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ART-EDUCATION: AN ARTFUL PLAY OR A STRICT DISCIPLINE?

1. Introductory Remarks<sup>1)</sup>

Let me start with a quotation from a famous opera, which contains the description of an art-experience:

I feel it, and cannot understand it -  
I cannot hold on to it, not yet forget it;  
And if I grasp it wholly, I cannot measure it! -  
But, then, how should I grasp  
what seemed to me immeasurable?  
No rule seemed to fit it,  
and yet there was no fault in it -  
(From "Meistersinger" II, 3 by R. Wagner).

Hans Sachs describes an experience many of us have had in the past, at least in those cases where we would conclude that some great work of art was the object of the experience. Much of the opera from which this quotation is taken, is concerned with the character and value of experiences like these. And we still are asking ourselves basic questions such as:

1. Does the quotation exhaust all there is to be said about art-experiences, assuming that such experiences are intrinsically non-cognitive, subjective in character? In that case art-education can only be artful play. Or does the quotation define a conceptual problem, to wit how to arrive at an adequate judgement of such experiences? For then it may be argued that art-education is to be considered as a real discipline.
2. If the quotation defines a problem, then how should we value art-experiences as such?

Participants in general meetings concerned with art-education will have to deal with these questions; for what is at stake is basically the question as to how art-education is to be valued.

As has been remarked many times, there is considerably less agreement about the usefulness of art-education as there is about the value of basic training in mathematics. Meetings like this congress should lead to



a better understanding of this curious lack of consensus.

In Hollans this problem of how to evaluate art-education takes on its own peculiar form. Strong pressure, exercised by the government to reduce expenditures in the cultural field did not so much cause intellectually stimulating debates about nature and value of art-education. The main question which was hotly debated concerned the most "natural place" of art-education, its most natural context in the bureaucratic sense: which department (department of welfare, of education, or the fine arts department) would leave art-education relatively unharmed? Disagreements as to how we should answer the two basic questions just mentioned were usually camouflaged. Participants in the debate about the bureaucratic "natural place"-problem usually tried to avoid a serious analysis of the character and value of art-education. Here we are confronted with a difficulty which seems to be characteristic of this particular field: usually many different purposes are ascribed to art-education; people working in this field often strongly disagree about what is to be preferred as "the" purpose of educational activities. As a rule little is known about the real effects of the various educational approaches which are actually in use. And most of these purposes are not easily described in terms which are sufficiently precise in order to allow for research into the possible effects. The general description of the aims of the Dutch Society for Artistic Development may illustrate this point<sup>2)</sup>.

## 2. A Syllogism

Plato's dialogue named "Protagoras" deals with "the art" of the sophists, as it was practised by the philosopher from Abdera<sup>3)</sup>. Socrates, upon meeting Protagoras in the house of Callias, asks him what it is that a young man could learn from the great sophist. Unhesitatingly Protagoras answers that it is the art of politics which he teaches to young people. Then Socrates poses his tricky question to Protagoras:

"... I will freely confess to you, Protagoras, that I have a doubt whether this art is capable of being taught... . I wish that you would, if possible, show me a little more clearly that virtue can be taught. Will you be so good?" (Protagoras 319A, 320C).



If we apply this Socratic question to "the art of art-education" we have to face a serious problem. For most of the currently held views on the status of artistic meaning and the appreciation of the arts are strongly subjectivistic. Hence these views tend to encourage radical relativism with respect to art-experiences: "de gustibus non est disputandum". But relativism blocks any attempt to give a coherent answer to the Socratic question, as has recently been argued convincingly in Best (1985).

On the other hand if art-education is considered with good reasons to be education that in answering the Socratic question we should be able to defend some version of the following fourstep argument:

1. The experience of something as a work of art has a cognitive component.
2. ∴ One can learn how to grasp art-phenomena.
3. Experiences of works of art are to be valued as indispensable.
4. ∴ One should learn how to grasp art-phenomena.

Being an amateur in this field I will limit myself to some very general remarks about the two claims (2) and (4), which are advanced by this syllogism. In order to sharpen some of my observations I put on the stage an imaginary teacher in mathematics, who has strong reservations about the argument. The following three sections of this paper describe this attempt to show that the argument is inconclusive. Let us put ourselves in the position of someone who tries to defend the syllogism against his attack.

