

## CRITICIZING WITH CARE

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My first response in reading this paper was that I've been set up! Here I am, reading along, feeling myself being gently (and willingly) sucked into a problem — no, not just a problem, a *paradox* — by compellingly clear and straightforward argument...and suddenly realizing that I am at the same time losing ground for any legitimacy as a respondent. On the one hand, a “respondent” is clearly a critic, someone charged with the task of initial criticism, or at least I think that is what our tradition within the PES has made of the role, and I would like to offer the best criticism I can muster. On the other hand, the person whose argument I am supposed to criticize is a friend, and a feminine-gendered friend at that, someone with whom I value my relationship and to whom I would sincerely like to offer whatever support possible. The paradox that I am acquiescing to, however, says that I cannot do both, that the two desires are in necessary conflict with each other, in some instances anyway. I am thus apparently being placed in the very bind that the paper revolves around. In fact, it is even worse than this in a bizarre, meta-”catch 22” sort of way: if “support” includes agreeing with the argument, the paper effectively pre-criticizes anything I can say in the role of critic, leaving *me* in serious need of support.

There's something wrong here. It should be clear, however, that I am not blaming Audrey for setting me up: she gave me a choice of papers to respond to, and I *chose* this one. Nor am I claiming that Ann intentionally set me up. Indeed, as I had yet to see the actual final five pages until I got to New Orleans, you could say that she gave me an opportunity to imagine and rewrite the conclusion in such a way as to avoid the bind. I was sorely tempted by this way out, but I chose not to do that, at least not directly. What is wrong here is not something to be laid at the feet of the people involved (or my choices), but something that is inherent in the issue itself that Diller is struggling with. This issue *is* an important, complex one for all of us who are called on to play the role of critic (whether with regard to students or colleagues), and I chose to respond to this paper because I could confidently predict that whatever Ann would say about the issue would help me in my own thinking about it. I also chose not to imagine a more congenial concluding five pages because I did not want to undercut the way in which she has so effectively captured the difficulty for us, weaving her way dialectically through three sharply differentiated positions that I suspect we all take perhaps too uncritically at various points in time (certainly I recognize myself in all of the positions).

Instead, what I think is wrong here follows more from artificial constraints of the situation — constraints of space on explanation, elaboration, exemplification, expression. This is not meant as a criticism of Diller or her insights into the problem, but rather as an offer of support to her in her efforts to grapple with the problem and to do so publicly for our benefit. Because whatever she says must be said in 4500 words or less, she has given us a very lean, stripped-down, abstract articulation of the paradox, of how it might be manifested (or avoided) in practice, and of the different approaches to solving it which are found wanting. Her positive suggestions are then also necessarily compressed into a “reconfiguration” of the problem via a fuller appreciation of the ethics of care and how it might help us better appreciate the role of community in this context. I shall thus focus my efforts on enriching what I think we need to keep in mind for full appreciation of the conditions under which the paradox would and perhaps would *not* — present itself within our pedagogical practice, an enrichment which I hope will identify the kinds of things Diller herself might have liked to address, given the opportunity.

The question I have already alluded to in my introduction, put more generally, suggests the kind of enrichment I would like to put on the table for discussion. In short, who is caught by this paradox, under what kind of circumstances? What must we be assuming about the participants within it for it to be real and for the different approaches to it, sketched by Diller, to be inadequate? For example, are we talking about the relationship between students and teachers, as implied by language in parts of Diller's paper, or about criticism in the abstract between just about anybody, as implied elsewhere? What, if anything, would constitute the relevant difference? If we're intending to focus on the former relationship, as I think Diller intends us to do, what kind of students are we talking about? In particular, does it matter what age they are or how their performance might be accurately described in terms of some criteria of competency and/or excellence in the form of learning under question? Similarly, does it matter how the teacher is situated vis a vis a particular student — and the group within which both are functioning — in terms of dimensions of power and privilege, such as gender, race, class, etc.? And what must we know about the particular psycho-pedagogical history of the relationship under scrutiny for us to feel confident about rejecting — in *this* circumstance — any of the approaches Diller finds unsatisfactory?

Then, with these kinds of questions in mind about the subjects involved, I think we need to seek further enrichment by pressing for more specification on both sides of the paradox. We need to ask in a more contextualized way what might count as both “educational criticism” and “nurturance.” Without more clarity, in particular instances, about what kinds of behavior are being picked out by these notions, we have little to warrant our acceptance of either as a legitimate intention, nor our worry that they might be at odds with each other. Without this, we run the risk of debating about straw students, straw teachers, and straw relationships between them.

For reasons of space I am going to focus only on the side of the paradox that involves the notion of “educational criticism.” Although it is clear that Diller thinks we need to “insist” on it — and thus will not give up on this side of the paradox — surprisingly little is said about this notion in the paper. Instead, we are left to work from some examples in an opening quotation from Morgan, ostensibly identifying “challenging, calling into question, posing contrary evidence, developing counterexamples, and detecting contradiction and other forms of inconsistency and inadequacy in the students,” and some passing mention of the “tasks of teaching” as requiring us “to make real demands upon students, to hold them to standards of achievement” (though it's not entirely clear whether Diller accepts this claim by the user of the “for your own good” model). Only in the beginning of the second half of the paper (in conjunction with her “insistence” on requiring it) does Diller tell us that her understanding of criticism entails that it “is taken to be reflective of care for the work of serious inquiry, care for the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.”

