

## Trust and Suspicion in Critical Thinking as Transcendence

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Critical thinking is often described by philosophers of education as a process of transcendence: a way to take one's beliefs, values, and actions as objects of thought, and to reflect on them for the sake of evaluation and possible transformation. John Dewey argues, for example, that "the essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment"; it involves a pause that allows us to stand back to reflect, to "metaphorically climb a tree... [to get] a more commanding view of the situation."<sup>1</sup> This process calls for a difficult balancing act between commitment and suspicion. Effective transcendence requires recognition of one's fallibility, a degree of suspicion regarding one's views and methods of thinking as a motivation for distancing oneself from these in order to evaluate them. Yet distancing must not be taken too far — one must trust in and remain committed to certain beliefs and methods as criteria for judgment in order to ground the evaluation made possible by stepping back to reflect. Critical thinkers must recognize their own fallibility without being paralyzed by it, and must commit to evaluative criteria without losing the suspicion that motivates reflection and revision. Teachers who work to promote critical thinking as transcendence must find a way to negotiate this balance, avoiding too much emphasis on either extreme.

The tension between commitment and suspicion plays out in the literature on critical thinking (CT) through disputes between (roughly) two groups of theorists: those who emphasize the contextual embeddedness of thinking and thus its fallibility, and those who emphasize the possibility of thinking objectively, and thus stress commitment to and trust in objectively valid principles and methods. The latter argue that too much emphasis on the contextual embeddedness of thought discourages transcendence by making it impossible to judge objectively between claims, arguments, or methods of thinking. The former respond that commitment to evaluative criteria is often in need of question and should be subjected to ongoing suspicion. The present essay addresses only a few aspects of this dispute, as ultimately the disagreements between these views of CT rest on deep epistemological differences that would require a much longer work to discuss adequately. Instead, I focus here on a single, yet significant issue that divides the two sides: whether or not and (if so) why CT requires appeal to methods and principles of reason that are, in Harvey Siegel's words, "taken to be universal and objective" even as one recognizes that they may not be so.<sup>2</sup> While some theorists, such as Siegel and Donald Hatcher, argue that critical thinkers *ought* to make appeal to principles and methods as if they are objective and universally valid, others, such as Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, argue that they *ought not* to do so. For the purpose of this essay, I call the former theorists "objectivists," and the latter "contextualists." I agree with objectivists that critical thinkers should appeal to principles and methods they take to be universally valid, but this is because doing so addresses an important

contextualist concern by signaling a recognition of one's own fallibility, and the need to discuss and think with others in order to think well.

#### OBJECTIVIST COMMITMENTS

Objectivists Siegel and Hatcher manage the balance between commitment and suspicion in regard to CT in large part through their realist view of truth. Both argue that teachers and students of CT should aim to achieve rational justification for their views as a means to approximate truth, while recognizing that truth remains "*independent* of rational justification."<sup>3</sup> Siegel argues that rational justification does not give "immediate or privileged access to the truth," but it does provide "a sign of truth," the best way to "estimate" it: "there simply is no other way in which we can responsibly judge truth."<sup>4</sup> Hatcher argues for trust in rational justification by pointing to its success in "solving problems or achieving our ends," especially in science.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, a realist view of the independence of truth and rational justification allows for recognition of fallibility, since mustering as strong a case as possible for the rational justification of a claim does not guarantee its truth, and emphasizing this can reduce tendencies towards dogmatism. Hatcher insists that taking fallibility seriously requires a realist view of truth: "it becomes difficult to make sense out of 'making mistakes' if one does not believe there are facts and some are true and some are false" — in a realist sense of "true" and "false."<sup>6</sup> Epistemological realism thus allows for both an approximation of truth that grounds trust, and an independent standard of it that forms the basis of claims for fallibilism and suspicion.

On the side of commitment and trust, Siegel argues that it is crucial for critical thinkers to appeal to criteria for judging beliefs, arguments, and methods that "purport to be and are taken to be impartial and universal."<sup>7</sup> Critical thinking requires evaluating some claims and methods of thinking as superior to others, and this in turn requires commitment to criteria that are taken to have universal validity. Otherwise, such criteria do not fulfill the "necessary condition of something's successfully functioning as a criterion," namely "that it discriminate or differentiate between items which meet it and items which do not."<sup>8</sup> Siegel concludes that appeal to objective, universally valid criteria is necessary for teaching and practicing critical thinking: "If we think there is some point to helping students become critical thinkers, we must think there are criteria, binding upon all reasoners, in accordance with which the strengths of reasons are appropriately determined..."<sup>9</sup> Thus, in order to engage in critical thinking at all, on this objectivist view, individuals must commit to criteria taken as universally valid. There is also a moral justification for such commitment: it is necessary for treating persons equally, by evaluating similar cases similarly. Referring to Kant, Siegel ties impartiality and consistency in applying criteria across relevantly similar situations to respecting the "equal moral worth" of persons, by ensuring that similar reasons and arguments are treated equally, regardless of who makes them or whose interests they serve.<sup>10</sup>

