BOOK REVIEW

Ellen Rose. *On Reflection: An Essay on Technology, Education, and the Status of Thought in the Twenty-First Century*. Canadian Scholars' Press Inc. 2013.

Ellen Rose. *On Reflection: An Essay on Technology, Education, and the Status of Thought in the Twenty-First Century*. Canadian Scholars' Press Inc. 2013. 170 pp. $00.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781551305189).

Ellen Rose's book contains a bold and professionally risky claim: educational systems are hostile to reflection. The rapid pace, byte size bits of time for our rapid fire switching among tasks in our educational systems and current high tech society, is hostile to the reflective life. Reflection is a type of thought that allows for synergistic and syncretic thinking that produces novel ideas which integrate disparate thought from a variety of areas. '[R]eflection...is a form of deep thought, emerging in the conditions of solitude and slowness, in which the mind engages in a synthesizing process that tends to produce original ideas' (107). As a teacher in an educational system about educational technology, Rose condemns her own profession and the corporate world which educational systems now serve. However, though she disavows providing a quick series of remedies for this failing of modern life which itself, Rose contends, is part of the syndrome of byte size fixes provided by technologically geared thinking, she does offer some long term and difficult to implement approaches that involve life style changes—such as stop, listen, think, be mindful, slow down, ponder, and others.

There are various obstacles one must overcome to appreciate the author's critique of how we think about thinking today.

One obstacle presents itself in the first two chapters where Rose seems to focus on how to define the word 'reflection', as if definitions were the means to understanding a concept. One does not have to be a nominalist or a conventionalist about definitions to agree that definitions do not contribute to understanding concepts but only to announce the meaning of the word by declaring the phrases one can use as substitutions for the word. One might get the impression that Rose is arguing fallaciously from the premise that the word 'reflection' originally meant 'X', but that the theories she critically discusses propose different meanings for the word, 'Y' or 'Z', and because 'Y' or 'Z' is not the original meaning, nor even the common sense meaning, to the conclusion, then those theories are false or at least inauthentic. Meanings change: it is not what the word means that counts, but what theories are conveyed by the words, and so the question is whether those theories have any validity, or capture anything about the reality of the situation under question. However, I think this reading of Rose is a misreading that misses what Rose implicitly argues: some of the recent theories of reflection are not really about reflection but about problem solving, or assessment of action, or action-planning and review—what sometimes is called 'proactive action' in corporate jargon. 'The reconceptualization of reflection...is part of this subtle and largely unnoticed shift in how we regard and value our own cognitive processes. Increasingly, deep, slow thought is devalued in favour of the kind of rapid reaction and calculation at which computers excel' (17). In other words, Rose is arguing that some thinkers about *reflection*, are reducing the concept to a technical process so that the problematic that reflection encounters in our technological society is avoided. The concept of reflection is deflated so that we are prevented from seeing the true richness of reflection and prevented from missing its loss in contemporary society.

Another misreading can occur while reflecting on Chapters Three and Four, where Rose seems to be making an argument from within the metaphysical approach of technological determinism where reflection was an unintended outcome of the invention of various communication technologies starting with the alphabet, writing, and then printing, as opposed to being an original human propensity. Indeed, one might think that Rose is saying we are caught in a trap of our own

making: the technology of printing resulted in the birth of reflection, and the new 'smart' technologies are resulting in the death of reflection—the natural life-cycle for artificial and invented systems, such as the birth and death of the horse and buggy as the main system of transportation in the civilized world. However, I think Rose's argument is a bit more subtle: technology affords certain types of cognition, and changes in technology afford other types of cognition. Current technology hinders reflection just as much as current technology hinders lengthy undivided and uninterrupted attention. When our smart devices pound us with messages, notifications, and provide us with multiple-tasks among which we have to divide our attention and time, our smart devices restrict the opportunities for reflection. 'I believe that reflection's decline is a matter of social changes that have resulted in the devaluation of slow, careful thought. This devaluation places us in an extremely precarious position because the intellectual capabilities we choose not to use today may very well become unavailable to us tomorrow' (75-6).

