

Modes of Criticality as Modes of Teaching

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Gert Biesta's essay is, for me, one of the most interesting and important projects I have read in philosophy of education recently. What he is trying to do, as I read him, is to situate the project of philosophy of education as a fundamentally critical endeavor, and then to examine what sorts of "grounding," if that is the right word, this critical endeavor can be given. The "right to be critical," as he puts it, is different for each of the three views he describes: for the critical dogmatist, the *truth* of the criteria of evaluation supports the right to be critical; for transcendental critique it is *rationality*; and for deconstruction it is *justice*.

In this response I want to revisit these issues from a slightly different angle. Nothing that I say is incompatible with Gert's analysis (and I should say here that this exchange is part of a larger conversation that he and I have been having about these issues), but it does stress some different points of emphasis.

First of all, what "critical" means in his discussion is defined as giving "an evaluation of a specific state of affairs," an evaluation based upon a "criterion." This identifies one strong tradition of philosophical critique: the way in which people usually think of "critical thinking" or "critical pedagogy." From these standpoints, critics identify and diagnose an unacceptable set of beliefs or states of affairs and invoke certain explicit or implicit values in the process. But I think that there are other important senses of criticalness. "Critical philosophy," at least in the sense that Kant meant it, was the process of reason understanding and questioning itself: questioning its own nature, its conditions of possibility, and its limits — not as an absolute or given, but as an object of reflection. This philosophy was "critical" in the sense of questioning "pure" or absolute reason, but importantly it was also critical in the sense that it was reflexive, self-critical, about its own nature and limits. This is not "evaluation" in the sense in which we ordinarily think of it.

The reason I highlight this point is that I do not think that "critical" means the same thing for each of these three traditions. It is not always a matter of evaluation. This may be a good definition for dogmatic critique, but it does not work as well for the other two. With transcendental critique, at least that of Karl-Otto Apel, Jürgen Habermas, and others who, as Gert explains so well, move from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language, the leverage point of critique is the set of conditions that make language itself possible — the conditions of communication that are invoked implicitly if not explicitly every time we speak and expect others to understand or to agree with us. These conditions are characterized by the ideal community of communication, a counterfactual ideal.

But here criticalness (or as I call it elsewhere, "criticality"¹) means something different. It is not a matter of evaluation by invoking a criterion or set of criteria. One does not identify and criticize lying, for example, by saying "that isn't how people in an ideal community of communication would act." Rather, one raises the

argument in the hopes of persuading others in a manner that they will come to change their patterns of action. The reference point of critique is not the ideal, but the implicit norms to which the speaker transcendently commits himself or herself; these are what create the possibility of change. It is this *capacity to yield change* that makes this approach “critical,” not the extent to which it can ground its evaluations in firm criteria. And this is the sense in which “critical theory” defined itself as critical: as a stimulus to change, not only to diagnosis and critique.

In the third instance, deconstruction, Gert stresses the ways in which the “neographism” *différance* operates as a quasi-transcendental condition of possibility. What does this mean? For Kant, reason could explore the conditions of possibility for its own knowledge; with Apel and Habermas, this became the conditions for communication. For Saussure, in a different way, difference became the condition for language itself, because of how sign systems operate (as a system of differences between signs). For Derrida, the conditions of possibility for any system are never wholly within that system, but inevitably rely upon “that which cannot be thought of in terms of the system (and yet makes the system possible).” Acknowledging this necessity, and so remaining open to the Other, what Gert refers to here as “justice,” is the criterion supporting the right to be critical. But I am not sure that terms like “evaluation” and “criterion” are still at play here. The idea of criticality that we find in deconstruction, it seems to me, shares an important characteristic with the criticality of critical theory: Deconstructive critique seeks actually to affect and change the way people think, speak, and act.

