"The World *Well Found*": Critical Thinking in the Contact Zone

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Motivated by the desire to "reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing," Mary Louise Pratt defines "contact zones" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."[1] Inside such spaces, pedagogical encounters can be challenging on many different levels. Pratt refers to a revamped course on the Americas, for example, by saying "The very nature of the course put ideas and identities on the line."[2] She further explains, "Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom," even describing the latter positive experiences as "the joys of the contact zone."[3] While we might wonder whether all the students would necessarily see things this way, Pratt reassures us that "The sufferings and revelations were, at different moments to be sure, experienced by every student," immediately adding "No one was excluded, no one was safe."[4] In the last paragraph, she says that the commitment to design the course so that it was "the best site for learning that it can be" meant that the search for "the pedagogical arts of the contact zone"[5] would continue.

In this essay, I want to argue that inside the contact zone the cultivation of a certain conception of critical thinking, one where the critical thinker is "*appropriately moved by reasons*," should be one of these "pedagogical arts."[6] First articulated and then developed by Harvey Siegel, this approach to critical thinking makes explicit the connection between an acquired ability to identify and evaluate arguments, which Siegel calls "reason assessment," with a commitment to cultivate "certain attitudes, dispositions, habits of mind, and character traits," which he terms "critical spirit."[7] To be a critical thinker, in other words, is to assess arguments in a certain spirit with the goal of possessing good reasons that can inform and properly influence beliefs, desires, and actions.

To develop this argument, in the next section I closely examine a remarkable response essay that Richard Rorty wrote for the edited collection *Rorty and His Critics*. In it, Rorty abandons his deflationary stance towards epistemology in general, and in the face of a critique inspired by Donald Davidson's notion of "triangulation" accepts what he calls "the inescapability of the normative."[8] After putting this epistemological framework firmly in place, I open the next section with a brief discussion of Laurance Splitter's claim that establishing a "*community of inquiry* (CoI)" is the best pedagogical follow up to the normative demands of triangulation.[9] I then show why this needs to be supplemented with Siegel's version of critical thinking to enhance teaching and learning inside the contact zone.

RORTY'S CHANGE OF MIND

The first half of my title, "the World Well Found," is an allusion to the opening essay of Richard Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism*, "The World Well Lost."[10] In the introduction to the collection, Rorty explains that its contents are "attempts to draw consequences from a pragmatist theory about truth."[11] In the next line, however, he lets us down by saying, "This theory says that truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about."[12] In contrast to the truth, "The World Well Lost" examines the idea of "alternative conceptual frameworks," arguing that it is possible to describe specific parts of the world in different ways for different purposes.[13] The upshot is that any reference to the truth of "the world" in general could potentially fade away.

Contrary to "losing the world" in this fashion, I sympathize with Colin McGinn when he credits Gottlob Frege with nudging philosophy towards a greater appreciation of the problem of exactly how language constitutes and conveys meaning.[14] McGinn summarizes Frege's key distinctions neatly: "A sentence is a physical sequence, a statement is a human action, and a proposition is an abstract meaning."[15] What fascinated Frege, and the philosophers who followed him, was how all three of these were connected: how exactly did marks on a page or sound vibrations travelling through the air, located in a

social context, communicate meaning?

In the introduction to *Rorty and His Critics* Robert Brandom declares, "the primary focus of this volume is a set of core arguments concerning the nature of truth, objectivity, and reality."[16] The setup of the text, with Rorty adding a separate response essay to each individual contribution, encouraged both depth and focus from all the contributors. What makes the collection so noteworthy, however, is Rorty's response to the final essay by Bjørn Ramberg, wherein he changes his epistemological views in quite fundamental ways.

Ramberg opens his critique by offering a summary of "what Rorty calls representationalism."[17] According to Ramberg, this depends on "two problem-defining assumptions," which include thinking of knowledge as a "relation" between the mind and the world, and the related belief that some "descriptions" express that relation better than others.[18] It is worth pausing to note here that throughout his entire career Rorty associated these assumptions with a rigid and unhealthy metaphysical urge that should be abandoned.

