

◆◆ Chapter 26

Teaching Critical Thinking in the Strong Sense: A Focus on Self-Deception, World Views, and a Dialectical Mode of Analysis

Abstract

This revised paper, originally published in Informal Logic in (1982), is one of the most influential of Richard Paul's writings among philosophers interested in critical thinking. In it, Paul questions some of the major assumptions that underlie much instruction in critical thinking at the college level. In so doing, Paul implicitly broadens the concept of critical thinking and links it with the problem of rationality. He links the assessment of "arguments" ultimately to the assessment of "forms of life". He argues that a world view is implicit in our behavior as well as in our public pronouncements, and further, that there are inevitable contradictions and conflicts between what we do and how we describe what we do. In this view reasoning is implicit in and intrinsic to human life and behavior. Because much of our reasoning is buried in our lives, and because there are multiple points of view possible in which to reason, the ability to enter sympathetically into divergent perspectives and to explicate the deepest substructure in reasoning are crucial to Paul's view of critical thinking. Finally, in this paper Paul emphasizes the significance of human interests, often vested interests, lurking behind, shaping, and distorting reasoning. Understanding this, it is easy to see why Paul argues against an atomistic approach to assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of reasoning, why he believes that to appreciate a line of reasoning we must appreciate how it stands up under criticism from opposing lines of reasoning, and why he so often sees strengths as implicit insights and weaknesses as distortions, as obfuscation of counter insights. For Paul there is often unexpressed motivation behind "mistakes" in reasoning. Humans often make the "mistakes" that serve their interests. We develop our ethical sensitivity only by recognizing the subtlety and pervasiveness of the dark side of human thought and reason. Given the decisions that all adults, like it or not, must make for human good or ill, it is not possible to be both intellectually naive and an ethical adult.

... no abstract or analytic point exists out of all connection with historical, personal thought: ... every thought belongs, not just somewhere, but to someone, and is at home in a context of other thoughts, a context which is not purely formally prescribed. Thoughts ... are something to be known and understood in these concrete terms.

Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, xii

◆ *The Weak Sense: Dangers and Pitfalls*

To teach a critical thinking course is to make important and often frustrating decisions about what to include and exclude, what to conceive as one's primary goals and what secondary, and how to tie all of what one includes into a coherent relationship to one's goals. There have been considerable and important debates on the value of a "symbolic" versus a "non-symbolic" approach, the appropriate definition and classification of fallacies, appropriate analysis of extended and non-extended arguments, and so forth. There has been little discussion, and as far as I know, virtually no debate, on how to avoid the fundamental dangers in teaching such a course: that of "sophistry" on the one hand (inadvertently teaching students to use critical concepts and techniques to maintain their most deep-seated prejudices and irrational habits of thought by making them appear more rational and putting their opponents on the defensive), and that of "dismissal" (the student rejects the subject either as sophistry or in favor of some supposed alternative — feeling, intuition, faith, higher consciousness, ...).

Students, much as we might sometimes wish it, do not come to us as "blank slates" upon which we can inscribe the inference-drawing patterns, analytic skills, and truth-facing motivations we value. Students studying critical thinking at the university level have highly developed belief systems buttressed by deep-seated uncritical, egocentric, and sociocentric habits of thought by which they interpret and process their experiences, whether academic or not, and place them into some larger perspective. Consequently, most students find it easy to question simply, and *only*, those beliefs, assumptions, and inferences they have already "rejected", and very difficult, often traumatic, to question those in which they have a personal, egocentric investment.

I know of no way of teaching critical thinking so that the student who learns to recognize questionable assumptions and inferences only in "egocentrically neutral" cases, *automatically* transfers those skills to the egocentric and sociocentric ones. Indeed, I think the opposite more commonly occurs. Those students who already have sets of biased assumptions, stereotypes, egocentric and sociocentric beliefs, taught to recognize "bad" reasoning in "neutral" cases (or in the case of the "opposition") become *more* sophistic rather than less so, more skilled in rationalizing and intellectualizing their biases. They are then *less* rather than *more* likely to abandon them if they later meet someone who questions them. Like the religious believer who studies apologetics, they now have a variety of critical moves to use in defense of their *a priori* egocentric belief systems.