### 3. Objections to Proposition (1)

Being a mathematician, our opponent will attack the syllogism in a systematic step by step manner. So he starts out by attacking proposition (1), reasoning as follows:

"Mathematics deals with well-defined abstract structure about which we can reason in an objective sense; this implies that we can communicate knowledge obtained about these structures to non-mathematicians in teaching them how to reason in mathematics.

The arts deal only with individual emotions and therefore art-education



has to fail, since it does not involve objective reasoning of any kind. The experience of something as a work of art is a strictly subjective, hence non-cognitive, matter."

How are we going to foil this attack (1)? I share the opinion held by a number of contemporary Anglo-american philosophers (particularly those, usually described as pragmatic realists) who claim that the traditional view reflects an utterly obsolete view of the human mind. Not only is this view based on a misconceived philosophical dichotomy (individual subjective emotion versus universal objective reason) but it fails to recognize the importance of the social dimension of our experiences.

Let me try to illustrate this claim briefly. The traditional philosophical view of visual perception compares my seeing something with taking a picture of something using a camera. The outside world is represented within the interior of the camera by some kind of reflection, using the lens as an "eye". Analogously, whenever I open my eyes, this will cause me to have within my private mind a representation of things in the world as they are. (This point of view goes by the name of naïve realism). Twentieth century perception psychologists advanced strong evidence for their claim that this view represents only an oversimplified model of perception. Of crucial importance for modern theories about perception is the following basic thesis: Perception always presupposes expectations. We are cued to some, not all of these expectations by our instincts: in that sense some of our expectations are in-born. Hence most of those expectations which are essential for having visual perception are learned in social practices. For that reason it should be maintained that those perceptions have cognitive content, perception generally involves cognition, and perception is not a purely private affair as was suggested by the camera-metaphor. I see what I see because a variety of social practices shaped my expectations.

This example also illustrates in what sense pragmatic realists claim that the question "What does the world really look like?" does not have any coherent meaning. What we are seeing depends on what we have been doing in the world and on how we have conceptualized our practical environment; it also depends on how the world is. But we cannot see the world independent of our practices and our conceptualizations of the world. That is the fundamental thesis of pragmatic realists<sup>4</sup>). As far as the philosophical dichotomy is concerned, if Goodman is right in





claiming "in aesthetic experience the emotions functions cognitively", then we certainly have to relativize the distinction<sup>5)</sup>.

At this point the mathematics teacher may object thus:  
"This is all sociology to me! There is one world, there is only one true picture of the world, and presently quantum mechanics comes closest to giving us that picture. All the rest is just subjective imagery, illusion etcetera."

Our answer should be that obviously the example just discussed is not quite understood by our opponent. Let us try to generalize the example in order to obtain a view of the matter which is coherent and consistent with both the scientific findings of our century and recent ideas in philosophy of mathematics and language. I will state this philosophical position of pragmatic realism in three theses:

PR<sub>1</sub> All human knowledge (including mathematics) involves constructive activities of our mind as well as something ("the world"!) which guaranteed non-arbitrariness of the final results of those constructions in some sense.

PR<sub>2</sub> In each specific world view (i.e. in each specific practical context of dealing with the world) both these components are inseparable.

PR<sub>3</sub> Our intellectual constructions are imbedded in social practices by which they are learned.

Each social practice has its own notion of "reality". In my every-day view of an audience, I will use this notion in such a way that the proposition "what I really see are human persons" makes perfect sense: But we can also easily imagine a different context, defined by a geneticist's view of "the world", in which I see reality as consisting of DNA-puddings of a rather peculiar kind. And again: I do not perceive what a physicist perceives in looking at a photograph picturing a collision of elementary particles, obtained from a cloud chamber. The every-day context, the scientific context, the "condition humaine" as described in a novel, the context of psychological explanation, they are all constructed involving perceptions and using concepts which are characteristic for that specific context. Even notions like "exactness of a concept" or "an adequate argument" are relative to the context in which they are used. Surely it is difficult for modern man to face up to this complex multitude of different views and practices. Most of us are longing for an easy escape. This explain why we so often encounter opinions like "Only what is scientific counts as being about reality" or "Only the world of science really



exists".

Nevertheless I would recommend to accept Wittgenstein's grim dictum<sup>6)</sup>, which implies for this case: Be silent about what the world really is like. We just have to accept a multitude of ways in which "the world" is to be conceived; this is an immediate consequence from PR<sub>2</sub>.

