

Romantic Understanding: The Development of Rationality and Understanding, Age 8-15 (Kieran Egan)

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Book Review

Kieran Egan. Romantic Understanding: The Development of Rationality and Understanding, Ages 8-15. New York and London: Routledge, 1990

Readers of *Paideusis* will be familiar with Egan's general and ambitious multi-volume project to replace the traditional model of curriculum selection and lesson planning from his earlier books¹ and his recent article in this journal.² Such a project cannot be other than fascinating; but, for most readers, the central notion of recapitulation is likely to be most troublesome. This is not a concept with a happy history—and, therefore, a provocative choice—and Egan invites discussion, for he views the book as a conversation (16-17).

Readers will also not be surprised by the general thrust of Egan's criticisms of traditional models of curriculum and teaching, nor by his general conception of education. Traditionally, he notes, we have tended to think of curriculum and teaching in terms of models which are loosely Platonic, emphasizing the nature of knowledge, or Rousseau-ian, emphasizing child development, and in ways which do not readily allow them to be mapped onto one another despite their obvious relevance. More recent thinking has shown us the difficulty of trying to conceive of mind and knowledge—psychology and epistemology—independently. Thus, Egan comes to talk of education in terms of the acquiring of sense-making techniques, or “the ways we have invented or discovered for making sense of the world or of our experience.”³ Emphasizing sense-making techniques enables Egan to respond to a major dilemma facing schools:

We expect schools both to socialize children to the prevailing social conventions and develop commitments to those conventions, and also to make headway in the Platonic programme of critical rationality which involves skepticism of all conventions and encourages intellectual contempt for the kinds of commitments socialization induces (10).

and to focus on

perhaps the greatest and most persistent problem faced by educationalists, and addressed most energetically by the greatest educational thinkers. This problem is not, perhaps surprisingly, ignorance or illiteracy

but rather “what we might call conventional thought, or the informed, conventional mind” which “represents precisely what *education* is supposed to transcend” (149-50).

Recapitulation

Education for Egan is not just a matter of *acquiring* sense-making techniques but of *recapitulating* them:

[S]tudents are predisposed to develop particular kinds of understanding in a particular sequence because of the logical and psychological forces that constrain and shape the process of acculturation. I will try to show that the same constraining and shaping forces operate both in cultural history and in individual students' educational development. Cultural history can, thus, provide us with important insights into how to construct a curriculum (6; cf. 198)

provided that we do not allow ourselves to become "imprisoned in the assumption that it was *the knowledge or content of cultural history* that had to be recapitulated" (14; italics added). This has consistently been Egan's position: "What is recapitulated. . .are sense-making techniques" and "Making sense of something implies both an accumulation of knowledge and a psychological development."⁴ This recapitulation involves the sequential accumulation of four kinds of understanding: mythic at the primary level, romantic in the middle school, and later philosophic and ironic.

Egan's reasoning is crucial here for cultural history is important not just as a way of enriching the curriculum or making it more interesting. Rather, as earlier kinds of understanding are incorporated into later ones, there are necessary causal relationships in the history of knowledge, and those same causes operate in the child's educational development. Consider what he says:

We are constrained to recapitulate the historical sequence because the prior stages are not discarded. They remain as constituents of the more sophisticated forms.⁵

Whenever we describe our cultural history as some kind of causal sequence, which one can hardly avoid, we are asserting a logical and/or psychological underpinning to the scheme (185).

In becoming educated, then, we are constrained to recapitulate the sequence whereby in our cultural history these sense-making techniques were invented and discovered. . .to recapitulate the sequence of their historical development.⁶

The dynamic that has determined the diachronic sequence of their (the sense-making techniques') invention and discovery in our culture is constrained and shaped by the interaction of logical and human psychology.⁷

Education, in this scheme, then is the *sequential* accumulation of the sense-making capacities, and associated abilities to communicate, available in our culture. This is a *recapitulatory* scheme because it embodies an argument that the *sequence* in which these capacities can be accumulated by the individual reflects the sequence in which they were generated in our cultural history. The tie between the two—cultural history and individual development—is located in the logical and psychological *constraints* that have influenced the historical generation of these capacities and that also constrain the sequence in which the individual can accumulate them. (187; italics added)

