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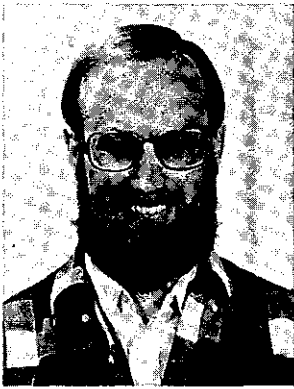
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The Study of Arts for Serviceable Insight

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An alumnus of Dordt College, Lambert Zuidervaart has also earned degrees from the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Ontario and the Free University in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. At present he is Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at The King's College, Edmonton, Alberta. This article is the sequel to "Toward a Shared Understanding of the Arts," which appeared in the December 1982 issue of Pro Rege. Both articles have been adapted from presentations made, in May 1982, at the Arts Seminar sponsored by the Fine Arts Division of Dordt College.

In response to a question posed for Dordt College's Arts Seminar, I should like to argue that, with respect to arts education, the college's stated philosophy rests on a mistake. This mistake is the notion of serviceable insight. My initial answer, then, to the question "What kind of serviceable insight does a study of the arts provide?" is simply "no kind at all." While developing this answer, however, I shall be heading toward a different notion of serviceable insight. This different notion will enable me to argue that studying the arts can provide insight that is not only serviceable but also crucial at a college such as Dordt.

1. "Serviceable Insight."

Although I share many of the concerns expressed in Dordt's statement of purpose, I

think its notion of serviceable insight is inadequate, to say the least. It is too broad to be serviceable. It is too non-historical to be insightful. And it conceals an intellectualism that can only misread the contemporary importance of studying the arts. Let me develop each of these polemical points.

In ordinary usage and in some of its primary lexical meanings, "insight" indicates the power or act of penetrating, of seeing far into a situation. "The Educational Task of Dordt College," however, takes "insight" primarily to mean understanding "the fundamental character" (p. 7) of the creation and of adult tasks within it. The statement considers such understanding a prerequisite to cultivating creation and to effective social activity (pp. 6, 9) as well as the core to education both inside and outside schools (pp. 6-7). Now, apart from the question

whether trying to understand the "fundamental character" of the creation is a meaningful endeavor, I sometimes wonder whether any persons besides philosophers have ever tried to do this. In any case it strikes me that such global understanding has much more to do with comprehensive theories than with perceiving situations in depth. Can anything but confusion result from the attempt to make "insight," as global understanding, the core to all education as well as to link it with the Holy Spirit's disclosure of Jesus Christ (p. 16; cp. I Cor. 1-3)? What does "insight" really mean? Unusual perceptiveness? Basic awareness? Philosophical understanding? Spiritual wisdom? As it stands, the term seems too broad to be serviceable for spelling out Dordt's educational task.

Whether institutional or not, and whether educational or not, tasks arise in definite situations at specific times under certain conditions. Saying this would be unnecessary were it not for the tendency in Dordt's statement to enunciate principles as if they were inscribed in nonhistorical stone. This tendency takes its toll on the notion of serviceable insight, making it less than insightful.

To be insightful the notion would have to carry within it a penetration of the social and historical circumstances in which Dordt College finds itself. Given the definite ethnic and confessional context of the college, and given the disparateness within Christianity today, isn't it the height of abstraction to connect the serviceability of insight with helping "Christians," "the Christian community," or "the community of believers" (pp. 9-10)? Of which Christians are we speaking, and what sorts of effective activities are we seeking to promote? Given current options for understanding the love of God and neighbor, what exactly do we take such love to imply today? Given the college's smallness and limited financial base, isn't it presumptuous to say that "wherever insight is required, there Dordt College is called to supply it" (p. 11)? Shouldn't we say instead

that the college is called to provide the educational leadership it deems most strategic and feasible in its current context?

Despite my criticisms of the nonhistorical character of "serviceable insight," I recognize some of the origins of this idea. They are most noticeable in the chapter on implementation. Philosophically, at least, those origins are the intellectualism mentioned earlier.

I have no quarrel with the concern to integrate "theory and practice" (p. 11). But the working assumption behind this concern seems to be that theoretical understanding of "God's created order" should be the foundation of practice and the core of the educational activity at Dordt College (pp. 11, 13). Even extra-curricular activities have as their goal the developing of insight and of desire for insight (p. 16). Surely one would have thought, for example, that intramural basketball had as its goal nothing more sophisticated than good competitive fun. Must everything be aimed at insight to be a legitimate part of campus life? Might not the desire for "integration" and consistency be forcing into theoretical service what is not properly eligible for conscription? Is a theoretical understanding into the fields of academic disciplines *demand*ed in order for students and graduates to act insightfully in "all kinds of practical situations" with "all kinds of problems"?