Another leap to an invalid interpretative inference is that in Rose's contrast of reflective thinking with scientific-technical thinking, professional thinking, and critical thinking—all forms of thought that use analysis with an orientation toward action—is that Rose is rejecting those forms of thinking. Rather, it soon becomes evident—especially as we traverse towards and through Chapters Five to Seven—that Rose rejects the identification and reduction of reflection with those other forms of thinking. Reflection involves synthesis and integration of a variety of ideas, resulting in novel ideas, as opposed to a deconstruction of ideas into their components. Analytic thinking involved in scientific-technical, professional, and critical thinking has its place and limits—as a process oriented approach for solving problems and weeding out bad ideas. But as far as producing novel ideas, the best form of thinking that would apply, according to Rose, is reflection. 'When we reflect, we ultimately construct not only new perspectives and ideas but also new ways of being in the world' (28).

The final obstacle that some readers may need to overcome to fully appreciate Rose's novel and bold theory of reflection, goes as follows: Rose tacitly, it seems, adopts a Cartesian philosophical framework in the development of her theory of reflection. One might surmise from Rose's references to Heidegger's works, especially on thinking, that Rose finds a correspondence with her own views in Heidegger's works and in Heidegger's background. It seems that Rose fixates on the Cartesian and phenomenological solitary subject, the transcendental ego, that attempts to construct experience and thought out of the basic structures of the phenomenal. Most contemporary philosophers are post-Cartesian in finding that the nature of thought is best examined either by studying public language, underlying grammatical structures, or by developing model languages; or by looking at thought in terms of knowledge in its objective forms such as science, or history, or literature; or, by looking at science and other forms of knowledge in its social forms. This turn toward the public sphere and away from the private sphere is in many respects a return to Plato's notion of thinking as an inner dialogue.

To overcome the obstacle of seeing Rose as fixated on the Cartesian ego, one can treat her apparent Cartesian approach to thinking as a matter of philosophical style rather than substance. Rose's philosophical style is reflective according to the theory of reflection she presents in her compact book—which to me is like a dense miniature painting of a complex and busy scene, or a many layered fugue with contrasting and overlapping themes. Rose takes ideas from a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, critical theory or cultural criticism, educational theory, media ecology, psychology, and sociology, but Rose is not advocating or using a particular philosophical

methodology other than her theory of reflection as taking ideas from different disciplines that one encounters in one's readings, with no special focus on a problem, nor a special focus on some action-oriented result. Rather, she is playing with the various ideas, letting them come into and out of one's attention, and then letting these ideas come into a new harmonious relationship.

In reflecting on Rose's book, I see that there are people, in spite of the ubiquity of smart devices, who still have the reflective attitude and lead a reflective way of life, and seek to have alone time in order to hear the inner symphony of ideas that had come to them upon random readings and lectures. However, those with a reflective way of life are an endangered species. In my reflections, I see both an irony here and a new ecological niche in the interface with these two species of people, the reflective people and action-oriented people. The irony is this: both the endangered species of the reflective thinker, and the invasive species of socially oriented thinkers focused on problem-solving, and on action-oriented results, are interlocked in a symbiotic relationship. If, as Rose argues throughout her book, reflection is the chief form of thinking that produces novel ideas, the socially oriented thinker needs to speak with the lonely reflective thinker. Moreover, results and product-oriented institutions need to make space and time for the lonely reflective thinker so that the two species of thinkers, technically-oriented, and reflective, can develop a symbiotic relationship.

I don't know whether Ellen Rose would endorse my recommendation encouraging lonely reflective thinkers to address the fleeting attention-span of professionals and specialists as they dash to the finish lines for completing their multi-tasks. But by having lonely reflective people jump into public space, the lonely reflective people would create a niche for themselves among the action-oriented socially directed species of thinkers, and escape their status as an endangered species.

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