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Frank Fair

Sam Houston State University, Psychology and Philosophy

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Commentary on: Benjamin Hamby's "Willingness to inquire: The cardinal critical thinking virtue"

FRANK FAIR

Psychology and Philosophy
Sam Houston State University
Box 2447
Huntsville, Texas 77341
psy_fkf@shsu.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

As I read Ben Hamby's piece, I found it hard to disagree with what he was saying. Certainly the willingness to inquire strikes me as extremely important. If that willingness was completely absent in someone, I find it hard to imagine how that person could amount to much as a critical thinker.

Still, the pleasant complacency of collegial agreement is itself a cue that perhaps should trigger greater exertion to think critically. So I will adopt a deliberately oppositional stance, one that searches for flaws in the proposal that Ben is asking us to adopt. I will try to present a variety of provocations in this regard, and, if my efforts seem on occasion to be stretches, that's OK so long as they stimulate further thinking—in this case further thinking about critical thinking and its pedagogy.

2. THE SITUATIONIST CRITIQUE OF VIRTUE

First, let me take direct aim at the general notion of virtue as an excellence of character. If one consults, for example, *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, edited by John Doris and the Moral Psychology Research Group, one finds this assertion: "much research in personality and social psychology appears to unsettle familiar notions of character . . ." (p. 355). John Doris sets the scene in his earlier book *Lack of Character* by describing virtues this way:

As I put it, virtues are supposed to be robust traits. If a person has a robust trait, they can be confidently expected to display trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations, even when some or all of these situations are not optimally conducive to such behavior. (p. 18)

Obviously, if the notion of virtues is jeopardized, as Doris and his colleagues contend, by the fact that "social psychologists have *repeatedly* found that the difference between good conduct and bad appears to reside in the situation more than in the person" (Doris, 2010, p. 357), then, by extension, the idea that there are cognitive virtues is jeopardized at the same time. Thus, Doris cites a number of experimental manipulations that are the stock-in-trade of social psychologists, including the

famous experiments by Milgram and the so-called “Stanford prison experiment” by Zimbardo. Doris’s theme is the surprising power of what seem like incidental situational variables to alter the behavior of many subjects.

What would this situationist perspective look like in relation to the propensity of someone to think engage in critical thinking? Here is a suggestion: consider the famous “framing effects” so artfully demonstrated in the work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, as for example in the “Asian Disease Problem” (Kahneman, 2011, p. 368). Don’t their findings and the subsequent elaboration by many others show the importance of situational variables relating to how information is presented for whether or not a person successfully engages in rational thinking? I don’t mean to suggest that Ben is unaware of this challenge, but in treating it by addressing Missimer’s version of it, he runs the risk of underestimating how strong the challenge is to any approach to critical thinking that stresses the virtue(s) of the ideal critical thinker. It is not a challenge that is that easily dismissed.

3. THE COGNITIVE MISER

Next, there is the set of issues posed by the “cognitive miser” conception of human rationality. Keith Stanovich has done more than anyone else I know of to promote a vision of human rationality that emphasizes the effort required to think rationally. This effort is something we cognitive misers typically avoid, settling instead for “fast and frugal heuristics.” The distinction between the intuitive Type 1 processes and Type 2 processes is central to Stanovich’s work, and here is a statement from Stanovich and a colleague, Jonathan St. B. T. Evans, prefacing a recent defense of the distinction:

Our preferred theoretical approach is one in which rapid autonomous processes (Type 1) are assumed to yield default responses unless intervened on by distinctive higher order reasoning processes (Type 2). What defines the difference is that Type 2 processing supports hypothetical thinking and load heavily on working memory. (Evans & Stanovich, 2013, p. 223)

From this perspective, none of us are likely to be critical thinkers, coolly and deliberately evaluating evidence and arguments, during most of the course of our lives. So perhaps the issue to be dealt with is how to make it more likely that people will deploy their critical thinking skills in a greater array of circumstances. I suspect there may very well be a host of factors relevant to making this effort that are discoverable by psychological research. For example, the work of Carol Dweck has emphasized that a child’s theory of intelligence has a profound effect on his or her willingness to risk failure. The belief that intelligence is a fixed quantity leads to “an urgency to prove yourself over and over” (Dweck, p. 6), and instead of using failure as an opportunity to learn, failure becomes something to avoid because it leads to deflating conclusions about oneself: “I’m an idiot.”

So why should many of our students, people who have this firm belief in the fixity of intelligence, go to the extensive efforts required, for example, to really learn the basics of statistical thinking or an informed appreciation for carefully designed

experiments? (For an interesting take on a brief test that may signal greater willingness to put in the necessary effort see Toplak et al. (2011) on the Cognitive Reflection Test.)

4. MOTIVATION

When one considers the phrase “the willingness to inquire” it involves, in Ben’s words, “the internal motivation to carefully examine an issue in an effort to reach a reasoned judgment.” So the question becomes how to enhance people’s motivation to engage in critical thinking. As someone who has for many years taught a critical thinking course, I did not totally ignore this dimension of the undertaking—on the first day of class I would emphasize that the person whose beliefs you should scrutinize the most carefully is yourself because those beliefs make the most difference as far as your life going well or going badly, and that those beliefs whose truth or falsity matters the most to you should receive an especially careful review. Plus, I’d emphasize the usual traps for the unwary in advertising and political campaigns, giving students an assignment that sent them to FactCheck.org during the 2008 election season, for example. But I did not give systematic attention to the question of motivation. Of course, a number of students responded positively when introduced to fallacies such as straw man, ad hominem, begging the question, false dilemma, etc. They zealously accepted the opportunity to bring in examples of these fallacies culled from TV, the local newspapers, or the arguments of roommates and family members. But for many, I’m afraid, it all was just one more hoop to jump through.

