THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Oct 16 ***Philosophy is Everybody's Business*** Nº 891

Nowhere in the contemporary world is there a truly democratic school system in which equal educational opportunity genuinely exists and in which teaching is conducted as a cooperative art that respects the activity of the learner's own mind as the primary cause of all genuine learning.

—Mortimer Adler

AMONG ALL THE ARTS, THREE STAND OUT FROM ALL THE REST

Mortimer Adler

These are the arts of farming, healing, and teaching. Their mark of distinction is that they are the only arts that cooperate with nature.

All other arts operate on nature, taking pliable materials and transforming them into products that would not exist were it not for the artist's intervention. That is why things so produced are called artificial rather than natural.

To fully understand the distinction of the co-operative arts and the role they play in human life, let us consider art in general and certain accepted classifications of the arts.

Art in General

There is hardly any word in our daily vocabulary that is more improperly used than the word "art", as when we speak of museums of art, or refer to paintings and sculptures as art, or talk about literature, music, and the fine arts, or denominate some persons as collectors or connoisseurs of art.

The English word "art" derives from the Latin "ars." Its Greek equivalent is "*techne*". From "*techne*", we get the English word "technique." We recognize a person's technique in doing or making anything as a certain skill that he or she possesses and that others may lack.

These etymological facts should lead and help us to realize that the word "art" in its primary significance designates an attribute possessed by a human being and nothing else. That attribute, as already indicated, takes the form of an acquired skill in the performance of certain acts or in the making of certain things. A skilled reader or speaker possesses the art of reading or speaking. A skilled carpenter possesses the art of making tables or chairs. The possessor of such skills is an artist in that respect and to that extent.

Instead of referring to things that persons of skill produce as "art," we should refer to all of them as "works of art" or "*objets d'art*." They are also artifacts, and, as such, they belong in the realm of the artificial or the man-made, as contrasted with the realm of the natural.

The Different Kinds of Art

In antiquity, the most basic distinction was between the liberal and the servile arts. The skills possessed by the grammarian, the orator, the logician, and the mathematician were regarded as liberal because they were skills in the use of the mind to produce intellectual products. In contrast, the shoemaker and the shipbuilder possessed skills regarded as servile, because though they, too, were skills in the use of the mind as well as of the hand, they were used to fashion and transform the raw materials worked on.

In modern times, a basic distinction is that between the useful and the fine arts. The useful arts comprise all the skills whereby artists produce things that serve as means to satisfy certain desired ends. Shoemaking and shipbuilding belong in the category of the useful arts. The liberal arts of logic and mathematics belong in the same

category.

The ancients had no word in their vocabulary equivalent in meaning to our use of the term "fine arts." That, by the way, is a peculiarly English bit of nomenclature. What we refer to as "fine art," the French call "*beaux arts*," and the Germans call "*schone kuns*t"—"arts of the beautiful."

In what meaning of the word "fine" does the phrase "fine art" have significance as the English equivalent for the French and German references to the arts of the beautiful? Certainly not in the sense in which the word "fine" means "refined," or "having a certain measure of excellence"; for in that sense a well-made table can be a work of fine rather than of useful art.

It is necessary to remember that the English word "fine" derives from the Latin "*finis*," which means "end." A work of fine art, in that sense, is something that is an end in itself, not as a means to be used for some end beyond itself. The beautiful has the finality of the enjoyable, whereas the merely useful lacks such finality. It is a means rather than an end.

A work that was intended by the artist to be useful can sometimes also be enjoyed as a thing of beauty—for example, a Sheraton table or a Chippendale chair. Similarly, a work that was intended by the artist to be enjoyed as a thing of beauty can also be put to use; for example, a painting to cover a spot on the wall, or a piece of music to put the baby to sleep.

A worse misuse of the term "fine art" occurs when it is used exclusively for works of visual art—paintings, photographs, etchings, engrave, tapestries, and sculptures. It should rather be used in the most extended sense to include not only all forms of imaginative literature, and musical performances, pieces of music, ballet compositions and performances, and dramatic performances, but also even bullfights and athletic competitions that provide the same kind of enjoyment that people experience at concerts, in the theatre, and in museums where works of visual art are exhibited.

The Productive vs. the Cooperative Arts

All the arts so far mentioned, whether liberal or servile in the ancient sense of those terms, and whether useful or fine in the modern sense, are productive arts. The artist in all these instances has the skill of producing something that would not come into exist-

ence without his effort to use his mind productively. Without skilled human beings at work, the things produced would not exist. Natural causes or forces, without human intervention, would not produce them.

Thus, for example, caves that can be used as shelters for human beings are purely natural things. So, too, are the calluses that form on the soles of the feet and serve, as do shoes, the process of walking. But shoes are artificial, not natural; and so, too, is the simplest hut or house that serves, as does the natural cave, the purpose of sheltering.

In short, the materials out of which useful things are made, left to themselves, would not naturally tend to produce these things. Useful products emerge only when human artists intervene to fashion, shape, or transform raw materials into the desired products.