Balancing the commitment to criteria for judgment with an emphasis on fallibility, Siegel argues that critical thinking is best grounded in what he characterizes as a fallible, absolutist view of truth, one that "provides for objectivity in the

evaluation of knowledge-claims and the possibility of criticism and improvement of criteria which guide such evaluation.”<sup>11</sup> Under this view, critical thinkers should appeal to putatively objective criteria for evaluating reasons and arguments, while acknowledging their fallibility and potential need for correction. Siegel admits that such standards are always developed from within a particular context of thinking, and may retain some of the particularity of that context: “We always judge from the perspective of our own conceptual scheme; there is no way to escape from all schemes and judge from a God’s-eye point of view. Since our schemes reflect our cultural/historical circumstances, then these circumstances constitute limits on our judgment; we can’t escape them entirely.”<sup>12</sup> Evaluative criteria are therefore subject to criticism in that they may contain contextual biases. Still, Siegel and Hatcher both insist that criteria for judgment *could* have universal validity, even if they originate from within limited contexts.<sup>13</sup> Siegel gives mathematical and scientific judgments as examples that are always made from within particular contexts and yet are readily considered to have universal applicability and legitimacy, and he argues that “[m]oral and social/political judgments also aspire to, and sometimes achieve, extra-scheme legitimacy.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, though one should remain suspicious of evaluative criteria, it is possible for them to be universally valid; and, for reasons noted above, they should be “taken as absolute” when they are being used in assessment:<sup>15</sup> those principles being used at any given time to assess reasons should be taken as universally valid in that they are to be consistently and impartially applied.<sup>16</sup>

Objectivists such as Siegel and Hatcher balance commitment and questioning by arguing that critical thinkers should use evaluative criteria as if they are objective and universal, recognizing that they could, yet may not actually be so. Still, it is not easy to understand how ongoing suspicion can be maintained while committing to criteria for judgment that are “taken as absolute” while they are being used. It is this apparent tension that I think the social nature of reasoning can help us address and understand better, as I argue in the final section of this essay.

#### CONTEXTUALIST SUSPICIONS

Contextualist theorists of CT, such as Thayer-Bacon, focus on fallibility in maintaining the balance between trust and suspicion that critical thinking requires. According to Thayer-Bacon, though Siegel attempts to navigate between “wanting to admit contextuality and the possibility of subjective, human error, on the one hand, and needing to insist on impartial generalizability and the possibility of objectivity, on the other hand,” he undermines the former by placing too much emphasis on the latter.<sup>17</sup> Thayer-Bacon rejects the possibility of thinking beyond contexts to understand and utilize objective, universally valid criteria for judgment by arguing (though appeal to pragmatist views of William James and John Dewey) that it is impossible to achieve a radical separation between ourselves as knowers and the objects of our knowledge.<sup>18</sup> We therefore cannot fully escape from our social, historical, and personal contexts to reach a neutral viewpoint in thinking that would allow for objective knowledge of reality: “there is no objective Reality for us to try to understand and know”; “we must let go of the hope of absolute Truth.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, she agrees with pragmatic arguments that what gets counted as “truth” is that which

results when inquiry or discussion stops because the participants are satisfied.<sup>20</sup> We may think we are accessing objective truth through appeal to principles with universal validity, but our conclusions are instead the results of contextualized, individual or social inquiries that stop at satisfaction based on particular contingencies.

Thayer-Bacon argues that the objectivist emphasis on encouraging appeal to purportedly universally valid principles is dangerous, since if one believes that one's criteria for judgment are universally valid when (as she argues) they are not, one will promote a limited perspective and partially valid principles as if these were impartial and universal. According to Thayer-Bacon, this "create[s] a false illusion of fair-mindedness and openness that is dishonest at best and dangerous and destructive at worst."<sup>21</sup> Not only does this discourage the contextually-embedded thinker from revising partial views that are wrongly taken to be impartial, it promotes the judgment of any alternative views as "wrong" and subject to criticism, exclusion, and/or silencing.<sup>22</sup> An objectivist view of CT would likely encourage thinkers to, as Nicholas Rescher puts it, "take on the role of a communal spokesperson," to speak for others by claiming what is valid for them, what they all "stand committed to" as true.<sup>23</sup> Thayer-Bacon rejects the idea of speaking for others, arguing that we should allow others to speak from their own perspectives, avoiding any method of thinking and acting that "co-opts and integrates others' voices into one image" that falsely claims universal validity.<sup>24</sup> Acting as if we have access to objective, universally valid principles does not promote movement towards this goal; rather, it works to force conformity to one partial view of what is said to be, but is not, valid for all.