This is not the effect, of course, we wish our teaching to have. Virtually all teachers of critical thinking want their teaching to have a global "Socratic" effect, making major inroads into the everyday reasoning of the student, enhancing to some degree that healthy, practical, and skilled skepticism one naturally and rightly associates with the *rational* person. Therefore, students need experience in seriously questioning previously held beliefs and

assumptions and in identifying contradictions and inconsistencies in personal and social life. When we think along these lines and get glimpses into the everyday lives and habits of our students, most of us probably experience moments of frustration and cynicism.

I don't think the situation is hopeless, but I do believe the time has come to raise serious questions about how we now teach critical thinking. Current methods, as I conceive them, often inadvertently encourage critical thinking in the "weak" sense. The most fundamental and questionable assumption of these approaches (whether formal or informal) is that critical thinking can be successfully taught as a battery of technical skills which can be mastered more or less one-by-one without giving serious attention to self-deception, background logic, and multi-categorical ethical issues.

The usual scenario runs something like this. One begins with some general pep-talk on the importance of critical thinking in personal and social life. In this pep-talk one reminds students of the large scale social problems created by prejudice, irrationality, and sophistic manipulation. Then one launches into a discussion of the difference between arguments and non-arguments and students are led to believe that, without any further knowledge of contextual or background considerations, they can learn to analyze and evaluate arguments by parsing them into, and examining the relation between, "premises" and "conclusions". (The "non-arguments" presumably do not need critical appraisal.) To examine that relationship, students look for formal or informal fallacies, conceived as atomically determinable and correctable "mistakes". Irrationality is implied thereby to be reducible to complex combinations of atomic mistakes. One roots it out, presumably, by rooting out the atomic mistakes, one-by-one.

Models of this kind do not effectively teach critical thought. This atomistic "weak sense" approach and the questionable assumptions underlying it should be contrasted with an alternative approach specifically designed to avoid its pitfalls.

This alternative view rejects the idea that critical thinking can be taught as a battery of atomic technical skills independent of egocentric beliefs and commitments. Instead of "atomic arguments" (a set of premises and a conclusion) it emphasizes argument *networks* (world views); instead of evaluating atomic arguments it emphasizes a more dialectical and dialogical approach. Arguments need to be appraised in relation to counter-arguments. One can make moves that are very difficult to defend or ones that strengthen one's position. An atomic argument is merely a limited set of moves within a more complex set of moves reflecting a variety of logically significant engagements in the world. Argument exchanges are means by which contesting points of view are brought into rational conflict. A line of reasoning can rarely be refuted by an individual charge of fallacy, however well supported. The charge of fallacy is a move; however it is rarely logically compelling; it virtually never refutes a point of view. This approach more accurately reflects our own and the student's experience of argument exchanges.

By immediately introducing students to these more “global” problems in the analysis and evaluation of reasoning, we help them more clearly see the relationship between world views, forms of life, human engagements and interests, what is at stake (versus what is at issue), how what is at issue is often itself at issue, how the unexpressed as well as the expressed may be significant, the difficulties of judging credibility, and the ethical dimension in most important and complex human problems.

◆ *Some Basic Theory: World Views, Forms of Life*

Here are some basic theoretical underpinnings for a “strong sense” approach:

- 1) As humans we are — first, last, and always — engaged in inter-related life projects which, taken as a whole, define our personal “form of life” in relation to broader social forms. Because we are engaged in some projects rather than others, we organize or conceptualize the world and our place in it in somewhat different terms than others do. We have somewhat different *interests*, somewhat different *stakes*, and somewhat different *perceptions* of what is so. We make somewhat different assumptions and reason somewhat differently from them.
- 2) We also express to ourselves and others a more articulated view of how we see things, a view only partially consistent at best with the view presupposed by and reflected in our behavior. We have, then, *two* world views overlapping each other, one implicit in our activity and engagements, another implicit in how we describe our behavior. One must recognize contradictions between these conflicting views to develop as a critical thinker and as a person in good faith with one’s self. Both traits are measured by the degree to which we can articulate what we live and live what we articulate.
- 3) Reasoning is an essential and defining operation presupposed by all human acts. To reason is to use elements in a logical system to generate conclusions. Conclusions may be explicit in words or implicit in behavior. Sometimes reasoning is explicitly cast into the form of an argument, sometimes not. However, since reasoning presupposes a system or systems of which it is a manifestation, the full implications of reasoning are rarely (if ever) exhausted or displayed in arguments in which they are cast. Arguments presuppose questions at issue. Questions at issue presuppose a point of view and interests at stake. Different points of view frequently differ, not simply in answers to questions, but in the appropriate formulations of questions themselves.
- 4) When we, including those of us who are logicians, analyze and evaluate arguments important to us (this includes all arguments which, if accepted, would strengthen or weaken beliefs to which we have committed ourselves in word or deed), we do so in relationship to prior belief-commitments. The