Surely the case for serviceable insight has been overstated; apart from certain "skills," insight seems to be the only service the college and its graduates have to offer. Such an exaggerated case means, I think, that the present statement of purpose cannot be "implemented" in arts courses and programs unless the statement itself is modified. The requisite modifications pertain to both terms of the phrase in question.

To indicate these modifications, I shall now reverse my tack and argue that the study of art can indeed provide insight that is highly serviceable. But by "insight" I mean "unusually penetrating perception of things, events, or situations." By "serviceable" I

mean "helpful in the long run for carrying out the ministries begun by Jesus Christ and summarized in Matthew 25:31-46." From this reversal will emerge the beginnings of a rationale for the study of arts at a college such as Dordt.

2. Art and Insight

Saying the study of art can provide insight quickly leads one into a thicket of controversy about the cognitive status of art. Though I am aware of the controversy, for now I wish to bypass it after making just a few comments.

Some philosophers wish to reintroduce into the concept of knowledge the broad connotations it had earlier.² This move would make it easy to talk about the arts as forms of knowledge.³ But North American philosophers tend to restrict the concept of knowledge to knowledge *about* something and to knowledge *that* something is the case. Given this tendency and its force in ordinary language, our purposes in this article might be better served by distinguishing *acquaintance with* something from *knowledge about* it.⁴ When I say the study of art can provide insight, I am not saying that the study of art can provide knowledge about and knowledge that, even though this knowledge might also occur in the study of art. Instead I am saying the study of art can provide acquaintance of a sort that is penetrating, important, and indeed crucial.

Two prevalent weaknesses of arts education in schools today are that either students acquire little more than knowledge about an art itself or they achieve little more than a nodding acquaintance with various arts. In either case students tend to miss out on insight. Either they become *Fachidioten*, socially and historically uninformed specialists in doing or appreciating a certain artform, or they become amateurish generalists who dabble in whatever art forms catch their fancy. But the insight art can provide remains inaccessible to *Fachidioten* and generalists alike. If this is so, and if the in-

sight in question is crucial, then a college such as Dordt should be insuring that no student here remains a mere amateur in the arts as well as that the arts courses offered do not allow students majoring in the arts to become socially uninformed specialists.

By now, of course, you are wondering what sort of insight is available to arts students and why it is so crucial. I shall address each of these matters in turn. First I'll distinguish some phases of insight in art, only to claim that no one phase can unfold without the others. Then I'll give reasons why insight in arts can be highly serviceable. My conclusion will be as follows: to the extent that the study of art provides highly serviceable insight, arts education is crucial at a college such as Dordt.

Insight in Art

When I speak of insight in art, you will recall, I mean "unusually penetrating perception of things, events, or situations." Let me now discuss two phases to insight in art. One phase can be described as insight into art. The other phase can be described as insight beyond art by way of art.

Insight into art is not the same matter as knowledge about art. That statement helps me explain why I judge the notion of "serviceable insight" in Dordt's statement of purpose to be mistaken so far as arts education is concerned. To the extent that this notion emphasizes global understanding of the "created order," any consistent "implementation" of the notion would lead to programs in which knowledge about the arts surpasses or eliminates insight into the arts. Either that, or the arts would be approached as mere skills, which is not all there is to art.

Whereas knowledge about art can be acquired theoretically, insight into art cannot be so acquired. Insight into music comes only by way of composing, performing, and listening to music. Only by actually doing music can one become unusually perceptive of what is happening in a piece, where a piece is headed, and how the musical events

are put together. A similar point could be made about painting, sculpture, drama, or literature. Certainly knowledge about the history and structure of music can enrich one's musical perception. But such knowledge can never replace insight into music.

In addition, I would argue that listening to music can seldom achieve the depth of insight attainable through composing and performing music, even though composing and performing can only become insightful in conjunction with disciplined listening. To emphasize insight into an art is to emphasize the activities of the artist rather than the activities of the spectator or of the scholar. Stressing *artistic* activities has been one of the potential strengths of arts education at post-secondary institution in North America.

Unfortunately this strength has been undermined by technical specialization. Instead of insight into an art, arts students are introduced to the repertoire, "savvy," and "contacts" that may insure a "successful" career. This tendency in arts education is understandable. For artists, the market system is still one of ruthless competition. The winners take all. With the emphasis on technical specialization for successful careers, however, comes a loss of insight into art, and with the loss of insight into art comes a failure to gain insight beyond art by way of art.

Insight beyond Art by way of Art

A good way to grasp what is at stake here is to see *My Dinner with André*, a film directed by Louis Malle. The film features a conversation between Wally, a mediocre playwright plugging away at his career, and André, a brilliant director and drama coach who has given up his career. Central to their conversation is the question whether contemporary theatre can break through the sophisticated surface of modern life, or whether the most it can do is simply to confirm the public's prefabricated illusions.