Thayer-Bacon recognizes and argues for the crucial importance of commitment to evaluative criteria, to "standards and criteria for warranting arguments and determining truths from falsities."<sup>25</sup> Yet at the same time she insists that these need not be, nor should they be claimed to be, objectively and universally valid (even if fallibly so). Rather, we should recognize that "the standards and criteria we have available to help us make judgments are themselves socially constructed," and thus fallible and correctable.<sup>26</sup> Thayer-Bacon explains how such criteria may be corrected by appeal to the value of increased generality: we can try to "reach beyond our micro- and macro-limitations" in order to "revise and improve our theories"; and "standards of epistemic worth... can become more independent and more general the more we include other inquirers into the establishing of standards."<sup>27</sup> Thayer-Bacon does allow that individuals can come to think *more objectively*, though "none of us is ever completely objective"; by communicating our partial and limited views to each other, we can "compensate, adjust, and correct for our own subjectivity," and so "the more we widen the community of others we share our perspectives with, the more objective we can become."<sup>28</sup> Greater objectivity comes not from encouraging individuals to appeal to standards and criteria as if these *are* universally valid, but rather from acknowledging our own partiality and the need to listen to others to help compensate for it.

Thayer-Bacon thus balances commitment and suspicion by arguing that while thinkers must make appeal to some criteria for judgment in questioning and evaluating beliefs, values, and practices, these ought *not* to be considered as

objectively true or universally valid. To do so would be to fail to take their fallibility as seriously as one ought. Instead, thinkers should recognize the contingency and fallibility of such criteria as social constructions, while trying to improve them by increasing their general validity through including as many different viewpoints as possible in their construction. Those principles that achieve more general validity (rather than universal validity, which she rejects as impossible) would then be proper criteria for use in thinking critically — with the recognition that these should continually be subject to question and revision.

#### PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS

It is clear that both objectivists and contextualists are trying to negotiate between trust and suspicion in regard to the criteria critical thinkers use to evaluate beliefs, arguments, methods, and practices. Each accuses the other of going too far to one side of this balance: objectivists argue that the contextualist focus on suspicion can undermine the commitment to criteria required for effective critical thinking, while contextualists argue that treating criteria as universally valid undermines the serious treatment of them as fallible. Though I cannot resolve all the grounds for dispute between contextualists and objectivists (especially the important epistemological disagreements regarding the reality of objective truth), I argue that focusing on the social nature of the activity of reasoning points to a way to negotiate this balance that may be able to address many of the concerns of both sides.

Reason is social at least insofar as it is other-directed, even if the “other” is also oneself — one formulates reasons and arguments as a means of supporting a claim, presupposing some audience to whom that claim and support are directed. Even if one is offering an argument to oneself (for example, to ensure for oneself the validity of one’s views), giving reasons is still aimed towards a listener and potential respondent. Israel Scheffler puts this point well when he says that to offer reasons for a claim is “to suggest that these reasons will be found compelling when looked at impartially and objectively” by other reasoners.<sup>29</sup> Further, and significant to my argument here, Scheffler claims that to provide reasons is to “invite discussions” of them: “To affirm [reasons] is to invite all who are competent to survey these reasons and to judge the issues comprehensively and fairly on their merits.”<sup>30</sup> Giving reasons and arguments to others is not merely a one-way communication — it can be said to invite responses and thereby potentially initiate dialogue.

Focusing on the social aspect of reason and argumentation can serve as a means for teachers to help thinkers negotiate the balance between commitment and suspicion that CT requires. I agree with objectivists that appeal to evaluative criteria as if these are universally valid is necessary to CT, and need not be considered as a way of unjustifiably speaking for others; but I offer an analysis of why this is the case that takes seriously contextualist concerns about the dangers of such appeals. In my view, making use of purportedly universal criteria in one’s arguments should be recognized as a signal of one’s commitment to thinking as objectively as possible, while also at the same time expressing one’s fallibility. Recognizing that one’s thinking will likely fall short of impartiality and objectivity, one can nevertheless signal that one is committed to this as a goal, that one is trying to think in ways that

are valid for others as well as oneself. Yet, offering an argument for one's view can also serve as a statement of one's own fallibility, by enacting an invitation to others to join in a social process of advancement towards the goal.<sup>31</sup> Instead of expressing an assumption that one has already managed to think objectively, and thus is acting as a spokesperson *for* others, giving arguments resting on principles taken to be universally valid could be understood as a way of opening one's views out to a discussion *with* others — all those for whom validity is claimed. The use of reason and argument could therefore be considered as an attempt to communicate with as many others as possible, to frame one's arguments in a way that (so far as one can tell) is likely to be understandable and discussable by all rational beings.

