

## Critical Thinking, Postmodernism, and Rational Evaluation

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**Key words:** Contextualism, critical thinking, epistemology, postmodernism, rationality, relativism, Rorty.

**Abstract:** In this paper, after showing how the postmodern critiques of Enlightenment rationality apply to critical thinking, I argue that a critical discussion on any subject must assume specific principles of rationality. I then show how these principles can be used to critique and reject postmodern claims about the contextual nature of rationality.

### I

**Introduction.** Harvey Siegel has often reminded me that most philosophy papers are either trivial or false. This paper is probably not an exception. While no one would intentionally put forth a position believed to be false, sometimes it makes sense to lay out and defend a few apparently trivial ideas only because so many in academe seem ready to deny them. One such idea is that in order to evaluate the rationality of claims, critical thinking classes employ specific standards of rationality and these standards can be defended. While this claim may seem trivial, the problem is that, to quote Karl Popper, "one of the most surprising elements of contemporary intellectual life is the ease with which many intellectuals embrace irrationalism in one form or another of epistemological relativism."<sup>1</sup> Today's most popular brand of relativism parades under the banner of postmodern epistemology. Postmodern thinkers claim that what counts as a rational belief is not a function of objective evidence or cogent

argument but rather depends on or is relative to one's "compartment," "conceptual frame," "background knowledge," "style of reasoning," "social history," "scientific paradigm," academic discipline, or specific human purposes.<sup>2</sup> While there are many faces to postmodern thinking, one dominant feature is its willingness to endorse epistemological relativism and so deny that there are objective standards of rational evaluation and choice.<sup>3</sup> Hence, rationality, understood as the possibility of evaluating *objectively* the reasonableness of a position or action with respect to available evidence and arguments, is under serious attack. By "objectively" I mean the possibility of giving reasons in support of a claim such that anyone who heard and understood the reasons would be inclined to accept the claim as "reasonable." Given that this is, at least for the most part, the notion of rationality taught in critical thinking classes, the postmodern critique of rationality is, by implication, a formidable attack on critical thinking.

In response to the postmodern critique, I shall offer a series of arguments intended to support a few general standards of rationality – standards common to critical thinking classes. I shall then employ these standards to identify problems with the postmodern critique of rationality. That is to say, if these specific standards of rationality are defensible, these standards permit serious criticism of any position claiming that all standards of rational evaluation are contextual, culturally based, or simply discipline-dependent.

## II

### *Postmodernism and Critical Thinking.*

As a point of departure, postmodern critics of rationality, among whom I count Richard Rorty as a leading proponent, point out the failure of the Enlightenment project and the demise of traditional foundationalist epistemologies, e.g., Cartesianism and logical positivism, as providing support for their claims about the contextual nature of rationality.<sup>4</sup> Some go so far as to claim that in light of the philosophical developments over the past 30 years, the battle between relativism and objectivism is over, with epistemological relativism now reigning supreme.<sup>5</sup> Again, the problem for teachers of critical thinking is that if appeals to the traditional standards of rationality, e.g., the experimental methods and inductive reasoning of physical science or the inferences of formal logic, no longer carry any privileged epistemic weight, then critical thinking becomes just one way among many of evaluating the reasonableness of claims and arguments. The evaluative methods taught in critical thinking classes would no longer be normative with respect to claims made across all academic disciplines. What counts as good reasons for holding a position would be relative to each discipline and its preferred methods of inquiry.<sup>6</sup> For example, according to Thomas Kuhn, what was believed to be the normative nature of the physical sciences is only one specific paradigm among competing alternatives.<sup>7</sup> On such theoretical grounds, those operating from a discipline with one specific paradigm cannot evaluate critically the epistemic merit of claims made from another discipline, one that employs a different paradigm with different methods of determining the acceptability, i.e., rationality, of a belief. As a result, there is no universal or meta-disciplinary standpoint from which we can critically evaluate the rationality of claims. This denial of "metanarratives," i.e., points of view which

can evaluate the different disciplines with respect to universal standards of rationality, is at the heart of much postmodern thinking.<sup>8</sup> From the postmodern perspective, for critical thinkers to reject claims in any discipline on logical grounds is only a sign of critical thinking's tendency towards unwarranted reductionistic epistemological imperialism.<sup>9</sup> That is, critical thinking is guilty of assuming only one frame of reference among many, and then judging all others by its own questionable criteria.

