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# Critical Thinking, Wisdom, and Paying Homage to the Human Experience

BY AMY ST. CLAIR

[*Editor's Note:* This excerpt is from a longer essay prepared by Amy St. Clair for her Honors Philosophy class, "Ideas Past and Present," taught by Prof. Daniel Polak, at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, NY, in Fall 2015. Prof. Polak asked his class to use critical thinking to discuss Stephen Alcorn's article, "Drawing the Line: Reflections on the Importance of Drawing by Hand in an Increasingly Digital Age," (*Voices*, Spring-Summer 2015). The assignment required the students to apply to what they had learned—the concepts, themes, and terms from the philosophers they had studied—to this discussion.]

Throughout human evolution, we have been constantly striving toward making the use of technology in our lives greater and more complex. Beginning with the use of rocks as tools to the invention of the wheel, which revolutionized agriculture, technology has expanded to present-day attempts to create artificial intelligence (AI) that can learn, think, and feel. As modern technologies develop, and we become more and more dependent upon them, what must we sacrifice when we adopt them into all parts of our lives? Stephen Alcorn's article "Drawing the Line" discusses technology and its role in creation. Alcorn informs us throughout his essay that something important is lost when we forget the "essential role that tactile values have played in the practice of drawing since time immemorial" (Alcorn 2015, 16). His article is prognostic for a greater pattern happening all over the world, one that has been developing for hundreds of years.

Could the people who began the Industrial Revolution foresee the ecological

effects and loss of life caused by the rise of factory systems, chemical manufacturing, machine tools, coal burning, and mining? We now know that the practices that began during that time have had widespread and detrimental long-term effects on the planet. It is essential for humans at this time in our evolution to begin to identify what is being lost through our utter dependence on technology and to determine how it may affect humanity long term. Furthermore, we must not think only of the long-term effects: we must also ask ourselves about the intentions of our actions. If we look to some of the great thinkers of antiquity who sought to educate others about the importance of fostering critical societies, they can help us see the flaws and fissures in our modern thinking, because they were able to ask important questions, foresee consequences, analyze outcomes, and pierce through clever manipulations.

William Graham Sumner, in his *Folkways* (1906), illustrates one way that our societies would be affected if critical thinking was included in general education: "The critical habit of thought, if usual in society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators ... They are slow to believe...." (Elder and Cosgrove 2013).

Alcorn suggests that the use of technology allows us to be more human, because we can rely on these labor-saving tools to be more productive and because his art can live on indefinitely through the digital world (Alcorn 2015). Clearly, there are many ways that technology enhances our lives, and like mediums in art, provide us with tools that

help us do our work. But at what point is it too much, and where do we *draw the line* with the use of technology, in order to preserve our important human faculties? Although Socrates believed that the written word would make us less wise (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c–279d) and would cause us to develop poor memory, it is now a widely promoted activity, with claims that it enhances brain function (see, for example, Klemm 2013). I would question, though: has it made us wiser?

As with anything in life, we must recognize the wisdom of balance—just as in nature, there must be accord for all things to function. True critical thinking must be informed by more than just the intellect, by also what Einstein skillfully pointed out in book, *Ideas and Opinions* (1954):

It is essential that the student acquire an understanding of and a lively feeling for values. He must acquire a vivid sense of the beautiful and the morally good.... He must learn to understand the motives of human beings, their illusions, and their sufferings in order to acquire a proper relationship to the individual fellow-men and to the community.... (Elder and Cosgrove 2013)

People are most effective when we are attuned to intellect, heart, and experience. We must not let go of all of the things that make us human. Einstein's words point to a lost art: the appreciation of morals, harmony, and the human experience. We all sense and experience the world differently, each of us shaped by our history, our location, our beliefs, and so much more. Our individuality is what makes our craft, our

art, and our personal vision unique. Is it not paradoxical then, that humans seem to wish to homogenize this very sensual human artistic process by making it digital?

