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Commentary on Turner

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In Response to: Dale Turner's *You should have arguments for your views?*

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1. Introduction: The integration between the nature of critical thinking and its pedagogical goals

The problem raised in Turner's paper "You Should Have Arguments for Your Views?" is a crucial one for both the study of the nature of critical thinking and for its pedagogical goals. The fact that Turner binds these two apparently different issues together is in itself an important statement regarding the field of argumentation and critical thinking; specifically, the important connection that should exist between what is critical thinking and the way critical thinking is taught. Johnson, in his recent book *Manifest Rationality* (Johnson, 2000), tells the story of how these two aspects were closely interlocked in the history of the development of informal logic. Turner is right, therefore, in addressing the two issues of the nature of critical thinking and its pedagogical goals together, as if they were an undividable subject. Any forthright examination of the kind taken up by Turner is more than needed for the development of the field of argumentation, and Turner's talk is an important contribution to opening the way for further discussion.

I think that the importance of Turner's paper lies in one more aspect that although more indirectly presented in his paper, motivates nonetheless his concerns. It is the way we grasp the nature of critical thinking when we come to teach it to our students. It is the moral aspect of teaching critical thinking as part of its nature as many of us indeed see the point of it. It is the reason why critical thinking and argumentation in general were developed in the first place and why we think they should be taught to students. This moral aspect is what concerns Turner, but I think it is also the key for the most promising answer to his concerns and challenge.

In the following I want to comment on two issues, that I hope will help to develop further the important discussion raised by Turner.

2. The 'complexity problem' and 'complexity theory' as part of future developments in argumentation theory and critical thinking

My first comment refers to the kind of reasons Turner uses in his paper for establishing his point regarding the limitations of critical thinking. The main reason Turner gives for the inability of critical thinking to achieve its essential and pedagogical goals can be termed as the "complexity problem". That is, the reconstruction of any piece of argumentation discourse is conditioned by our actual limited abilities to know all the relevant circumstances of this piece. In other words, given any piece of argumentation discourse, there is a set of innumerable propositions and innumerable structures or forms that are relevant to the articulation and evaluation of this piece. Thus, the complexity of any such piece is in principle beyond the human ability to grasp it. Turner sees in the "complexity problem" the reason for a pessimistic stance regarding the goals of critical thinking and argumentation theory in general. However, complexity is a common phenomenon in the sciences in general. What is more significant is that the 'complexity problem' has recently been taken up by researchers, since complex behavior occurs in any area we know about. Furthermore, becoming conscious to the presence of

complexity is a mark of a field of research becoming mature, and the call to come to terms with complexity is in many times a prologue for a deeper understanding of the field.

One of the recent books devoted to the study of complexity is *Foundations of Complex-System Theories* (1998) by Sunny Auyang, where he analyzes complex behavior in diverse areas such as physics, biology and social sciences. Auyang gives the following intuitive definition of complexity: “I use *complex* and *complexity* intuitively to describe self-organized systems that have many components and many characteristic aspects, exhibit many structures in various scales, undergo many processes in various rates, and have the capabilities to change abruptly and adapt to external environments” (Auyang, 1998, 13). Argumentation, as a social phenomenon, can clearly be seen as a kind of a complex-system. Accordingly, argumentation is an infinite diversity and complexity of reasoning processes. However, complexity theory, like Auyang’s theory, presupposes that the composition of any complex-system is not merely congregation; the constituents of a compound interact and the interaction generates complicated structures. It is not even mere interaction; it conveys the additional idea of compounds as wholes with their own properties. A theory should represent and explain the complexity of a given composition, and argumentation is no exception.

Auyang does not study argumentation nor do I know of any other research that applies complexity terms for the study of argumentation. However, there is certainly a place for an application of his or other approaches to the field of argumentation. In general, a complex-system theory analyzes the key concepts and general methods used in studying complexity in a given field, and provides a way to understand and deal with complexity in that field. Moreover, there is no reason why argumentation understood as a complex-system cannot be studied as such. The problem of complexity is, therefore, not necessarily an obstacle but can be also a reason for the need to use more interdisciplinary theories and methods for its study, such as a theory of complexity.

