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Critical Thinking as Arguing Against Oneself: IL in the Philippines

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Socrates: Do you call thinking what I call thinking?

Theaetetus: What is that?

Socrates: To talk [logon] which the soul holds with herself on what she sees. It appears to me that when she thinks, she is doing nothing else than conversing, asking questions and giving answers, affirming and denying. When she reaches a decision and is not in doubt, we call that opinion. So what I call forming an opinion is talking [legein] and opinion is speech that is held not with someone else or aloud [phōnē] but in silence with oneself.

-*Theaetetus*, 189E-190A (Kneale and Kneale 1962)

This paper is about informal logic education (ILE) as practiced by the philosophy department in the leading state university in the Philippines; how it started as well as recent developments that highlight its main characteristics. Philippine ILE will be compared and contrasted with dialectics as understood in informal logic. The former's concept of "epistemic obligation to produce a counter-argument," for example, will be compared with that of Ralph H. Johnson's "dialectic obligation to respond to objections."

Informal Logic Education (ILE) as Practiced in the University of the Philippines

The University of the Philippines (U.P.) was established in 1908 during the American administration of the archipelago. It has ever since educated the leaders and professionals of the country and has produced many brilliant scholars that work in and out of the country. It now exists as a system of autonomous units located in the north of the Luzon islands in Baguio and San Fernando, in the National Capital region in Quezon City and Manila, in the south of the Luzon islands in Los Baños, in the Visayas islands in Iloilo, Miagao, and Cebu, in the Mindanao islands far south in Davao City. It also has an open university that offers some undergraduate and graduate courses. Informal Logic Education (ILE), known here as education in critical thinking, is part of the general education curriculum of all autonomous units. During the late 80s a set of general education courses has been prescribed by the different autonomous units and all of them are mandated to incorporate the objective of teaching critical thinking. During the early 90s the Philosophy department began experimenting on a course that taught students linguistic analysis, basic sentential logic, and fallacy theory. This became the initial structure of the general education course eventually offered by the department. While developing a reasoning course for philosophy majors, Prof. Acuña, added a reasoning

component to the general education course the department is developing that went beyond fallacy theory. Without explaining why, fallacies became an appendage to the said course and the technique of argument and counter-argument became the core. While other departments taught fallacy detection and debate techniques, the Philosophy department taught students how to compose "a complete argument set," i.e. an argument with definitions, first argument, evaluation of first argument, counter-argument, evaluation of counter-argument, and comparative evaluation of the two arguments. As other departments taught students how to argue against others and spot fallacies that others commit, the Philosophy department taught students how to argue against oneself as their general education version of teaching critical thinking.

In 1999, I helped initiate what now has become a regular activity of the autonomous U.P. unit in Quezon City. The activity was designed to demonstrate and encourage the above-mentioned alternative technique in critical thinking/reasoning. Unlike the more popular debate sessions, we initiated what we call the U.P. Critical Thinking Festival or CTF. CTF involves teams that argue against themselves and not against other teams. The activity is a competition where teams try to produce the best complete argument set. The U.P. CTF is now on its 10th season and has already involved the teams from the autonomous units in Manila and Los Baños. The dream is to get all the other units from the whole archipelago to send a team to compete in the CTF. Considering the fact that IL is an international phenomena and in view of the publication of Ralph Johnson's (2000) *Manifest Rationality* with its notion of a full argument in contrast to a proto-argument, it is not at all bad to think of the possibility of organizing an international IL competition following Johnson and Acuña's argument models.

A year ago, the different autonomous units of the U.P. system adopted to make the existing general education courses optional. By doing so, new general education courses can now be added. Even after the general education program was liberalized a year ago, critical thinking remains to be a mandate for all the general education optional courses. The approach to teaching critical thinking that is expected to be adopted does not necessarily have to be like the one adopted by the Philosophy department nor is critical thinking necessarily operationalized in terms of constructing arguments.

