

John Regan

Seminar summary by Daniel Ott



The Integration of All Cultural Knowledge: Discovering Networks and Connections

Thursday, December 3, 1998 – CPS hosted John Regan, Professor of Education at the Claremont Graduate University, as he gave a presentation entitled, “The Integration of All Cultural Knowledge: Discovering Networks and Connections.” Regan marked connections between Lambian linguistics, Whiteheadian ontology, and cultural analysis and educational studies. As Regan led the audience through various stories, case studies and literary snippets, it became clear that his recent research and the epistemological and linguistic work of S. M. Lamb affirmed Whitehead’s suggestions concerning the interconnectivity of all things.

Connections between the work of Whitehead and Lamb have been pursued dating back to 1982, when John Cobb, David Griffin, Arabindu Basu, Regan and Lamb himself participated in a conference entitled “Whitehead and Lamb: A New Network of Connection.” While Regan admitted that his work with explicitly Whiteheadian categories has been somewhat limited, he was excited to report to his Whiteheadian colleagues that his research has further confirmed the “nondiscrete, nonlinear, galactical-like” characteristics of culture, knowledge and meaning.

Regan began by diving directly into a story from his recent trip to China. In the story, one of the members of Regan’s research team discovers a little bit of Chinese culture when his aggressive driving is affirmed with nods from Chinese passengers. They learned that one should “only give way when the other has definitely blocked the path.” The realization that the team has discovered this tiny little cultural unit immediately births a plethora of questions: “If this observation were considered to be a first thread to pursue into the cultural matrix, where would the exploration of that topic go next to get further grasp on the theme?, Could such a single observation lead to others?” The necessarily ambiguous character of any possible answers for these questions led Regan to conclude that we are dealing with complexity, imprecision, ‘messiness.’

“The meaning of any word is every word.” This provocative intuition of S. M. Lamb provides a launching pad for Regan’s cultural analysis. The thesis of Regan’s presentation was essentially that *the meaning of any cultural unit is every cultural unit*. Just as Lamb bucked against the false precision of linguistic studies insisting that “language is messy,” Regan insists that “[f]rom the network of relationship theory viewpoint, any part of a culture is, in fact, connected

to all the rest; therefore there cannot be, logically, any linear, one-dimensional pursuit of the ‘meaning’ of an event or word.” Thus, “for educators and others, relationship theory contains a practical reminder of necessary precautions against assuming linear, cause-effect associations. A culture’s information system is a cohesive, interlocking reality.”

Regan pointed out the obvious consonances between his “network of relationship theory” and the philosophy of organism of A. N. Whitehead. Regan is especially attracted to Whitehead’s philosophy of education wherein Whitehead insists upon “the rejection of assumptions of inert ideas, concrete isolates, and linear accumulation of knowledge.” This rejection of isolated events in favor of attention to larger networks of relationships among ideas fits well with Regan’s intuition that cultural analysis and educational theory should pay more attention to the complexity and messiness among various cultural phenomena.

While Regan admitted that he consistently frustrates colleagues who struggle to see the practicality of his discoveries. He did show that his network of relationship theory does more justice to the distinctiveness of various cultures. In this way “the Lambian ‘messiness’ viewpoint is salutary for educators dealing with the issues of living, appreciating, and working in a multicultural society.” It is more important to Regan, that educators get a glimpse of the complexity that makes up their students than that educators have an easily applicable fix based on a reduction of reality to simple cause-effect relationships.

Regan closed his presentation with an evocative snippet from J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. Barrie independently captures the spirit of Regan’s intuitions in metaphorical form as he draws a map of a child’s mind. Barrie describes the zigzag lines of the map, the roads on the island that is “Neverland.” Gnomes give way to tailors and tailors lead to rivers that run through caves and the thought ends with one very small old lady with a hooked nose. These Neverlands that are the minds of the children are many and various, “messy” and complex, “but on the whole the Neverlands have a family resemblance, and if they stood in a row you could say of them that they have each other’s nose, and so forth. On these magic shores, children at play are forever breaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more.”