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WE DON'T HAVE A THEORY OF RATIONALITY AND WE NEVER WILL: A PHILOSOPHICALLY PRAGMATIC VIEW

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Introduction

What I propose to do in this paper is to adopt, for the sake of argument, the view advanced by Siegel, and widely endorsed, that critical thinking is the "educational cognate" of rationality. I do this in order to assess, and in a small way, to "flesh out" the implications of that view. If Siegel's view of critical thinking is correct, then programs that purport to teach "critical thinking" should be construed as, and justified as, one of the principal means to the development of the students' rationality. Moreover, given the truth of this claim, particular programs would have to be evaluated as good, bad, or indifferent by reference to how well they accomplish, or contribute to the attaining of, the underlying goal.

But clearly, if we are to accomplish this sort of evaluation, we must first arrive at some idea of what is meant by "rationality. Only then can we sensibly ask what sort of program, if any, would be effective in fostering that trait. Siegel writes,

> the theory of critical thinking...depends fundamentally on the theory of rationality. Theorists of critical thinking must perforce turn to the development of the theory of rationality, for it is that latter theory which undergirds the former one.[1]

Unfortunately, as Siegel also notes, we don't seem to be in the possession of a fully worked out theory of rationality. It would seem to follow that we are simply not in any position to assess the value of existing critical thinking programs — so it's somewhat strange to have to note that the absence of the supposedly necessary condition has not seemed to prevent us "critical thinkers" from proceeding apace to the development and (one would like to think) the evaluation of any number of critical thinking programs.

This paper is intended to address this problematic situation. The argument advanced will be as follows: First, I will consider what might be meant by the term "rational," in, for instance, "rational thought." Second, I will set out and indicate the implications of a pragmatic interpretation of rationality, and third, I shall discuss, very briefly, some of the educational implications of such an understanding.

What Is Meant By "Rational?"

At first glance, it seems clear that we *cannot* simply say that by "rational thinking," we mean "good" thinking. Why? Because if we do this, the term "rational" has become merely a term of commendation, an accolade to be awarded to *any* thinking of which one happens to approve. Of course, if we *do* make this move, then some ground is gained, since the pursuit of rationality then requires no justification, for it is tautologically true that one "should" come to think in the way (or ways) that would be good, that is, precisely those ways in which one "ought" to be thinking. Unfortunately, having made this move to identify "rational" and "good," we are left with no

guidance whatsoever as to what in practice would *constitute* rational thinking, nor, *ipso facto*, what would count as "critical thinking."

There is a second, and perhaps more recondite problem, though. As soon as we try to move beyond the purely evaluative construction of rationality, we encounter an embarrassment of riches. There is at present no consensus as to the best interpretation of what "rationality" is. Hence, before one can identify an appropriate content, and/or evaluate the relative merits of critical thinking programs, one would first need to articulate carefully the particular conception of rationality that one has in mind. But, further, having done that, one would need to justify *that* conceptual decision, showing that a "rationality" construed in that way makes more sense than any other theoretical account. That is, one must show that it would be the rational thing to do to adopt that account of rationality. But this judgment, of course, if it is to be rational, could only be made on the basis of the criteria of reasoning picked out in the theory. But, to accept the very criteria at issue, and then to proceed onwards to a "successful" justification of those criteria, surely begs the question. It may well be that if one were to have used some *other* method of reasoning, one would have come to reject the proffered theory. The only reason for objecting to the use of some other sort of thinking would be that that would be "irrational." But, this again presumes the appropriateness of the theory in question, the very point that was to have been established.

The claim that a particular theory of rationality must be true because one cannot help but to reason thusly (on pain of being judged irrational) is a case of begging the question. Is that sort of thing a flaw in the reasoning? Well, that is a little hard to say, in the absence of any theory of rationality. But, note that virtually anyone offering to justify a particular conception of rationality *would* agree that this pattern does indeed constitute a reasoning error; indeed, it is one of the best known, most widely accepted flaws. Unless one is prepared to agree that one's theory of rationality both permits and disallows a particular argument form (which as far as I know, no one's theory does), any attempted justification that includes this begging the question move is unacceptable, on its own terms. Hence, the successful justification of a particular theory of rationality is not possible. One *has* to reason in some way to effect a justification, but to accept and employ at the outset the rules at issue is to reason fallaciously, and to do otherwise is to reason irrationally. (Note, though, that as long as one is willing, given one's conception of rationality, to accept begging the question and/or self-contradiction, one can immediately justify that or any other conception.)