I worry that there may be some equivocation (or at least definitional looseness) going on here, and that this contributes — or *can* contribute in some contexts—to some of the substance of the paradox. That is, especially the examples from Morgan and, to a large extent, the further intentions to “make real demands upon students” or “hold them to standards” seem to me to turn on what I would call the negative mode of criticism, the “finding fault” sense. On the other hand, when we focus more on promoting “serious inquiry” and the “pursuit of knowledge and understanding,” we are surely *also* concerned with a more positive mode of criticism, with the on-going enhancement of relevant skills, dispositions, and preparation for appropriating as one's own some form of knowledge or mode of activity. Of course, part of the latter can be subsumed under the former; but, *not all*: acknowledging *good* moves in an argument and confirming why they are good, e.g., pays homage to the same standards as pointing out inconsistencies and contradictions, and, it could be argued, sometimes more effectively locates inquiry, knowledge, and understanding as things more interpersonal than monological (part of Diller's preferred reconfiguration of the problem).

But why does this possible equivocation matter? It matters in several ways. First, at least some of the weight of the paradox — perhaps that which captures our attention so readily — depends on emphasizing the negative mode of criticism in order to contrast it more vividly with nurturance. And

certainly to the extent that this is what we have in mind exclusively, or even predominantly, the paradox gains strength. But to the extent that we can effectively focus our attention and energy on the positive mode, the paradox seems to me to lose strength. Indeed, when we emphasize this mode, the “for your own good” rationale seems less hypocritical (and, I suspect, is so understood by students), and the “never criticize” admonition can be understood as having the purpose of moving us away from the negative sense. Second, we can see more clearly not only that we often tend to be better at the negative tasks of criticism — this is sometimes almost equated with being a “good philosopher” — but also that we receive very little training in anything other than this. (I painfully learned in graduate school that, in philosophy, a “critical mass” is three units: get more than two philosophers together and they are always — and only critical. Note that this aphorism works only because we *assume* the negative mode of criticism.) As long as this is true, and our students perpetuate it, we will have trouble working our way out of the paradox.

A third reason for paying attention to the risk of this equivocation also helps us see that there is a sliding scale here that is not merely conceptual but also psychological: whether some particular pedagogical behavior comes down more positive or negative depends on the perceptions of the particular student involved as well as the intentions of the teacher. Here the importance of context for interpreting this paradox simply cannot be overstated. Whether a given student will interpret some act of criticism from a teacher as positive or negative — and thus more or less undermining of personal support — depends on a multitude of continually changing and interacting factors that can probably only be recognized in the actual context of reflective practice. These factors include (but are not limited to) such things as the personality of the student, the “mesh” between this personality and that of the teacher, the student’s current level of competence in the matter at hand, who else is involved and the extent to which they function as significant others to the student for whatever different reasons, the history of interaction of a given student with both other teachers and this one, the balance of recent negative/positive criticism, and, last but not least, whether a student’s moral expectations vis a vis the teacher are framed by an ethics of care or an ethics of respect, etc. Some students, sometimes, will be devastated by any mode of criticism from anyone; others, perhaps almost always, demand and thrive on it. Given careful attention to all these factors, some instances of the paradox, perhaps *most*, may vanish; however, it is also likely that some will remain, and may even seem more intractable.

A final point about paying attention to different modes of criticism and their contextual fluidity is highlighted by Diller’s own positive suggestions at the end of her paper (or at least what I understand of them at this point). She proposes that working on how students and teachers can together create and maintain a *community* that is both one of *support* and one of *inquiry* dissolves the paradox in ways qualitatively different from the positions she rejects. I certainly do not want to undermine this direction of thinking about pedagogy: I think there is far too little of it in both theory and practice. And I agree that thinking in these terms does transform many of our established pet pedagogical problems (to say nothing of transforming education!). But I think our enthusiasm also needs balancing with some realistic caution — caution about what can happen to criticism in this context. Thus, on the one hand, care must be taken to ensure that within such a community not only the teacher but also all the students understand and appreciate the different modes of criticism and *know how to* work together to maximize the use of whatever criticism that is most supportive of individuals and the group. There is, in my experience, no reason to think that it is any easier for students to avoid the paradox with each other than it is for the teacher, with particular students. (Perhaps less: at least graduate students seem often inclined to cut their disciplinary teeth by biting their fellow students!) On the other hand, care must also be taken that the teacher’s role within the group is such that it does not simply camouflage, or worse, repress, the paradox. To the extent that “last resort” appeals to the teacher-as-expert by the group pulls for negative criticism of some person or persons within the group, “orchestrating a community” can hide use of critical authority in much the same way that “discovery learning” can turn into “time-lapsed indoctrination.” Criticizing *with care* *requires* a sophisticated care for criticism.

