

Rationality and Redemption: Ideology, Indoctrination, and Learning Communities¹

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In *Educating Reason*, Harvey Siegel² argues for a “reasons conception” of critical thinking as the ideal of education. According to this account critical thinking is none other than the ability and the willingness to decide what to believe and how to behave on the basis of good reasons. Since critical thinking is advanced as the educational ideal, education according to this view is about becoming more rational.

This account of the role that critical rationality plays in education is of great import to those who find fault with dogmatic and doctrinaire approaches to the transmission of culture, such as may be found among fundamentalist religious groups or totalitarian regimes.³ If there is to be a difference between education and indoctrination, between liberal and doctrinaire conceptions of cultural transmission, then something like Siegel’s account must be correct.

Siegel offers four arguments in support of his “reasons conception of critical thinking” as an educational ideal, based on notions of respect, empowerment, traditions of inquiry, and democratic citizenship. He considers two objections to this line of thinking which are the subject of this paper: one based on ideology, the other on indoctrination. According to Siegel, if these objections cannot be set aside, then his project is in trouble because each strikes at the heart of his account of critical rationality as an educational ideal. I will argue that Siegel does not respond successfully to these objections because each calls for a justification of rationality that would be acceptable to those who do not otherwise care about reasons. This he does not provide.

Inherent in the justification that he does provide, however, is a way of thinking about the significance of critical rationality in education that is plausible, at least to those who prize liberal democracy and open society. The adoption of this approach requires a sort of “Copernican revolution” in educational thought by recognizing that we base our commitment to critical rationality on conceptions of the good life for moral persons rather than basing our conceptions of the good on rational justifications. Critical thinking, in other words, is not the educational ideal; it is a tool we use to achieve that ideal. Rationality is not the end in view; it is a means used by educators, among others, to cultivate moral personhood.

THE IDEOLOGY OBJECTION

After careful consideration of the wide variety of ways in which the term “ideology” is used in the scholarly literature, Siegel stipulates that he will regard ideology “as a general framework that shapes individual consciousness, guides and legitimates belief and action, and renders experience meaningful.”⁴ The objection raised on the basis of ideology, then, is to the idea that critical thinking can be justified independently of ideological commitment, when in fact “ideological commitment is logically prior to a commitment to educational ideals.... What counts

as a reason depends on what one's ideology recognizes as a reason," so the objection goes. "Rationality itself...is ideology dependent."⁵

This objection is based, Siegel argues, on the premise that ideology shapes consciousness. He dubs this doctrine "ideological determinism," because it holds that ideology rather than reasoning determines belief and behavior. For the ideological determinist, writes Siegel, "rationality itself is a function of ideology, and what counts as good reason will depend on the ideological stance from which one evaluates reasons."⁶ Siegel responds with the following argument:

1. Suppose *p* is a putative reason for some thesis *T*.
2. Either (a) *p* genuinely supports *T* or (b) it does not.
3. Suppose *T* is ideological determinism.
4. If *p* does not genuinely support *T* (2b), then ideological determinism is no more plausible than its alternative.
5. If *p* does genuinely support *T* (2a), then either (a) one's ideology accepts that *p* genuinely supports *T* or (b) one's ideology does not accept that *p* genuinely supports *T*.
6. If one's ideology does not accept that *p* genuinely supports *T* (5b), then *p* is not a genuine reason for *T* which contradicts the assumption in premise 5.
7. If one's ideology accepts that *p* genuinely supports *T* (5a), then ideological determinism is affirmed which holds that there are no ideology independent reasons that genuinely support *T*. Since premise 1 supposes that *p* is such an ideology independent reason, this also contradicts premise 5.
8. Ideological determinism is therefore either arbitrary or self-defeating. It should be rejected.

In Siegel's words:

The ideological determinist is thus in a bind. Either there exists some good reason for embracing the determinist thesis or not. If there is not, then there is no good reason for embracing that view....[I]f there can be good reason for embracing the thesis, then the thesis is undercut, for asserting that there can be good reason to embrace it is tantamount to asserting that such good reason can be independent of prior ideological commitment — which is just what the thesis denies....Either way the determinist goes, the determinist thesis must be given up.⁷

The problem with this response, of course, is that it assumes precisely that which is at issue between critical rationalism and ideological determinism, namely, whether reasons are ever independent of ideology. Premise (1) already supposes that *p* is such an ideology independent reason.⁸ Premise (4) puts that supposition to work by assuming that if *p* does not genuinely support ideological determinism, then the thesis is no more plausible than the alternative. Its acceptance, in Siegel's words, "is arbitrary and without merit."

