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Commentary on: D. Hatcher's "The Role of Personal Values in Argument Evaluation"

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It is important to examine the subjective limits of critical thinking, not only because we need to be mindful of student diversity when it comes to appraising argument evaluations, but also because a great deal of false objectivity can lurk inside the teaching of critical thinking. As instructors, we can unwittingly end up demanding "objective analysis" in ways that not only fail to recognize the scope for diverse yet competent argument evaluations; we can also fail to recognize the scope for our own ideological investments to intrude into our teaching and into our appraisal of students' efforts. So we owe thanks to Don Hatcher for so concisely raising and illuminating the question of the subjective limits of critical thinking. I want especially to thank Don for a paper that so helpfully led me to clarify for myself where I stand on these issues.

Mainsteam critical thinking has been criticized for operating as if arguments can be analyzed as artifacts removed from their living dialogical context (see e.g. Pyne Addelson 1993). Underlying this, critical thinking's traditional claims to objectivity have been criticized as based on an epistemological framework that assumes that knowledge is impartial, independent of the knower, and independent of the language in which it is developed and expressed (discussed in Courtenay-Hall 2003). Although Don's paper does not directly question this epistemological framework, he argues that irresolvable personal differences can arise in argument evaluation, and the fact of these irresolvable differences means that critical thinking must give up some portion of its claim to objectivity – it must acknowledge the influence of (non-rational) personal values when it comes to how much weight people give to competing arguments. Don notes that this conclusion has come to him after 15 years of teaching critical thinking, so we can well imagine that this concession to subjectivity came with some regret.

But I want to invert this perspective. I want to question the main contours of critical thinking's traditional claims to objectivity, yet to insist that personal values are NOT pre-given, nonanalyzable inner-space entities that leave students and instructors no rational dialogical recourse in the face of value differences. I will do this by claiming a much fuller scope for the diagnosis of "worldview differences" than Don allows, and by questioning the claim that personal values are not analyzable. I would like also to suggest a different picture of objectivity from the one that I suspect underlies Don's account, but lacking space for this, I can only suggest looking at Courtenay-Hall 2003. I will close by cutting into the ripe question of how to facilitate reasonable and productive discussion of "personal values" in a postsecondary critical thinking classroom. But first, let me summarize Don's argument.

Banning handguns, banning abortions

Don argues that some instances of diversity in argument evaluation are due not to differences in students' capacities to appreciate "compelling argumentation"; rather, they are due simply to the influence of "personal preferences" and "personal values" in situations where there

seems to be "no objective way" to decide which argument is stronger. His main examples are the banning handguns/Bush vs. Gore arguments, and the abortion/fetus-as-a-future-person-like-me argument. In both cases, Don argues that the question of which argument is stronger is a question that can end up turning on the personal values or preferences of the evaluator (in the banning handguns argument: how much one happens to like guns vs. how much one happens to care about the social causes that would lose funding if Bush were to win over Gore (medicare and environmental protection); in the banning abortion argument: how much one happens to be concerned about the harmful consequences of banning abortion vs. how horrified one happens to feel about allowing an abortion policy that in principle could have prevented oneself from being born).

DIGRESSION: I feel compelled to note the odd masculinist bias of Don Marquis' argument against abortion as cited in Don's paper. In focusing entirely on "the fetus that might have been me! (or you)" (non-verbatim paraphrase), Marquis' argument absents from consideration the burdens and harms attached to the role that only WOMEN would have to worry about playing in any abortion conflict (namely, the role of *pregnant woman*). Such an omission is much less likely to occur on the social dialogue understanding of critical thinking that I advocate. END DIGRESSION.

Don acknowledges that some argument evaluation differences can be explained by a difference in worldview, and that "critical thinking can play a valuable role in getting people to examine and alter their worldviews" (Hatcher 2003). *But*, he argues, *not always*: some people might simply feel that "their gun collection is the most important thing in their lives" (the banning handguns argument). And some people "might think it would be quite OK" not ever to have been born, while others might be "horrified" at the thought of not ever having come into existence (the banning abortion argument). Which it will be is simply a matter of irreducible personal values or preferences, Don believes, NOT a matter of different worldviews. And since such personal values appear to be outside the realm of rational discussion and argument, Don concludes that there is nothing for critical thinking theorists to do but to acknowledge this region of nonrational subjectivity in their otherwise objective enterprise.