Objectivists could likely agree that it is important to formulate one's arguments so that they are addressed to as wide an audience of rational beings as possible, and that public discussion could be a crucial part of improving rational justification to make it more closely approximate truth. But my argument here is that giving an argument can and should be understood as expressing, not only one's commitment to certain principles upon which one's argument rests as universally valid, not only that one is addressing the argument to all rational beings, but also that one is thereby recognizing and expressing one's fallibility — which is one of the main concerns of contextualists. One publicly expresses one's commitments through argumentation at the same time as one also expresses one's suspicions of these. Indeed, we can consider the social and public character of reason as a justifying ground for commitment to principles, values, and evaluative criteria: such commitment may best be justified in part by the public use of reason as an invitation to and participation in discussion. Insofar as one refuses to subject one's commitments to suspicion through argumentation, the justification for those commitments is undermined. The use of reason, then, need not be thought of as only a matter of *supporting* one's views; it is also a means of remaining suspicious of them, as part of the justification for one's trust in them.

I am arguing mainly for a *reframing* of how the use of reason and argumentation is understood by teachers and students of CT, which might lead to some deeper changes in method and content. It need not be the case that we think of reason as a means of thinking neutrally, as if one were a bare rational being thinking as other rational beings can also think. This is a common picture likely heavily influenced by Kantian arguments, such that reason allows us to “put ourselves in thought in the place of everyone else”: this is possible if one “disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment...and reflects upon it from a *universal standpoint* (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others).”<sup>32</sup> Yet, even Kant's claims here need not be interpreted as saying that reason automatically allows us to think purely neutrally, as if outside all contexts; rather, some commentators argue that, for Kant, reason is universal insofar as it allows us to put ourselves into a public sphere of discussion that is open to all rational beings.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in *that* sense, we can think in the same “place” as others, by thinking *with* others in public.<sup>34</sup>

Objectivists and contextualists agree that reason is required for CT as transcendence, but disagree on (among other things) the value of claiming universal validity



for the principles on which one's arguments rest. Perhaps, while epistemological debates continue, both sides can agree on an interpretation of the use of reason as addressing as wide an audience as possible through claims of universal validity, and inviting that audience to engage in dialogue wherein not only the argument given but also the principles on which it rests can be open to question. It is because reason allows us to think objectively by thinking with others that it can legitimately ground trust and commitment — and this is because it also thereby involves continuing suspicion.

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1. John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910; repr., Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1997), 74, 11. See also Matthew Lipman, *Thinking In Education*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 143; and Richard Paul, "Teaching Critical Thinking in the Strong Sense: A Focus on Self-Deception, World Views, and a Dialectical Mode of Analysis," in *Re-thinking Reason: New Perspectives in Critical Thinking*, ed. Kerry S. Walters (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 197.
  2. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (London: Routledge, 1988), 34.
  3. Harvey Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed? Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (London: Routledge, 1997), 18.
  4. *Ibid.*, 23.
  5. Donald Hatcher, "Three Theories of Rationality: Some Pedagogical Consequences for Critical Thinkers," *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 17, no. 2 (1997): 11.
  6. Donald Hatcher, "Epistemology and Pedagogy," *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 10, no. 2 (1992): 16.
  7. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 134. Hatcher agrees, arguing that critical thinking requires a realist view of truth that allows us to say one account or argument is better than another in an objective sense. Hatcher, "Epistemology and Pedagogy," 15.
  8. Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1987), 157.
  9. Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed?* 20.
  10. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 34, 56.
  11. Siegel, *Relativism Refuted*, 162.
  12. Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed?* 175.
  13. *Ibid.*, 177. See also Donald Hatcher, "Critical Thinking and the Postmodern Critique of Rationality" (1995), [http://www.bakeru.edu/crit/literature/dlh\\_ct\\_postmodern.htm](http://www.bakeru.edu/crit/literature/dlh_ct_postmodern.htm).
  14. Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed?* 176.
  15. Siegel, *Relativism Refuted*, 162.
  16. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 135.
  17. Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, *Relational "(e)pistemologies"* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 21.
  18. Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, *Transforming Critical Thinking: Thinking Constructively* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 31–34.
  19. Thayer-Bacon, *Relational "(e)pistemologies,"* 10, 25.
  20. Thayer-Bacon cites favorably the following views of truth: (a) (from William James) that which "help[s] us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience"; (b) (from John Dewey) "that which satisfactorily terminates inquiry" begun by doubt; (c) (from Richard Rorty) "the outcome of undistorted communication...whatever view wins in a free and open encounter." Thayer-Bacon, *Relational "(e)pistemologies,"* 52, 39, 43.
  21. Thayer-Bacon, *Transforming Critical Thinking*, 35.