- best we can do to move toward increased objectivity is to bring to the surface the set of beliefs, assumptions, and inferences from the perspective of which our analysis proceeds, and to see explicitly the dialectical nature of our task, the critical moves we might make at various points, and the various possible counter-moves to them.
- 5) Skill in analyzing and evaluating reasoning is skill in reciprocity, the ability to reason within more than one point of view, understanding strengths and weaknesses through comprehending the objections that could be raised at various points in the arguments by alternative points of view.
 - 6) Laying out elements of reasoning in deductive form is useful, not principally to see whether a "mistake" had been made, but to see critical moves one might make to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the reasoning in relation to alternatives.
 - 7) Since vested interest typically influences perception, assumptions, reasoning in general, and specific conclusions, we must become aware of the nature of our own and others' engagements to recognize strengths and weaknesses in reasoning.
 - a) Only when we recognize that a given argument reflects or, if justified, would serve a given interest can we, by imaginatively entertaining a competing interest, construct an opposing point of view and so an opposing argument or set of arguments. By developing both arguments dialectically, we can see their strengths and weaknesses.
 - b) Arguments are not things-in-themselves but constructions of specific people who must further interpret and develop them, for example, to answer objections. By recognizing the interests typically correlated with given arguments, we can often challenge the credibility of others' premises by alluding to discrepancies between what they say and what they do. In doing so we force them to critique their own behavior in line with the implications of their arguments, or to abandon the line of argument. There are a variety of critical moves they may make upon being so challenged.
 - c) By reflecting on interests as implicit in behavior, one can often much more effectively construct the assumptions most favorable to those interests. Once formulated, one can begin to formulate alternative competing assumptions. Both can then be more effectively questioned and arguments for and against them can be entertained.
 - 8) The total set of factual claims that buttress a world view, hence the various arguments generated by it, is usually indefinitely large and often involves shifting conceptual problems and implicit judgments of value (especially shifts in how to formulate the "facts"). The credibility of an individual claim often depends on the credibility of many other claims; very often the claims themselves are very difficult to verify "directly" and atomically. Very often then, to analyze an argument, we must judge

relative credibility. These judgments are more plausible if they take into account the vested interests and the track records of the sources.

- 9) The terms in which an argument is cast often reflects the biased interest of the person who formulated it. Calling into question the very concepts used or the use to which they are put is an important critical move. To become adept at this, we must practice recognizing how social groups systematically and selectively move back and forth between usage in keeping with the logic of ordinary language and that which accords with the ideological commitments of the group (and so conflicts with ordinary use). Consider the ways many people use key terms in current international debate — say, ‘freedom fighter’, ‘liberator’, ‘revolutionary’, ‘guerrilla’, ‘terrorist’ — and reflect on:
- a) what is implied by the *logic* of the terms apart from the usage of any particular social group (say U.S. citizens, Germans, Israelis, Soviets);
 - b) what is implied by the usage of a particular group with vested interests (say, U.S. citizens, Germans, Israelis, Soviets); and
 - c) the various historical examples that suggest inconsistency in the use of these by that group, and how this inconsistency depends on fundamental, typically unexpressed, assumptions. Through such disciplined reflection, one can identify predictable, self-serving inconsistencies.