These are strong causal claims. Ultimately, they are probably rooted in Egan's general philosophical orientation, for he cites MacIntyre:

Human life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story . . . it is not just that poems and sagas narrate what happens to men and women, but that in their narrative form poems and sagas capture a form that was already present in the lives which they relate. (cited on 230)

A narrative is more than just a chronicle: it *connects* events. Two passages cited above summarize the position: ". . .we describe our cultural history as some kind of causal sequence, which one can hardly avoid. . ." and ". . .the same constraining and shaping forces operate both in cultural history and in individual students' educational development." Indeed, Egan maintains that

necessary relationships between particular technical resources of thought and particular cultural effects, such as kinds of understanding. . .will operate whenever and wherever these technical resources of thought are

developed—whether in the process of cultural history or of student's education today.⁸

Those technical resources include, in the case of romantic understanding, not only “the kind and number of books circulating in the later eighteenth century in most of Europe”—which might readily be thought to be related to kinds of understanding—but also some quite physical developments “such as spaces between the words, paragraphs, notes separated from the main text, and so on” and “[p]rint, and the further developments in designing accessible pages” for all these affect “the kinds of thinking possible while reading” (22).

This thesis should be situated within a larger view of cultural history and literacy associated with Parry, Ellis, Goody, Ong, Stock, Innis, McLuhan, Olson, and de Kerkhove which, in general, Egan accepts (49). On this view, “print has effects, both in cultural history and in education, on the way literacy can affect thinking” (41) for “[o]rality entails a complex of positive techniques—more or less well developed by particular individuals—for making sense of the world and of experience” (44) which continue with the development of writing and print: “literacy” . . . does not displace orality, but rather encourages its further development” (45). This yields Egan's story:

The “literacy hypothesis” . . . that the invention of writing, particularly with the alphabet, provided a technical enhancement to certain kinds of thinking, that these have had an enormous transforming effect on the minds and on the cultures that have taken advantage of them, and also that they have the potential to bring about this transformation in any individual who masters literacy in appropriate circumstances (48).

Laws, Verification, and Specificity

Talk of *enhancement* and *transforming* softens the causal claims, however, and in this connection three other claims are worth noting:

These historical consequences of literacy are not some natural or logical unfolding of implications. . . . They are not inevitable consequences, such that we can expect their appearance today in anyone who masters conventional reading and writing skills (63).

Oral cultures seem in general to evoke, stimulate, and develop some capacities more than others, as do literate cultures. “Oral” and “literate” indicate what seem to be among the more significant of the the differential stimulators of the range of cognitive capacities. . . . (84)

We do not need to recapitulate this sequence if we are not to acquire the fullest range of these techniques—if, that is, we are not to become educated.⁹

Perhaps this is what provokes Egan to remark that

what is needed is also an account of why particular technologies influence thought in particular ways at particular times in particular circumstances (53)

and why he has used “the concept of layers to suggest that we accumulate these kinds of understanding more or less sequentially” (187) and finds himself presenting a position which “is not straightforwardly empirical, open to straightforward empirical testing” (199):

The major empirical claim—which I take to be uncontentious, though potentially falsifiable—is that one can acquire the capacities of mythic under-

standing before those of romantic understanding, and those of romantic understanding before subsequent layers. The potentially more contentious claim, that we are predisposed to do so, *if we are to become educated*, is complicated by the emphasized conditional clause (197).

. . . this is not like a psychological theory, and. . . while circumstantial empirical and conceptual support can be amassed behind it, that support by itself is not its basis. Clearly, if any of my claims contravenes what we can show is logically or psychologically the case, then this would count as adequate disconfirmation. Logic and psychology define the constraints within which the scheme is composed. But there is considerable freedom within those constraints. It is in that area of freedom that the detailed specification of the layers is described, and those descriptions are derived from our cultural history and from empirical observations of students (199).

