The Limits of Intractability

Jon Fennell
Hillsdale College

Dale Turner clearly identifies the central question raised in his essay: "The issue concerns the specific sets of expectations attached to the word ["argument"] in philosophical contexts and especially in the developing conversation of the [Critical Thinking] movement." In what follows I would like to show that Turner unnecessarily jettisons certain expectations traditionally associated with argumentation and critical thinking and, further, that in doing so he fosters the very "misology" ("hatred of reasoning and argument") that it is the purpose of his revised conceptions to avoid.

The central concept of Turner's essay is "deep disagreement." Turner borrows this concept from the "Wittgensteinian view" of Robert Fogelin who insists that interlocutors must share a context of "commitments and understandings, including much about what counts as a resolution of disagreement" in order for effective argumentation to occur. Deep disagreement results from the absence of "a common core of framework propositions" that makes argument possible. In Turner's repeated use of "normal" to designate those conditions where a common core of framework propositions *is* present, we recognize another source of Fogelin's views, namely, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. More than a quarter century ago extensive work regarding the implications of Kuhn for rationality and critical thinking took place in philosophy of education, including a 1977 Philosophy of Education Society essay by Harvey Siegel and a subsequent exchange in *Educational Theory* between him and a pair of authors, one of whom sits before you today.

Turner notes that it is "damaging" to characterize as argument that which makes argument possible, namely, the background of shared understandings. This is damaging because overlooking the distinctive character and decisive influence of the shared world that makes argumentation possible leads to unrealistic expectations regarding what critical thinking (the "argument form") can achieve. To hold such expectations, and then learn of disputes marked by deep disagreement in regard to whose resolution critical thinking is impotent, will cause people to become frustrated and develop a disdain, born of disappointment, for reason and argument. To avoid this, Turner recommends that in teaching critical thinking we (1) reduce expectations regarding the effective domain of its use, (2) expand the meaning of rationality beyond evaluation of arguments to include respect for factors that can cause us to "change our minds" but "cannot be captured epigrammatically," (3) reveal the existence and significance of what makes agreement possible, and (4) linking his proposal to the dominant orthodoxy of our time, demonstrate the existence of the background constituents of agreement by way of a multicultural curriculum that develops "a critical and imaginative understanding of difference."

From his "Wittgensteinian" starting point Turner moves in precisely the wrong direction. Turner is correct in tracing intractability in argumentation, especially

when argumentation is honest and earnest, to disagreement at a fundamental level. ("Fundamental" refers to background commitments and understanding — "framework propositions" — that are involved in deciding what counts as resolution of an issue, and hence are indispensable to genuine agreement.) But, it is one thing to reach agreement *qua* resolution of a question; it is quite another to reach agreement on what is at issue in reaching such resolution. It is indeed unrealistic to expect of critical thinking that it can lead to resolution of all the difficult questions of our day. It is not unrealistic, however, to expect critical thinking to illuminate what must be resolved in order for agreement to occur. One might respond to this distinction by alleging that, in the difficult cases with which Turner is concerned, disagreement exists at a level so fundamental that it is impossible to share an understanding regarding what must be addressed in order for the question to be settled. The ultimate move along this tack is the assertion that we lack (shared) grounds for being rational, a claim that is an instance of performative contradiction, and hence incoherent. Persons engaged in debate agree on much more than they disagree, including that there is a point to communicating with one another, they owe each other good reasons, and recourse to reason is practically and morally justified. Granted, there may be "deep disagreement" that inhibits resolution of the question with which they are concerned. There is nevertheless important work for critical thinking to do. For example, Bob Ennis, soon after *Roe vs. Wade*, declared that at the heart of the abortion debate was whether the fetus is a human being. Critical analysis of a similar sort is possible for difficult matters such as the intelligent design controversy that for Turner is the paradigmatic case of the intractable issue. Intractable argument may even lead to common ground on matters not originally recognized.

Turner's statement that "contexts of deep disagreement undermine the very possibility of argument" is, then, ambiguous. The statement might mean that there exists a chasm that makes impossible any fruitful discussion. On the other hand, it might mean that there exist underlying disagreements that, until they are resolved, will inhibit resolution of the issue. Note that, under the second possibility, the parties arrive, rationally, at identification of the matters that need to be addressed before they can productively move on to the larger question. When one or both parties cannot or will not move in the direction outlined by the second possibility, it is more useful to speak of absence of critical spirit or lack of critical acumen than it is to refer to intractability. It is the business of critical thinking pedagogy to defeat these shortcomings — by teaching the skills of rational deliberation as well as the dispositions without which these skills will not be used or, if they are used, will not be used fairly and well.

Turner is correct in stating that we ought to pay attention to expectations regarding the role and effectiveness of critical thinking. If the student at the outset believes that critical thinking is capable of resolving any and all questions, let us rectify such a view. But, contrary to what is suggested by Turner, we ought to heighten and *increase* our expectations of critical thinking. While critical thinking, like any tool, has its limitations, there is much it can accomplish. Among the matters it can clarify is its own limitations.[1]

10.47925/2006.233

Turner worries that enthusiastic endorsement of confident critical thinking will, due to disappointment regarding its capacity to resolve the most important questions, lead to misology. But careful teaching will prevent disappointment. We do face a danger, but it is in fact the opposite of what worries Turner. Critical thinking can be proud of its capacity to reveal within intractable questions what is at issue. Imagine, in contrast, the reaction of the budding enthusiast of critical thinking who, following Turner, learns that in the face of the most important questions there is little or no point to argument, and that such disputes are grounded in a realm impervious to critical examination. Distrust and hatred of argument is more likely to develop among those who believe that critical thinking has no rightful say in regard to the decisive factors driving human behavior than it is among practitioners who understand that critical thinking is incapable of resolving all questions, but is able to tell disputants what must be addressed when they are willing and able to proceed.

Allow me to close with several points deserving fuller development:

1. Critical thinking does depend upon initiation and training, but this no more deserves apology than does the fact that eating is necessary in order to have moral and spiritual experience. Within philosophy of education, recognition of the enabling conditions for critical thinking has long coexisted with respect for its real and potential achievements.

2. To say that reaching agreement depends on persons sharing initiation and training and, more broadly, a "framework" of understanding, is ambiguous. We can acknowledge that (a) agreement requires joint participation in a framework without granting (b) such participation inhibits critical examination of that framework. Turner's reduction of expectations follows from the latter, but he establishes only the former.

3. To say that critical thinking is a matter of giving reasons and evaluating arguments is not to say that this is *all* that it is. Our conception of rationality can include recognition, for example, of enabling dispositions without these needing to be subject to critical examination within particular arguments. Because they are, in fact, presupposed by critical thinking, it is scarcely the case that their influence must be labeled irrational. This is a red herring.

4. Finally, in referring to agreement, let us not speak of "intersubjectivity." Even for Wittgenstein something is the case.

We are in Professor Turner's debt for reminding us to be careful about the expectations we associate with critical thinking. Nevertheless, critical thinking is an indispensable tool that deserves both our enthusiasm and deepest commitment.

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1. As for pedagogical implications, contra Turner, vibrant and confident critical thinking would focus more on our similarities than on what makes us different. It might call for a prerequisite curriculum consisting of "cultural literacy," that is, one promoting a common vocabulary and understanding.

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