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The Role of Personal Values in Argument Evaluation

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Title: The Role of Personal Values in Argument Evaluation
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Introduction

Some of us here have been crusaders for critical thinking requirements in higher education for many years. The thought of institutions seriously trying to teach all students to arrive at judgments only after "honestly evaluating alternatives" (Hatcher and Spencer, 1) seems the essence of good education. We believed that such institutional commitment to critical thinking would result in the much needed objectivity in students' thinking, thinking that often tended to be guided primarily by personal values and subjective tastes.

About the same time that some institutions began requiring courses in critical thinking, postmodern thinkers, with their endorsement of various forms of epistemological relativism, directly challenged the critical thinking ideal of objectivity (Kuhn, Rorty, Walters). Confronted with the challenge, devotees to critical thinking understood then that epistemological relativism had the potential for undermining the goal of critical thinking as honest objective inquiry. In response, some of us at this conference responded by writing books and papers arguing against the ever-popular epistemological relativism (Hatcher, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1994, 1995; Siegel).

Given such a history, it is with some reservation that I bring up what I now believe to be a serious problem confronting the ideal of critical thinking as objective inquiry. Through a series of examples and replies to objections, I will argue that when we find people who disagree on the merits of arguments, in many cases the best explanation is the presence of subjective elements involved in the evaluation of the arguments. This is because the weight given to various arguments, both for and against a position, is often a function of the values of the persons evaluating the argument. As a result, what is seen as a rational choice to one person will seem irrational to another. If I am correct, the presence of this subjective element undermines any claim that decisions reached on the basis of sound critical thinking are truly objective. However, I will also try to show that even if such subjectivity cannot be avoided, that critical thinking, properly understood, still plays a valuable role in the honest evaluation of alternatives and that there are effective strategies for minimizing the force of personal values in argument evaluation.

The Problem Explained

Let's look at the experiences that led me to conclude that there was indeed a problem with critical thinking being seen as objective inquiry. I have been teaching roughly the same courses in critical thinking for fifteen years. (One would think that if there was a problem, I might have discerned it sooner!!) In 1988, faculty at Baker University endorsed the notion that critical thinking should be an institution-wide educational goal. With the help of grants from the U.S. Department of Education and the Hall Family Foundation, a team of faculty members from

many disciplines designed a two-semester sequence required of all freshmen that integrated instruction in critical thinking and written composition. This project has been described in some detail in two articles in *Informal Logic* (Hatcher, 1999a, 1999b). In essence, after going over the fundamentals of argument identification, analysis, and evaluation (including deductive and inductive logic), students are asked to choose an issue (usually a public policy issue), and, after considerable research and reflection, formulate the arguments both for and against a chosen position. They then evaluate the arguments on both sides and choose the position that appeared to have the strongest support. This then would become the position to be defended in their papers. Students repeat this process five times during the year.

Our approach to argument evaluation is basically *deductive reconstruction*. That is, students construct their arguments as practical syllogisms, where the patterns closely resemble standard deductive argument forms (usually *Modus Ponens*, *Modus Tollens*, or *Disjunctive Syllogism*, or some combination of these). For example, suppose we were looking at arguments for raising state taxes, one might see the following: "If we do not raise taxes, then public education will be underfunded. We do not want to public education to be underfunded because.... Hence, we should raise taxes."

In evaluating the strength of arguments, given that they meet the conditions for validity, students then focus on the reasonableness of the premises. If any of the premises in an argument are problematic, then that argument could be rejected. Finally, after evaluating the arguments on both sides, students choose to defend the position that had the strongest support. They would then be in a position to formulate a preliminary thesis statement that included their chosen position, at least one major objection, and the reasons to be used in the paper in its support. For example, some student who has chosen the issue of handgun control might put together an initial thesis something like "Even though banning handguns seems counter to the Second Amendment (major objection), the U.S. government should ban handguns (position) because handguns are used in most violent crimes, thousands of lives would be saved each year, and millions of dollars in medical expenses would be avoided (reasons)."

The form of the actual papers consists of an introduction to the debate, thesis statement, clarification (if needed), arguments and evidence in support of the thesis, major objections to the position, replies to each objection, and a conclusion. If students have done adequate research and formulated the arguments on both sides, at least some of the major objections to their position will already be clear. The challenge then is to reply adequately to these objections. This is one place where critical thinking requires creativity.

