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Commentary on Hughes

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HUGHES ON ETHICS AND CRITICAL THINKING

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William Hughes makes several points, among which are:

> 1)Moral scepticism can be answered.
> 2)It is morally preferable to include moral reasoning in critical thinking courses.
> 3)Two particular forms of moral reasoning are rationally respectable.
> 4)These forms of reasoning are particular to moral debate.

Along the way Hughes claims that moral reasoning is inadequately represented in textbooks on critical thinking. My brief and rather haphazard survey of critical thinking texts does not support his claim, but that is not important. After all, I found several which entirely omit specifically moral arguments, and that is enough for Hughes's case.

I concede Hughes's point 2) above, that it is morally preferable to include moral reasoning in critical thinking courses, but am concerned to deal with his arguments for the position. I start with the point that moral scepticism can be answered. It seems to me that Hughes could have distinguished between two forms of scepticism, one which he finds among students and which he suspects is to be found among the authors, the other which he discusses without attributing it to anyone.

The first form of scepticism is positivist in tone—science allows public resolution and deals with the factual, while morals (values?) cannot be resolved by public procedures. The second form rejects moral reasoning because its conclusions lack certainty. Maybe the first can be called Positivist scepticism and the second Demonstrative scepticism. I think that Hughes could strengthen his position by distinguishing between the two.

Positivist scepticism. Hughes observes that this position can be answered by reference to the ways in which the two types of moral reasoning permit ongoing, public debate that leads to applying socially approved standards to the discussion. Historically, the movement away from emotivism took a line somewhat like this position. The analysis of rules of moral discourse, gradually replaced the simple-minded accounts of the early emotivists, which in effect disappeared as people examined debates more closely. So far, so good. But I wonder why Hughes does not also build on developments in the philosophy of science to show that science is not nearly so cut and dried as this scepticism requires. Much philosophy of science has shown that scientific theory construction and theory choice is not a simple matter of meeting the facts. In considering theory choices and in theory preferences we see how scientific claims can require long periods of discussion and debate. Once we see the extent to which debate and differing values can affect our conceptions of correct theory, the sharpness of the differences between simple fact and questionable value can be dulled. Without denying that there are differences, we can see that ongoing public debate is central to both.

Demonstrative scepticism. As Hughes himself notes, since virtually nobody holds that absolute certainty is achieved in typical empirical enquiries, it is hard to see how lack of certainty is a special objection to moral

reasoning. And certainly a few examples of immoral behaviour could show that we are in practice confident enough of our judgements about many moral matters. And that it seems to me is enough for this kind of scepticism. In fact, it seems almost enough to observe that we are more nearly certain that killings in Rwanda are bad than we are that the universe is five billion years old.

Turning from answering scepticism, I wonder about point 4) that these forms of argument are sufficiently exclusive to moral reasoning.

Do these two forms of scepticism require special attention?

As Devil's Advocate, I ask whether we need moral reasoning to counteract these two forms of scepticism, since both would be eliminated by close reference to the status of scientific theories and empirical investigations. Why not simply make it clear that certainty cannot be expected in most of our very important concerns, and that constant debate and ongoing re-examination of the best way to treat available evidence are the hallmarks of the scientific spirit and free society? In taking this line, I would ask why the reference to Hughes's first form of moral reasoning, consequential reasoning is different from general economic or prudential or strategic reasoning. As for his second form of moral reasoning, the "appeal to right and wrong", we have here concepts of consistency, which of course need to be separated from cases of illicit *ad hominem*. The case of Mary, who is asked for the maxim on which she is acting, is not in general unlike asking people for the more general principles on which they are staking their positions, whether in support of their favourite social policies or their reasons accepting a theory as to why their new printer messes up their e-mail. In all such cases we want the reasoner to show that the principles used in the particular instance are also principles that the speaker can defend in the general case. And these are different from *ad hominem* in that the issue is whether the present case is being dealt with by a defensible principle.

I suggest, as Devil's Advocate that proper treatment of scientific and empirical matters would so undermine these two forms of scepticism, that we need not address them except in passing, and that attention to typical forms of argument, including prudential or strategic arguments on the one hand and consistency of principle arguments on the other, would make it unnecessary to pay special attention to moral arguments.

Deep silliness. I note that Hughes finds yet another form of moral scepticism and a curious one at that. It holds that value judgements are best understood as weapons, and that self-identity is attacked by attacking someone's values. I am less inclined than Hughes to find anything of value here. Maybe we need to re-introduce some of the trial of Socrates to such students. I recall many years ago that students were quite complacent about killing Socrates on the grounds that he was a trouble maker, asked unpopular questions, and upset people by challenging their values. At the time I thought of this position as simple stupid nasty bigotry, and I confess I have trouble dissociating myself from that opinion. It seems clear that this last form of scepticism is little more than the justification for getting rid of Socrates and his ilk. I wonder whether we could not get these people to see that their view would let Socrates keep his own values of criticizing the values of others, since that is part of his identity, and at the same time try to prevent him from doing so, since he would be depriving them of their values. But I am not at all sure how much success one can have with the views in question.

In my capacity as Devil's Advocate I have asked whether it would not be effective to distinguish the forms of scepticism and answer each on its own terms, and then, once that is done, whether it is true that moral reasoning is all that distinct from other forms of reasoning. I agree with Hughes's conclusion that we are better off to include moral reasoning in critical thinking courses, but am not sure that Hughes's way actually proves his case.