To my mind, such thinking sets the stage for intellectual anarchy and hence deserves careful consideration. I shall argue that it is possible to justify a few standards of rational evaluation that transcend the specific disciplines. In other words, metanarratives about rational norms are still possible – and needed. In my defense of these rational norms, I shall try to show that there are ways to understand standards of rationality that avoid the problems of either Cartesian foundationalism or the relativism, either stated or implied, of much postmodern thinking. To be considered rational, these standards of rationality need not be seen as eternal Platonic forms or Archimedean points having independent existence and absolute validity. Rather the standards should be seen as principles growing out of the common human practices of critical discussion and honest inquiry – regardless of the discipline.<sup>10</sup> In other words, these standards of rationality, including the principles of logic, should be seen as constitutive values necessary for engaging in such fundamental human practices. Their value then is conditional rather than absolute. Seen in this light, the defence of the standards of rationality falls between what I consider two unacceptable extremes: Cartesian foundationalism, on one hand, and epistemological relativism on the other.

## III

*The Postmodern Misconception of Rationality.* For postmodern thinkers, the

problem with establishing general standards of rationality begins with the demise of Cartesian foundationalism. For Descartes, we begin with clear and distinct indubitable premises as our epistemic foundation and then reason deductively to more complicated truths. I agree that if this is the *only* way to establish the rationality of a set of standards or a procedure embodying these standards, then a justification is impossible. What is indubitable to some is not indubitable to others, and what is indubitable turns out to be too meager a foundation upon which to build a system of knowledge.

But the failure of Cartesian foundationalism should not be the end of the story. There are other ways to establish the rationality of a belief or practice besides deducing it from a "clear and distinct idea." First, we might say that a specific procedure for evaluating positions is rational if, given the known alternatives, it faces fewer difficulties. For example, we would consider risk assessors rational if they adopted a set of quantitative methods for assessing risks, even if there were shortcomings with such methods, as long as there were no better alternative methods for determining the level of risk. In other words, to be considered rational, the quantitative methods of risk-cost-benefit-analysis need not be perfect; they only need to be better than the alternatives.<sup>11</sup>

Second, it is rational to choose one procedure over others if, given our specific purposes, that procedure "gets us where we want to go" better than alternatives. For example, if we want to carry out logical inferences, then it would be rational to choose whatever rules of inference allow us to infer true conclusions from true premises and avoid allowing us to infer false conclusions from true premises. Or, with respect to induction, we are justified to generalize from past experience because such inductive logic serves our purposes with respect to learning from experience, while other counter-inductive methods do not. Another clear example of such a ra-

tional practice is the adoption of the procedures of controlled experimentation in science. Given that we want to discover the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for an event, the procedures of controlled experimentation work better than the alternatives. They get us where we want to go, even though they assume the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Uniformity of Nature, neither of which is provable by the methods of Cartesian foundationalism.

Third, and this approach will provide the foundation for the rest of the paper, we could adopt Aristotle's strategy in his *Metaphysics* for establishing first principles and say that it is reasonable to adopt certain principles if they are necessary conditions for some commonly accepted human practice such as successful communication.<sup>12</sup> If endorsing specific standards of rationality is necessary for communication, our choice is either to accept those principles as rational or remain silent.

Each of these three ways offers us a strategy for seeing the rationality of certain practices or beliefs without appealing to the Cartesian foundationalist notion of certainty and proof. Hence, even if Cartesian foundationalism is unacceptable, we need not give up the notion of there being general standards of rationality and adopt some version of postmodern Rortian relativism where we are rational to endorse whatever practice our culture or peers permit us to endorse. The inability to provide a rigorous proof for a set of standards does not entail that the adoption of any specific set is irrational, any more than believing that other people have minds or there is an external world is irrational simply because we cannot provide a proof on the foundationalist model.

#### IV

***Principles of Rationality as Constitutive Values.*** Based on Aristotle's insight that specific principles must be endorsed because they are necessary to engage in a

chosen practice, e.g., discourse, it is possible to give a series of non-question-begging arguments for the traditional standards of rationality. The arguments are non-question-begging because, as Epictetus pointed out, for anyone to ask seriously whether it is rational to accept the standards of logic and reasoning is already to assume that they accept such standards. Presumably, the person who asks the question is asking for someone to provide a set of reasons for endorsing rationality or, conversely, for denying its importance. But to ask for reasons is already to commit oneself to the value of giving some sort of "rational argument."<sup>13</sup> So, a rational evaluation of any critique of rationality need not beg the question, unless the postmodern critics have quite capriciously adopted their position, not because of reasons, but rather out of some sort of Kierkegaardian "Leap of Faith"<sup>14</sup> or "the spite" of a Dostoevskian Underground Man. In either case, they would not really be asking whether one should accept or reject rationality because there were good reasons to do so. Their belief would be void of any epistemic foundation beyond a matter of personal taste or choice.