But this is just what the determinist denies. To the claim that ideological determinism is not supported by adequate reasons, the determinist might respond as follows:

Who cares? It is you, the rationalist, who insists upon ideology independent reasons to support your theses. As far as I am concerned, my deterministic beliefs are a product of the cultural and political milieu of the late twentieth-century, Western society of which I am a part. My adherence to these views is no more a product of decisions based on reasoning than

the language I learned from my parents. Whether or not they are supported by ideology independent reasons is quite beside the point. These beliefs are part of the air I breath, and any reasons I would use to evaluate my beliefs would ultimately support them since those reasons are born of the same air.

Premise (6) also puts Siegel's supposition that *p* is an ideology independent reason to work by claiming that it contradicts the affirmation of ideological determinism, which of course it does. But this reasoning is possible only because Siegel has presupposed that which he set out to demonstrate in the first place.

In short, the ideologist is in a bind on Siegel's account only if she already accepts the view that Siegel set out to defend, and which the determinist thesis denies, namely, that reason can be independent of ideology. In the absence of that presupposition, the determinist is stung by neither horn of Siegel's dilemma. Indeed, the assumptions of critical rationality seem plausible only to those who already accept them, which would appear to lend support to the determinist thesis.

Missing from Siegel's response to the ideology objection is a justification of rationality that does not itself depend on a prior commitment to the value of reason. This paradox of rationality is, of course, nothing new. But, in claiming that rationality is ideology dependent, the ideological determinist reminds us of this paradox; and short of some solution to it, the independence of reason from ideology is surely in doubt.

THE INDOCTRINATION OBJECTION

Unfortunately, critical rationality appears to fair no better in responding to the indoctrination objection. After carefully reviewing the standard approaches to indoctrination that see it as stemming from the intentions, methods, or content, Siegel follows Green⁹ in depicting indoctrination as the promotion of a non-evidential style of belief. In Siegel's words:

If a belief is held non-evidentially — that is in such a way that it is held without regard to evidence relevant to its rational assessment...then the belief is an indoctrinated one....Indoctrination may be regarded as the collection of those modes of belief inculcation which foster a non-evidential...style of belief.¹⁰

Indoctrination, then, "whatever else it may be, is anti-critical."¹¹ It would be a problem for critical thinking as an educational ideal, therefore, were indoctrination to be inevitable. Yet some argue that this is precisely the case. Indeed, they claim not only that indoctrination is inevitable in general, but that the non-evidential inculcation of the value of critical thinking is inevitable in particular. In Siegel's words once again,

If this value must be indoctrinated, the students must be unable to embrace it on its merits...Either the value of critical thinking would not...be rationally supportable; or...the student would not accept the values for reasons that...support it. Either way, the student is not valuing critical thinking critically.¹²

In sum, if indoctrination is inevitable, then critical thinking is impossible. But is indoctrination inevitable? This is the question that Siegel sets out to answer in responding to this objection.

Siegel admits that inculcation is indeed inevitable since all societies inculcate ideas in youngsters whose rational capacities are limited by their stage of development. This having been said, as children grow intellectually, the nonrational grounds

on which they base their ideas can sometimes be replaced with good reasons. Siegel calls ideas of this kind “redeemable by reasons.” The difference between indoctrination and nonrational belief inculcation, then, is that indoctrinated ideas are not redeemable, inculcated ideas are. As Siegel put it, “if indoctrinated, the belief cannot be redeemable, if redeemable, it cannot have been indoctrinated.”¹³

The problem with this response arises when we ask whether critical rationality is itself redeemable by reasons. Having inculcated the child to accept the assumptions and values of critical thinking, can it be supposed that the plausibility of those assumptions and values are themselves justifiable, such that the nonrational grounds upon which the child initially based her commitment to rationality could later be replaced by good reasons?

As we have seen, the answer to these queries is yes only if one already accepts the assumptions and values of rationality. But the child who has truly imbibed the assumptions of rationality will not allow such a vicious circle in seeking to replace her nonrational grounds for this commitment with good reasons. Rather, to shed the nonrational basis of her conviction, she will require that any justification must convince, without presupposing that which it endeavors to demonstrate; and this sort of justification for rationality is again absent from Siegel’s analysis.