3. Philosophical skepticism regarding rationality as the more fundamental source for the Turner’s concerns

Nevertheless, the difficulty that the field of argumentation faces is more general in nature than the complexity problem since, as Turner rightly suggests indirectly, it has to do with rationality and reason in general. What Turner shows in his paper is one important reason why there are unresolved disputes, but the general underlying source for difficulties here is the concept of rationality. Philosophical skepticism is notorious in challenging the possibility of being rational. It is the old story about the philosophical effort to maintain rationality given that philosophical skepticism is unrefuted in principle. Barry Stroud concludes his seminal work *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (1984) by saying that whatever our reaction towards the skeptical threat, the starting point is that once this criticism becomes familiar: “...it becomes difficult to see how anything but scepticism could be the proper verdict on our putative knowledge of the world. Scepticism can come to seem inevitable, not just invulnerable against a certain line of attack.” (Stroud, 1984, 209). Any argumentation theory is, in a sense, an attempt to repel the inevitability of philosophical skepticism, and here is where the pessimism of Turner is the most acute.

However, there is the obvious difference between philosophy in general and critical thinking. In formulating our theories in argumentation and in teaching them, we are obligated to

come to a decision regarding which concepts of rationality and reason we are going to use and we cannot afford the detached and uninvolved stance of philosophy. This situation is exemplified in one of the responses to Turner's talk at the OSSA 2001 conference, when Leo Groarke asked Turner how charity, as part of the concept of rationality, could be taught.

The principle of charity is most known from the philosophical point of view through the work of Donald Davidson. The principle of charity, as Davidson uses it, is justified as a necessary assumption for solving problems within radical interpretation. Radical interpretation is Davidson's variety of a response to the general problem of philosophical skepticism, upon which Davidson's philosophy of language is, in a large part based. Davidson regards his discussion of radical interpretation as a way to evade the problem of skepticism. In his "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" and "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (Both in Davidson, 1984), Davidson gives his main arguments for the refutation of global skepticism or at least for how to render conceptual relativism untroublesome. These arguments depend on his account of radical interpretation and specifically, on his principle of charity. Davidson gives different versions of the principle in his work, but the kernel is that it is the assumption that in understanding a speaker, we assume him or her to be rational and having true beliefs.¹ One of the reasons for the necessity to adopt the principle of charity is that understanding a speaker requires a 'foundation of agreement' (Davidson, 1984, 196-197). Whether we agree or disagree with the speaker's beliefs, recognizing them as beliefs requires a substantial 'background' of agreement, and so adopting the principle of charity is only to admit at the beginning of interpretation what we are bound to conclude when interpretation succeeds (Cf. Davidson, 1984, 137, 168-169, 200; 1980, 221). It is a way of minimizing disagreement or of maximizing agreement for enabling the process of interpretation and for achieving understanding. However, when it comes to understanding and not merely interpreting a speaker, radical interpretation must assume speakers to be rational. Davidson uses the term, "rationality" minimally, to mean consistency (among beliefs), and coherence (actions must logically follow from the beliefs and desires the interpreter posits to explain them). Thus, radical interpretation turns the concept of rationality into a pragmatical tool, indispensable for the process of understanding and linguistic use.