Let us begin then by examining the notion of constitutive values. Often when we think about values we see that, given certain practices, a commitment to specific values is necessary for that practice to succeed. For example, in the realm of science, if we assume that the search for scientific truth is important, then scientists must endorse the value of honesty. This is because without honesty, the community of scientific inquiries cannot build on the results reported by others. Each inquirer would be forced to "reinvent the wheel," so to speak. Honesty then is a constitutive value of all legitimate scientific investigation.

In an analogous fashion, one way to derive specific standards for rational evaluation is to examine the practice of discussion and inquiry, and then see what principles the participants must adopt *if* they are

to communicate their ideas to others and attempt to support their beliefs with reasons.

In spite of the postmodern claims about the relative nature of evidence, reasons, and methodologies, combined with their denial of the possibility of "metanarratives," it seems obvious that we do *not* live in an environment void of meaningful communication. We do have intelligent discussions about issues and occasionally even change our minds in light of the other's reasons and arguments. So, if it is fair to assume that meaningful discussion does occur, one method for criticizing the postmodern attitude towards rationality is to show how some constitutive rules appear to be necessary conditions for successful communication, discussion, and debate, regardless of the subject matter.<sup>15</sup> To my mind, this approach is an adequate enough defense of the accepted practices used in most critical thinking and logic classes. In formal terms, the justification for the approach is as follows: It seems axiomatic that if *x* is a mutually accepted practice and *y* and *z* are rules or procedures necessary for the success of *x*, then all who accept *x* must likewise accept *y* and *z*. To deny either *y* or *z* would be to deny *x*.

This strategy will allow us to see how the epistemologies typically put forth by the postmodern critics of rationality are inconsistent with principles necessary for postmodern thinkers to put forth and attempt to defend their positions. That is to say, if postmodern epistemologies are accepted, they entail the denial of principles necessary for their successful communication.

One such rule or principle that must be assumed for all successful communication is the Principle of Non-contradiction. Aristotle pointed out in his *Metaphysics*<sup>16</sup> that if communication and reasoned argument are possible (no matter what the context), the Principle of Non-contradiction must be upheld. Within a discussion, one cannot at the same time assert that both *p* and *~p* are

the case and still communicate anything. This is because if someone both states and denies a claim, those involved in the discussion cannot decide what is being claimed of what; whether something is or is not the case. Second, such logical contradictions are always false. If **p** is true and **not-p** false, then **p and not-p** must be false. And third, if a logical contradiction is accepted as true, then the truth of any claim whatsoever can be inferred.<sup>17</sup>

One consequence of all logical contradictions being false is that any position (**p**) that entails its own negation (**not-p**) must also be rejected. That is what we mean when we say a position is logically incoherent. For the sake of critical thinking courses, we could call this principle “the Rejection Principle.” If we apply this principle to claims made by many postmodern epistemologies, serious problems arise. In denying the possibility of metanarratives, postmoderns claim that the reasonableness of any claim is context dependent, e.g., what is reasonable for a philosopher, may not be reasonable for a poet, given that both operated from different contexts. But as Plato argued in his *Theaetetus* (171a-d), if one believes

- (1) all persons operate from some distinct context
- (2) the reasonableness of all claims is context-dependent

then these two premises entail that persons (such as Socrates) who operate from what they call a “non-contextualist or objective context” are within their epistemic rights to believe that “It is not the case that the reasonableness of all claims is context-dependent” – the negation of (2) above. So, if the claims about rational beliefs made by contextual epistemologies are accepted, they entail their own negation, which is to say they are logically incoherent.<sup>18</sup> If a theory about the justification of beliefs is logically incoherent, it should be rejected. Or, to state the conclusion more positively, if logical coherence is essential for successful communication, we have good reasons

to reject any epistemology that is logically incoherent. If, on the other hand, logical coherence is not important, we must then cease to value effective communication, including making claims which state our favorite epistemological theories.