So here we reach a crucial phase of my discussion: I am suggesting that by examining the changing meanings of “critical,” we see that what changes between these views is not only the kind of justification and grounding that is given to critique, but seeing criticalness as a different sort of endeavor, not always a matter of evaluating in reference to a criterion or set of criteria. Let me put this a different way: What we need to examine in the attempt to justify critique is not only what gives us the *right* to do it, but the effects we mean it to have. And only in the simplest of circumstances can this process of critique be characterized as saying something like, “Here, this is wrong (bad, invalid, false, immoral, unjust), and this is why it is wrong.” This characterization fits the model of dogmatic critique best, but I think that Gert carries forward elements of this characterization in how he describes the other two views also. (I wonder, for example, how this discussion would look if he had written about them in a different order.)

Now, my second point. When we supplement the question “What supports the right to be critical?” with the question “What are we trying to *do* when we are critical, and what is criticality *for*?” I think we start seeing these three traditions in very different ways. In part, as Gert rightly points out, this is a more educationally interesting issue, and I am sure he would have liked to have time to address it in this essay. But it opens up a whole host of important questions.

For critical dogmatism, for example, there is a point where the questions stop: One simply must accept certain premises or the other arguments never get off the ground. This is not just a logical problem about the limits of justifying one’s own

foundations. This is a serious impediment *from the standpoint of trying to persuade or influence others*. Think about the point one reaches when being asked a series of “why” questions by a three year old: One reaches a point where the only possible answers are “just because,” or “I don’t know,” or “we don’t have time for that now,” or “you’ll understand later,” or “because I said so, now be quiet.” Now, I want you to transpose that experience into the domain of philosophy: Dressed in more subtle language, perhaps, these are the only answers the critical dogmatist can, beyond a certain point, give. This defines the limits of educability, and from this standpoint it is a serious impediment to the value of this mode of criticality (common as it is).

The mode of transcendental critique is of the sort that holds a special fascination for philosophers and others who enjoy the illusion of watching someone floating upwards while pulling on their own bootstraps. And there is something hermetic, very neat, like a Moebius strip, in the argument that to ask a question is already to have committed one’s self to the answer. You cannot question the fly bottle because you are of necessity already in the fly bottle. But in an exchange with Harvey Siegel a few years ago, it suddenly came to me why this is all wrong.² No one who has ever seriously posed such questions was ever really convinced by such an argument, which basically comes to “You must agree with me because although you do not know it you already agree with me.” That is most likely to get you a punch in the nose. Or one might put the problem this way, showing that the logic of the argument is reversible: If someone seriously questions what is (transcendentally) self-evident, then they are probably not the sort of person who will be, or even can be, convinced by such an argument. This is the *educational* question, and as so often happens for me these days, the more closely one examines an educational problem, the more one finds a really important philosophical insight lurking there.

You may find my examples flippant, but if you read the last issue of *Educational Theory*, you will find an essay by Kate McCoy in which she *embraces* the idea of performative contradiction and asks, Why is this such a terrible thing?³ Now I ask you, seriously, *What do you say in reply to that?*

With deconstruction, something is going on that partakes of the transcendental search for the conditions of one’s own philosophizing, and, like the critical dogmatist, finds a limit for how far that self-examination can go. The difference, as Gert explains so well, is how one responds to that limit: by recognizing it as a limit and so responding with an openness to the Other, by asking of one’s own limits “what or who is excluded” by them. What makes this mode of critique educationally useful is that it helps create a perpetual openness — a self-examination that is truly critical, and not only a search for confirmation or a grounding for one’s judgments. This is why I would hesitate to call it a “right,” or to characterize it as an *evaluation* based upon a *criterion*.

What it is, speaking positively, is a condition for the possibility of *thinking differently*, a condition of profound caution and tentativeness about one’s judgments and criteria, a condition of openness to the “constitutive outside” (what a wonderful phrase), a condition of continuous learning. By accepting that all systems are necessarily incomplete, one also must accept both the necessity of Others and yet

also the limits of one's ability to understand them fully. This tragic dialectic yields, I think, the most fertile philosophical attitude and resource of all: modesty.

1. Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," in *Critical Theory in Educational Discourse*, ed. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge).

2. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness: A Discussion of Harvey Siegel's Relativism Refuted and Educational Reason," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 235-52.

3. Kate McCoy, "Killing the Father/Becoming Uncomfortable with the Mother Tongue: Rethinking the Performative Contradiction," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 4 (Fall 1997): 489-500.