Further, it seems that one must also face the task of showing that rationality of the sort one is describing would indeed be a value once achieved. That is, one must justify rationality itself. Yet, it seems that this task is no easier, since it would almost certainly require, as a necessary first step in reasoning, that one adopt the conception and employ its rules, leading us back to the conundrum above.

So, a serious question arises. Does this, the conclusion that we cannot actually achieve a justification of a particular conception of rationality — at least not without the ever-useful tools of self-contradiction, begging the question, and/or an admissible irrationality — does this mean that we actually *cannot* justify the teaching of critical thinking at this point? On Siegel's view, it would seem that that is so. We must either proceed as we have been doing, to evaluate critical thinking programs *sans* the "undergirding theory," or admit that we cannot evaluate our work.

There is, however, another alternative. We can escape the dilemma if we are willing to adopt a pragmatic view of what rationality is. In the next section I will sketch out a rough picture of what I take to be a pragmatic account of the meaning of the term "rational."

A Pragmatic Account of Rationality

The problem shown above arises only if we are required to provide some substantive content to this notion of "rationality" before we can develop programs and assess and promote the teaching of critical thinking. It seems to me that we must certainly question the wisdom of that requirement. If

the task is impossible, perhaps, just perhaps, the task is unnecessary. We have some reason, indeed, to believe that this may be the case, since we observe that very few of those who are much respected as critical thinkers have found the absence of a justified theory of rationality a real impediment to the development of critical thinking programs. In this section I will set out, as a first possibility, an alternative to the requirement for an a priori theoretical account of rationality — a pragmatic understanding of rationality.

I must note first that this pragmatic account is not the sort of substantive "theory" that Siegel calls for. Instead, it is a very simple thesis of meaning. Suppose that by "rational thinking," we merely mean "good" thinking — that, indeed, the view entertained briefly above, and rejected as less than useful, is, with all its flaws, the best we can do, and the term "rational" really is, in its use, merely a term of commendation, an accolade we award to that thinking of which we happen to approve. As said before, we do gain some ground, since rational thinking then requires no justification. And we find, too, that we really require nothing in the way of a "theory" of rationality *per se* — since there is simply nothing of any substance that would have to be explained by such a theory. I'm hoping that, at this point in the argument, the ground gained no longer looks insignificant, it being the only way I can see to escape the conundrum set out above.

We are, though, if we make this move, left with the admittedly rather daunting, but more mundane task of deciding, without benefit of an over-arching sanctioning theory, what sort of reasoning we do, in fact, approve of, or disapprove of, in the multifarious domains in which people actually do think. Our guidance, sans theory, can only come from the realm of practice, and the sort of thinking that "works" best, that in retrospect seems to have solved problems, to have left us "better off," rather than worse off after having engaged in it, would be the thinking that merits the accolade "rational." This is a basically pragmatic view, in the Rortian pattern, of what we mean by the term "rationality." This is a view which merits further inspection.

On Rorty's view, there is no intrinsic nature of "rationality" to be looked into, no theory of rationality to be devised, since *all* that we mean by calling a piece of reasoning rational is that we commend it, according to the standards we hold. That is, by rational thought we mean "good thought." And by good thought, we mean merely "that sort of thinking which ought to be done." Hence, no "justification" of rationality *per se* can be required of us.

Is critical thinking, then, to be reduced to following some set of agreed-upon "rules of thinking?" No, since, first, it seems doubtful that there are very many of those (save within the confines of a well-defined system, for example, logic or math). Indeed, Rorty writes that we should "substitute *phronesis* for codification."[2] We should not fall into "the Cartesian fallacy of seeing axioms where there are only shared habits."[3] We must settle for what Rorty terms a "criterionless muddling through."