Worldview differences vs. Personal values conceived as preferences

I have a different view of the matter, not least because I can't imagine worldview differences NOT being the correct diagnosis for disagreements involving someone who cares more about his gun collection than about social and environmental justice. Further, how could a person who feels amicable to the idea of never having been born have the same worldview as a person who is horrified at the thought? But let's begin with some clarification of the terms "worldview" and "personal values." Don's definitions appear to be as follows:

> World view: "an entire web of [a person's] beliefs that can be explicated, analyzed and evaluated."
>
> Personal values: a personal liking, dislike or commitment that is "beyond evaluation"

Now, unless one is operating with a positivist conception of values vs. beliefs, it is not immediately obvious why personal values need to be conceptualized as being "beyond evaluation." The reasons and causes that have led me to hold the values that I hold may not be easily accessible or expressible, but there are reasons and causes nevertheless, and their potentially lying deep in my personal and family history does not thereby set them outside of the realm of rational discussion. Similarly, there are reasons and causes that lie behind one person's valuing his gun collection more than fair medical access and environmental protection, just as there are reasons and causes that lie behind another person's feeling so horrified at the thought of not ever having been born that he feels entitled thereby to force every pregnant woman to bring her pregnancy to full term no matter what the circumstances that got her pregnant and no matter what the risk to her own life.

These reasons and causes are within the purview of a critical thinking course to the extent that the issues they are concerned with are part of the curriculum and part of public debate – and to the extent that students are interested and able to discuss them productively. But understandably, the difficulty of engaging with students on such potentially personal ground can lead critical thinking instructors to be hesitant to travel down those roads. I'll address the pedagogical issues involved momentarily. First, I want to give one more example to illustrate the weakness of the "personal values" or "personal preferences" diagnosis – suggesting that even the prototype for personal *preferences* may not be an irreducible given.

The venerable ice cream example

When it comes to giving an example of what a *personal preference* is, the perennial favourite of informal logicians is ice cream flavours. I don't want to destabilize this worthy classic. Nothing communicates the point of "preferences" more clearly. But even for this example, it is worth noting that worldview differences can enter in: 34 of the 38 flavours in your favourite ice cream store may have been produced using unfair labour practices, unsustainable agricultural or food processing practices, or may contain more carcinogens or heart disease contributors than the remaining 4.

So there we are at the ice cream store. I explain to you why I think that ethically, our choice is really only between 4 flavours. You look at me incredulously and wish you had asked someone else to go to the ice cream store with you. Chances are, we have arrived at the point of world view differences. At the very least, we are moved by substantially different values.

These differences are more profound and complex than are mere differences in personal preference, but they are also more promising of some dialectical future beyond the impasse of "nonrational differences." If we understand a man's valuing his gun collection to be deeply linked to his family history, his social context, and his experience in the world, then this valuing can come to be recognized (by us and by him) not as simply irrational or nonrational, but as being in place for understandable reasons and causes – an outcome of certain histories, contexts and experiences. *To reflect on these reasons and causes, and reassess their connection to the signifier* (in this case, the gun collection) *is to have the possibility for some rational reconstruction of values.* Without this, if we leave the matter simply at the level of indisputable preferences and inaccessible personal values, then we truly are stuck with the "R" problem – relativism in a form that gives no space for having faith in the power of reason and inquiry.

Pedagogical questions

But how do you *do* this in a university or college critical thinking course, amid teaching about premises, inferences, evidence, argument structure, argument forms, argument evaluation, etc.? How do you get students to engage reasonably and productively and efficiently in discussion of argument evaluations at a level that reaches such deep personal commitments and life histories? How do you deal with student inhibitions but also ensure that students don't feel pressured to discuss personal matters that they might prefer to keep private? How do you make sure that the discussion stays on track? How do you know what "on track" is when students are exploring the histories and experiences behind their beliefs and values? How do you bring the discussion back to the argument evaluation that began it? How do you deal with awkward moments? Rambling? Inappropriate personal revelations? Meanness or conflict between students? How do you overcome instructor inhibitions?

I was faced with a dramatic permutation of these questions when I first moved from teaching in a philosophy department to teaching in an education faculty 12 years ago. The lecture-based argument analysis teaching that I had used so successfully with undergraduate students at the University of Windsor just wasn't going to fly with pre-service teachers at UBC, who were full of high expectations for "learner-centered classrooms" and "hands-on learning," and who were most interested NOT in exploring philosophical issues, but in improving their classroom management skills and subject area mastery. With much searching and gleaning (and not much space here to elaborate), I learned to use the following methods whenever I had to engage students in argument evaluation, to ensure that it would engage them deeply enough to compete with their practice-focused concerns. (I also emphasized the practice-relevant dimensions of philosophical questions, but that strategy does not seem relevant here.)