In the first section of his essay, "Davidson in Rorty's dialectic," Ramberg claims that Rorty was critical towards both "Davidson's claims about the significance of the concept of truth," and "Davidson's account of the relation between the mental and the physical."[19] What this amounted to was that "For Davidson," according to Ramberg, "the notion of truth has great philosophical import," even being "the cornerstone of the very account of thought, language and agency that Rorty praises."[20] On the second criticism, Ramberg clarifies, "Rorty doubts that there is a "philosophically interesting" distinction to be drawn between the mental and the physical."[21]

To clarify his own contribution to the overall discussion, and to buttress Davidson's position to criticize Rorty's, Ramberg summarizes the focus of his own concerns this way:

> The point I care about is that it is possible to give Davidson's distinction between the vocabulary of propositional-attitude ascription—what I call the vocabulary of agency—and vocabularies of scientific explanation a reading, and a metaphilosoph-

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ical context, that renders it impervious to Rorty's criticisms.[22]

Central to the development of this "point," is that the "reading" and "metaphilosophical context" depend, in turn, upon "Davidson's doctrine of triangulation, which makes intentional ascriptions to be characterizations of patterns of causal interaction between interpreters in a world."[23] As Claudine Verheggen helpfully explains, however, these "patterns of causal interaction" mean that there are two triangles at work here: one rooted in "perceptual externalism," the other "linguistic" and therefore based in language.[24]

To explain what I think Ramberg is driving at here, and to fill out what exactly Davidsonian triangulation amounts to, I want to offer a concrete example that I hope will make things a little clearer. Imagine a grade five class is on a fieldtrip to the zoo. One of the students nudges to her friend, points and says, "Look at the ostrich!" Her friend looks at the bird and says, "They are really tall." Right at this moment the zookeeper happens to be walking by and she smiles and gently says to the girls "Actually that is an emu." The girls turn to the zookeeper and want to know what an emu is, and how she can tell the difference. The zookeeper then informs them that while ostriches and emus look alike and are both large flightless birds, the most important differences are that the emu is native to Australia and has three toes on each foot, while the ostrich is native to Africa and only has two toes. The girls laugh at the "toe" detail, and then thank the zookeeper as their teacher ushers the entire class along.

In this example, the discourse between the girls and the zookeeper is epistemologically meaningful, that is, the girls now possess knowledge that they did not possess before, because the situation fulfills all three sides of triangulation. On the first side is what Ramberg above calls "the vocabulary of propositional-attitude ascription," or, in his own terms, "agency."[25] When one of the girls points at the bird and gives it a name, she is exercising her capacity as an active agent to name a physical object in her perceptual field. However, she can only address what she sees in a sentence to another person, in this case her classmate, who represents the second side of the triangle, or what we can call "the wider community." The final side, however, is "the world," and here the zookeeper is in possession of relevant facts about emus and ostriches that

allows the girls to use the right words.

Davidson's big insight is that only all three sides of this proposed "triangle,"—an individual, a community, and the stubborn details of the world, working together simultaneously, can produce a linguistic proposition that is "meaningful" and therefore counts as knowledge. We would have no need of the terms "emu" and "ostrich," in other words, if we did not need to talk about them, and we would not need to talk about them unless we saw them. Ramberg's argument against Rorty is that triangulation sidesteps his concerns about representationalism, since as revealed in this example, it is not necessary to advance a knowledge claim in absolute epistemological terms. Instead, what is required is a *causal* justification that links all three sides of the triangle.

Remarkably, Rorty opens his reply to Ramberg by admitting "I find myself not only agreeing with what he says, but very much enlightened by it."[26] As Rorty sees it, the core of Ramberg's argument depends upon what Rorty calls "the inescapability of the normative."[27] What does this mean? When Rorty then admits that "a normative vocabulary is presupposed by any descriptive vocabulary," we can appreciate that things are really starting to shift. Rorty proceeds to accept and even endorse this very position when he goes on to say, "the inescapability of norms is the inescapability, for both describers and agents, of triangulating," since "none of the three corners of his process of triangulation can be what they are in independence of the other two."[28] Again, from my example, the girls can only see and point and talk about the "large flightless birds" called "emus" and "ostriches" because they can acquire a language to refer to them in ways that involve their own subjective capacity to describe, a community of other people, and the material details from "the world."