One important question here is whether that clause contains a value judgment which makes the claim no longer strictly empirical. The net effect is a claim about cultural recapitulation whose status and truth are no longer clear.

Yet, Egan is surely right that "Cultural history can. . . provide us with important insights into how to construct a curriculum" (6) and how to coalesce "considerations of mind and knowledge" (184), and right that this is because "the major achievements in our cultural history. . . have extended our capacity to make sense of the world and of experience."¹⁰ Moreover, from the beginning, this insight has been his concern:

It has long been obvious that education involves in some fashion the individual's recapitulation of cultural history, but it has not been clear how we could find a basis for describing what might be common to the two processes, nor how we could locate a dynamic that would point up some causal sequence that they share. That is, even though there is a superficial sense in which the individual in being initiated into a particular culture learns what was invented and discovered in the process of that culture's history, it is not clear whether, or in what way, the sequence of the latter process should have an impact on the former.¹¹

Egan is certainly not alone in seeing parallels between children's intellectual development and certain moments in cultural history. But parallels are not causes, and this is where a certain looseness in causal claims—"that we accumulate these kinds of understanding *more or less sequentially*" (187; underlining added)—matters. Moreover, it is a long jump from the identification of certain *necessary conditions*—"certain inventions or discoveries required certain knowledge to be in place to make them possible" and "certain sense-making techniques could not be conceived before others were in place"¹²—to the claim that

the individual's ability to acquire sense-making techniques is constrained and shaped by *exactly the same forces* that have constrained and shaped their historical generation.¹³

It is also ambiguous to say that what is at issue is "exactly the same forces," "that the *same* constraining and shaping forces operate both in cultural history and in individual students' educational development" (6; italics added).

These causal claims are important if recapitulation is to be taken literally, but what exactly are we to understand by them? It would seem that the consequences are not inevitable, the sequence not necessary, and the mechanism not

known though the sequence is causal, the conditions are necessary, and the forces at work are the same.

Recapitulation as a Metaphor

Yet, it is possible to preserve Egan's fundamental insight about recapitulation. We do talk of children's *reliving*—or at least sharing—something of the intellectual excitement of our cultural history and of their education being more meaningful for it (cf. 200) perhaps because they become more knowledgeable, more insightful, better critical thinkers, better problem-solvers, or more confident of their own abilities as a result—and not simply because it makes classes more exciting or learning more interesting. In this, Egan is right and importantly so. But we do not mean *reliving* literally, and to attempt to assess this as an empirical claim would be problematic, for the “particular technologies,” “particular ways,” “particular times,” and “particular circumstances” remain just that, particular. What we have is a *metaphor*, a powerful and enduring metaphor.

And Egan's insight—that we have “expressions in different times and circumstances of the same kind of understanding” (37, cf. 53)—is what makes his a great book about teaching: to see children *as if* they were recapitulating their cultural history is to see school subjects as part of the human quest to make experience meaningful and to restore the story of our intellectual heritage, our quest for knowledge. To see this as simply a way to make studies interesting or exciting is indeed to trivialize the point. Recapitulation, then, is a powerful and important metaphor: “Cultural history is made up of the invention and discovery of an array of techniques for making sense of the world and of experience” (192).

As a metaphor, it avoids the problems of how a child can in any real sense relive times and experiences centuries in the past or continents away, of showing that the mind of the modern child is somehow like that of the ancient Greeks or the romantic poet, and of defending a historically ordered curriculum. And these are problems which have long bothered Egan. In his earlier article, he takes a strong line:

If a Thucydidean form of historical understanding is in some complex way a product of an Herodotean form, then in our education we will have to recapitulate the Herodotean form prior to achieving the Thucydidean.¹⁴ In becoming educated, then, we are constrained to recapitulate the sequence whereby in our cultural history these sense-making techniques were invented and discovered. . . to recapitulate the sequence of their historical development.¹⁵

Yet, he seems to qualify this position later:

Will this scheme, then, for example, require that astrology, or something like it, be introduced to children before knowledge of astronomy? No. The particular content of our cultural history is not what is to be recapitulated. . . . We will focus on the cultural achievements embedded in astronomy and their contribution to enhancing our sense-making grasp over the world. . . . Evoking, stimulating, and developing the imaginative search for meaning in the stars does not require us to begin with astrological stories from Greek, Norse, African, or other mythologies—though we would be a bit obtuse to overlook their possible educational uses in encouraging initial engagement

with astronomy. But we might equally well begin with the most recent findings about the Big Bang, quasars, pulsars, black holes, and so on (190).

