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Commentary on Sobocan

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Commentary on: J. Sobocan's "Teaching Informal Logic and Critical Thinking"

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In her paper, Jan Sobocan argues that the distinction commonly drawn between informal logic and critical thinking is a purely semantic one with no substantive basis. Criticizing the grounds upon which the distinction is usually based, she concludes that the two are essentially the same: both aim to help students to develop stronger arguments with respect to everyday issues.

There appear to be three general argumentative lines used to support this conclusion. One broad argument focuses on the fact that a survey of course content and textbooks for both informal logic and critical thinking courses reveals that there are very few differences between the two and that both focus primarily on reasoning. The second centres on the claim that the moral or dispositional dimension usually attributed solely to critical thinking is, in fact, an aspect of informal logic as well. The third line develops the argument that all thinking of a critical nature involves argument and that both informal logic and critical thinking are sub-species of argumentation theory. I shall deal with these arguments in turn.

1. The Course Content Argument

With respect to the first argument, I would argue that similarities in course and textbook content do not necessarily entail that informal logic and critical thinking are conceptually indistinguishable. Such similarities could be a function of the fact that critical thinking courses are frequently taught by instructors with informal logic backgrounds and that the title, "Critical Thinking" might have more appeal in drawing students than the title, "Informal Logic." That course content may be similar does not necessarily indicate that there is no conceptually useful distinction to be made. Indeed, equating critical thinking with what is taught in a particular course may be misleading in that what you will get of critical thinking will only be that version or those aspects which can be taught in a separate course. Many theorists view critical thinking much more broadly, seeing it as integral to the making of judgments in many, perhaps most contexts, including disciplinary contexts (Siegel 1988; Paul 1990; Bailin et al. 1999). So teaching critical thinking may have largely to do with the approach taken to teaching the particular disciplines. A separate course focusing on informal logic (whatever it is called) may contribute to critical thinking by supplying some of the skills or resources, but the criteria used to make judgments in these areas are not exhausted by the argument-assessment criteria of informal logic. They include, as well, discipline-specific criteria and principles (for example the principle of control in evaluating scientific experiments, or the criterion of aesthetic balance in making artistic judgments).

Distinctions are made (or rejected) for a purpose, and I am not clear about what is at stake for Sobocan in rejecting the distinction between informal logic and critical thinking. She does not appear to be trying to sort out this distinction in order to offer some criticism or suggestions regarding current educational practices. Rather, she seems to be using the current state of educational practice as a ground for rejecting the distinction. I would be more inclined to make the former move, however, arguing that because there is an important conceptual distinction between informal logic and critical thinking, separate courses dealing with informal logic (whatever the title) should not be seen as all there is to teaching critical thinking.

2. The Moral Dimension Argument

I completely agree with Sobocan that informal logic is a normative practice, that it is grounded in the assumption that one ought to base one's beliefs and actions on reasons, and that it is likely that most informal logic instructors attempt to instill attitudes such as the desire to understand, respect for other arguers, and self-criticalness. I also think that she makes an important point in demonstrating that there are certain values 'built into' many informal logic practices. Thus, for example, learning to consider alternative arguments or to avoid the straw person fallacy are, in a sense, exercises in learning fairmindedness. I would not, however, agree with her that teaching these principles equates to teaching attitudes. Students may perform these classroom activities effectively and yet fail to be open-minded, fairminded or self critical in their other classes or in their daily lives. They may not, in other words, have the generalized attitudes (dispositions, habits of mind) of a critical thinker. For many theorists (e.g., Siegel 1988; Paul 1990; Ennis 1996), the dispositional component is integral to how critical thinking is conceptualized. It goes beyond certain particular values which may be connected with some argument assessment practices. Rather, critical thinking is seen as an educational goal which ought to govern the making of judgments across school subjects and disciplinary contexts as well as in everyday situations. And it is a dispositional as well as a cognitive goal, involving the development of traits of character (Siegel 1988) as well as epistemological understanding (Bailin 1999). It is a goal which, of necessity, extends beyond the walls of the informal logic classroom.

3. The Argumentation Argument

I find Sobocan's reduction of critical thinking to argumentation problematic. One of the reasons why I think she makes this equation is because she views critical thinking almost exclusively in terms of the evaluation of belief, specifically in the context of disagreement or controversy. If, however, we view critical thinking, as does Lipman (1991), in terms of making critical judgments, then it becomes clear that critical thinking is involved in contexts other than the evaluation of belief. We make critical judgments in situations of choice as well as disagreement, and with respect to evaluating actions, performing tasks, and creating products (Bailin et al. 1999). Moreover the form of the thinking in these cases cannot easily be forced into an argument structure.

These limitations to the scope of argumentation are evident in many areas, but can be illustrated particularly well by examples from the arts (as Govier points out). I am in agreement with Sobocan that we do make evaluative judgments about art and that our judgments are open to disagreement and critical discussion involving the giving of reasons. So such discussions can be examples of critical thinking. There are several points to be noted here, however. First, the kinds of criteria appealed to in the evaluation of reasons are not generally the criteria of argument assessment but are, rather, specifically aesthetic criteria.

Second, the nature of and relationship between reasons and judgments is somewhat different than in traditional argument contexts. Aesthetic discussions serve, generally, to enhance the appreciation of a work rather than to arrive at an agreed upon judgment. An aesthetic judgment may, then, be the starting point as opposed to the conclusion of an aesthetic debate, "functioning to provoke re-examination rather than, in the usual sense, defense" (Cavell, 1970, 347). An aesthetic discussion is not so much an argument about the value of a work which seeks to convince through the force of reasons, as it is a mutual exploration of a work. And if there is movement on the part of one of the participants, it will be the features of the work itself which convince and not the reasons. The reasons serve to illuminate the particular features. Aesthetic discussion is better viewed as criticism rather than argument (Bailin 1993).

The third point is that, in the realm of art or other creative endeavours, critical thinking is not limited to appreciation. The artist or creator also makes critical judgments in the process of creating a work. I would want to call this critical thinking. Yet it is difficult to see how we could view this activity in terms of argument.

4. Conclusion

I stated earlier that we make distinctions for a purpose, and I would argue that the distinction between informal logic and critical thinking serves a useful purpose. Argumentation does not encompass the entire realm of critical judgment. The concept of critical thinking allows us to point to the criticalness of various kinds of judgments in many areas of human endeavour. Moreover we need the concept of critical thinking in order to articulate a broad educational ideal, broader than what is encompassed by any particular set of argument assessment practices. It is an ideal with a dispositional as well as a cognitive component, and one that I would argue should govern educational practice in all areas.

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