Recognizing how jarring all this may seem to his devoted readers, Rorty tries to clarify what all this meant for his overall philosophy when he says:

> Some readers may have noticed that Ramberg has persuaded me to abandon two doctrines which I have been preaching for years: that the notion of "getting things right" must be abandoned, and that "true of" and "refers to" are not word-

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> world relations. These readers may wish to know about the ramifications of these concessions to my "realist" opponents. How many of my previous positions—positions criticized by McDowell, Dennett and others in this volume—am I now forced to give up? Not many.[29]

I must admit, I just about fell out of my proverbial philosophical armchair when I first read this, since it seemed to me then (as it does now) that *everything* has changed for Rorty here in terms of his "previous positions." In contrast to his relentless criticism of epistemology as a representationalist desert, he is now treading water in an epistemological flood, since he now must include not only "rightness," but also "the truth" and "reference" within his own philosophical views.

Rorty even extends Davidson's approach beyond the perception of physical objects. In a parenthetical aside, he asks, "Can you get right something that does not exist?" and he answers "Sure. Thanks to advances in archaeology and epigraphy, for example, we know a lot more about Zeus than was known in the Renaissance."[30] This move expands "the world" side of Davidson's triangle to include a wide berth of ways that facts in general are generated. Students of philosophy who translate *eudaimonia* as "happiness" rather than "flourishing," for example, can be corrected, since "the world" in this context would include "scholarly opinion."

Rorty seems to understand this himself since on the next page he admits, "It was a mistake to locate the norms at one corner of the triangle—where my peers are—rather than seeing them as, so to speak, hovering over the whole process of triangulation."[31] Rorty basically admits here that his attempts to get his readers to accept his pragmatic re-descriptions actually failed from a normative standpoint to take "the world" properly into account. The "inescapability of the normative," then, is not just an academic insight. It can have real and serious consequences if ignored.[32]

As a brief aside to reinforce this essential last point, consider, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum's essay "The Professor of Parody: The Hip

Defeatism of Judith Butler," which reviews four of her influential books.[33] Nussbaum bluntly admits early on "It is difficult to come to grips with Butler's ideas, because it is difficult to figure out what they are."[34] Finding the prose "ponderous and obscure," the arguments drawing on "many contradictory concepts and doctrines," and the texts advancing "highly contestable interpretations," Nussbaum concludes that overall Butler's work "makes few definite claims."[35] Nussbaum's final verdict is that what she describes as Butler's "hip quietism" is a "bad response" to social and political issues, and at its worst, even "collaborates with evil" since it fails to offer any insights to be utilized for the social justice initiatives that Nussbaum takes as central.[36]

There are unavoidable and serious implications of Davidsonian triangulation for the contact zone. If Rorty was right to change his mind about the "inescapability" of certain norms that must be in place for discourse to be meaningful at all, then everyone inside the contact zone, even while fully acknowledging the differing life experiences that have shaped everyone, still must communicate, for better or worse, with one another. Nevertheless, for that communication to be meaningful, Davidsonian triangulation says that an agent must address another person with a vocabulary that employs referential terms that can be epistemologically located in a shared world. This means that a sizeable portion of the pedagogical attention inside the contact zone needs to be directed to these norms so that students can better understand and be understood, especially in the intellectually challenging and emotionally fraught encounters that Pratt describes.

NORMATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING

In his essay "Agency, Thought, and Language: Analytic Philosophy Goes to School," Splitter provides a thorough analysis of belief from the standpoint of Davidsonian triangulation. He insists that "claims to propositional knowledge involve assertions of belief," but this involves "grasping the distinction between what is claimed to be true and what is actually true."[37] This in turn raises the problem of how a single person can distinguish between the two. While Rorty throughout most of his work gave expression to the worry that we actually live in a philosophical hall of mirrors with no reliable way to get to what is

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"actually true," Splitter learns from Davidson's notion of triangulation the big conclusion that "a single thinker cannot understand (hold concepts about) the world—cannot even hold any beliefs about it (or themselves)-unless she is in a certain kind of interpretive or dialogical relationship with others."[38] For Splitter the necessity of this "interpretive or dialogical relationship with others" has definite and serious implications for how we might conceptualize the classroom:

> "The life of the mind," as I like to call it, is both enabled and enriched by enabling and enriching, in turn, the quality of the inter-personal relationships—not as some kind of curricular "add-on" or option, but as a key ingredient. The point is well-captured by taking seriously the notion of the classroom as a *community of inquiry* (CoI), in which dialogue—or "thinking out loud"—is the key mode of relating. The place, indeed the existence, of each member is bound up with her relationship to others.[39]

This is nicely put and importantly correct as far as it goes, but what is missing here from "the life of the mind" is the acknowledgement that "thinking out loud" will involve specific individuals employing reasons in a range of different contexts and purposes. In other words, while in the face of Davidsonian triangulation, Splitter rightly emphasizes the community and how inter-personal relationships can enable inquiry. I want to highlight the individual within that community who is struggling through those very inter-personal relationships to be a good critical thinker, someone who utilizes "thinking out loud" to the purpose of ultimately being "appropriately moved" by the quality of the reasons she comes to hold.