Here, Egan almost seems to fall back into the use of recapitulation as motivation—which is just what he does not intend as his point, useful though this might also be (cf. pp. 14, 170)—in order to avoid the consequences of a strict reading of the causal links in cultural recapitulation. But this solution would be recapitulation without history, for the problems of modern astronomy are not those of astrology: the particular is lost, but the particular is crucial to cultural or historical recapitulation. In fact, the very example is one he used in his earlier article:

the move from astrology to astronomy cannot be understood if seen simply as a displacement; astronomy grew out of astrology.¹⁶

Causality and Kinds of Understanding

Throughout the arguments about recapitulation, we have maintained, there runs a crucial vagueness about causal links. In fact, at one point we read that

Without a large number of technical achievements, which constitute Western cultural history and which have had profound influences on how and what people think, what I am calling romantic understanding *could be achieved only fitfully and could not be systematically sustained* (23; italics added).

It may be that people's belief in the power of history is what both gives plausibility to recapitulation (our ways of thinking are part of an intellectual tradition and heritage) and works against it (for our circumstances are not those of our ancestors either and we have built on their ways of thinking).

A second, perhaps related, crucial vagueness occurs in defining the various kinds of understanding—in this case, romantic. Egan needs to maintain that

the modern forms of romantic understanding. . . are *profoundly like* their romantic predecessors. . . because they are expressions in different times and circumstances of *the same kind* of understanding (37; italics added)

as well as the product of the same shaping and constraining forces. Are they alike or the same? Metaphor requires less than identity.

His argument here is interesting, but perhaps cuts two ways:

I will try to show, furthermore, that these connections are not just more or less interesting correlations but that they are causally related in a rather complex way. That is, modern students growing into our culture make sense of the world and of their experience in particular ways as a consequence of the history of our culture (37).

Modern students grow not only into history in the large sense but also within an immediate history and context of their own which, too, seems likely to have its own effects on their ways of thinking. Thus, it is no accident that he remarks on McLuhan's ideas:

The effects of electronic media may well have transforming effects on our consciousness, as McLuhan and others argue. . . . No doubt the undermining and transforming may be going on and in future years will be evident to all. At present, however, it seems clear to me that the characteristics of romantic understanding remain clearly evident in most middle-school-aged students in Western countries (162).

Oral cultures seem in general to evoke, stimulate, and develop some capacities more than others, as do literate cultures. "Oral" and "literate" indicate what seem to be among the more significant of the differential stimulators of the range of cognitive capacities (84).

Since modern "children in Western culture become literate very largely in a print environment" (41), how alike then can they be? How similar is similar? This brings us again to the question of causality

. . . what is needed is also an account of why particular technologies influence thought in particular ways at particular times in particular circumstances (53)

and of the definition of the kinds of understanding.

How precise, then, is the characterization of romantic understanding?

. . . [T]he initial sense of romantic understanding. . . is a way of making sense of the world and of experience that highlights certain features and suppresses others. It serves as a kind of mental lens that brings particularly into focus—to take the limited set of characteristics that I will emphasize in the following chapters—a sense of reality and nature as vividly present to the senses and rich in meaning; the extremes of reality and its more exotic, strange, and mysterious features; a sense of the self as located within the head, distinct from the natural world and from social roles, and as director of the imagination; and an ambiguous, partly rebellious, desire to transcend everyday reality but also to recognize its bounds (36).

