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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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The Flow of Western Culture

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Introduction

Many people consider reading or thinking about philosophy as "a disagreeable task, because the work is dry, obscure, opposed to all ordinary notions, and moreover long-winded." {1} But it is philosophical systems, and the movements they spawn, that drive much of the change in the world we live in. And where have these recurring revolutions taken us? Every historical period has its horror stories of power misused, and for sheer numbers killed, our own time may rank near the top of the list. Bad philosophy, like bad theology (and the two are often inextricably intertwined) can't be lived, and so in this century alone we have seen the death of nearly one tenth of the current population of the globe flowing from bad philosophy/theology.

The hope of this outline is to at least prepare you to think about the ways in which philosophy and the arts have either made or mirrored the development of Western culture in each period of our history. In order to do this, the presentation combines graphic summaries of some of the major shapers of Western thinking with art produced in the same timeframe. Of necessity, both art and philosophy are short-changed, and each might be the subject of far longer presentations. However, the goal will have been reached if you begin to see the connections between how men and women think and how they portray the world and themselves in their art.

Though philosophers want to be understood, (Kant complained that his book would be "misjudged because it is misunderstood, and misunderstood because men choose to skim through the book and not to think through it" {2}), artists often seem fearful of their work being understood (as opposed to felt). Picasso undoubtedly spoke for many artists when he said:

Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the songs of a bird? Why does one love the night, flowers, everything around one, without trying to understand them? But in the case of painting people have to *understand*. If only they would realize above all that an artist works of necessity, that he himself is only a trifling bit of the world, and that no more importance should be attached to him than to plenty of other things which please us in the world, though we can't explain them. People who try to explain pictures are usually barking up the wrong tree. {3}

Picasso notwithstanding, it is possible to talk about meaning and significance in art, and the goal of this discussion is to see what artists have done with the ideas that dominated their various ages. Does philosophy affect art? Are the ideas of the times something that become a part of the very air that the rest of society breathes? How is the spirit of the age reflected in the spirit of its art?

This point could as well be made with literature, or poetry, or sculpture, and the connections might be even more clearly drawn. But painting makes the most direct appeal to our senses. Painting is immediate, not linear, as music, a story, a poem, or a movie must be. It is all before the eye at once, even if we spend hours looking at it. But what a painting "means," what it says to us, is as much conditioned by the atmosphere of the times as any other art form.

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