Since Siegel offers no solution to the paradox of rationality’s rationality, there is no basis for the claim that critical thinking is redeemable by reasons; and if the very process of reasoning is itself nonredeemable, there is also no basis to the belief that reasons are capable of redeeming any other commitments a child might be inculcated to adopt. In short, Siegel’s distinction between indoctrination and belief inculcation collapses because rationality is not redeemable; and with the collapse of this distinction, we are left with the inevitability of indoctrination, and the consequent impossibility of critical thinking.

SIEGEL’S RESPONSE

Siegel has responded to this sort of critique.¹⁴ If the determinist claims that the rationalist has not properly justified his position concerning the value of reasons, Siegel argues that she has in fact already accepted the very claim for which a justification is being demanded; for the call for a justification presupposes that such a rational account is required for the rationalist position to be worthy of accent. In Siegel’s words:

The skeptic is herself asking our question. She is asking: “Why be rational?” that is, she is asking for reasons which justify the rationalist’s commitment to rationality. She is suggesting that if reasons cannot be adduced which justify the rationalists’s position, then that position fails to be justified and so fails legitimately to command the rationalist’s respect.¹⁵

Rationality, then, is self justifying according to Siegel, “in that seriously querying the justificatory status of rationality presupposes that very status. In order to seriously question the value or justificatory status of rationality,” Siegel continues, “one must assume the relevance of considerations which rationally support one or another answer to the question; in so assuming, one is presupposing the rationalist’s position.”¹⁶

If, on the other hand, the determinist does not offer such a call for a justification, then, according to Siegel, she has not in fact joined the issue with her rationalist

opponent. If she simply refuses the rationalist's gambit by stating "I don't care whether or not your position or any other is justified because it is you the rationalist not I who is concerned about reasons," then there is no real dispute between them. The determinist or ideologist has not entered the debate. "What I think I've shown," wrote Siegel in private correspondence, "is that any dispute about the justificatory status of rationality will involve the disputants in a prior commitment to the value of reasons. Such a commitment is a requirement of engaging in the dispute."

Siegel agrees that if the determinist does not care to join the issue with the rationalist, there is nothing of a rational nature that the latter can do to convince her to do so. Indeed, reasons are simply irrelevant to such a person. Hence, it is unclear why Siegel holds that rationality is self-justifying, when by his own account it is justified only to those who already accept its justificatory power. Put differently, rationality is self-justifying to those who already accept rationality as justified. But this is precisely the point I have been making. The rationalist's arguments are convincing only to those who already accept them. Robert Ennis put it this way:

Unfortunately, even if this ploy did work to show that the questioner is committed to rationality, it would not constitute a justification of rationality. It would only show that the *questioner*, by presupposing rationality, is committed to it. Suppose Siegel's enemy does not even bother to ask for the justification of rationality, but goes merrily on in his or her irrational way. Then no justification for rationality has been presented.¹⁷

"The question," wrote Siegel again in private correspondence, is whether the determinist can, "establish the rightness of her view, or the wrongness of mine." But the determinist is out to establish neither the rightness of her view nor the wrongness of Siegel's, since she has in fact rejected the very utility of such categories as right and wrong. It is the rationalist, therefore, who is out to establish the rightness of his view and the wrongness of the determinist's. And this, according to Siegel's own account, cannot be accomplished unless the rightness of rationality is already agreed to in the first place.

Siegel has not shown, therefore, that there is a rational basis for the belief in the value of good reasons that can appeal to those who lie outside of a community of discourse that already accepts their value. Consequently, his responses to the ideology and indoctrination objections fail. The question remains, however, whether Siegel has not demonstrated something of value for those who function within that community of discourse. I believe that he has.

CRITICAL THINKING RECONSIDERED

To see what Siegel has demonstrated, it will be useful to distinguish between two kinds of rationalism and two approaches to ideology. Dogmatic rationalists tend to believe that they possess absolute truth because their methods of both discovery and justification are unassailable. Since this group generally believes that there is one best interpretation of data, one best reading of texts, one best answer to most questions, provided the proper methods are employed, those who accept other interpretations, readings, or answers are viewed with suspicion and mistrust.