22. *Ibid.*, 161–164.

23. Nicholas Rescher, *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 16. According to Rescher, any time one makes a claim to knowledge, to what “is” the case rather than what one “surmises,” one is in essence speaking for all rational beings, for whom this claim to knowledge is supposed to be valid. Rescher, *Objectivity*, 15.

24. Thayer-Bacon, *Transforming Critical Thinking*, 164. See also 105 of this text for why it is crucial to listen to others speak in their own voices.

25. Thayer-Bacon, *Relational “(e)pistemologies,”* 6.

26. *Ibid.*, 9.

27. *Ibid.*, 70. Note that the problems associated with relativism seem here to have been addressed by admitting the need for criteria, but these problems reappear when the criteria are argued to be themselves relative to context. Thayer-Bacon does seem to give the ideal of increased generality as a way to evaluate these criteria; but what is the epistemological status of this ideal itself? Is it to be taken as universally valid? Or, if it is relative to context, how does it serve to resolve concerns about relativism?

28. Thayer-Bacon, *Transforming Critical Thinking*, 139.

29. Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 140.

30. Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching*, 140, 141. There is significant debate in the CT literature on the degree of inclusion that is required in such discussions, focused on who counts as “competent” and who does not. I do not have the space here to engage the debate found in the following articles, though doing so would be necessary to fill out the view I am outlining here. See Harvey Siegel, “What Price Inclusion?” in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), [http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95\\_docs/siegel.html](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95_docs/siegel.html), and responses in the same volume (and online) by Kathryn Pauly Morgan, “We’ve Come to See the Wizard! Revelations of the Enlightenment Epistemologist,” [http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95\\_docs/morgan.html](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95_docs/morgan.html), and Sharon Bailin, “Inclusion and Epistemology: The Price is Right,” [http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95\\_docs/bailin.html](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95_docs/bailin.html). See also Kenneth R. Howe, “What (Epistemic) Benefit Inclusion?” in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1997*, ed. Susan Laird, [http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/97\\_docs/howe.html](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/97_docs/howe.html), Thayer-Bacon, *Transforming Critical Thinking*, 69–70, and Thayer-Bacon, *Relational “(e)pistemologies,”* 66–71.

31. This argument is inspired in part by Connie Missimer’s “social view” of critical thinking, in which she argues that “it is widespread use of critical thinking by many people over the long haul that produces greater reasonableness.” Connie Missimer, “Why Two Heads are Better than One,” in *Re-Thinking Reason*, ed. Walters, 125. My view also owes quite a bit to Karl Popper’s arguments regarding scientific objectivity as “closely bound up with the *social aspect of scientific method*,” such that objectivity is achieved “from the cooperation of many scientists” rather than from “the attempts of an individual scientist to be ‘objective.’” Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945), 217.

32. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), 136 (Section 40). See also Immanuel Kant, *Logic*, trans. Robert S. Hartman and Wolfgang Schwartz (New York: Dover, 1988), 63 (Kant’s “Introduction,” Section VII).

33. Onora O’Neill and Katarina Deligiorgi both argue in different ways that Kant justifies the use of reason at least in part on the basis of its public character, that it allows for communication, coordinated action, and the recognition of one’s own errors. Onora O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3–50. Katarina Deligiorgi, “Universalisability, Publicity, and Communication: Kant’s Conception of Reason,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 143–159.

34. I have not addressed here the important question of whether it is even possible to *speak to* something like an audience of “all rational beings.” Kenneth Strike offers an intriguing suggestion as to how a pluralistic society might be able to develop and use a “civic language” across borders of seemingly incommensurable sets of principles and values, which may help further develop the approach I sketch here. Kenneth A. Strike, “On the Construction of Public Speech: Pluralism and Public Reason,” *Educational Theory* 44, no. 1 (1994): 1–26.