Professors from other nearby universities get their education from U.P. Because of this most of them undergo the critical thinking curriculum, including that which is offered by the Philosophy department. Some export the whole course including the textbook used and so it may be likely that other schools also practice the same kind of ILE as U.P.'s. Some schools I know to be doing such include Trinity College, University of the East, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, and Philippine Christian University, to name a few. These schools however do not adopt the said approach to ILE on official terms. The ILE that is practiced there is purely on the discretion of the professors that came from U.P. and have imported U.P. ILE to their institution.

ILE in the Philosophy Department

My professor in philosophical reasoning and colleague has repeatedly advised his students: "**Never accept the truth of any statement or belief unless there is adequate evidence for it.** If you take this healthy **skepticism** seriously as I have all my adult life, it

would be **beneficial** to you and the rest of your natural life" (Acuña 2001,110). Adding a moral dimension to reasoning and believing, this epistemic obligation is what the good professor considers to be the most important learning outcomes of the course he developed in critical thinking. The said course is titled Philosophical Analysis (PA) and is offered by the Philosophy department as part of the general education program of U.P. I've been teaching this course for four years now and I myself underwent the training as an undergraduate student in philosophy. What makes the course unique is its emphasis on thinking of the best reasons to support any claim or belief. "Best reasons" are determined on the basis of a clear understanding of the kind of evidence required to prove a claim. If the reasons given fulfill what is required then it is deemed good, i.e. relevant and sufficient to support a claim (cf. Johnson, chapter 7). Some claims, e.g. empirical generalizations, are impossible to completely prove. Generalizations like "All crows are black," for example require observing that the color of all crows that exist in the world is black. Such is the kind of evidence required to prove the claim. No one may be able to observe all crows because none can practically gather all crows for observation. Doing so may not be impossible but since such cannot be done due to its impracticality, one may not be able to completely prove the claim "All crows are black." One can, however, support the probability of the claim by sampling the evidence required. If one can just collect and cite all of her/his observations of crows, which are all relevant to the evidence requirement identified, one can give good reasons to believe that indeed it is likely that "All crows are black." But since the evidence provided is incomplete, the possibility of the claim being false is not eliminated. If this is the case, we can then think of a counter claim, namely "Some crows are not black" or "Not all crows are black." The kind of evidence required to prove this counter claim is observation of at least one crow that isn't black in color. Since one cannot recall an observation instance of a crow which is not black nor can one cite a reported observation of such, no reason can be provided to support the counter claim. Upon comparing the original claim and counter claim with their respective supporting evidences, one is led to the conclusion that the original claim is supported with the best or better reasons. It is, therefore, one's epistemic obligation to accept the original claim. This example of crows is a simple illustration of how the basics of critical reasoning are taught in PA.

Unlike its counterpart, debate and argumentation (DA), PA teaches students how to think clearly and reason rigorously. DA aims to develop students' ability to speak and persuade. Being articulate and persuasive is an important communication skill but it does not necessarily imply that by doing so the best reasons are given. Using the aim of PA, i.e. producing the best reasons, as a criterion for evaluating reasoning, one can say that one should first think clearly and reason rigorously before trying to speak out to persuade others to believe one's conclusions. One should convince herself/himself first before convincing others. Convincing oneself in PA does not merely refer to causing oneself to be psychologically predisposed to accepting a claim but (1) thinking of the best reasons to support or reject a claim and (2) comparing the argument and counter-argument to determine which claim is better supported by evidence. As mentioned earlier, the objective basis for evaluating reasons is the kind of evidence required. The evidence requirement can only be determined if one knows exactly what is being claimed. Claims are linguistically expressed and the vehicle for expressing claims can be ambiguous, i.e. the same declarative sentence can be used to express another different claim. So the first