This approach to integrating instruction in critical thinking and composition seems to be a reasonable way for students to learn to apply critical thinking skills in a meaningful way. It is an approach that can be duplicated in any class that asks for papers with a thesis or position. If the research and reflection are adequate, the students should be in a position to choose and argue cogently for the most reasonable position. Papers that are a product of this process should be clear, appear to be objective in their argumentation, and rhetorically forceful. Indeed we thought this was an adequate approach to "the honest evaluation of alternatives" conception of critical thinking. So where does the problem of personal values and subjectivity come in?

The problem of personal values and subjectivity arises when students evaluate the arguments on both sides of a position and then try to determine which side has the strongest support. Because we require deductive reconstruction, the arguments are in valid logical form, but sometimes the premises of each appear to be reasonable. However, as one might expect, each argument is not given equal weight. And, moreover, *because the source of the unequal weight is*

a function of personal preference, there seems to be no objective way to assign the weight. In other words, what appears to be the weight given to an argument is a function of or (to use the R word) relative to the personal values of the person evaluating the argument. Consider the following argument:

- P1. If some proposed legislation is counter to the U. S. Constitution's 2nd Amendment, then it should not be adopted.
- P2. Legislation to ban handguns is counter to the 2nd Amendment.
- C. Legislation to ban handguns should not be adopted.

For those who place great value on their handguns, the argument is given great weight. It meets the conditions for soundness, being a formally valid syllogism (at least for the purpose of practical reasoning) and having reasonable or acceptable premises. If pressed, they will support premise #1 by saying how important, if not necessary, the 2nd Amendment is for a properly functioning democracy (ignoring the Canadian counter-example), and that premise #2 is self-evidently true. Being valid with reasonable premises, the conclusion not only follows, but the argument is sufficient to carry the day.

However, those who place no great value on handguns will give the argument little weight. They might question the truth of both premises, and claim it is a flawed argument. The anti-gun folks will say that there is not strong enough connection between the antecedent and the consequent of the major premise. That is, just because some policy may be counter to the 2nd Amendment is not a sufficient reason for opposing the policy. From the anti-gun perspective, the 2nd Amendment is of minimal importance, and they actually wish it would be amended or done away with.

From another perspective, those who value gun owners' rights but, for one reason or another, are opposed to handguns will give the argument little weight. They might attack the minor premise by pointing out that banning handguns is not the same as saying people cannot own guns. It is only banning a certain kind of gun. If it was deemed OK for the government to ban artillery pieces and automatic weapons without undermining the 2nd Amendment, why not ban handguns?

In each case, the weight given to the argument is, to a large part, a function of the personal values of the people doing the evaluation, that is, how they feel about the importance of handguns.

Beyond public policy issues, pointing out the subjective element in weighing arguments is a plausible way to explain the logic of single-issue voters who claim to have arrived at their conclusions after honestly evaluating the alternatives. Imagine the NRA member in the last U.S. presidential election who is trying to decide whether or not to vote for George W. Bush. Having had our course in critical thinking, she lays out the arguments both for and against voting for Bush. They might go something like this:

Pro Argument

- P1. In the 2000 presidential election, if someone wants to minimize the chance that he/she will be required to register one's handguns with the Federal Government, then he/she should vote for Bush rather than Gore.
- P2. I want to minimize the chance that I will have to register my handguns with the Federal Government.

C. I should vote for Bush rather than Gore. (*Modus Ponens*)

Con Arguments

Argument #1

P1. If I vote for Bush, then I lower the chances that my mother will get adequate prescription drug coverage through Medicare.

P2. I do not want to lower the chances that my mother will get prescription drug coverage through Medicare.

C. So, I should not vote for Bush. (*Modus Tollens*)

Argument #2

P1. If I vote for Bush, then it is likely that the EPA regulations will be weakened.

P2. I do not want the EPA regulations to be weakened.

C. So, I should not vote for Bush. (*Modus Tollens*)

Argument #3

P1. If I vote for Bush, then it is likely that the tax laws will favor the wealthy even more.

