

## The Perception of Questionability: Epistemic Warrant, Given Experience, or Conceptual Rationality?

Christopher Martin  
*University of British Columbia*

Daniel Fisherman's "Perceived Questionability and the Phenomenology of Critical Disposition" claims to identify a necessary condition of the critical thinking disposition — that of the *perception* of questionability. The perception of questionability is variously described as a pre-reflective judgment, skilled intuitive judgment or a "given of experience" that presents affordances for the agent to engage in the critical thinking (CT) process.

First, Fisherman criticizes the external relationship between the conceptualization of the CT disposition and the uptake of reason assessment by the agent. Here, the critical disposition is reduced to a list of personal attitudes (hunger, eagerness) that are either thought to cause critical thinking behavior or probabilistically increase the likelihood the agent will reason. I believe that Fisherman is responding, rightly, to the idea that there must be a logical, and not just a causal, relationship between means and ends in the educational process. There should be a meaningful relationship between the act of critical thinking and the value of critical thinking for the agent.

Further, Fisherman claims that if this relationship is only ever causal, this greatly diminishes the possibilities for educating the critical spirit. For example, we could reward inquisitiveness because inquisitiveness correlates with seeking reasons, but it may also follow that such a person becomes uncontrollably prying about other people's business. Without incorporating the value of CT into their own experience, students are unable to respond in a critical way when the relevant situation calls for it — they can at most be unwitting slaves to critical passions. On this view, cognition and motivation are insufficient conditions because they do not provide the discrimination necessary to know *when* to apply CT.

Finally, Fisherman suggests that experiential qualities can bridge between motivation and cognition in the form of critical *perception*. The call on the critical spirit is "an act of perception rather than an act of judgment, an aptitude for holistically discriminating questionability in experience ... to 'see' the degree to which an assertion, argument, or experience is appropriately questionable ... it defines the possibility for critical engagement." If correct, this suggests an important role for world-disclosing arguments in the articulation of critical thinking pedagogy — ideal critical thinking include not only affective and cognitive components, but also a holistic background such that assertions have the potential to present themselves to the agent in a "questionable" way. It reminds one of the critical role of moral salience in recognizing when a need for moral judgment is required<sup>1</sup> and similarly promises to make an important contribution to the philosophical literature on CT.

Fisherman's pedagogy is based on Hubert Dreyfus and Stuart Dreyfus's phenomenological reconstruction of skill building, where agents motivated by the success and failure of their action-orientations move from the reliance on impersonal rules to an intuitive grasp of the situation into which he or she is initiated.<sup>2</sup> If we assume, as Fisherman does, that critical thinking is a kind of expertise, it then follows that an education in CT based on this reconstruction would involve critical thinkers learning to internalize various criteria of reason assessment in an emotionally committed way leading to an intuitive sense of when a situation warrants critical thought, or "learned responses that manifest phenomenologically as a holistically discriminated quality of experience. That is, they appear [to the agent] as perceived questionability."

Fisherman claims that the perceptive critical thinker must be disposed to think critically when it is warranted, or that they must see "things" as questionable when, and only when, they should be perceived as questionable; or that they must be emotionally committed to critical thinking if they want to perceive affordances. Setting aside concerns about the political implications around stipulations regarding the "appropriateness" of critical thinking, we can interpret this condition in at least three ways. The first way takes up the term "warranted" in the epistemic sense. If critical thinking is warranted in situation X, then it must follow that there are good reasons for that warrant. However, the conclusion that CT is warranted in situation X presupposes the assessment of the reasons that warrant engagement in CT. In other words, only critical thinking could determine that critical thinking is epistemically warranted in situation X. For why could reasons of all types be open to critical assessment with the exception of just those reasons warranting engagement in the critical assessment of reasons? Further, note that the warrant for critical thinking is necessarily entailed in the very possibility of asking the question, is critical thinking warranted?, as such a question is itself a demand for good reasons. As such, the "warrant" of critical thinking is more a warrant for a generalizable (and general) ideal, not a situation-specific operation, and as such must include within it the competencies necessary for being judicious in the application of critical thinking skills in different situations. Therefore, I do not think it is possible, as Fisherman claims, that "feelings of satisfaction and dismay replace reason as the standard for determining questionability." Such feelings might serve as a heuristic for reason assessment, but they do not replace criteria of reason assessment in determining the degree to which an assertion warrants critical attention.