1) When argument evaluation differences arise, make these differences part of the curriculum. Ask students to write about and to discuss why they hold the views that they do in their argument evaluations. Simply encountering the diversity of views and values can help students to question their own.
2) Writing: Ask students to answer these questions about the views that they hold in journal-note form, to be graded either as part of their "in-class assignments" or as part of a dossier to be graded at mid-semester and at the end of the semester. It is important to have students write their thoughts out BEFORE they discuss the topic in class, so that they can figure out for themselves where they stand, find a way to articulate it, and think ahead about what they want to share, and what they may NOT want to share in group or class discussion.
3) Discussion: I always begin my courses with a list of considerations to guide discussion, so that the course begins with explicit discussion of principles of respectful, caring, and productive interaction. I use small-group discussions to help generate student interest and to provide a space for less outgoing students to share their views. I use collective (whole-class) discussion afterward to find out what students discussed and deal with whatever issues and questions arose.
4) Small-group discussion: I generally assign 3 to 8 students to each group depending on class size and the nature and potential personal-ness of the topic. How to keep the discussion on track? Give students a specified question or set of questions to address. Ask students to submit a written overview of the discussion for you to review and/or

grade. Make it clear to students that they will be asked to report back to the class on whatever they have discussed. In large groups, I ask students to appoint a facilitator and secretary to help guide discussion.

All of this is not simply a matter of adding "reflection on life experiences" to traditional critical thinking courses, and *stirring*. It involves a reconsideration of what our teaching aims and focus should be in critical thinking. While it might seem wonderful for the gun collector to go through deep-level personal reflection in a critical thinking program, that isn't the aim of a typical critical thinking course, and it can seem delusory to hope to achieve that kind of deep personal reflection in a two-semester course with 30, 60 or 100 students. Yet I want to push forward the suggestion that in some sense, such deep personal reflection *should be* among our aims in teaching critical thinking; that is, I think we should be aiming *at least to provide some starting points and conceptual resources* for deep personal reflection – for helping students to better understand and negotiate the interconnections between their beliefs, their identity, and their relationships to the various communities they are part of.

"Better understanding and negotiation" includes, of course, improvement in the individual's capacities to recognize, analyze, and evaluate arguments. But it means that the pedagogical focus is not simply on arguments and their possible evaluations, but at least equally, on the individual student as socially and culturally situated in ways that impinge upon her experience and output in a Critical Thinking course. And it means that personal values are not left untouched as irreducible, nonanalyzable givens.

We can help students engage in this kind of personal reflection in an *ad* hoc way by exploring the worldview disagreements that inevitably arise along the way in teaching about argument evaluation, tracing out the social, inter-cultural and philosophical issues they raise. And we can do it more directly and systematically by exploring *with our students* some of the basic epistemological issues related to the development and legitimation of knowledge claims. In a Critical Thinking context, this happily can be done by exploring with students one of the central debates in Critical Thinking research, a debate fuelled by feminist and postmodern criticisms of Critical Thinking; namely, Is Critical Thinking problematically objectivist? (Note: I say "happily" above, because I think it one of the hallmarks of teaching for critical thinking, that if something about a subject is a debate in the larger academic world or in the larger society, then students are invited to join that debate in class (rather than expected to be the mere recipients of whichever way the teacher himself decides the debate should be settled (discussed further in Courtenay-Hall 1997, 367-9)).

The objectivism debate in Critical Thinking involves the questions of whether beliefs are something apart from the individual person holding them (Radical Epistemic Autonomy) or whether many of our beliefs are constitutive of who we are and tie us to our communities, such that to revise or reject them is to engage in profound reorientations of who we are and how we are related to our community (Epistemic Relationalism); whether knowledge is impartial and independent of the knower (Epistemic Agent Neutrality), or whether knowledge is better understood as an organism's (or a social group's) encoding of lessons learned from its successful interactions with the cultural, social and physical world around it (Epistemic Agent Specificity); whether our language provides impartial, undistorting access to an independent reality external to it and to us, as long as we get it right (Neutrality of Language), or whether our language deeply influences our understanding—even our perception of things—and while we cannot detach ourselves from it, we can become reflexive and critical of the assumptions embedded in

our language (Constructivist Theory of Language and World); etc. (This debate is examined in more detail in Courtenay-Hall 2003.)