Now consider such things as the fruits and grains we eat, the health we possess, and the knowledge or understanding we acquire. We might call these things, respectively, the products of agriculture, of medicine, and of education.

In the case of the fruits and grains, as well as edible animal organisms, prehistoric people were hunters and gatherers. This means that the edibles they consumed were all products of nature, which they merely picked or killed in order to consume them. Farming began when human beings acquired the skill of working with nature to facilitate the production of fruits and grains and also edible animal organisms. Farming thus became the first of the cooperative arts.

Long before the art of medicine came into existence, human beings possessed health as a result of natural causes. They also recovered from illness and regained health as the operation of natural causes. Medicine or the art of healing emerged when humans acquired the skill of co-operating with these natural processes to preserve health or to facilitate its recovery after a bout with illness.

Hippocrates, whom we in the West regard as the father of medicine, wrote treatises setting forth the rules of healing as a cooperative art. They were rules for controlling the regimen of the patient, the food he ate, the air he breathed, his hours of waking and sleeping, the water he drank, the exercise he engaged in, and so forth.

Administering drugs, introducing foreign substances into the body,

Hippocrates regarded as the least cooperative of all medical treatments. Surgery he regarded as a drastic measure to be resorted to only when all cooperative methods failed; it was, strictly speaking, an operative rather than a cooperative procedure.

Finally, we come to teaching, and here it is Socrates who first depicted teaching as a cooperative art. He did so by comparing his own style of teaching with the work of a midwife. It is the mother, not the midwife, who goes through the pains of childbirth to deliver the child. The mid-wife merely cooperates with the process, helping the mother in her efforts, and making childbirth a little easier and a little more hygienic.

Another way of saying this is to point out that teachers, like midwives, are always dispensable. Children can be born without midwives. Knowledge and understanding can be acquired without teachers, through the purely natural operations of the human mind. If any art at all is involved in this process, it is the intellectual skill of the learner, not the art of the teacher.

Teachers who regard themselves as the principal, even the sole cause of learning that occurs in their students, simply do not understand teaching as a cooperative art. They think of themselves as producing knowledge or understanding in the minds of their students as shoemakers produce shoes out of pliable or plastic materials.

Only when teachers realize that the principal cause of learning that occurs in a student is the activity of the student's own mind do they assume the role of cooperative artists. While the activity of the learner's mind is the principal cause of all learning, it is not the sole cause. Here the teacher steps in as a secondary and cooperative cause.

Just as, in the view of Hippocrates, surgery is a departure from healing as a cooperative art, so, in the view of Socrates, didactic teaching, or teaching by lecturing or telling rather than teaching by questioning and discussion, is a departure from teaching as a cooperative art.

What This Means for All of Us

Anyone acquainted with the difference between the high-tech medicine practiced in our most advanced hospitals and the kind of medicine practiced by the family physician will have some appre-

ciation of the importance of healing as a co-operative art. Whether the future holds any hope for the resuscitation of family medicine to regain the merits of healing as a cooperative art is a problem that deeply affects our lives and the lives of those who come after us.

Industrial agriculture, like high-tech medicine, also violates the principles of cooperative art, especially when its processes pollute the environment. The old-time individual farmers did not do so. They, more than healers, manifested their awareness of agriculture as a cooperative art. They did so by their inclination to pray for the kind of weather and the kind of environmental conditions without which all their own efforts to cooperate with nature might be of no avail.

The act of praying clearly reveals their recognition that the forces at work in the production of food were not entirely within their own control. No one prays for results that are entirely within his or her power to produce.

Anyone acquainted with the present deplorable state of education in our schools and colleges will also realize how far teaching has departed from its mission as a cooperative art. Here, too, we face a need for profound educational reform that will affect generations to come and the whole fabric of our society. 🕮

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

I would like to relate a lovely story. Thanks to your direction, I sought the 1940 edition of *How to Read a Book*. In the University of Calgary library, they had one copy on loan. They had one other copy on the "elite" 12th floor "Archives and Collected Literature." To enter this holy domain, one must don gloves, sign consents, offer identification, and almost (but not quite) be subjected to a strip search.

It was here that I found the 1940 edition of *How to Read a Book* and I found the wonderful piece of text about lovers and love letters. I was enamored myself with the irony that here I was in the midst of hermeneutic research and I found the best description of "method" offered by Dr. Adler himself. And I found it in the context of love letters . . . the reading actually purely and simply gave to me (gloved and humbled on the 12th floor) a description of hermeneutics as to: "read every word three ways; read between the

lines and in the margins; the whole in terms of the parts, and each part in terms of the whole...grow sensitive to context and ambiguity, to insinuation and implication . . . perceive the color of words, the odor of phrases, and the weight of sentences . . .”

These are the precious gifts of graduate school to a 43 year old nurse, simply finding her way and discovering a world...

THANK YOU!
Nancy Moules, RN, MN Ph.D. Candidate The Faculty of Nursing, The University of Calgary

---

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.