P2. I do not want the tax laws to favor the wealthy even more.

C. I should not vote for Bush. (*Modus Tollens*)

For those who value drug coverage for the elderly, a cleaner environment, and taxing the wealthy at a fair rate, the arguments against voting for Bush will be compelling. But for those people who fear greatly that they might have to tell the U.S. government what kind of and how many handguns they own, the single argument for voting for Bush is sufficient, and the weight of the arguments on the other side is minimal. In such cases then, it seems obvious that what counts for a rational choice often comes down to what each individual values and how those values are ranked. In such cases, as in choosing which presidential candidate to support, the weight given to any argument put forth, either pro or con, is a relative to the values of the person looking at the issue. While I think I am correct, this is not a conclusion with which I am particularly comfortable.

A third area where looking at the role of personal values is a plausible explanation for disagreements is in the area of ethics. For example, when different people think critically about the arguments for and against abortion, it is common to list the arguments on both sides, and yet to come to different conclusions as to which side has the stronger arguments. Some find Don Marquis' well-known argument that abortion is immoral sufficient to carry the day (Marquis, 190). That is,

P1. If something possesses a human future like yours or mine, then it is immoral to deprive it of that future.

P2. Human fetuses possess a human future like yours or mine.

C. Hence, it is immoral to deprive it of that future. (So, abortion is immoral.)

For those people who give Marquis' argument a lot of weight, the following list of consequentialist arguments often put forth in favor of each woman's right to choose carry little weight.

Argument #1

- P1. If abortion is made illegal, then we would in effect force women who are very young or older who become pregnant to carry unwanted fetuses to term.
- P2. We do not want to force women who are very young or older to carry unwanted fetuses to term.
- C. Hence, abortion should not be made illegal.

Argument #2

- P1. If abortions are made illegal, then, as studies show, thousands of women will die having illegal abortions.
- P2. We do not desire for thousands of women to die having illegal abortions.
- C. Abortions should not be made illegal.

In evaluating the competing positions on abortion, the question seems to be whether one prefers to live in a world where the futures of fetuses are not given intrinsic value, and so abortion is allowed or in a world where abortion is not allowed and twelve-year-olds or menopausal women who become pregnant are forced to have babies. Neither is an appealing choice. So, by what standard can a critical thinker weigh these arguments? It seems again, that which argument carries the most weight is not a question that can be answered objectively. It is a matter of personal preference. Some people find the thought of not being born abhorrent; others are indifferent or even find the idea appealing. Some find the thought of forcing 12-year-olds to have children just punishment for their promiscuity; while others find the thought of such a practice to be akin to savagery. It seems again that the decision is a function of personal values rather than compelling argumentation.

Objections

There are of course objections to my position. For example, someone, such as Robert Fogelin, might argue that what is really going on in the evaluation of arguments for and against a specific policy or position is that each person is operating from a different conceptual scheme or "language game" (1985). Given different conceptual frames, it is easy to see how people weigh arguments differently.

In response, I say, "Let's not multiply entities beyond need." When something as simple as personal tastes and values can explain the different weight given to various arguments, why bring in such problematic concepts as *conceptual schemes*? One might remember the major criticisms of "conceptual scheme talk" put forward by Roger Trigg and Donald Davidson (Trigg, Davidson).

Another similar objection is that rather than simply appealing to subjectivity or individual taste, the best account of why people disagree on which arguments are the strongest is that different people have different world views. Peoples' world views give different things or outcomes different values. So people with different world views can look at the same arguments and naturally come to different conclusions as to their merit. For example, those whose world view centers on being paranoid that the Federal Government may take away all of our freedoms and turn us into slaves will be inclined to value their guns more than someone whose world view is that democratic governments are harmless extensions of the will of the people who elected them. The paranoid world view finds the arguments for handgun control to be quite flimsy, while the person who trusts democratically elected governments will find them compelling. Or, in the

case of abortion, someone with a Catholic world view might give more weight to arguments giving rights to the fetus than a humanist whose world view focuses more on the well-being of already existing people than fetuses.

