

The Virtue of Critical Thinking

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In his title, Emery Hyslop-Margison boldly proclaims the failure of critical thinking. He decries its vices and concludes that critical thinking is beyond rehabilitation. As an alternative, he extols the virtues of virtue epistemology. I shall argue that critical thinking is in no need of rehabilitation as Hyslop-Margison's case against it is misdirected. I shall also examine to what extent the notion of epistemic virtue provides a viable conceptual or pedagogical alternative to critical thinking.

Hyslop-Margison claims that critical thinking, in focusing on mental processes, generic, de-contextualized procedures, meta-cognitive strategies and skill transfer, commits epistemological errors based on fallacious Cartesian metaphysics. Calling on Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein, he demonstrates the error in conflating mental processes and physical processes, the problems in seeing critical thinking as generic and viewing it apart from context, and the conceptual confusion inherent in notions of transfer and meta-cognitive discourse. In this I think that he is correct. Indeed, numerous critical thinking theorists have pointed out exactly these problems previously.¹

These are, however, problems only with certain psychological theories of critical thinking. In contrast, philosophical theories of critical thinking are explicitly normative, focusing not on the psychological processes used in thinking, but rather on what makes thinking critical. The kinds of normative theories of critical thinking which fill our philosophy of education literature are not the appropriate target for Hyslop-Margison's attacks. Indeed, the absence of attention to or even mention of the theories of Ennis, Siegel, Paul, or Lipman is rather striking. To proclaim critical thinking a failure without examining any of the conceptions of any of the principal theorists in the area seems a trifle rash, at best.

It may be that Hyslop-Margison would want to argue that, in framing their theories in terms of skills, these theorists would also be guilty of some of the conceptual mistakes he describes. Now, I believe that a case can be made that skills talk can be misleading if taken to refer to mental entities,² although I do not believe that these philosophers intend it in this way.³ But if this is Hyslop-Margison's position, then he would need to make the case through careful argumentation based on detailed examination of the theories at issue. Moreover, not all philosophical theories of critical thinking are framed in terms of skills.⁴

According to Hyslop-Margison, the notion of epistemic virtue is superior to that of critical thinking because the former deals with the various character traits, personal qualities and dispositions central to improved epistemological success. Now, he is certainly correct about the importance of these qualities and dispositions. But in this he joins a long line of critical thinking theorists. Dispositions, character traits, and/or intellectual virtues form a central part of virtually all theories of critical thinking. Siegel, for example, uses the notion of the critical spirit to refer to this

characterological or dispositional dimension which he sees as being of equal importance with the reason assessment component.⁵ Dispositions are fundamental to Ennis's conception of critical thinking;⁶ dispositions, values, and traits of character are central to Paul's strong sense critical thinking;⁷ and habits of mind constitute an important intellectual resource in Bailin, Case, Coombs, and Daniels's conceptualization.⁸ And even Perkins, who offers one of the psychological theories of critical thinking criticized by Hyslop-Margison, centers his 1993 account around the concept of dispositions.⁹ Indeed, all the virtues Hyslop-Margison describes under the rubric of epistemological virtue are included in the dispositional component of various critical thinking theories. Moreover, a dispositional component has been a very clear and central part of all these theories virtually since their inception. Indeed, Ennis first introduced the notion of "tendencies" or dispositions in his Presidential Address to the Philosophy of Education Society in 1979.¹⁰

The central importance of knowledge in specific areas is also recognized by philosophical critical thinking theorists. And, although there is some debate in the field as to whether some aspects of critical thinking are general as opposed to subject-specific, no critical thinking theorist I know would advocate critical thinking as a way to bypass subject knowledge and understanding.

Although Hyslop-Margison's arguments against critical thinking do not go through, it still remains to investigate whether virtue epistemology constitutes a viable rival theory. Hyslop-Margison conceptualizes epistemic virtue in terms of character traits, personal qualities and dispositions, and the kind of epistemic virtues he cites, for example the aspiration to discover new truth, to increase one's explanatory understanding, and to hold true rather than false beliefs, as well as the regulatory virtues entailed in these, are indeed necessary for epistemic success. Are they, however, sufficient? A person might well aspire to hold true rather than false beliefs but might not have the resources for accomplishing this aspiration. They might not, for example, understand the criteria according to which to assess reasons in support of or opposed to various candidate beliefs. Let us take, as an example, someone critiquing a particular theory — call her Emily. Despite Emily's honest intention to pursue truth, she may fail to acquire the relevant background knowledge and so creates a straw person as the object of her objections. The disposition by itself does not guarantee successful performance.