Yet, there is no sharp division between mythic and romantic understanding—the rhetorical skills of an oral era remain and are transformed to suit the written word—though the printing press along with the Industrial Revolution set the stage for Romanticism (73), a new kind of literate cognition unfettered by the preoccupation with preserving the precarious corpus of knowledge (79) and free to explore and create. Just as it is not clear that the causal factors interact in unambiguous ways, so it is not clear that romanticism is either a single, well-defined movement or the same from one historical epoch to another. But this vagueness is useful if we must face the accusation that recapitulation commits us to the view that the mind of the modern child is somehow like that of the ancient Greek or a romantic poet, or that eight- to fifteen-year olds today relive "[t]he romantic reaction against the dehumanizing machine and factory system. . . the romantic sense of a better and quite different future" (23).

Here, treating Egan's claim as a metaphor is helpful, and we can still retain what he wishes to say. We add to a "poetic grasp. . . a more literal sense of the world and experience" (94) such that

[T]hought will seek to conform with reality rather than shape it into story patterns. Not that the story-shaping will disappear, but. . . non-narrative structures will become increasingly important in making sense of the world and of experience (94).

[B]y getting a sense of the limits of human behaviour and experience we begin to grasp a proportionate sense of the range of the possible (100).

Typical of romantic understanding, then, is a rational grasp on particulars bound within a more general narrative context (105).

We add to mythic understanding of the earlier level "abstract conceptual techniques" (106), but still

it is within the larger, epic contexts that their meaning is enhanced and can be attached to our lives (107)

and

the heroizing technique. . .tends to distort knowledge, or distorts the relationship between what is highlighted and the suppressed backdrop. . .but also. . .to stimulate the pursuit of further knowledge and deeper understanding (126-127).

Romantic understanding, we may say, is at once more “vivifying of knowledge and experience” and more scientific, “supported by learning the basic tools of rationality, by absorption in details, in “inhuman” systematic categorizing and theorizing” (129)—inhuman perhaps, but part of the human story of the quest for meaning, the human adventure which in romantic understanding sees “the early forms of rational thinking. . .‘literal thinking’ because of its connections with the inventions that led to the alphabet and relatively easy literacy” (142).

Conclusion

What Egan wants to emphasize,¹⁷ of course, is the recapitulation of *sense-making*, not *content*, and he has told us so: this is the key to his version of recapitulation. Because they represent sense-making techniques, cultural history and our stories can be the essence of education, and remain so:

. . .storying capacities do not go away with the development of theories: they provide the contexts of meaning in which theories make more precise sense of their limited phenomena of interest.¹⁸

This is precisely the merit of Egan’s account: questions about his account of cultural recapitulation, while not perhaps quibbles, should not blind us to the importance of his insight. *Sense-making* is probably as fundamental an educational concept as we are likely to come up with: Egan has explained and developed it in interesting and revealing ways, and with profound educational sensitivity rooted in reflection on the teaching which he has experienced, observed, and tried—and that might be as good a test as any for his success. Egan has succeeded in his basic project “to fuse” the logical and psychological, our “changing mental structures” and “the contents of the particular structures themselves” into a way of characterizing sense-making techniques that is equally adequate for discussing cultural history and individual development.¹⁹

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Notes

¹*Teaching as Story Telling* (London: The Althouse Press, 1986) and *Primary Understanding* (New York: Routledge, 1988), as well as his now more recent *Imagination in Teaching and Learning: The Middle School Years* (London: The Althouse Press, 1992).

²“Education as the Recapitulation of Sense-Making Techniques,” *Paideusis*, 2(1), 1988, 3-13.

³*Ibid.*, 6.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, 9.

⁶*Ibid.*, cf. 198.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸7, sic; cf. *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹*Ibid.*, 10; cf. 199.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 5.

¹²*Ibid.*, 9.

¹³*Ibid.*; italics added.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 10; cf. *Romantic Understanding*, 198.

¹⁶*Paideusis, op. cit.*, 11; cf. 6.

¹⁷I would particularly like to thank Geoffrey Fidler for reminding me of the significance of this point, and my colleagues Nimrod Aloni, Harold Entwistle, and William Knitter and those who participated in the discussion of these ideas in the Department Seminar at Concordia University for their several helpful suggestions.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹*Ibid.*