I do not know of many rationalists who actually fall within this category — probably most do at one time or another when they are not paying close attention to the consequences of their statements — but some ideologists believe that rationalisms

of all varieties are inherently dogmatic. These dogmatic ideologists often accept a Marxian analysis which holds that their is no truth, and that what passes for knowledge is nothing more than the propaganda used to justify the actions of those in power. There is no difference between rationalism and rationalization. All versions of rationalism, therefore, are merely the ideologies of those who claim the privileges of power. Thinking that is genuinely critical will attempt to empower those denied access to such privileges by exposing the arbitrary, and where appropriate, oppressive character of these rationalisms.

Siegel's arguments against ideology and indoctrination will not convince dogmatic ideologists of the merits of critical rationality because they view Siegel's reasons conception of critical thinking as no less dogmatic than other rationalisms. It is they who will simply refuse to accept the idea that a doctrine that lacks sufficient rational support is no more arbitrary than one that does not. Dogmatic versions of both rationalism and ideology, then, are essentially incommensurable. There are approaches to both rationalism and ideology, however, that are not dogmatic. I like to call one group of them pragmatic. Pragmatic rationalism shares, with its dogmatic counterpart, a commitment to the value of critical thinking in the pursuit of truth and goodness. It differs from dogmatism, however, in at least two ways: First, it tends to be committed to a more robust fallibilism. According to dogmatic rationalism, doctrines which we hold true today might be proven false tomorrow through the consistent application of appropriate methods of discovery. This view tends to be less willing than pragmatism to subject methods of discovery and justification to critical scrutiny. For pragmatic rationalism, not only truth, but also method is fallible.

Second, dogmatic rationalism tends to see rationality as an end-in-itself. Pragmatic rationalism, on the other hand, sees critical thinking as a means to more important ends. To illustrate this distinction, consider Siegel's four arguments for critical thinking as an educational ideal. According to one of these arguments, critical thinking is needed to initiate students into the community of inquirers. This argument views rationality as an end-in-view, since it claims that learning to reason is valuable because it leads to further reasoning. Here, Siegel's rationalism tends to be more dogmatic, since as we have seen, he offers no successful justification for such a commitment.

According to Siegel's other three arguments, however, critical thinking is praised because it promotes respect for persons, self-sufficiency, and democratic society. Here, rationality is not the end-in-view, it is a means to achieve moral and political ends. One could, of course, claim that these values are themselves rationally justifiable. Given the precarious state of rationality's justifiability, however, I submit that it may be more plausible to begin, as Siegel has in these three cases, with moral and political suppositions rather than cognitive ones. Here, Siegel's rationalism tends to be more pragmatic.

Unlike their dogmatic counterparts, pragmatic approaches to ideology have not completely abandoned the possibility of truth. Although they accept that knowledge can be used as a tool of oppression, they do not reduce it to propaganda for

rationalizing the actions of the powerful. Rather, they are concerned that those who have the power to advance their own interpretations of the universe fail to understand that all interpretations are under-determined by the facts, and that there are many ways to understand experience that are consistent with reality as it is presented to consciousness. For this reason, alternative ways of conceiving human realities and the people who adhere to them are too often not afforded sufficient respect.

Whereas dogmatic versions of rationalism and ideology appear to be incompatible, pragmatic versions of these two doctrines do not. On the contrary, they seem to share common commitments to respect for persons, empowerment, and democratic living. They differ, however, over whether critical rationality is a help or a hindrance toward these ends.

Although pragmatic ideologists sometimes argue at crosspurposes with rationalism, they do not completely reject rationality. Rather, they reject its misuse for immoral and politically undesirable ends. Hence, ideologists of this sort would not remain silent or respond with, "Who cares?" when the likes of Siegel point out that, without justification, their position is without merit. On the contrary, they see their position as making a truth claim, if also a political one; and they seek to support that claim with relevant reasons and not merely with plays for power.

In short, pragmatic rationalists and ideologists share a community of discourse that is not shared by the dogmatists; one that begins with a common conception of human beings as moral persons, and with a vision of human communities as promoting the good for moral persons. According to this conception, humans possess free will, that is, the capacity in many situations to decide of their own volition what they wish to believe and how they choose to behave. They also possess the capacity to understand their circumstances with sufficient intelligence to make decisions about beliefs and behaviors that can contribute to accomplishing the ends they deem desirable. Because of these capacities, humans can be held responsible for the consequences of those choices; because of these capacities, it is possible to talk about whether those choices are right or wrong, and because of these capacities, human life in all of its potential is intrinsically valuable. Without people who are intelligent and free it would be nonsense to speak of values altogether.