This Davidsonian analysis of the principle of charity definitely implies the 'means-end' concept of rationality. We need to adopt the principle of charity for linking the beliefs of a speaker with the meaning of his or her utterances. Otherwise, understanding is not possible: "since knowledge of beliefs comes only with the ability to interpret words, the only possibility at the start is to assume general agreement on beliefs" (Davidson, 1984, 196; cf. 1980, 238; 1986, 316). Furthermore, the principle of charity is consistent with the ends of interpretation and understanding as the only strategical way to enable these ends. Thus, radical interpretation assumes an instrumental or operationalist concept of rationality; it assumes that speakers are

¹ Although Davidson does not clearly distinguish between the versions of the principle of charity, we can find at least three different versions of the principle in his writings. In his early papers, he often described it as the interpreter's assumption that there be an "agreement" between speaker and interpreter (Davidson (1984) 27, 136, 137, 169, 196-197, 200-201; (1982) 302; (1980) 239). In other papers, he offers a second version, saying it is the assumption that the speaker has (mostly) true beliefs (Davidson (1984) 137, 152, 154, 168, 197; (1980) 221, 222, 238; (1986) 316). Yet, in other papers, the third and more known version of the principle of charity is the assumption that the speaker is rational (Davidson (1984) 27, 137, 154, 159; (1980) 221, 222, 231, 238; (1990a) 24-25; (1987) 47; (1985) 90; (1982) 303; (1990b) 319-320, 325).

rational for enabling the possibility of understanding and, consequently, for blocking the way for skepticism to challenge the possibility of understanding.

Back to the problem of teaching charity as a basic notion of critical thinking, we can see now why it is difficult to teach it. On the one hand, it is definitely a powerful tool for dealing with argumentation discourse, but on the other hand, neither the Davidsonian project nor any other philosophical project is really successful with evading philosophical skepticism. The Davidsonian approach clearly suggests guidelines for approaching the question of teaching the principle of charity and rationality in general. Mainly, it suggests the idea that we need some suppositions that will enable the process of reconstructing arguments. Precisely because Davidson suggests an instrumental understanding of rationality as part of the principle of charity, things like how to persuade an audience or what it is to give reasons for establishing a claim, become at least strategically necessary and philosophically acceptable. However, since Davidson does not succeed in addressing skepticism, this threat is still present. Thus, the tension between the pedagogical need to teach some type of rationality and the philosophical ‘dead end’ caused by skepticism is not something that can be resolved.

This pessimistic and unavoidable state of affairs surely permeates our students and, consequently, initiates the serious concerns Turner raises in his talk. Furthermore, the principle of charity and its role in teaching critical thinking is only one instance to the inclusive difficulty in teaching argumentation in general. It highlights the point that the pedagogical difficulty in teaching critical thinking is interwoven with the theoretical difficulties of the theory itself. However, I suggest that this interweaving of problems might be caused precisely because of the ‘means-end’ or instrumental concept of rationality that theories of argumentation are so attached to. I suggest that if a totally different concept of rationality be adopted by theories of argumentation, some of the concerns raised by Turner might be answered. The reason is that this tension is not necessarily a drawback of teaching critical thinking, but some human and social reality that is part of the nature of critical thinking. It is part of why critical thinking is needed in the first place, since otherwise there is no need for the complicated tools developed in argumentation for resolving disputes.

4. The moral obligation to be rational as the pedagogical goal of teaching argumentation versus describing the tools for gaining efficacy in being rational

To begin with, we teach argumentation since we feel there is no alternative; since we think there is a moral aspect to the whole field. However, this feeling is not clearly presented in the concept of rationality that argumentation theories usually employ. Most of the argumentation theories employ some kind of a means-end model of rationality. It is an instrumental concept of rationality since it treats reason merely as an instrument for detecting effective means to achieve a given end. Rational deliberations, therefore, concern only the means a person uses to satisfy his or her desires, and not the desires themselves. The question is whether the concept of rationality requires more than being effective in means-end terms; is there any moral aspect to this concept?