For Rorty, "rationality" is a matter of solidarity with the community to which one belongs — that is, one is counted as rational when one's thinking is in accord with the standards accepted by that community, and irrational otherwise. If those standards require one to hold, and assert the truth of, particular tenets, then in that community one is being "irrational" whenever one's conclusions or beliefs depart from those allowed. If, however, one happens to belong to a community in which it is not the beliefs per se, but rather the patterns of thought, the public testing and critiquing of possible conclusions, which constitutes the relevant standards, then one is being irrational only when one's *ways* of arriving at or retaining belief are unacceptable.

According to this view, we may correctly attribute rationality to a person, on an episodic basis, even when we decline to accept the belief(s) in question as "true." Indeed, it would not be rational in most, if not all, cases to accept a belief as "true," since to assert truth is to assert the impossibility of ever improving upon the belief, and, with the exception of merely analytic truths, we cannot know that this is impossible. Rorty writes, "From a pragmatist point of view, to say that what is rational for us now to believe may not be *true*, is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better

idea. It is to say that there is always room for improved belief."[4] The pragmatist does, however, "feel free to use the term "true" as a general term of commendation…particularly to commend his own view."[5]

Note, that in this pragmatic model, one key question that we often find ourselves needing to ask is, what is this piece of thinking *for*? The success or failure of a piece of thinking can only be judged within the context of the problem situation in which it is used. And hence rationality, in this model, is fundamentally instrumental in nature, but instrumental in a very broad sense, so broad a sense that it encompasses even thinking in the moral realm.

Second, note that in this view rationality is fundamentally *social* in nature, since the ultimate, in the sense of last and best, court of appeal in which we test the merit of a belief, whether empirical or moral, is the community of inquirers with which we are associated.

The standards on which we judge thought, on the pragmatic model, do, in fact, arise from the agreement of the relevant community of inquirers. In this light, McPeck's critique of the specialized, more or less "free-standing" critical thinking program becomes telling, since there are, in different fields, many and various particular patterns of thinking that are considered "top-drawer," commendable, to be emulated. On the other hand, there still remain some generalizable criteria by which patterns of thought are judged that are applicable across all fields; for example "self-contradiction" is unacceptable in all fields, as is refusal to entertain contradictory evidence.

Further, on this pragmatic model, it is a fundamentally rational move to attempt to expand the limits of community. "For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is…simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can."[6] To this end, in the quest for beliefs that are as near as we can get to true, the pragmatist must seek, not to "transcend," but to expand the limits of his or her community — that is, to bring as many "voices" as possible into the conversation/inquiry, and to actively search for the potential intersubjective agreement among an ever larger "us." The reason is that, as Rorty writes, "the best way to find out what to believe is to listen to as many suggestions and arguments as you can."[7]

This aspect of the pragmatic view perhaps makes more palatable (less offensive?) Rorty's insistence that the pragmatic view is ineluctably *ethnocentric*, rather than relativistic. According to Rorty, we can *only* judge a person or way of thinking "rational or "irrational" by reference to the standards that we share as a community — we simply have no other option.

One question that might be raised at this point is, does it really matter, in the justification of a critical thinking program, whether we adopt a "theory of rationality?" Would we not come up with the same basic set of "good" ways of thinking, whether by reference to theory or practice? Do we not all really share a common sense of what such good habits are? But, while this may well be true, this suggests again the Rortian pragmatic notion of what "rationality" *is* — that set of ways of thinking that we *do,* in fact, have an agreement on, that we, as a community of inquirers/reasoners, do in fact accept. Those in any community whose reasoning happens to fall outside the norms accepted would, in any community, be counted as "irrational." We use the "most-people-would-accept-this" standard of reasoning virtually explicitly in the teaching of informal fallacies — when *is* a generalization "too hasty?" When *does* the character of the speaker become an acceptably relevant factor in the evaluation of the claim he or she sets forth? We have no clear answer to give to this sort of question, yet we remain at least somewhat sanguine that our students will be able to respond appropriately on an intuitive level, once the need to consider such questions has been brought to their conscious attention.