The very definition of “craft” is to make something by hand. Alcorn explains: “The art instruction establishment has turned its back on the established curriculum, which gave beauty and craft top priority” (Alcorn 2015, 20). If I am going to craft a piece of wood by hand, the wood itself will inform me, and it will become a process of cooperation between myself and the medium. This is the balance of where the use of tools meets human skill, and this balance is vital to preserve. If we begin to depend solely on the click of a mouse, we will lose the tactile wisdom of our bodies. Alcorn warns us of the dangers of depending too heavily upon the digital medium for this very reason: “The computer is an extremely powerful instrument, and like all tools, it alters our perception of reality. Because of this, one’s consciousness of form, color, shape, and meaning can risk the danger of being eclipsed by increasingly technological extensions of our faculties” (Alcorn 2015, 19). Alcorn suggests painting is like having a conversation. I would go even further and say painting is a performance art. When performing live with your instrument, mistakes become part of what gives the music beauty and life. Hitting that wrong chord can often lead you to new discoveries. Improvising makes you a better musician. When you are making digital music, there is no sense of urgency, no natural mistakes, because you can just go back and touch it up.

Universities and colleges everywhere are pushing career-based curriculums that are based solely on the needs of the economy. This is why it is so alluring for our culture to move towards digital, because we can do more, produce more, and keep it longer. Why have we not used the creative power we so plainly possess to invent things that benefit the whole of humanity and improve our world? We need to educate students in critical thinking so the future inventors, engineers, artists, and politicians can understand that motivations that serve the whole,

that consider future consequences, and that establish a balanced and harmonious way of doing business are the only ones that will allow us to continue as a species.

If we seek guidance from the critical thinkers of history, we can see that humanity does not often invent processes for the benefit of the whole, but instead for the benefit of one’s self or group. According to Elder and Cosgrove (2013), people have a natural tendency toward service-to-self behavior: “...what comes first in terms of human tendencies, and often takes precedence, is an orientation focused on self-gratification, self-interest, self-protection.”

Erich Fromm’s thinking mirrors my own in that I believe that we seek meaning in our lives by grasping for more possessions. He goes on to explain in his book *To Have or To Be* (1976) that, ‘...With industrial progress... we could feel that we are on our way to unlimited production, and hence, unlimited consumption...that science made us omniscient...’ (Elder and Cosgrove 2013). If universities continue to standardize education and push for career-based models, this only serves to support the service-to-self economy, which will ultimately and unquestionably fail.

Could we say intellect is propelled by the desire to feel secure by understanding our world? Or is our intellect propelled by fear and this is why we reject people who question conventional thinking? Fear plays a primary role in anti-intellectualism in the world. The philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti says, “...because we are afraid, anxious about life, we come to some form of conclusion to which we are committed. From one commitment we proceed to another, and I say that such a mind, such an intellect, being slave to a conclusion, has ceased to think, to inquire” (Krishnamurti 1991, 217). When Alcorn quoted the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art as saying, “Time-consuming traditional techniques, such as the creation of multiple layers of transparent glazes, can now be accomplished in minutes with no anxiety, no mess and no harmful solvent fumes,” he recognized that, “It is, in effect, a thinly veiled advertisement, at the

expense of students, from an industry intent on dominating a field in order to exploit a gullible, unwitting audience” (Alcorn, 2015, 20). If our education systems were to employ critical thinking, we would not fall prey to the folly of clever manipulations, but instead seek to be unconditionally who we are as individuals and to make our unique mark on the world.

Alcorn elucidates a struggle within the education system that does not seem to be new, but has only changed over time as the tools of the trade has changed. His contention with digital art is: “Pedagogically, students have little to gain by mimicking the effects of any given medium, if first they don’t experience the real thing. Equally problematic are the suggestions that the creative process should somehow be ‘anxiety free,’... (Alcorn 2015, 20).

In 1851, in his lectures *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, John Henry Newman criticized some of these same issues, with respect to education, that Alcorn developed: ‘...Learning is to be without exertion, without attention, without toil; without grounding, without advance, without finishing. There is to be nothing individual in it; and this, forsooth, is the wonder of the age...’ (Elder and Cosgrove 2013). Without the ability to integrate critical thinking into education systems, we will soon realize that it is too late to take back some of the damage that has been done. How will we feel in 200 years when we have forgotten what the word “craft” once meant, just as the word “artificial,” which once meant artfully and skillfully constructed, now means a copy of something natural?

