

Critical Spirits In the Contact Zone: Response to Shannon Rodgers

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The term “contact zone” was originally used to designate spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of inequality or some other asymmetrical relation. Rodgers concludes her foray into this domain by stating that contact zones do not threaten critical thinking but rather encourage and welcome it; and there is no arguing with that. However, I think that contact zones *also* need and should welcome such “things” as skills of communication and meta-communication, tact, sensitivity, charity, politeness, and so on.

“Contact zone” is a large, perhaps unwieldy, concept, and I like Rodgers’ tentative nuancing of it into primary, subsidiary, and consequential contact zones, and how these might lead to one another— that creates a nice drive in the essay. The primary contact zone is where we find collisions and clashes of values (indeed not uncommon); Rodgers’ business is the possible clashes of critical thinking and other values, arguing that in the event of such clashes critical thinking should be given priority. The subsidiary contact zone brings together philosophy (critical thinking) and empirical psychological research: how we (ideally) *should* think and how we in fact *do* (tend to) think. There is much literature identifying reasoning pitfalls that we can fall into, including various biases and heuristics. I shall come back to a couple of them shortly. But first the last of the trio; the consequential contact zone, so termed because it arises as a consequence of the first two, looking at concrete manifestations. The argument for critical spiritedness culminates in this third contact zone.

I am not going to argue against critical spiritedness, but I am going

to inquire into a couple of the steps along the way in Rodgers' essay.

Let me begin with a brief comment concerning cognitive psychological research into how we think and my slight puzzlement at how often it is angled toward identifying pitfalls in thinking. Confirmation bias, jumping to conclusions, etc.; Rodgers lists a number of them and argues that they are barriers to critical thinking and critical spiritedness. But are they? To be sure, pitfalls are often barriers to arriving at true/justified conclusions. However, if this cognitive research is right — Rodgers certainly thinks so and there is indeed a lot of positive evidence for it — we are all fallible thinkers that to a large or small extent display shortcomings in our reasoning. That does not prevent some people from qualifying as critical thinkers and being of a critical disposition. There is hardly any hope of ridding an unwieldy contact zone of reasoning pitfalls to make way for critical thinking. Thought processes are fast and automatic, and it takes will and effort to become aware of them, let alone change them. Could we not think of them as something to think critically *about*? Especially our *own* thought processes, beliefs, and claims, which I take critical spiritedness to embrace. In fact, I would like to suggest that knowledge of how we think and the pitfalls we fall into can be very valuable in meeting, clashing, and grappling in a contact zone. “Tell me how you think” can be a friendly approach to understanding someone else's viewpoint, or at least grasping how they came to hold it — especially if our intentions in entering the contact zone concern enhanced understanding, or some such thing.

My second comment concerns narrative: narratives come in many shapes, including fictional stories and historical accounts. I would like to defend narrative generally from the charge of irrationality. It is true that narratives by their nature leave out many details about facts, events, and actions. This they have in common with scientific theories, since they

also rely on selection of variables and parameters. It is not necessarily true that such selectivity makes narratives false or unjustified, and it is certainly not true that narratives are not grounded in reason so that challenging them using reason is futile. Sometimes people do leave out certain facts and make the narrative portray themselves favourably. But to dub narrative as irrational overstates the difference between narrative reasoning and critical reasoning. It is also unnecessarily adversarial, since narrative is a ubiquitous mode of reasoning found in all cultures at all times. It is better to work with it than to work against it. Hearing people's stories in a turbulent contact zone might be productive, but not if we at the outset presuppose that they are false or irrational. Highly biased narratives might reveal a lot about the storyteller.

I am not sure that all the reasoning shortcomings mentioned by Rodgers are interconnected, although they may well be. Nor am I sure that they inevitably lead to an echo chamber. Here I allow myself a small digression: A forerunner of the echo chamber might be traced back to Francis Bacon,¹ who argued that in order to avoid one-sidedness, which results from interacting only with members of our own group, we should interact with people belonging to other groups and thus gain access to different perspectives. I am not sure that the echo chambers are to blame for the loss of shared values, since not all values are shared in any state anyway. And meetings in the contact zone must at least partly be about learning to handle differences.

Now to the story of Kathleen Stock. This is now the consequential contact zone: concrete manifestations of meetings and clashes. I agree that cancellation has nothing to do with legitimate critique. Stock was bullied out of her job. My concern is rather how the discussion is framed: the cancellers are described as irrational and illogical, and Stock is described as pursuing the path of critical spiritedness, along with "us," who are

implied. So “we” are clashing here with a group of activists who subscribe to a certain narrative about transgenderism and sex eliminativism. How should we exercise our own critical spiritedness in this situation? What intentions could and should we have in this contact zone? “They” label Stock (and others) as transphobic, conservative pawns, but how do “we” label “them”? Again, cancellation culture is a democratic problem. If our target in this contact zone is better mutual understanding, would it not be more productive to ask people how they think, instead of splitting the two sides into an irrational one and a critically-minded one? Should we perhaps take Bacon’s advice and move in different circles and sample (so to speak) different perspectives? Researchers are as prone to confirmation bias as anybody else, I would think.

One final comment: feelings. Critical spiritedness is to pursue what *is* the case, Rodgers says, not a story of what someone *feels* is the case. This is too dismissive of feelings, I find (even counting myself an analytic philosopher). Often when people say they *feel* something to be the case, they simply mean that they *believe* it — that is, they make a regular claim that can be assessed as any other claim. Sometimes feelings are feelings and not dressed-up claims — and as such they should be treated as facts in the matter at hand. If we want to discuss or do research on phenomena that involve people and matter to them, we cannot ignore their perspectives or their feelings. If somebody feels frightened, that is a fact. Moreover, the reasoning mistakes discussed in the second contact zone are not about replacing reasoning with feeling. They are errors, but errors in reasoning.

With that, I have worked my way to the conclusion. I agree that critical spiritedness has much to offer in contact zones. Perhaps in a tempered, tactful way, depending on what our intentions are.

1 Francis Bacon, *The New Organon* (1620; repr., Cambridge University Press, 1999).