Of course, this begs the question, "What exactly is a reason?" and it should come as no surprise that the answer to this question has produced a lot of interesting answers. Aside from the well-worn funneling distinction between theoretical and practical reason, these include reasons as "psychological attitudes," "facts," "evidence," and "indicators of value."[40] Within each of these definitions there are key refinements that further nuance the relationship between an agent and her formulation and use of reasons in the living of her life.

For my purposes in terms of pedagogy inside the contact zone, I want to express my basic agreement with T.M. Scanlon's approach to reasons in *What We Owe to Each Other*.[41] Scanlon opens the first chapter by saying:

> I will take the idea of a reason as primitive. Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. "Counts in favor how?" one might ask. "By providing a reason for it" seems to be the only answer.[42]

What I find attractive about this "primitive" stance to reasons is that it is generously inclusive: it allows for the widest possible range of reasons on different topics, while paying attention to circumstances. Basically, a proposition is a reason if it "counts in favor" of another proposition. Reasons function this way whether we are talking about the Andromeda galaxy or our favorite Tom Hanks movie. I would like to think that this definition of reasons would be acceptable to everyone inside the contact zone, even to those who may be suspicious of the contours of critical thinking as an educational ideal.

Given "the inescapability of the normative," however, I also think it is important to recognize that the reasons we can give ought to be what Dancy describes as "grounded in features of the situation."[43] In other words, discussion of galaxies or movies require very different kinds of propositions to stand as reasons that can theoretically "count in favor" of other propositions. Sometimes this will mean that the critical thinker will need to be familiar with what Siegel calls "field-specific criteria of reasons assessment," but as he also points out, "many reasons and beliefs are not subject-specific."[44] In a later text, Dancy refines this insight by utilizing the term "practical shape" to better capture its meaning: "In talking about practical shape, I mean to be talking about the shape of the situation that confronts us, not about the shape of our thinking about that situation."[45] Of course, Davidson would say that both are needed, but Dancy's point is that for too long we have focused too much attention on "the shape of our thinking" and not enough on "the shape of the situation that confronts us." This point seems parallel to Rorty's admission regarding his own habit of leaning too hard on two sides of Davidson's triangle.

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If reasons are primitive in terms of "counting in favor of," and further, they need to have a definite "practical shape," then Davidsonian triangulation, I believe, leads straight to Siegel's conception of critical thinking. At the outset, I want to recognize that this conception, according to the authors of an introductory text, "has generated an enormous amount of literature within educational circles."[46] For my purposes, it is the relationship between the dual components of "reason assessment" and "critical spirit" that I believe is tantamount to the quality of the inter-personal exchanges inside the contact zone.[47] Every fall term I tell my students this joke: "what is the difference between ignorance and indifference?" The punchline is "I don't know, and I don't care." Siegel's definition of critical thinking not only aims to take these problems seriously, but it also sees them as intimately connected.

It is noteworthy that in his very first text Siegel defends critical thinking as an educational ideal in ways that I believe still have resonance inside the contact zone. He offers four basic "considerations" that are to count as "at least the beginning of a justification."[48] They include "Respect for students as persons," "Self-sufficiency and preparation for adulthood," "Initiation into the rational traditions," and finally "Critical thinking and democratic living."[49] It is not difficult to imagine how each of these has important corollaries inside the contact zone, especially given the difficult and intense encounters that Pratt describes. For example, it is relatively obvious and uncontroversial that regardless of their background or current commitments, all students deserve respect and to have their autonomy recognized, especially when they passionately disagree with others over questions of deep moral and political relevance. It is also not hard to imagine students who could realize that living in a healthy democracy not only tolerates but also needs to encourage active reflection and discussion on a raft of such perplexing issues.