Invested individuals or corporations have always had their methods of marketing to what people think they need (iPhones, for example), what kind of music we should like (pop), and to our tendency to blindly follow the rules, not questioning “why” or “why not?” The article, “A Brief History of Critical Thinking” summarizes these ‘Idols of the tribe,’ which is what Frances Bacon, in his book *The Advancement of Learning*, called the aforementioned ideas (Paul, Elder, and

Bartell 1997). The very first line of the quote that Alcorn shared from the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art is: ‘Current software gives artists the tools capable of mimicking almost any medium.’ (Alcorn 2015, 20). This sentence alone certainly illuminates that one of the primary ‘idols of our tribe’ is digital technology. Furthermore, I would query how much money the Lucas Museum has invested in this technology, representing another ‘idol.’ This is what Bacon calls ‘idols of the market-place,’ in which we use our power and clever words to tell our tribe what to want and what is better for them (Paul, Elder, and Bartell 1997).

It seems that instead of learning to embrace our humanity, we seek to become less human. Our dehumanization efforts are visible across the full spectrum of our culture and are revealed by the values of our time. Alcorn emphasizes this point when he talks about his experience as a teacher: “... with each passing year the amount of hand-made imagery presented diminishes, while the amount of digitally manipulated photographs culled from the Internet increases, resulting in a marked depersonalization of the portfolios” (Alcorn 2015, 20). He juxtaposes his complaint about dehumanization in art schools with an example of three artist colonies that celebrate and embrace the “by-hand” approach to art, which is quickly diminishing:

What is striking about all three “schools” is the organic warmth of the products they spawned, and their commitment to celebrating the ties that bind people to the very environments in which they live and work. All are expressions of the way in which artists, through an assertion of the basic human instinct to create things by hand, have been driven to rebel against the depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects of the machine on the arts, and by extension, on the quality of life.” (Alcorn 2015, 21)

Which is more alluring: sitting in a chair, in front of a screen, tapping or clicking away or standing in front of an easel with paint on your hands, the scent of your medium mingling in the air, and the colors

moving across a page? Alcorn calls the former a “shortcut to the demise of the senses” (Alcorn 2015, 20). This movement towards dehumanization calls for an examination of a specific idea put forth by Karl Mannheim. Mannheim’s proposal that we can separate ourselves from the very experiences, views, preferences, and thoughts that are our biases and that make us utterly human seems to be an omen of the technological age. (Coser 1987). Are people striving to be more like machines?

In any given moment, we are feeling many things, thinking, processing; our bodies are monitoring the environment; our memories are alive in us; and even in our least active moments, we are extremely animated. It is so easy for us to forget the mystery of life, and therefore, focus on only a very narrow sense of our existence. When we ask Google a question, it can only compute and output an answer based on the information it has compiled. Alcorn says that, “...even the most sophisticated machine is only as sophisticated as the mind that conceived it” (Alcorn 2015, 27). A human, on the other hand, has access to creativity, invention, playfulness, existential ideas, a sense of humor, and the power of the mind. But we turn away from all of this and seek to be more symmetrical, more plastic, and more perfect.

With all of our creative power, have we actually become happier and healthier as individuals and as a species? As Alcorn eloquently expresses, “And because I believe in cultivating a plurality of skills, I also encourage students to cultivate their mark-making abilities both on analog surfaces and drawing tablets in the hope that the physical and the digital may stand side by side in their lives” (Alcorn 2015, 27). It is important to embrace our technology, but these tools are only useful if tempered by wisdom, critical thinking, the value of human qualities, and the memory of the tactile knowledge of the thousands of years of humans who have come before us. We must think about the possible consequences, positive and negative, of how our actions today will affect our bodies, minds, hearts, and the future of humanity. ▼

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