On this pragmatic account, there are no "limits to rationality," except insofar as one refuses to evaluate thinking in some domain. Where no particular pattern of thought is conceived to be better or worse than any other, no commendations will be made, and hence no pattern will be awarded the

accolade "rational." For example, patterns of dreaming would perhaps be "outside" the limits of rationality. Everything else is "in." And this brings us to the question of the rationality of moral reasoning.

Morality and A Pragmatic Sense of "Rationality"

Siegel's critique of what he terms the "means-to-an-end" conception of rationality, that is, the conception of rationality as instrumental, (which this account fundamentally *is*) hinges largely on the inadequacy of such a conception to explain why it is that we do, in fact, denounce certain sorts of ends, for instance, the achievement of a promotion even at the price of back stabbing. The means-ends reasoner, Siegel writes, "overlooks moral constraints on rational choice…and takes ends as given…but we would do well to preserve the possibility of judging the rationality of our ends themselves."[8] Moreover, the means-ends conception is unable to account for the character traits associated with the critical thinker, which Siegel asserts are valuable, but which are not justified by reference to the achievement of further ends. Siegel maintains that "the values and character traits of the critical thinker [which he has spelled out] are absolutely central to a full conception of critical thinking…yet "in so far as the means-ends conception is unable to account for these features of critical thinking, that conception of rationality is inadequate for the further development of the theory of critical thinking."[9] One must wonder, though, as an aside, how Siegel happens to know that these traits *are* central to critical thinking? Prior to the development of the theory of rationality that is required? Note that this is not a mystery if in fact the "theory of rationality" is nothing more than a list that spells out for us the set of a traits approved at a given time within a given community. To say this, though, is to agree with the thesis set out here, that rational thinking is good thinking, and good thinking is that thinking of which one approves.

Would the pragmatic account offered here be susceptible to the same sort of critique, that such an account leaves us with no "moral limits to rational action?" No. Consider the question, on this account: why *does* one approve of a particular set of traits, or of thinking habits? The answer would be that one approves certain habits because those habits, better than the others with which one is acquainted, tend to solve the problem situations that one tends to encounter more effectively. Now, if we keep in mind that one of the most prevalent and vexing of "problem situations" is how to get along with one's fellow persons, to keep the peace, somehow to maintain harmonious relations with the others in one's community, this, I think, explains why "back stabbing" as a means of securing tenure, which is generally considered "bad form," ought to be "reclassified." It is a tenure-attaining move that is disapproved of, and if one disapproves quite strongly, one might well term the approach "irrational." Certainly, if the "back-stabbing" were to become literal, we would not hesitate to call the person irrational. Why? Because this sort of thing just does not contribute to our well-being as a society.

There is more, though, than this perhaps too "practical" consideration that falls out of a pragmatic interpretation of rationality. On this view, one's participation in a community is of paramount importance in enabling one to find and embrace sets of beliefs that will work out well. And there are certain forms or patterns of interaction that are more conducive to *cognitive* success than others. So Rorty counsels that we should "give up our attachment...to the idea of rationality as obedience to criteria,"[10] and instead view the "rational" person as one who pursues the goal of "unforced agreement." In so doing, the person must display what are actually *moral* virtues, that is to say, "tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force."[11] So, we can find in this pragmatic account a justification of what are considered moral virtues, a justification that is grounded in "rational" efforts to arrive at a workable set of beliefs.

Does this move to a pragmatic understanding of what we mean by the term "rational" bump us into a moral and rational relativism? Must we say that any beliefs, moral or otherwise, are equally valuable or that one belief is as good as another? No, because, first, we judge beliefs, actions,

patterns of reasoning, etc., as good, or laudable, or "rational," on the basis of our experience with them, in the concrete problem situations in which we employ them. We find that we are satisfied, or dissatisfied, with some more than with others. Second, we find that our successes seem *not* to be randomly distributed, but rather, are related to some patterns of reasoning. That is, our attributions of rationality are not made arbitrarily. It is not the case that, given our experience, *any* belief could have received the accolade "rational."

Third, we cannot on this view consistently claim, prior to experience, that two different beliefs are "equally rational," since to do so would be to assume that we know of the existence of some sort of independent scale of value/rationality, a theory of rationality, by which to make the required assessment. But, that theory, as explained above, we do not and cannot have.

