

Abstract

To be adept at abstract thinking is to make a place for mind in which the whole personality can symbolically deploy itself. But while it is so deploying itself, there is the danger the personality will detach from the empirical world, and lack the survival skills for social existence. To be too abstract is to lose touch with the nourishing forces of daily soil, 'to walk around with your head in the clouds.'

Examples

1 Ideas and Things

I am myself drawn to abstract ideas. Take Plato's arguments for what we call his Theory of Ideas. The basic premise is congenial and clear to me. Behind each of the concrete things in the world—behind all the things we call tables and all the things we call chairs—there must be some unifying intelligible principle that lets us think of, refer to, and identify those objects. Otherwise, how would we account for the way the things in the world come on us not in a jumble but divisible into 'categories?' Where I start having difficulty is when it comes to finding the ideas that lie behind other meaningful components of the world than 'nouns,' 'objects.' What about *actions*—say running or teaching? Is there an 'idea' behind those states of affairs? And what about the ideas that lie behind complexes of entities, like tables placed on top of chairs?

2 Abstract painting

An abstract artist—Picasso (sometimes), Braque, Chagall (sometimes) --shares, with the abstract thinker, like Plato, a concern with the play of abstract ideas, and the ways they integrate with the 'real objects' they signify. Braque can paint a still life—a pitcher and a couple of fruits in a bowl—so 'realistically' one might think it possible to consume what's on the canvas—or in the bowl. On the other hand he can create work of 'abstract expression' —like his large cubist design of bottles and fishes—which geometrizes and inter-implicates many intersecting planes, and in which the 'ideas' of bottles and fishes are being aired, reviewed, and remodeled. The latter is called 'abstract art,' though in itself it is as concrete a thing as an actual plum. Are ideas, as in Plato's 'Theory of Ideas,' what we use to access the meaning of abstract painting?