It would not be inappropriate to refer to this as a broadly liberal conception of the human condition — although its roots in the West are to be found first in the Hebrew Bible which is too often inappropriately seen as endorsing conceptions of the good that are anything but liberal. Communities, according to this liberal conception, are capable of promoting opportunities for people to enhance their moral personhood, both as individuals and as groups, by exercising their intelligence and their free will. Communities of this type require a commitment to learning in order to enhance the exercise of free will toward desired ends. This sort of learning requires standards of rationality akin to those advanced by Siegel. It also requires traditions of inquiry that will record what has been learned for transmission across the generations.

It is within the context of this sort of community of discourse that Siegel's arguments against ideological determinism and indoctrination make sense, because

pragmatic ideologists cannot duck the requirement of providing good reasons to support their position. To make this case, Siegel would have to demonstrate that liberal conceptions of moral personhood and community would be better served by means of critical thinking than unchecked ideological pluralism. At least three of the arguments he advances in defense of his reasons conception, those rooted in respect, empowerment, and democratic citizenship, are the basis for such a case.

Dogmatic rationalism tends to accept this liberal view. However, unlike pragmatic rationalism, it holds that this view is rationally justifiable rather than being the basis for the justification of rationality; it is based on reasons rather than being the basis of reasoning. As has been argued, this position cannot withstand rational scrutiny.

Dogmatic ideologists, on the other hand, tend to reject this liberal conception of the human condition because they believe that human behavior and belief are determined by history, politics, or environment, rather than by the choices people make. People, according to this doctrine, are not moral persons; they are amoral because they cannot be held responsible for their behavior, since it was determined by forces outside of themselves. Any discussion of good or bad behavior is literally nonsense, in this view, since the origin of the behavior is not a moral agent, but rather, history, politics, or environment.

Dogmatic conceptions of ideology, then, are not only incommensurable with all varieties of rationalism, they are incommensurable with pragmatic conceptions of ideology as well. Although there may be no refuting the dogmatic ideologist on rational grounds, this analysis has uncovered a choice between two clear alternatives — at least for those who believe that we are capable of choice — between an irrefutable, amoral dogmatism, on the one hand, and on the other, a community of discourse in which the possibility of moral discussion is preserved. In the former, the distinction between education and indoctrination collapses; in the latter it does not.

SUMMARY

The real choice to be made in considering theories of critical rationality and education is not between those dogmatically committed to rationality and those equally dogmatic about ideology. If we are able to choose the doctrines we prefer, the choice is between precluding or preserving the possibility of moral discourse. The consequences of the former have played themselves out dramatically on both the right and the left in twentieth-century, European, political history. Those who view human life in all of its potential, as an end-in-itself, would be wise to choose the latter.

1. The author is grateful to members of the California Association for Philosophy and Education, and to Harvey Siegel for helpful comments and criticism. Responsibility for the substance of the paper, of course, remains the author's alone.

2. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988).

3. See H. A. Alexander, "Science and Spirituality: Traditional Interpretation in Liberal Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (1992): 383-400; H. A. Alexander, "On the Possibility of Teaching Theology," *Panorama: An International Journal of Religious Education and Values*, forthcoming.

4. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 65.
5. Ibid., 66.
6. Ibid., 69.
7. Ibid., 72.
8. Although Siegel refers to this as a putative reason, the fact that reason is put to work so quickly in premise four suggests that it very quickly becomes quite an active reason indeed.
9. Thomas Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: Megran Hill, 1971); Thomas Green, "Indoctrination and Belief," in *Concepts of Indoctrination*, ed. I. A. Snook (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 25-46.
10. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 80.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 78.
13. Ibid., 85.
14. Harvey Siegel, "Why Be Rational? On Thinking Critically About Critical Thinking," in *Philosophy of Education 1989*, ed. Ralph Page (Normal, Illinois: The Philosophy of Education Society, 1990), 392-401; Harvey Siegel, "Rescher on the Justification of Rationality," *Informal Logic* 16, no. 1 (1992): 23-31.
15. Siegel, "Why Be Rational?" 398.
16. Ibid., 389.
17. Robert Ennis, "The Rationality of Rationality: Why Think Culturally," in Page, ed., *Philosophy of Education 1989*, 403.