But there is a second, strong phenomenological sense, to the idea of "warranted" critical thinking. Fisherman has this sense in mind when he claims that judgments about when to be critical are "a given of experience, a perceived affordance of the environment." This is the sense we have in mind when Hubert Dreyfus speaks of "the nonconceptual embodied coping skills we share with animal and infants."<sup>3</sup> Non-epistemic, embodied perception is the standard that indicates to us when something is relevant, in this case the need to apply CT skills. This would require that Fisherman's pedagogy do no less than redeem the Myth of the Given, so ably

identified by Wilfred Sellars. To be sure, Hubert Dreyfus has himself attempted this very thing through his own critique of John McDowell on the space of reasons.<sup>4</sup>

So let us assume that we can re-embrace the Myth of the Given in just the way that Dreyfus's phenomenology claims: note that here standards of reason assessment are not simply experientially invisible or implicit for critical thinking experts; rather, they are to be left behind altogether by the expert.<sup>5</sup> Given this view, we need to explain where standards of reason assessment come into play, if at all, in expert critical thinking. If reason assessment is not a constitutive feature of experience and is instead, as Fisherman suggests, a form of expertise, it would seem to follow that according to Dreyfus's phenomenology expert critical thinkers should not only intuitively perceive affordances for CT skills, but abandon altogether standards of reason assessment as they become "intuitively critical." On this view, critical thinking in the reason assessment sense of the term is never warranted. What therefore needs to be addressed here is how the conclusion that non-epistemic expertise in CT skills is a necessary condition for ideal critical thinking coheres with the cognitive conditions of the ideal critical thinker.

There is a third, naturalistic sense at play when Fisherman claims that we should engage in educational activities that are meaningful as a way of internalizing skilled intuitive judgment. This reminds one of the idea of education as initiation into worthwhile activities, of which concern for the rational standards constitutive of the activity are fundamental.<sup>6</sup> On this view, critical thinkers come to care about standards of reason assessment. Perceived questionability is not so much non-rational perception as the natural acquisition of conceptual rationality for anyone with a decent upbringing. *Contra* Dreyfus, affordances (including those for CT) are fundamentally conceptual and become salient to learners as they are initiated into the space of reasons.<sup>7</sup> Of course, while initiation can make conceptual affordances and standards salient to us, we can engage with those affordances and standards skillfully or unskillfully. As Fisherman suggests, anyone raised in the world can in this way "get by." But on the initiation interpretation the problem seems not so much that critical thinkers do not "intuit as well as we could or should," but that we do not handle well the many affordances disclosed through this intuitive sense of our conceptual world as well as we should, and that our upbringing can limit what we see as questionable. One thinks here of the expert physician who is so assured of his intuitive skill that he is unresponsive to evidence that a procedure is going badly, even when the diagnostic equipment is affording many reasons for concluding so.

I fully acknowledge the potential contribution of phenomenology in understanding the experience of critical thinking and its importance in crafting pedagogical interventions that reflect the development of the critical spirit. Accordingly, Fisherman's broadening of discourse on critical thinking promises an important contribution. I believe the next step is further disclosure of the extent to which and ways in which the phenomenological analysis of critical thinking relate to those aspects of rationality that are constitutive of critical thinking as an educational ideal.

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1. Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
  2. Hubert Dreyfus and Stuart Dreyfus, *Mind Over Machine* (New York: Free Press, 1986).
  3. Hubert Dreyfus, "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79, no. 2 (2005): 47.
  4. Ibid.
  5. Ibid., 52.
  6. R.S. Peters, "Education as Initiation," in *Philosophical Analysis and Education*, ed. R.D. Archambault (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 87–111.
  7. John McDowell. "What Myth?," *Inquiry* 50, no. 4 (2007): 343.