Another normative principle of rational discourse is what I shall call the “Principle of Reciprocity.” I take it to be obvious that in any discussion, if a form of argument is used to either refute or to establish some claim, then that same form of argument may be used by any member of the discussion. So, for example, if the critics of rationality are warranted in accepting some form of argument against foundationalist epistemologies, the Principle of Reciprocity allows this same form of argument to be used against their contextualist epistemologies. “What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.”

The “Principle of Reciprocity” can be used to critique postmodern contextualist epistemologies in two ways. First, in their critique of foundationalism, if postmodern thinkers endorse forms of arguments acceptable to analytic philosophers, they cannot then claim that such forms of argument are no longer allowed in the debate over the acceptability of their own epistemologies. So any cry that analytic philosophers beg the question by submitting postmodern epistemologies to rational analysis is fair only if there are no rational arguments against foundationalism and for accepting the postmodern position. However, if there were no arguments, why would anyone believe it was reasonable to accept the postmodern position? Hence, surely postmoderns do not believe that rationality is *always* context- or discipline-dependent. They cannot use reason to critique Enlightenment methodologies common to critical thinking, but then claim that the use of reason to critique postmodern relativism begs the question. This, it seems, breaks the Principle of Reciprocity.

Second, postmodern thinkers are anti-foundationalists. One argument against

foundationalist epistemologies is they are self-referentially flawed, and hence should be rejected.<sup>19</sup> The argument runs something like this. Foundationalists hold that it is reasonable to believe only claims that are either members of some rational foundation and need no further justification or claims that follow logically from propositions in the foundation. Typically, claims in the foundation are either indubitable, logically self-evident, or evident to the senses. Critics of foundationalism then ask whether the propositions that define the foundationalist epistemology are either self-evident, indubitable, or evident to the senses, or inferred from propositions that are. They are not. They conclude, then, that the foundationalist epistemology is self-referentially flawed; that is to say, by its own criteria, the statements that define the theory must be rejected as unwarranted. Without the demise of foundationalist epistemologies, the door is open the sorts of contextual epistemologies endorsed by such postmodern thinkers as Richard Rorty.

Ironically, by employing this manner of argument, it is possible to show that postmodern contextualism suffers the same fate as foundationalism. If a postmodern thinker makes the claim that "The rationality of all claims is context- or discipline-dependent," then foundationalists can point out that if that claim is accepted, then the extent to which this claim is rational must also be context- or discipline-dependent. If its rationality is not context-dependent, then it is false that the rationality of *all* claims is context or discipline dependent. If, however, the reasonableness of the postmoderns' claim is itself context- or discipline-dependent, the claim cannot be treated as having any objective epistemic warrant. But without objective support, the claim bears no epistemic weight to convince thinkers who question its reasonableness or acceptability. Hence, when the postmodern theory about the nature of rationality is applied to itself, it too has self-referential problems. If those who opt for

postmodern contextualism intend the statement of their theory to be objectively compelling, the theory is false. If it is intended only to be contextually compelling, it bears no epistemic weight for the skeptic.

The issue of a theory's epistemic warrant brings us to a third principle of rationality that must be endorsed if we are to engage in critical discussions. It is generally accepted that people discussing the reasonableness of a position must attend to the evidence for or against the position. When people disagree about issues, one common question is, "What evidence do you have for your belief?" If the issue is one of competing epistemologies, it seems fair, then, to ask, "What is the evidence for each position?" Let us call this the "Reasons Principle." If we accept the Reasons Principle, then any epistemology that holds that the evidence for a claim is dependent upon one's specific context, methodology, or discipline has a peculiar problem. Such a theory entails that there could never be objective evidence either for or against any claims, including claims about one's favored epistemology. The epistemic warrant of claims provided as evidence would always be relative to some context. It seems then that if accepting a particular epistemology would undermine any notion of providing reasons or evidence, we have good reason to reject the epistemology. This is because, as rational inquirers, whatever theory of knowledge we end up choosing, we should choose it because there are better reasons or more evidence for it than for its alternatives.

So, if postmodern thinkers believe they can provide good reasons or evidence for their epistemological theory, they are faced with the following dilemma. Either the evidence for the position that "The reasonableness of all claims is dependent on some context or discipline" is itself context-dependent, or the evidence for accepting it is not dependent upon one's context or discipline. If the evidence is not context-dependent, then their position is false, because the

reasonableness of at least *some* claims – those which provide evidence for contextual epistemology – is not context-dependent. If, on the other hand, the evidence is not considered to be objective, but provides epistemic warrant only for people already operating from a postmodern point of view, then the evidence provides no warrant for those who remain uncertain. So if there are objective reasons and evidence for postmodern contextualism, the position is false, and if there is no objective evidence, no one need believe it.