This interpretation of rationality, and hence of critical thinking, is diametrically opposed to the notion that there exists a "rationality," which we are morally obliged to achieve, although we cannot say exactly what it is, a rationality that must, somehow, be philosophically justified on "non-pragmatic" grounds. On this pragmatic account, rationality requires no justification. This again is in stark opposition to Siegel's view, that "the justification of rationality is perhaps the most basic problem which a full theory of rationality must face."[12]

The Role of the Critical Thinking Program

First, when we assume that "critical thinking" is to be understood as "rational thinking," and "rational" as good thinking, we immediately run into difficulty. We have a serious problem in designing a specific critical thinking program, since the effort to developing "rational" thinking, and/or "rational persons," would seem to encompass the whole of the educational project, rather a large project for any one self-contained program. It seems impossible to think of any times when we are "educating" that we are not also "developing rationality," and vice-versa. But, if so, *all* teachers, whenever they are properly teaching, are teaching "critical thinking." We are confronted with the conclusion that "critical thinking" can only be taught "across the curriculum," that efforts to teach it must be "infused" into all teaching at all times. What seems to be required is not that we develop special programs to teach a special subject, but, as McPeck claims, that we simply carry on and extend a liberal education in the traditional disciplines, perhaps adding to those, (or returning to) the teaching of logic, as one of the disciplines.

But this, then, suggests that the proper recipients of — participants in? — the "critical thinking program" are the teachers themselves. "Critical thinking," as part of the teacher education program, would focus on bringing the future teachers to understand, analyze, and critique the patterns of thought that are prevalent in their fields. Were this project to become a major emphasis in teacher preparation, introduced early and "reprised," built upon throughout the program, I, at least see a potential for radically altering the prospective teachers' view of their social role. And such a change in teacher self-perception, by affecting practice, would actually *alter* their social role. Teachers who conceive themselves as, primarily, the advocates of critical thought could no longer serve as mere purveyors of a static body of knowledge, nor yet as agents of social control. Such a teacher would have, moreover, an active intellectual role, equivalent in value to those whose role is to "do." The science teacher, for example, would not be expected to be merely the passer-on of "what science tells us," but an active critical "scientific generalist," a "scientific commentator," engaging his or her students in building the knowledge base that would support their own future knowledgeable critique.

Clearly, a broad range of changes in the general societal conception of "teacher" would be required to support this sort of change. And these changes would, I believe, be quite beneficial overall. There may be no way to achieve such change. But, it seems to me that the only *potential* way to bring about the desirable changes is to begin with teachers' perception of their primary role, to teach critical thinking, to promote "rational thought."

Second, recall that on this view the individual is ineluctably social, brought up into a community in which certain patterns of thought are accepted; the individual clearly has no starting point for his or her analysis of, and acceptance of, thinking patterns other than those of his or her community. However, this is not to say that the individual's beliefs as to what constitutes "acceptable (accepted) reasoning patterns" cannot change. To the contrary, on active reflection, linked with, perhaps caused by, wider experience, the individual may come to reassess and alter his or her habits of thought. And this suggests a significant educational role for the critical thinking course. The key notion that can be introduced, as a way of precipitating such reflection, is the notion that the most fundamentally "rational," (approved of), habit is that of critically examining one's own patterns of thought, and maintaining a willingness to change those habits should the need arise.

One might respond that the justification of these goals is still problematic, since we still have no *theory* of rationality by which to accomplish it. But, perhaps this struggle to resolve the "problem of rationality" is itself the most appropriate content of the critical thinking program. It is the prospective critical thinkers themselves who stand to benefit most by grappling with these basic questions: — that is to say, how should I be thinking?; do I approve of this habit of thought, and if so, why?; or, in other words, what sort of thinking is rational?

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1. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 127.

2. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 25.

3. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth,* 26.

4. Ibid., 23.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 39.

8. Siegel, *Educating Reason,* 129.

9. Ibid., 131.

10. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth,* 38.

11. Ibid., 37.

12. Siegel, *Educating Reason,* 132.