Reflecting on these questions in a course where they have explored deep personal differences can help students develop a greater awareness of the social and cultural influences that may be acting on them, and a better understanding of the broader philosophical contours of many of the tensions and conflicts they experience in conversation with others, both in class and outside of class. As noted above, successful learning in a critical thinking course entails that a student's argument evaluations will meet certain requirements of accuracy, cogency, etc. But he will also be expected to meet certain standards of acknowledgement of individual standpoint and reflection on personal values – to provide intelligent answers to such questions as why he might value his handgun collection more than his mother's access to medical care and environmental protection -- and should he?

The question of means in Critical Thinking: Deductive reconstruction and its alternatives

Many philosophers engaged in argument analysis have construed issues as having two sides: Pro vs. Con, For vs. Against. When we reflect on the strength and pervasiveness of "winner-loser" dichotomies in western culture, it is easy to see why issue analysis might end up getting constructed along such simple lines. But rarely are there just two opposing sides in any debate, and rarely are there just two possible and mutually exclusive resolutions to an issue. Rather, there are MANY stakeholders with perhaps partially opposed but also partially overlapping perspectives on the issue, and many different resolutions possible, of varying degrees of (dis) satisfaction to the parties involved.

Yet to explore issues and arguments with this level of complexity is a daunting task, and NOT the traditional domain of philosophy. It is rather the traditional domain of History, Political Studies and of interdisciplinary programs in professions dealing with conflict resolution: Environmental Studies, Community and Regional Planning, etc. The concern of Critical Thinking courses is rather with the broad outline of an issue and the major arguments given on different sides of the issue. The goal is to help students recognize argument lines, identify argument features, and evaluate the strength of the arguments they encounter.

Deductive reconstruction of arguments is often used as a means to this end. But we must note that deductive reconstruction of necessity simplifies issues, overlooks distinct voices, and skips over torrents of important details and nuances of consideration. It doesn't get students exploring the human experiences that are embroiled in issues; it gets students to explore (more abstractly) only the broad factors and considerations involved.

This doesn't mean that deductive reconstruction fails to accomplish good things – as Don notes, it helps students become clearer about the broad contours of issues, and it helps them in argument, essay and thesis writing and evaluation. But there is reason to be concerned that such general treatment of issues can minimize the significance given to human experiences of the issues discussed, and can add to the tendency to tolerate the marginalization of minority voices in a society.

This leaves open the question of whether some greater engagement with the details of issues would improve Critical Thinking outcomes. Some Critical Thinking educators (e.g., Stevenson 2000) have argued for such greater engagement. But Stevenson's focus has been in

the context of teaching for critical thinking within secondary school environmental education and history courses, NOT in the context of post-secondary Critical Thinking courses.

There are many issues concerning legitimate aims, time-effectiveness, and instructor qualifications to be considered with regard to this question. My point in raising it here has been only to float out the suggestion that a counterpart and complement to the exploration of individual standpoint that I recommend in Critical Thinking courses is a fuller examination of the *diversity* of standpoints involved in any particular issue. Such examination typically helps students extend their background understanding in ways that brings their own epistemological limitations into clearer relief. This all goes far beyond the standard fare of post-secondary Critical Thinking courses. The question I leave you with is, Should it?

Postscript

In the lively discussion that followed in this session, Phyllis Rooney and I commented further on the importance of recognizing that far from being individual givens, values have histories, contexts, experiences and justifications that can be brought out effectively in class discussions (Rooney 2003), and on the merits of moving Critical Thinking courses into student exploration of the construction of beliefs and values. In response, one participant replied, "But that moves into the field of psychology," and another, "Well, but that's counselling!"

The dialectical assumptions and rhetorical effect of such comments need responding to. They were uttered as if the mere marking of traditional disciplinary boundaries ended the question, if not the debate. But what is in question here is the very way in which critical thinking and philosophy are defined. When those defending the status quo use the fact of the status quo to justify the status quo, it is difficult to feel confident that arguments against the status quo were fully heard or allowed entry. Yet it seems that what was of most concern to participants – what might have hindered hearing or entry -- was the DIFFICULTY of teaching Critical Thinking in ways that engage more deeply and explicitly with students' beliefs and experiences. And this difficulty I don't deny. As several participants noted, to have students engage in analysis of their own arguments and in exploration of the social construction of knowledge, if this includes the construction of their own beliefs and values, is a much messier and more unpredictable business than the mere assessing of arguments on putatively neutral grounds.

But it is also a shift that brings coursework closer to the pulsing, breathing reality of students' lives. And that, after all, is how Informal Logic came into being from the politically and interpersonally *neater*, *cleaner*, and *safer* field of Formal Logic. Here, I will simply suggest that the commitments which inspired the move to Informal Logic 25 years ago (Blair and Johnson 1980, x) stand as a solid case in favour of its further evolution.

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