What makes this criticism interesting is, if I do not hold that world-views are themselves exempt from careful criticism, that is, one world view is as good as another, then critical thinking can play a valuable role in getting people to examine and alter their world views. Hence, when I claimed that disagreement was grounded on personal values and seemingly beyond evaluation, it is in fact grounded on an entire web of beliefs that can be explicated, analyzed, and evaluated. People might at first disagree on the weight given to an argument depending on their world view, but the next step is to evaluate the reasonableness of the world view.

Surely, in some cases disagreement over the merit of an argument can be ascribed to differing world views, but I do not think this move always works. The NRA member who voted for Bush to minimize the odds of registering her handguns might not have a different world view than others who voted for Gore. The difference could just as easily be explained by how much the individual likes handguns. For some, their gun collection is the most important thing in their lives. In the same sense, people who disagree about arguments against abortion need not have different world views. They might simply have different views about the value of their lives. As I said earlier, some people might think it would be quite OK not to have ever been born, while others are horrified at the thought of never existing. I don't think having different world views is what is going on. So, I agree that world views can explain the different weight given to some arguments, but not all.

Finally, someone might object to my account and say that for any set of sample arguments, I have just not pushed the logical analysis of the arguments far enough. That is, the reason the evaluation of many of my examples appears to be subjective is, after a closer look, each argument is simply a bad argument. Indeed, if each is a bad argument, then it is simply a matter of personal choice, rather than logical force, what weight one gives the arguments. For any argument where the premises do not adequately support any of the conclusions, it will always be a matter of personal choice as to which is given the most weight. For example, one might point out the antecedent in the major premise of the anti-abortion argument does not **necessarily** entail the consequent. Without a lot of assumptions about what ultimately constitutes morality and what makes any act immoral, the fact that something does or does not have a human future does not necessarily entail anything about morality or immorality. In other words, there is no **necessary** connection between the antecedent's being true and the consequent being true.

But such an objection, I believe, sets too high a standard for premise acceptability. If applied to most policy debates, no conclusion would ever be deemed reasonable because there is seldom a necessary connection between the antecedent and the consequent of the argument's major premise. For example, consider the premise used to argue against drilling for oil in the Alaskan Wildlife Refuge, "If we allow drilling, then it is likely that we will destroy some of the natural environment of the Refuge." But whether it is "likely" that the destruction takes place is an empirical question. There is no necessary connection between drilling and the likelihood of destroying the environment. In other words, it is **possible** for the antecedent to be true and the consequent false.

However, this is the sort of argument that we find over and over again in public policy debates. Hence, if we hold that the premises of the arguments must be absolutely true, where the antecedent's truth is **sufficient** to warrant the consequent's truth, then there would be no good

arguments in policy debates. This is a conclusion that teachers of logic and critical thinking should not endorse, given that the major justification for requiring critical thinking is its usefulness in decision-making.

Practical Implications for CT Instructors

So, if my argument is correct, where does this leave the value of critical thinking? If, in many cases what decides the "rationality" of a choice is a matter of personal values, does critical thinking have any positive role? If subjectivity is the bottom line, what do students gain by being taught the skills described at the beginning of this paper? What value is positing the arguments on both sides of a position if the weight given to any argument is a matter of personal taste?

If my account of the role of personal values in evaluating arguments is accurate, critical thinking still has an important role to play. Critical thinking involves the honest evaluation of alternatives. An honest evaluation of alternatives means people must both consider and reply to the arguments on the other side of their preferred position. Not only is this strategy rhetorically effective, but it forces the person to either tell those who see things differently why the arguments for his or her position are in fact superior to the counter arguments or to simply confess that the matter comes down to a simple matter of taste. Those who disagree will at least be aware of that, and not waste their time trying to argue the other side.

One would hope, however, that for most students, when they look at the arguments on the other side or the objections and see that they cannot adequately respond to them, they will see that their preferred position is not a reasonable one, and so try to change their minds. But even if they cannot change I think it is better to openly say,

"Of all the things in life that I value, my handguns are more important than anything else. I fear that if we are forced to register them, we will soon be like citizens in Canada, Britain, and Australia, where the private ownership of handguns is illegal. So, I am going to vote for Bush, who is a stated friend of the NRA and 2nd Amendment rights."

rather than pretend there are good objective reasons for one's choice. This in itself will avoid many unseemly confrontations between people who disagree.

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