The best serious and systematic efforts to address the “motivation gap” that I am aware of occur right on my home campus in the form introductory sciences classes conducted under the heading “Foundations of Science.” These are optional classes for nonscience majors, and they are taught principally through the use of vivid case studies, for example a dramatic case involving the scare over the alleged link between vaccination and autism. My two colleagues who are most deeply involved in this enterprise, Matt Rowe, a biologist, and Marcus Gillespie, a geographer, created and adapted case studies that allow students to get involved in group discussions about what the best conclusions will be, given the data, and to experience the power of applying the logic of experimental design to the questions raised in the cases. Marcus and Matt have been able to systematically assess the impact of this approach on students’ critical thinking abilities, and the impact is pronounced. And I can testify from personal experience (to be sure a sample size of one) about the impact of the case studies by having participated with other faculty members as learners in a teaching workshop demonstration of the method.

In any event, most of us who teach critical thinking can and should give careful thought about motivating our students, and we should give attention to whatever lessons we can learn from relevant research. By focusing on the willingness to inquire, Ben highlights the centrality of motivation, and that, it seems to me, is a good thing.

5. THE TRANSFER ISSUE

Part of the point of talking about virtues of any sort, including cognitive virtues, is, I suppose, the idea that a person will exhibit the appropriate behavior in a wide variety of situations. Thus, my former student, Morgan Luttrell, who along with his identical twin brother Marcus, became a Navy SEAL can be relied upon to keep his cool in all sorts of extremely dangerous situations that would probably leave me simply paralyzed or running rather rapidly toward what I hope will be an escape. But the ability to control one's reactions to fear is of little value if one is unable to recognize the danger in situations when it arises. A large part of Morgan's training then, was not about staying steady in the face of danger, so much as it was about being able to size up situations quickly and correctly as far as the threat or lack of it they pose. If it's not too much of a stretch, an analogous issue with any critical thinking virtue is the issue of "transference," that is being keen at recognizing situations as ones that call for the deployment of specific critical thinking skills.

Thus Diane Halpern, former President of the American Psychological Association and author of a critical thinking textbook (soon to appear in its fifth edition) has a four-part model for teaching thinking skills that includes: (a) dispositions, (b) skills, (c) metacognition, and (d) structure-training activities. These last activities are crucial for transfer, and Halpern avers that

On the basis of what is already known about adults' learning, students need spaced practice with different sorts of examples and corrective feedback to develop the habit of "spontaneous noticing." Learning should be arranged to facilitate retrieval of skills in a way that does not depend on content area. (Halpern, 1998, p. 453)

Her example is teaching students to recognize the existence of "sunk costs" in a number of disparate circumstances, but my own examples come from recalling the students who began to notice fallacies everywhere--once they caught on to them. The students began to pay attention the swirl of argumentation in the persuasive communications that surround us daily. Ad hominem, illegitimate appeal to authority, and inferring causation from correlation began to leap out at them. And of course students need practice with these matters that is not limited to a stand-alone critical thinking class, but to some degree, at least, practice which pervades their entire course of study.

6. A QUESTION ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF THE VIRTUE

But let me return to the idea of a cardinal critical thinking virtue, the willingness to inquire, understood, as Ben suggests, as "the internal motivation to carefully examine an issue in an effort to reach a reasoned judgment." Here is a question: is this virtue like the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love? Or is the virtue like those in Aristotle's account? The issue that I wonder about comes to this—while one can certainly have too little faith, too little hope, and too little love, it is harder to see how these could be excessive—at least that is my impression of how the medievals viewed them—there is no upper limit. In contrast, of course, Aristotle (and most of

us) will allow that for qualities of character such as courage, temperance, truthfulness, and the like there can be defects of too little and defects of too much. So with regard to the virtue of the willingness to inquire—we are all familiar with the defect of too little, but is there a defect of too much? I suspect there is. Let me use my daughter Joanna as an example. She is a very bright, very conscientious person who is chief of Nuclear Medicine at the University of New Mexico. She told me a few years ago about happening to hear a program on NPR while she was driving to work, a program that discussed the contrast between optimizing and satisficing. She suddenly had a start of recognition when she realized that she generally operated as an optimizer, and it was actually something of a relief to her to understand now that for many of us in most situations the “good enough” of satisficing is, well, good enough.

Here is the issue that presents itself under this heading, namely, how does one recognize when someone is putting in the requisite amount of effort to “carefully examine an issue”? What appears to be a slapdash, off-the-cuff response may just be the quite reasonable strategy of satisficing. Or forget about determining whether the behavior of others exhibits the virtue, what about one’s own behavior? Is there a bright line standard for when one should exert oneself to the fullest in an “effort to reach a reasoned judgment” versus those times when one can rest content with a casual survey of the situation? If there is no such bright line standard, what then is the basis for our assessment?

7. CONCLUSION

In closing, let me thank Ben for presenting all of us with an occasion to think critically about critical thinking. The root question he addresses concerns the ideals we set for ourselves and for those whom we model for and preach to. It behooves us to give them careful consideration.

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