

Decentering and Reasoning

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Benjamin Endres, in his essay "Habermas and Critical Thinking," sets out a central problem for those of us who, having accepted the necessity of some non-relativist account of reasoning in general, are struck by the situational embeddedness of reasoning in particular. His essay offers the thoughts of Jurgen Habermas, who he takes to be engaged in the project of providing "a foundation for ethical theory," and various critical thinking theorists, particularly Richard Paul, who he characterizes as "trying to describe a particular kind of thought: thought that is in some ways better than everyday thinking." Despite the apparent difference between those two endeavors, Endres sees a crucial overlap between the two in that critical thinking theorists "implicitly or explicitly, invoke concepts similar to 'decentering' or the 'hypothetical attitude'"; and he sees Habermas as arguing that "a commitment to decenter is a necessary presupposition of genuine communication." Endres concludes: "Accounts of critical thinking must struggle to meet Habermas's original goals: they must do justice to a diversity of socially defined perspectives while providing a grounding for the evaluation of controversial problems."

The hypothetical attitude, or alternatively, decentering, is the second of three foundations that Endres sees Habermas to require in support of a "universal principle," taken to epitomize Habermas's solution to the problem of objectivity, and in support of the "evaluation of social norms." The first and third foundational supports are, respectively, "the production of cogent, consistent arguments," and "structures of the speech situation [be] immune to repression and inequality." Although rich in philosophical perplexity, these will remain undiscussed here. We focus on the crucial second:

the dialogical or procedural level of presupposition requires that people engaged in discussion about a problematic claim adopt a hypothetical attitude through which they consider the validity of claims regardless of their immediate needs in the situation. This hypothetical attitude requires that the participants in the argument step back from their personal perspective and consider the relevant issues critically.

Endres sees Habermas's second presupposition as grounded in the work of Kohlberg, who, according to Endres describes "a three stage progression in moral thinking from pre-conventional thinking about punishments and rewards, through conventional thinking about the norms of friends and society, to post-conventional thinking about universal rights and principles. Endres continues:

Since Habermas's theory requires that participants in argument consider only the force of reason by adopting a hypothetical attitude with respect to relevant claims, Kohlberg's post-conventional stage in which reasoning according to abstract principles becomes possible plays an important role in his theory.

The reason for this is quick to follow. On Endres' presentation of Habermas,

everyone is a product of their "life-world" or the cultural-linguistic traditions in which they participate. The lifeworld defines the norms at issue in any arguments...(and is constituted by three dimensions)...the objective world, which represents facts independent of human

thought and serves as a common reference for determining truth; the social world comprised of intersubjective relationships, and the subjective world of private experiences. For Habermas, the person who can differentiate between the three aspects of experience and the different perspectives they involve, achieves a 'decentered' understanding of the lifeworld. Decentering allows one to distinguish matters of truth, justice, and taste according to the objective, social and subjective views respectively. Decentering then, corresponds to Kohlberg's post-conventional moral stage where one is able to transcend personal needs and societal norms, to consider moral problems abstractly.

Would that it were so, and recent challenges to the Enlightenment so handily defeated; but first to the critical thinking connection.

Endres sees critical thinking to have the modest goal of moving thinkers towards objectivity. He sees Paul agreeing with Habermas that "thought is embedded in social history," and identifying, as critical thinkers, "those who avoid prejudice and bad habits of thought through reflection on themselves and their environment." Critical thinking thus involves "turning inward to examine one's own interests and the conceivable prejudicial effects they may have on a particular problem." Limiting his presentation of Paul to one early essay, Endres offers none of the technical detail elaborated in Paul's more recent works, where relying on, for example, the intellectual virtues, Paul offers contrasting concepts that indicate just what qualities the critical thinker is to exhibit, and offers strategies that help to develop such qualities in students.¹ But the details notwithstanding, Endres correctly sees Paul as offering a more pragmatic and less foundational version of the structure that Habermas requires, a bulwark of principle against the tides of social particularity and biasing personal interest (sociocentric and egocentric reasoning).²

But sadly for Habermas and the advocates of objective reason, things are not as easy as they may have seemed in those Rawls-intoxicated days when moral foundations seemed secured in a theory of justice that required no more than the temporary suppression of interest — interpreted by Kohlberg in his well known metaphor of "moral musical chairs." The reason is not hard to see. The core difficulty is the "thin" notion of self that a Rawlsian or a Kohlbergian requires for the empathic projection of an other's interest to hold. And it is just such a thin notion of self that the theorists of social and cultural embeddedness must deny.