The mathematics teacher now tries to deal a final blow to premiss (1), arguing:

- (a) that our position reduces to sheer relativism (which robs the concept "cognition" of its commonsensical meaning) and
- (b) that proposition (1) seems to be inconsistent with the quotation from "Meistersinger" which was accepted as an adequate description of an art-experience at the beginning of par. 1. For in that quotation Sachs is actually saying that his art-experience consists of feelings not of a cognition.

In answering these two objections we should first point out that these PR<sub>1</sub> - PR<sub>3</sub> need not be interpreted in a sufficiently relativistic sense so as to rob the concept "cognition" of its usual meaning in making the application of the term a matter of complete arbitrariness. To hold the view that we are always dealing with "the world" in terms of some conceptual framework (of which many are possible) is not saying we can just believe anything we like. This is expressed in the second part of PR<sub>1</sub>. The pragmatic realist is only arguing that in some sense we construct the "facts" of the world and we find "values" in the world<sup>7)</sup>. As far as Hans Sachs is concerned, in the quotation just mentioned he is also saying that he is not hearing random noise, but something which can be grasped and can even be recognized as being in some sense correct!

#### 4. Objections to Proposition (2)

The mathematics teacher now moves on to proposition (2). Here is how he states his objection to (2). "An education in mathematics is based on a precise notion of what there is to be learned at various levels; each level of education has its unambiguously defined instrumental purposes. That explains why we are able to evaluate the efficiency of specific teaching-activities in this field, using clear objective standards. But art-educators are hopelessly confused about their aims; there even is



confusion about what constitutes a "work of art". This lack of consensus blocks the discovery of appropriate teaching methods. Therefore, even if we accept premiss (1) of our syllogism, proposition (2) is a non sequitur."

Let us advance a bold claim concerning the subject of both mathematics- and art-education in trying to meet this objection. In both cases we teach students how to reflect upon specific constructions of the human mind; in both cases these constructions have certain properties which can be discussed objectively with different degrees of exactness. Of course most people are willing to believe in the objective character of mathematics, since they consider mathematics to be about something "given", whereas they are doubtful about the use of the term "objectively" in the context of art. But, as philosophers of mathematics have pointed out, it is extremely difficult to explain what this objectivity consists of! The foundational crises in mathematics may serve as an illustration of this point. Does the criterion of "exactness" enable us to push the teaching of mathematics and art-education apart, the first being a meaningful and second being a senseless activity?

If we accept theses  $PR_1$  -  $PR_3$  as explained in par. 3, including the necessity to recognize a multiplicity of social practices, then as a corollary we also have to accept a variety of notions of "exactness" (cp. the exactness of a mathematical proof, a harmonic analysis of a piece of music, a historical explanation, an analysis of a poem). As has also been remarked by Eisner (1981), if we classify intellectual activities using the standard of exactness (and lack of ambiguity) we will get a continuum rather than a sharp dichotomy. In this continuum even mathematics occupies a region instead of a precise point: From a constructivistic point of view mathematical reasonings may differ in the degree of exactness according to their meaning. This renders harmless the objection of the mathematics teacher.

Note what we have been doing. We have tried to show that the difference between the two educational activities is not one in kind, but only a difference in degree. And it is a difference in kind which our opponent needs in order to reject proposition (2).

Our opponent now demands us to tell him what art-educators actually are teaching. Is it possible to state in precise terms what art-education is about, in order to be able to judge whether teaching activities really



bring about the intended results?

I think we should answer our opponent as follows. Whatever the various purposes, art-educators should at least aim at

- (a) teaching what it is to perceive something as a work of art
- (b) teaching which distinctions one can make in order to judge a work so perceived
- (c) indicating how one can learn to be articulate about art-experiences (i.e. how to participate in critical debates about works of art), given the rather ambiguous character of those experiences (cp. Sachs' description).

The mathematics teacher now tries to force my hand, asking his next question: "But can you teach those things?"

We should counter this attack by throwing back to our opponent the following question: "Can you teach mathematics, even who think they are not talented at all for even elementary mathematics could be considered to be evidence for the conjecture that we do not know too well how to teach mathematics.