To have more than just means for achieving some given end and satisfying our desires, we need the noninstrumental concept of rationality that transcends simple means-end rationality. When the ends and desires themselves come under rational deliberations, only then rationality turns into a noninstrumental concept. This addition to the instrumental concept of rationality is the core of the dispute about the scope of rationality. Ends and desires are diverse; resolving

disputes is only one possible end for using rationality. Many other desires may be legitimate ends, such as trying to be clear about one's beliefs or wishes, introspection, researching some natural phenomenon, solving a mathematical problem and so forth. Many ends and desires are subject to rational deliberations and to the use of argumentation. What is important is that human conduct is susceptible to rational criticism, the kind of criticism that is independent from one's subjective motivational system of desires. Any motivational system contains a conative component and this component can be rational or irrational, justified or unjustified. And when the ends and desires turn out to be part of rational deliberation, the concept of rationality acquires a moral dimension. This moral dimension is not judged or evaluated by its being decidable or undecidable, attainable or not; it is more of a moral obligation to be rational than judging the efficacy of being rational.

This noninstrumental concept of rationality is a combination of intellectual and epistemic virtues regarding the way we form our beliefs as part of the instrumental concept of rationality, and a moral obligation to develop these intellectual and epistemic virtues as part of the noninstrumental concept of rationality. We can see this combination very clearly when we examine our cultural heroes, such as Socrates and Gandhi. We praise them and see them as models exactly because such people questioned authority and criticized any form of dictatorship and unquestioning behavior. They do not question the efficacy of the rationality employed by the object criticized, but its ends, wishes and desires. The works of art and scientific theories that constitute our canon are mainly the works of creative thinkers, both scientists and artists, who break the bonds of staid conceptual frames and look at problems from a new perspective. Their ingenious quality in our eyes is manifested in their revolutionary way of thinking about the prevailing situation, not in how efficient their thinking is.

Thus, when discussing our epistemic obligations, we need to distinguish the content of beliefs from the process or the manner in which beliefs are formed. Epistemic obligations refer to both of them: First, they refer instrumentally to process of forming beliefs. Second, they refer noninstrumentally to the actual content of our beliefs. If we assume that an ethics of belief is possible, then we must be able to judge and evaluate the ends and desires for which people are held responsible. This is possible only if people can be held morally accountable for the quality of their beliefs just as people are held accountable for other behaviors or character traits. In this way, the discussion becomes inclusive, covering a joint theme of epistemology and ethics, as in one of the approaches in modern philosophy that sees in ethics the foundations of epistemology.²

However, as opposed to the general discussions in philosophy, the field of argumentation is first and foremost a pragmatical field that has to deal with human and social realities. A crucial point for being able to adopt such an approach to critical thinking is being able to justify the idea that "ought presupposes can." That means that whatever set of moral precepts we adopt, they

² One of the dominant movements in post-war ethical philosophy has been that of virtue ethics, which takes its cue from the writings of Aristotle. Until recently, however, this virtue-theoretic approach had stayed largely confined within this ethical setting, despite the fact that Aristotle himself accorded a significant role to the kind of intellectual virtues that also enable us to gain knowledge, such as conscientiousness and open-mindedness. What has been significant about recent discussion in epistemology is that it has started to draw on virtue-theoretic approaches in ethics to offer analogous virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge. Consequently, there have even been some notable attempts to integrate the two areas of philosophy under a general virtue theoretic approach. Moreover, this cross-fertilization of ideas between those working in ethics and epistemology has been extremely fruitful, producing some of the most interesting work in these areas in recent years.

must be a set that is realistically possible to attain and the moral precepts themselves must be mutually compatible with each other, such that the set satisfies at least the instrumental requirements of rationality (e.g., coherency). When ought presupposes can, then “can” presupposes some understanding of what is possible in the world; of what is possible to actually achieve in argumentation discourse. In this way, the ethical theory underlying a theory of argumentation must take account of social sciences in order to know what can be done or achieved in the social reality of argumentation. Therefore, it must take account of what sorts of things might possibly fit under what ought to be done. Obviously, this by itself does not say much regarding the content of what ought and can be done, since some sort of criterion for what can or ought to be done is needed. The answer to that question might come from utilitarianism or from any other moral theory.

However, my point is rather of an indicative nature than suggesting a specific answer to Turner’s concerns. These concerns are real and bothersome and there is no doubt that future developments in the field of argumentation would have to address them one way or another.

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