◆ *Multi-Dimensional Ethical Issues*

Teaching critical thinking in the strong sense helps students develop reasoning skills precisely in those areas where they are most likely to have egocentric and sociocentric biases. Such biases exist most profoundly in areas of their identities and vested interests. Their identities and interests are linked in turn to their unarticulated world views. One’s unarticulated world view represents the person that one *is* (the view implicit in the principles which guide one’s actions). One’s articulated view represents the person that one *thinks* one is (the view implicit in the principles used to *justify* one’s actions). Excepting honest mistakes, the contradictions or inconsistencies between these two represent the degree to which one reasons and acts in bad faith or self-deceptively.

Multi-dimensional issues involving proposed ethical justifications for behavior are ideal for teaching critical thinking. Most political, social, and personal issues which most concern us and students are of this type — abortion, nuclear energy, nuclear arms, the nature of national security, poverty, social injustices of various kinds, revolution and intervention, socialized medicine, government regulation, sexism, racism, problems of love and friendship, jealousy, rights to private property, rights to world resources, faith and intuition versus reason, and so forth.

Obviously one can cover only a few such issues, and I believe that the advantages lie in covering fewer of them deeply and intensively. I am certain-

ly unsympathetic to inundating the student with an array of truncated arguments set up to “illustrate” atomic fallacies.

Since I teach in the United States, and since the media here as everywhere else in the world reflects, and most students have internalized, a profoundly nationalistic bias, I focus one segment of my course on identifying national bias in the news. In doing this, students must face issues that, to be approached dialectically, require them to discover that mainstream “American” reasoning and the mainstream “American” point of view on world issues is not the only dialectical possibility. I identify as mainstream American views any which have significant support with the Democratic and Republican parties. This segment of the course serves a number of purposes:

- 1) Though most students have internalized much media “propaganda”, so that their egos are partly identified with it, they are neither totally taken in by that propaganda nor incapable of beginning to systematically question it.
- 2) The students become more adept at constructing and more empathetic toward alternative lines of reasoning as the *sociocentric assumptions* of mainstream media coverage come more and more to the surface — for example, the assumptions that:
 - a) the U.S. government, compared to other governments, is more committed to ideals,
 - b) U.S. citizens have more energy, more practical know-how, and more common sense than others;
 - c) the world as a whole would be better off (freer, safer, more just) if the U.S. had *more* power;
 - d) U.S. citizens are less greedy and self-deceived than other peoples;
 - e) U.S. lives are more important than the lives of other peoples.
- 3) Explicitly addressing and constructing dialectical alternatives to political and national as well as professional and religious “party lines” and exploring their contradictions enables students to draw parallels to their personal and their peer groups’ “party lines” and the myriad contradictions in their talk and behavior. Such “discoveries” explicitly and dramatically forge the beginnings of a commitment to developing the “critical spirit”, the foundation for “strong sense” skills and insights.

◆ *A Sample Assignment and Results*

It is useful to provide one sample assignment to indicate how my concerns and objectives can be translated into assignments. The following was assigned last semester (1984) as a take-home mid-term examination, approximately six weeks into the semester. The students were allowed three weeks to complete it.

The objective of this mid-term is to determine the extent to which you understand and can effectively use the basic concepts of the course: world view, assumptions, concepts (personal, social, implicit in language, technical), evidence (empirical claims), implications, consistency, conclusions, premises, questions-at-issue.

You are to view and critically and sympathetically analyze two films: *Attack on the Americas* (a right-wing think-tank film alleging Communist control of Central American revolutionaries) and *Revolution or Death* (a *World Council of Church's* film defending the rebels in El Salvador). Two incompatible world views are presented in those films. After analyzing the films and consulting whatever background material you deem necessary to understand the two world views, construct a dialogue between two of the most intelligent defenders of each perspective. They should each demonstrate skills in explicating the basic assumptions, the questionable claims, ideas, inferences, values, and conclusions of the other side. Both should be able to make some concessions to the other point of view without conceding their basic positions. Each should be able to summarize some of the inferences of the other side and raise questions about those inferences (e.g., "You appear to me to be arguing in the following way. You assume that You ignore that And then you conclude that").