A supporter of virtue epistemology would likely respond that there is some notion of success built into the very concept of virtue, much in the way in which Aristotle's virtuous person is one who is not only disposed in a certain way but who acts virtuously. Thus, by virtue of the fact that her performance was unsuccessful, Emily could not, in fact, be said to possess the relevant virtues. Montmarquet would probably say that she lacks epistemic conscientiousness.¹¹ There do, then, seem to be some criteria according to which successful thinking is evaluated. But what are the criteria, from whence do they emanate, and how are they grounded?

These questions become particularly salient with respect to justification. Hyslop-Margison states that virtue epistemology conceptualizes justified belief in terms of epistemic virtues rather than in terms of evidence requirements. But in what

way can character traits or dispositions justify particular beliefs? Montmarquet seems, in places, to equate a justified belief with a virtuously formed belief, but this is problematic.¹² A person might arrive at a belief in an epistemically virtuous manner and yet, due to an error in reasoning, an understandable oversight or information to which she does not have access, the belief might not be justified according to the evidence currently extant. There is a distinction to be made between an individual's being justified in holding a particular belief and the belief itself being justified. In the latter case, evidence requirements and criteria outside the individual are primary.¹³ These are precisely the kinds of criteria of justification explicated by critical thinking theorists. I would argue that a complete theory of epistemic success, in order to be both conceptually accurate and pedagogically useful, must make reference to such criteria and not just to the dispositional component.

What virtue epistemology might provide, however, is a language for talking about the dispositional component that avoids the ambiguities and psychological and behavioral baggage surrounding the concept of disposition.¹⁴ And, in being explicitly normative it brings to the fore issues of doxastic responsibility. Moreover, one could say of a critical thinker that she is epistemically virtuous. But, to the extent that criteria for judgment are unacknowledged or implicit, virtue epistemology fails as a full blown theory of epistemic success. To the extent that such criteria are acknowledged and articulated, virtue epistemology begins to look a lot like a theory of critical thinking.

1. See, for example, Sharon Bailin, Roland Case, Jerrold R. Coombs, and Leroi B. Daniels, "Common Misconceptions of Critical Thinking," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 31, no. 3 (1999): 269-83; Sharon Bailin and Harvey Siegel, "Critical Thinking," in *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Education*, ed. Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish (London: Blackwell, 2002), 181-93.

2. See Sharon Bailin, "Critical Thinking and Science Education," *Science and Education* 11, no. 4 (2002): 361-75.

3. For a discussion of this point, see Bailin and Siegel, "Critical Thinking."

4. See, for example, Sharon Bailin, Roland Case, Jerrold R. Coombs, and Leroi B. Daniels, "Conceptualizing Critical Thinking," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 31, no. 3 (1999): 285-302.

5. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

6. Robert Ennis, *Critical Thinking* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996).

7. Richard Paul, *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World*, ed. A.J.A. Binker (Rohnert Park, Calif.: Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, 1990).

8. Bailin, Case, Coombs, and Daniels, "Conceptualizing Critical Thinking."

9. David Perkins, Eileen Jay, and Shari Tishman, "Beyond Abilities: A Dispositional Theory of Thinking," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1993): 1-21.

10. Robert Ennis, "Presidential Address: A Conception of Rational Thinking," in *Philosophy of Education 1979*, ed. Jerrold Coombs (Bloomington Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1979), 1-30.

11. James Montmarquet, "Epistemic Virtue," *Mind* 96, no. 384 (1987): 482-97.

12. *Ibid.*, 491.

13. *Ibid.* Montmarquet does acknowledge that the notion of epistemic virtue cannot, by itself, generate a complete account of justification.

14. Richard Paul, for example, speaks of intellectual virtues. Paul, *Critical Thinking*.