Recall that Rorty wanted us to get rid of distinctions that he saw as implicated in bad forms of representationalism. Perhaps as philosophers of education inside the contact zone, we can do our part to show that epistemology does not need to remain stuck in outdated notions that made it seem so absolute, and at times even authoritarian, to Rorty. The good news is that he

has given us the insights from his own "change of mind" to enable this to happen. Following Siegel's "critical spirit," we could focus more on the intellectual virtues, such as honesty and openness and objectivity—virtues that enable us to clarify what we think we mean by listening to others and engaging with "the world." We could discuss the components of the "normative" at every relevant opportunity, so that students could come to not just see, but also internalize, the idea that a proposition is only "meaningful" if all three sides of the "triangle" are fulfilled. This would not only nudge them to talk to other people but would also help them appreciate the vastness and complexity of the world we share.

We should also be saying to our students that it is not enough that they find other people who agree with them and then call what they agree about a "perspective;" they should also press their ideas against the facts of "the world" broadly construed. Given the outright hostility and even aggressiveness of our current "cancel culture," it is more important than ever that people find ways to reflect and share inside a community that values different arguments. Here is another factor in favor of critical thinking: how else are students to address divisive topics like politics and religion unless they can really learn to listen to one another with respect while remaining in search of the best reasons for their considered points of view?

Let me sum up: Richard Rorty was right to change his mind about "the inescapability of the normative," thereby re-finding "the world." Inside the "contact zone" philosophers of education should strive to create a "*community of inquiry* (CoI)" where each member can take seriously the pedagogical goal of enhancing their capacity to be "critical thinkers." What this amounts to pedagogically is a commitment to helping students care about finding, assessing, and sharing the best of reasons with others.

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1 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991), 34.

2 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 39.

3 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 39.

4 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 39.

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5 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 40.

6 Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education*, (New York: Routledge), 2, (emphasis in original).

7 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 34 & 39.

8 Richard Rorty, "Response to Bjørn Ramberg," in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 370-371.

9 Laurence Splitter, "Agency, Thought, and Language: Analytic Philosophy Goes to School," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, no.4 (2011): 355.

10 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 3-18.

11 Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xiii.

12 Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xiii.

13 Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 3.

14 Colin McGinn, *Philosophy of Language: The Classics Explained* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

15 McGinn, *Philosophy of Language*, 3.

16 Robert B. Brandom, "Introduction," in *Rorty and His Critics*, x.

17 Bjørn Ramberg, "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson," in *Rorty and His Critics*, 351.

18 Ramberg, "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind.

19 Ramberg, "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind, 352.

20 Ramberg, "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind.

21 Ramberg, "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind, 353.

22 Ramberg, "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind.

23 Ramberg, "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind, 361.

24 Robert H. Meyers and Claudine Verheggen, *Donald Davidson's Triangulation*

Argument: A Philosophical Inquiry (London, UK: Routledge, 2016), 16 & 20.

25 Bjørn Ramberg, "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson," in *Rorty and His Critics*, 353.

26 Richard Rorty, "Response to Bjørn Ramberg," 370.

27 Rorty, "Response to Bjørn Ramberg," 370-71.

28 Rorty, "Response to Bjørn Ramberg," 372-374.

29 Rorty, "Response to Bjørn Ramberg," 375.

30 Rorty, "Response to Bjørn Ramberg."

31 Rorty, "Response to Bjørn Ramberg," 376.

32 Rorty, "Response to Bjørn Ramberg," 370-71.

33 Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody: The Cheap Defeatism of Judith Butler," *The New Republic* 220, no. 8 (1999): 37-45.

34 Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody, 38.

35 Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody, 38.

36 Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody, 45.

37 Splitter, "Agency, Thought, and Language: Analytic Philosophy Goes to School," 349.

38 Splitter, "Agency, Thought, and Language," 355.

39 Splitter, "Agency, Thought, and Language," 355 (emphasis in original).

40 See for example, Eric Wiland, *Reasons* (London, UK: Continuum, 2012).

41 T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

42 Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 17.

43 Jonathan Dancy, *Practical Reality* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52.

44 Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education*

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(New York: Routledge) 37.

45 Jonathan Dancy, *Practical Shape: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

46 Christopher Winch and John Gingell, *Philosophy of Education: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 46.

47 Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge) 34 & 39.

48 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 55.

49 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 55, 57, 59, & 60.