let us suppose that we could help large numbers of people to acquire sophisticated understanding of epistemology; we still have the problem of temperament.

2. The chief risk incurred by becoming epistemologically sophisticated is, it seems to me, either alienating irony or despair. Egan notes that many young people in the throes of moving from Romantic understanding to Philosophic understanding are swept into totalitarian causes. This is bad enough, but there is some evidence that epistemological doubt among youth may be what leads some of them to suicide.[3] The best we can do is to arrange educational communities which would promote critical thinking and, perhaps, even Socratic temperaments—situations where full, free, and continual debate is expected, even welcomed. But there's the irony. Isn't that what universities are supposed to be?

Notes

[1]Elliott Eisner, "Objectivity in educational inquiry," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 22(1), 1992, 9-15; and Egon G. Guba, "Relativism," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 22(1), 1992, 17-23.

[2]Sharon Bailin, Roland Case, Jerrold Coombs, and LeRoi Daniels, "Conceptualizing Critical Thinking," *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, in press.

[3]Michael Chandler, "Self-Continuity in Suicidal and Non-suicidal Adolescents," Gil G. Noam and Sophie Borst, *Children, Youth and Suicide: Developmental Perspectives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 55-70.