In the second part of your paper, write a third-person commentary on the debate, indicating which point of view is in the strongest position logically in your view. Argue for your position; do not simply assert it. Give good reasons for rejecting or accepting whatever aspects of the two world views you reject or accept. Make clear to the reader how your position reflects your world view. The dialogue should have at least 14 exchanges (28 entries) and the commentary should be at least 4 typewritten pages.

A variety of background materials were made available, including the U.S. State Department "White Paper", an open letter from the late Archbishop of San Salvador, a copy of the Platform of the El Salvador rebels, and numerous current newspaper and magazine articles and editorials on the issue. The students were encouraged to discuss and debate the issue outside of class (which they did). The students were expected to document how the major newspapers were covering the story (e.g., that accounts favorable to the State Department position tended to be given front page coverage while accounts critical of the State Department position, say from *Amnesty International*, were de-emphasized on pages 9 through 17). There was also discussion of internal inconsistencies within the accounts.

Many of the students came to see one or more of the following points:

- 1) That in a conflict such as this the two sides disagree not only on conclusions but even about how the issue ought to be put. One side will put the issue, for example, in terms of the dangers of a communist takeover, the other in terms of the need for people to over-throw a repressive regime. One will see the fundamental problem as caused by Cuban and Soviet intervention, the other side by U.S. intervention. Each side will see the other as begging the essential question.

- 2) That a debate on how to word the issue will often become a debate on a series of factual questions. This debate will be extended into a series of historical questions. Each side will typically see the other as suppressing evidence. Those favorable to the Duarte regime, for example, will see the other side as suppressing evidence of the extent of communist involvement in El Salvador. Those favorable to the rebels will see the other side as suppressing evidence of government complicity in terrorist acts of the right. There will be disagreement about which side is committing most of the violent acts.
- 3) That these factual disagreements will at some point or another lead to a shifting of ground to *conceptual disagreements*: which acts should be called 'terrorist' which 'revolutionary', and which 'acts of liberation'. This debate will at some point become a debate about *values*, about which acts are reprehensible or justified. Very often the acts which from one perspective seem required by circumstances will be morally condemned by the other.
- 4) That at various points in the discussion the debate will become "philosophical" or "anthropological", involving broad issues concerning "the nature of man" and "the nature of human society". The side supporting the government tends to take a philosophical position that plays down the capacity of "mass man" to make rational and appropriate judgments in its own behalf, at least when under the influence of outside agitators and subversives. The other side tends to be more favorable to "mass man" and suspicious of our government's capacity or right to make what appear to them to be decisions that should be left to the people. Each side thinks the other begs important questions, suppresses evidence, stereotypes, uses unjustified analogies, uses faulty causal reasoning, misuses concepts, and so forth.

Such assignments help students appreciate the kinds of moves that typically occur in everyday argument, put them into perspective, and construct alternative arguments, precisely because they more clearly see how arguments develop in relation to each other and so in relation to a broader perspective. They give students more practical insight into the motivated nature of argument "flaws" than the traditional approach. They are therefore better able to anticipate them and more sensitive to the special probing moves that need to be made. Finally, they are much more sensitive (than I believe they would be under most "weak sense" approaches) to the profound ethical consequences of ego-serving reasoning, and to the ease with which we can fall prey to it. If we can indeed accomplish something like these results, then there is much to be said for further work and development of "strong sense" approaches. What I have described here is, I hope, the beginning of such work.

Postscript

In the five years since I wrote this paper, I have become increasingly convinced that if students are to learn to think critically in a strong sense, they must be exposed to critical thinking over an extended period of time, over

years not months. To think critically in a strong sense is to become a critical person. It is to develop particular values and traits of mind in addition to particular skills and abilities. If we are committed to critical thinking, we must then be committed to major reform of education, for most schooling is didactic in nature and discourages rather than encourages critical thinking and the values and dispositions essential to it.

As time passes it becomes increasingly apparent that the field of critical thinking is only now beginning to develop. If critical thinking is to be encouraged in every discipline, every discipline must reconceptualize the manner in which students acquire its knowledge. Knowledge and thought are in a reciprocal relation. The traits of mind essential to critical thinking should be fostered in every subject area or domain, not just in selected assignments.