In order to teach somebody (viz. the notion of "continuity") one first has to stimulate the imagination of the student (showing continuous curves as well as curves with strange jumps or crazy holes). Next we have to show how sharpen and to develop intuitive ideas of what we imagine visually. Then the student has to learn how to think about those ideas, which means she has to learn how to describe them to other people (this leads up to the so-called  $\epsilon$ - $\sigma$ -definition of continuity). Finally the student has to learn how to follow consistently the rules, implicit in the description. And even this is not enough; for the student should also learn how she can avoid being blinded by those rules (viz. in case we are forced by the discovery of inconsistencies or weird results to change our original intuitions or descriptions rather drastically).

Let us now take the case of drama-students. Essentially a good teacher will go through similar stages. In teaching about acting, how to analyse a play or how to criticize a theatre performance we also should be able to indicate how to develop intuitive ideas and be as precise as is possible about them, and what it is to follow certain conventions, at the same time being able to break with them in an imaginative way.

As I have argued in par. 3, for the purposes (a) and (b) of art-education





this can be done; (c) is more difficult. But as I know some very inspiring teachers in mathematics, I also know some very stimulating teachers in art and music, who are doing just the sort of thing I tried to describe. Maybe this is our only problem: We do not know as yet in either field how to produce good teachers in large quantities. In other words, from our present inability to be successful in teaching certain topics we should not infer with certainty that those topics cannot be taught in principle.

This is how we could try to defend the propositions (1) and (2) against our opponent. Let us next consider the second part of the argument.

#### 5. Objections to Propositions (3) and (4)

Let us assume that our opponent decides to direct his attention to the last two propositions of the argument from section (2). We have to remember that the argument tries to establish that one should learn how to grasp art-phenomena; this conclusion crucially depends on the third proposition of the syllogism (the experience of art-works is to be valued as indispensable). Hence our opponent will attack this claim, arguing thus:

"Even if I would accept the propositions (1) and (2) as elucidated by your exposition of  $PR_1 - PR_3$ , then all you have argued so far is that there is a difference in degree only between the teaching of mathematics and art-education. Furthermore you argued that we cannot exclude the possibility that art-experiences can be articulated and discussed in an objective sense. But this is a pretty weak conclusion, since it leaves open the question as to why we should try so hard to teach anything about these rather elusive experiences. In other words, what is your evidence for what you claim in proposition (3)?"

In order to meet this objection we should first consider scientism. Scientism is a belief in the general significance of science, which is expressed in two fundamental theses: first only science defines what it is we should consider to be real; secondly the paradigm of rationality is to be found in the scientific method. According to scientism, real



problems are exclusively those which are open to a scientific approach. Hence problems about values are to be considered as questions which we cannot discuss and answer in an objective way.

As we all know scientism has exercised a deep influence on twentieth century thought. The spectacular technical successes of science-based technology strongly encouraged this scientific view concerning the cultural significance of science.

At the same time we are becoming increasingly aware of the difficult position in which we have placed ourselves with beliefs like those just described. For in most if not industrialized nations we have to face up to a complex plurality of serious problems which seem to have something in common: In order to arrive at an adequate and politically acceptable solution of the problem under consideration, we have to evaluate long term consequences of our actions and short term advantages of certain political decisions. Environmental problems as well as problems caused by demographic developments are typical examples: usually the actions needed to stave off serious future calamities are incompatible with decisions which are considered to be advantageous from the short term political point of view. And the political point of view seems to be short termed by sheer necessity. For on the one hand politicians come up for re-election after a relatively short period of time. On the other hand the actions needed for an adequate approach of our environmental and demographical problems usually presuppose extremely far reaching human loyalties (viz. the willingness to make sacrifices for the benefit of future generations). As a result of these incompatibilities we are hardly able to deal with the problems just mentioned in a rational way. Scientism does not help us here. What we really need are stimulating images and suggestive metaphors in terms of which we can explain to ourselves and to others the cultural dilemmas we have to deal with. Yet, due to the influence of scientism on our educational system, there is a dangerously increasing inability to develop a rich repertoire of such metaphors. It is in this respect that we should hold scientism to some extent responsible for the increasing lack of cultural literacy. The American computerscientist J. Weizenbaum, arguing against the blind scientific faith in the explanatory power of the computer metaphor regarding everything human, expressed our concern in very precise terms thus:



"... the computer is a powerful new metaphor for helping us to understand many aspects of the world, but... it enslaves the mind that has no other metaphors and few other resources to call on." 8)

Here then we have the vital relevance of art-education. We have to face up to an increasingly complicated multiplicity of "realities": our everyday world, reality as defined by the natural sciences, the world of computers, but also our social reality, the world of our moral commitments, and even more ambiguous contexts and practices. We have to learn how to deal with the plurality of possible life-forms, without getting trapped in a radical relativism which may lead inevitably to hedonism and indifference as a response to our dilemma.