To make things a little clearer, if the person's thought, values, and attitudes are embedded within a perspective, short of postulating a transcendental self, change must occur against the background of the contextualizing framework within which a self identifies herself as herself. For those to whom such abstractions are obscure — take Bernard Williams's notion of personal projects, or MacIntyre's notion of practice, as examples of contextual considerations that define selves. For those of more mundane taste, contrast a working class perspective uninformed by a history of academic pursuits, but strongly grounded in the daily struggle against economic oppression and political marginalization, with the perspective of a tenured philosopher from a comfortably middle class family whose language and thought process reflect the academic culture within which she excels.

Or to make it transparently clear, take the following: socially and culturally embedded selves, x and y, are seated around the table reflecting contexts, Cx and Cy,

respectively. If x must understand y 's perspective, she must perceive it in terms of C_y , but if her language and thought is internal to her socially determined worldview, the most that she can muster is to express C_y in C_x — and that is clearly not good enough. Notice the veil of ignorance does no good, for even if x is unsure that she will remain in context C_x , and strives to act so as to offer C_x no unfair advantage, her language and thought, informed by C_x remains so. Piaget can overlook the difficulties, for in the mathematical contexts within which his notion of formal reasoning is defined, the reciprocal of the reciprocal stands as an operational surrogate for formal reasoning. Kohlberg has no such easy remedy, for even if principles are cited in defense of a position, their interpretation and application to the case in point may very well fall short of formal objectivity, demonstrating cultural or personal perspectives where objectivity is needed.

To give the relevant concrete example: Care theorists must see justice concerns subordinated to the care perspective, that is, see a principled justice perspective as either uncaring or rooted in care itself — the contrary being true for the canonical Kohlbergian. This offers an interesting test case. Do published discussions between Kohlbergians and Gilliganites demonstrate the ability of each to fully understand the perspective of the other, or do they rather exhibit the translation of the view critiqued into their own language and perspective? A test is easy enough to perform. Do the interlocutors accuse each other of misdescribing and misunderstanding the view critiqued, or do they exhibit a neutral language of critique that both parties see as fair and to the point?

Only one question remains: If academic discussion of competing viewpoints point to the inability of the interlocutors to truly appreciate the perspectives of their opponents, will offering them Richard Paul's course in critical thinking help?

A MORE SERIOUS POSTSCRIPT

Endres raises a profound issue but appears lulled by the invocation of great names to accept a superficial solution. The question is just whether a neutral language of critique exists and is available to all of those who differ on the profound issues that constitute the moral and political dimension of our experience. Harvey Siegel³ has demonstrated the hopelessness of reasoning in the absence of some context within which objective reasoning is grounded. And he rightly sees that such a context need not be univocal or infallible. But the most Siegel (or Habermas) demonstrates is the conditional: for reason to accomplish its appointed task, reason must satisfy certain presuppositions. This leaves open the possibility that reason, not satisfying such presuppositions, cannot achieve its appointed task, and so the Enlightenment project is doomed. All Siegel shows us is how weak and unattractive reasoning will be in such a context, and all Habermas shows is that, in such a context, public discussion of moral import is vitiated through interest.

Those of us deeply concerned with the theory of argumentation, with informal logic, and with critical thinking, are struggling to define the possibility of a usable frame within which critical discussions can take place. The task seems harder the more we look closely at the issues, for even basic logical notions such as consistency become essentially contested outside of the framework of the artificial languages of

yesteryear. Much work is needed and the consequences for education are enormous. For if Siegel is correct in identifying critical thinking as the educational correlate of reason,⁴ getting what reason requires straight becomes the central job of education today, and critical thinking is the terrain of choice. Critical thinking, resplendent with best-selling textbooks and quick fixes, needs to be carefully looked at by all of those concerned, particularly philosophers of education. And so what Endres has done that is enormously valuable is to raise crucial questions to which he offers some hints that point to possibly productive answers.

1. R. Paul, *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World* (Rohnert Park, CA: CCTMC, 1990), 33, 74-78, 306-8.

2. On sociocentric and egocentric reasoning. *Ibid.*, 370-74.

3. Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987).

4. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988).