Wally, who is more at home in contemporary "reality," thinks his career is still worth pursuing. André, who obviously has deeper insight into drama, thinks contemporary "reality" prevents the gaining of insight beyond drama by way of drama.

When insight beyond art is gained by way of art, human experience is disclosed in ways that are hard to describe. Brokenness is exposed; suffering is presented; possible events and actions become highly imaginable; actual situations become very memorable; inarticulate desires become expressible; the usual is estranged; the unusual is brought home. Of course there are also countless works of art through which little insight is gained and much human experience is occluded. They are, we could say, of less import, and thus in some respects they are less important.

We would be mistaken to think that the insight gained beyond art by way of art is a knowledge of specific matters or of things in general. If this were so, art would be dispensable. But in our society art is indispensable precisely because all our means of gaining knowledge often seem to afford little insight.

As with insight into art, insight beyond art by way of art is best achieved through artistic activities and trained listening or viewing. But unless the artist or trained participant is well-informed about social, historical, and cultural matters outside art, whatever insight is gained probably will become "interesting" rather than effective in art and beyond.

With respect to studying art for insight, then, I would propose the following. The student should become a competent artist and trained participant who connects artistic engagements with well-informed experience of the world in which those engagements take place. In this way insight beyond art will be achieved by way of art, and insight into art will have extra-artistic implications.

3. The Significance of Arts Education

Insight in art can be highly serviceable at

the present time. That is to say, unusually penetrating perception into an art and by way of an art can be helpful for carrying out the ministries of Jesus Christ. Those ministries are ones in which human interests are fulfilled.⁵

I have several reasons for claiming that insight in art can be highly serviceable at present. Despite an increasing public concern about the deadends into which the development of Western society has taken us, it is becoming obvious that any significant turnaround will be extremely difficult. In this context it becomes just as difficult to carry out the ministries of Jesus Christ, despite some glib Christian talk to the contrary. Prevailing criteria such as convenience, success, or efficiency are pounded into us daily, often without our noticing. What could be done or should be done is fully prescribed. And what really needs to be done hardly comes up for discussion.

In this situation artistic insight can be highly serviceable. This is especially so of insight into and from the more important art of our day. Such art requires and provides keen sensitivity to real needs. It takes and gives imaginative envisaging of past and future possibilities. And it includes much protest against the prevailing criteria in our lives and society. Keen sensitivity, imagination, and resistance are required if the ministries of Jesus Christ are to be carried out today. Thus artistic insight embodying those prerequisites can be highly serviceable. By the same token, to the extent that these prerequisites cannot be found outside contemporary art, Christians lacking artistic insight might contribute little to the liberation and reconciliation for which Jesus Christ came.

To say that insight in art can be highly serviceable is not to say that the acquiring of such serviceable insight is the full extent of arts education. Nor is it to say that arts education is the full extent of the *aesthetic* education important to the lives of mature Christians today. But perhaps the significance of arts education at a Christian college

today may hinge on the insight such education can provide and on the special serviceableness of such insight. The serviceable insight provided will not be a global understanding of God's creation. Instead it will be an unusually penetrating perception, without which human interests will be ignored, theoretical understanding will be made irrelevant, and the cause of Christ will be poorly served.

Notes

¹"The Educational Task of Dordt College" (Sioux Center: Dordt College, 1979). Subsequent references to this document will be in parentheses in the text.

²Among these philosophers are Martin Heidegger, who has tried to recapture dimensions of human experience underlying classical Greek theories of knowledge, and Hendrik Hart, who has tried to bring into epistemology concepts of knowledge found in the Old and New Testaments.

³Cp. my article on "Music" in *Shaping School Curriculum: A Biblical View* (Terre Haute: Signal, 1977), pp. 94-104.

⁴This distinction has been suggested by John Hospers, following Moritz Schlick, in *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946, 1974), pp. 232-38. That the distinction need not entail an underrating of art is shown by Hospers's concluding paragraph: "What art gives us . . . is something which is not knowledge but perhaps more valuable than knowledge—the enrichment of experience itself. . . . And who is to say, in an age when the consequences of *Erkenntnis* have brought our civilization almost to the brink of disaster, that a larger share of *Erlebnis*, as art gives it, might not help to give humanity the largeness of spirit and breadth of vision which alone can enable us to survive?"

⁵On the connection between Jesus Christ's ministries and the fulfilling of human interests see Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 214-77, 530-602.

Corrigenda

In the December 1982 issue,

Page 20, col. 2, line 13 should read: "criteria for calling something good art."

Page 22, col. 1, line 1 should read: "Seerveld's philosophical tradition goes back to German speculation, described by . . ."

Page 25, Note 16 should read: "bringing forth of beings . . . out of. . ."