task in thinking of the best reasons is to disambiguate the expressions used to represent claims. Such is done by analyzing the concepts that words in the expression represent. This involves producing analytic definitions for terms that expressions contain. Decisions are made regarding what ambiguous words mean. The one who is making the claim is in the better position to determine what the words in the linguistic expression he uttered refer to. Students of critical thinking in PA are encouraged to be as clear as possible when expressing claims. Vague and ambiguous expressions should be avoided as much as possible and if they cannot be avoided, analytic definitions or clarifications should be offered. After clearly determining the meaning of linguistic expressions, one should then move to determining how the claim can be known. Is it about something that can be observed? Is it about definitions that are tautologous or is it about deductions? Determining the method of knowing is called epistemological analysis in PA. The answer to epistemological questions is utilized to determine the kind of evidence required which in turn serve as the basis for coming up with reasons to support a claim as well as in evaluating the reasons given to support or debunk a claim.

The above technique/method I explained above is operationalized in five units that are taught in one semester. The first unit deals with conceptual analysis and the technique of providing analytic definitions. The second unit deals with epistemology and the basis for producing knowledge. It is in this unit that the notion of evidence requirement is expounded. The third unit deals with the structure of an argument where in deduction is presented as a paradigm for reasoning to distinguish it from induction where in reasons merely support but not guarantee the truth of a claim. The fourth unit contains what is known to IL circles as IL or informal logic. This is called inductive reasoning in PA and it involves six steps with rigorous sub-steps (Acuña 2001, 236-257). The last unit is a workshop on moral reasoning using statistical syllogism as a model, i.e. the moral conclusion is an instance of moral generalization in which the empirical antecedent is affirmed. Cases, which are called cognitive-moral dilemma, are presented for students to analyze using the framework/technique taught in unit four. The analysis here, however, is informed by ethical theories and a discussion on the epistemological status of evaluative and moral claims in unit two.

The output expected from students of PA is a demonstration of the ability to compose a complete argument set containing the rigorous analysis outlined above. In addition to demonstrating the basic skill of composing a complete argument set, many professors who teach PA (including myself) also test students' abilities to apply the technique in analyzing more complicated problems such as moral dilemma. Such skill is tested either by on the spot pen and pencil test, where students compose a complete argument set in one hour, or a paper writing assignment where in a moral problem is presented and students are asked to present their critical analysis after a week or two. The feedback that we get range from praise of the usefulness of the training to whining because of the difficulty that some encounter in coming up with good reasons on the spot without the advantage of research. Some praise PA because it gives them adequate understanding and hands-on experience in critical reasoning that is useful for other purposes such as paper writing, thesis defense, and even preparation for law school.

Aside from PA, another course that is not part of the general education program teaches a form of ILE. The course is called Philosophical Reasoning (PR), PR is actually a practical/experimental philosophy course that applies the basic technique of composing

a complete argument set in analyzing philosophical problems, e.g. derivability of ought from is, atomism versus holism, freedom versus determinism, empiricism versus rationalism, analytic-synthetic distinction debate, and the like. PR is taken by middle and senior philosophy majors as a required course. Rarely do I see deductive arguments in PR. Most of what I've seen involve a kind of inductive argument that makes counter-arguments possible. The reasons produced to defend a solution to a philosophical problem are usually incomplete and so I consider PR another form of ILE designed particularly for philosophy students. After discussing theoretical and technical issues, students of PR are called upon to demonstrate their abilities to compose a complete argument set to defend and attack proposed solutions to philosophical problems. Their arguments are usually informed by the existing debate in literature but such arguments should demonstrate the same rigor and even more than what is required in PA which students of PR have taken also as their general education course in critical thinking. The arguments I have seen composed by students of PR are remarkable and some even go beyond the existing arguments in literature. Some innovate and come up with arguments that are either absent in literature or are less popular.