Anthropologists claim that particularly dealing with ambiguous and complex phenomena is one of the most difficult tasks for human beings<sup>9)</sup>. This brings us back to the beginning of section 1. True art-experiences are paradigmatic for ambiguity! This simple truth is precisely what that great and uncomfortably ambiguous 19th century artist expressed in the quotation from one of his characters, which is given in section 1. It is for this reason that we should defend proposition (3). Of course we are only speculating about the possible intrinsic value of art-education for our intellectual development. Given the desintegration of traditional religion we have little else at our disposal in exploring new ways for enhancing intellectual literacy concerning the fundamental dilemmas of our time. And if our opponent is still doubtful we should try to strengthen this argument. Whoever is sincere about art-education should try to come up with an argument which would convince our mathematics teacher why it is necessary to learn how to deal with art-objects and how to be articulate about our art-experiences.

## 6. Conclusions

Aristotle described the purpose of education in general terms as the bringing about of those habits and dispositions which characterize a fully developed human being. For Aristotle this obviously includes the development of a truly moral character. I fully agree with Dewey as he therefore remarks such an education should satisfy at least the following three



conditions:

It should stimulate the imagination (for moral decisions usually require a creative search for possible courses of action). Furthermore it should teach people how to be open to new experiences, at the same time recognizing their limits (!). Finally it should encourage people to change their limits (!). Finally it should encourage people to change their minds in the light of new experiences. Obviously all this requires the development of multiple forms of literacy. And in the light of our previous discussion let me add to this it also requires the ability to deal with ambiguity.

I have tried to sketch a philosophical position (i.e. pragmatic realism) from which it follows that art-education may contribute to the development of those capacities and dispositions. I do believe that the "natural place" of art-education (both in and outside schools) can and should be described in even more precise terms. But then still more stimulating debates are needed about the various ways in which these aims of art-education could be realized. Such debates are needed not only in order to discover better educational means; they might also increase our knowledge about ourselves. I consider it of the utmost importance that such debates should also engage intellectuals working in other fields. Even our teacher in mathematics might profit from some insight in the problems of art-education.

As to the title question of this paper: Art-education should engage to some extent in artful play (as should any type of education!); simultaneously it should be disciplined by thorough selfreflection if it is to survive the socratic question.

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FOOTNOTES:

- 1). Speech, delivered at the 26th Worldcongress of INSEA in Hamburg 1987.
- 2). "1. Introduction into artphenomena as well as grasping and making use of artistic means.  
2. Enhancing the development of one's personality by grasping and making use of artistic means.  
3. To contribute to the capacity of conciously and critically shaping ones lifepattern by using artistic means." Momentopname van de Kunstzinnige Vorming, Bulletin CITO & LOKV, 1985, pg. 14.
- 3). Protagoras from Abdera (c. 481-411 B.C.) was a famous sophist. "The art" of the sophists is an expression commonly used to refer to the rhetorical techniques which they taught to young people in the city-state.
- 4). Cp. J. Dewey, W. James, H. Putnam, to mention only a few of these philosophers. The qualification "pragmatism" indicates what Putnam calls "the agent point of view": If you want to know what it is a person beliefs, you should look for those "thruths" the person is willing to act upon. (H. Putnam in his Caruslectures 1985, to be published).
- 5). N. Goodman (1968). Among psychlogists there is a renewed interest in the study of emotions as such. The dutch psychologist N. Frijda proposed to treat emotion as indicators for specific positive or negative interests of the subject and therefore as involving cognitive aspects. Cp. Frijda ( ).
- 6). Tractatus 7: "What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence" (transl. Pears & MacGuinness).
- 7). The "facts" of the microphysical reality are in a certain sense constructed out of experimental data of macrophysical reality using mathematical constructions. On the other hand, moral and aesthetical values are not the result of a purely subjective activity of my mind. I "find" them in the social reality as this reality is revealed to me in growing up and interacting with other people.
- 8). J. Weizenbaum (1976).
- 9). Cp. M. Douglas (1966).



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