

Close-Reading Works of Art and the Ideal of Naïveté: Elements of an Anti-Cartesian Approach to Humanistic Liberal Education

Authors : Peter Hajnal

Abstract : The need to combine serious training in disciplinary/scholarly approaches to problems of general significance with an educational experience that engages students with these very same problems on a personal level is one of the key challenges facing modern liberal education in the West. The typical approach to synthesizing these two goals, one highly abstract, the other elusively practical, proceeds by invoking ideals traditionally associated with Enlightenment and 19th century "humanism". These ideas are in turn rooted in an approach to reality codified by Cartesianism and the rise of modern science. Articulating this connection of the modern humanist tradition with Cartesianism allows for demonstrating how the central problem of modern liberal education is rooted in the strict separation of knowledge and personal experience inherent in the dualism of Descartes. The question about the shape of contemporary liberal education is, therefore, the same as asking whether an anti-Cartesian version of liberal education is possible at all. Although the formulation of a general answer to this question is a tall order (whether in abstract or practical terms), and might take different forms (nota bene in Eastern and Western contexts), a key inspiration may be provided by a certain shift of attitude towards the Cartesian conception of the relationship of knowledge and experience required by discussion based close-reading of works of visual art. Taking the work of Stanley Cavell as its central inspiration, my paper argues that this shift of attitude in question is best described as a form of "second naïveté", and that it provides a useful model of conceptualizing in more concrete terms the appeal for such a "second naïveté" expressed in recent writings on the role of various disciplines in organizing learning by philosophers of such diverse backgrounds and interests as Hilary Putnam and Bruno Latour. The adoption of naïveté so identified as an educational ideal may be seen as a key instrument in thinking of the educational context as itself a medium of synthesis of the contemplative and the practical. Moreover, it is helpful in overcoming the bad dilemma of ideological vs. conservative approaches to liberal education, as well as in correcting a certain commonly held false view of the historical roots of liberal education in the Renaissance, which turns out to offer much more of a sui generis approach to practice rather than represent a mere precursor to the Cartesian conception.

Keywords : liberal arts, philosophy, education, Descartes, naïveté

Conference Title : ICAH 2016 : International Conference on Arts and Humanities

Conference Location : Singapore, Singapore

Conference Dates : March 03-04, 2016