Another practice related to ILE that is worth mentioning that has been initiated by colleagues in the Philosophy department is Philosophy for Children (PC). PC was brought to the Philippines by John Holder who studied in Montclair State College, New Jersey, USA under Matthew Lipman and Margaret Sharp. The one who hosted the program introduced by Holder in the Philosophy department was Zosimo Lee who initiated trainings in PC. Elementary and high school teachers from public schools in Manila underwent the first level of training which aims to demystify philosophy, i.e. to show the practicality of philosophy. The second level taught teachers how to create a community of inquiry among their students. These teachers will teach their students how to think critically, analytically, freely and responsibly. In the third level, the teachers were and are being evaluated, until they are ready to train others also. Finally, aside from creating a community of inquiry among students, attempts to provide philosophical texts have been written in Filipino by the teachers themselves – for instance, stories rich with philosophical concepts. Though PC as shown above does not involve much of argumentation, it is instrumental to developing the ability to do critical analysis. It may even be considered a preparation to ILE.

Parallels in Johnson and ILE in the Philippines

I will end this brief sketch of ILE in the Philippines (ILEP) with a comparison between Ralph Johnson's (2000) notion of full argument and the concept of a complete argument set exemplified in Acuña's (1998; 2001) design of IL. The two professors have not collaborated with each other and yet they were able to independently develop fairly similar if not equivalent concepts about reasoning.

Johnson (12) defines argumentation as "the sociocultural activity of constructing, presenting, interpreting, criticizing, and revising arguments." More importantly, he defines an argument as

A type of discourse or text – the distillate of the practice of argumentation – in which the arguer seeks to persuade the Other(s) of the truth of a thesis by producing the reasons that support it. In addition to this illative core, an argument possesses a dialectical tier in which the arguer discharges his dialectical obligation (Johnson 168).

Arguments that do not possess a dialectical tier are merely proto-arguments (Johnson 170) because they lack a structural component, which full arguments have (cf. Hitchcock 2003,5).

ILEP, on the other hand, operates on parallel notions as complete argument set/critical argument which does not only contain an argument but its evaluation, counter-argument, evaluation of counter-argument, and comparison between two arguments. Since the epistemic obligation of a critical thinker is "Never accept the truth of any statement or belief unless there is adequate evidence for it" (Acuña 2001,110), thinking only of reasons to support a claim would be inferior to thinking also of reasons to support a counter-claim because the latter will dispel or confirm doubts regarding the reliability of the original claim as supported (though incompletely) by evidences.

The important parallel here is their similar notions of full argument and complete argument set/critical argument, illative core and argument, dialectical tier and counter-argument, and dialectical obligation and epistemic obligation. Both models require reasons to support a claim and a counter argument to complete reasoning/argumentation. However, they slightly differ in the way reasoning/argumentation is done. The significant difference lies on the direction or *telos* of the argument. Johnson's model is directed towards persuading the Other(s) while ILEP towards persuading oneself. Johnson's model is structured towards arguing with the Other(s), ILEP towards arguing against oneself. The obligation in Johnson is directed towards anticipating objections while in ILEP on the critical establishment of the reliability of a belief or claim. Johnson's model imagine another reasoner while ILEP only one reasoner. Despite the said difference, the dialectical tier/counter-argument is to be produced by just one rational agent/critical thinker in anticipation of the possible objections to the illative core/argument. While the objections anticipated may not be similar to actual objections, producing such completes argumentation by dispelling or affirming doubts about the original claim. Both models can provide adequate reasons for one to believe or reject a claim.

Allow me to return to the quotation from *Theaetetus* I cited at the beginning. *Theaetetus* attempted to define knowledge as true opinion (alēthēs doxa) which is arrived at by having a silent discussion with oneself, one that involves asking questions, giving answers, affirming, and denying – very much the same activities we do when we discuss issues aloud with another person. Martha Kneale (1962) suggests that this is also what constitutes thinking (dianoesthai). I propose that if thinking is discussing with oneself, critical thinking is arguing against oneself.

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