A fourth principle of rationality is what I call the “Clarification Principle.” When we discuss issues, it seems obvious that we should always try to make sure that all members of the discussion understand the meaning of the key concepts in the discussion. It seems obvious that we cannot determine the acceptability of a claim unless we first know what the claim means. To know what a claim means assumes that we understand the meaning of the key terms of which it is comprised. For example, if someone says that all claims are reasonable or unreasonable, depending upon the “context” of the person making the claim, before we begin the discussion, all parties should make sure they are clear on the meaning of the key term “context.” We should ask then, “What constitutes a context?” Here again our postmodern contextualist runs into difficulties. What characteristics of the person would allow us to conclude that that person is operating from a different epistemological context than we are? In effect, the position assumes that different personal characteristics constitute different ways of knowing. What, however, are these epistemologically relevant differences? Are contexts determined by differences in sex, as some feminists claim? When we seek different contexts, should we include race, age, I.Q., philosophical schools of thought, class interests, nationality, religious beliefs, or any combination of such differences as relevant? On what grounds could we exclude any

such individual differences? Are all of these sufficient to constitute a context, and hence significant epistemic differences? If contexts are so important to postmodern epistemology, we need to know what counts as an essential difference between subjects such that what counts as true, acceptable, or reasonable is in fact “context-dependent?”<sup>20</sup>

Our demand for a clear definition of important terms shows that there is a problem with epistemological contextualism much the same as the problem faced by those who endorsed cultural relativism in ethics: In claiming that what is ethically right and wrong is relative to one’s culture, cultural relativists found there was no way to determine what differences in the persons constituted “a culture.” Even within geographically small human communities, there is large disagreement over ethical issues. Does this mean that all who disagree over ethical issues are operating from a unique culture? This seems unlikely. So, just as cultural relativism reduces itself to ethical subjectivism, so any epistemology that appeals to the notion of “context,” without first stating clearly the necessary and sufficient conditions for a “context,” becomes a subjective epistemology, where any specific set of individual differences may constitute an epistemically relevant difference. However, if any difference, say sex or age, is sufficient to constitute a different context, then the notion of a “context” becomes trivial. Ultimately, the number of contexts would equal the number of individuals holding disparate beliefs. As a consequence, rather than trying to resolve disagreements through rational means, we would say that each different belief was simply a result of the individual operating from a different context, being a different age, having a different education, being from a different part of the country or world, or belonging to a different social class. The list could go on and on. Hence, contextual epistemologies lead to a kind of epistemic subjectivism where each person

has a unique epistemological context and could neither understand nor evaluate the position held by anyone operating from a different context.<sup>21</sup>

We have assumed from the beginning, however, that communication was possible. Postmoderns such as Rorty and Lyotard are always trying to get others to accept their position, that is, to see things their way. Hence, given these difficulties, I would suggest that the notion of context be given up.

For the sake of argument, though, let us assume that it made sense to talk of such things as different epistemological contexts. We should then ask what is the nature of such entities. We are faced with the following dilemma: Either contexts are in some ways similar to each other (and hence translatable like different languages) or they are radically different (and hence untranslatable). If they are translatable, then it hardly makes sense to say "The truth or reasonableness of all claims is context-dependent" as that would be equivalent to saying the truth or reasonableness of all claims is *language-dependent* and hence what is reasonable to believe about the world when stated in German is not reasonable when stated in English or French. As a general claim, this is surely false. Whether or not it is reasonable to believe that "Mammals have hair" surely does not depend upon whether the claim is uttered in French, German, or English. Or, whether or not a doctor's claim about a compound fracture of the fibula is true or false does not depend upon whether the claim is made in Greek, Latin, or Hopi. So, if claims made in various contexts are translatable one to the other, the claim that the truth or reasonableness of *all* claims is "context-dependent" is false. The meaning and reasonableness of at least some claims does not alter with translation.

On the other hand, let us suppose that contexts are so radically different that they are not translatable. If we assume this position, we should ask how anyone could know that there were such things as non-

translatable contexts. To identify a context radically different from our own requires that we are able to *understand* the claims made from the other context and we know that their way of understanding the world will not translate into equivalent ways of understanding in our context. But in order for a person to understand the claims made by someone else in the other context, the inquirer has to fit them into her own contextual frame. Such understanding requires some sort of translation. This leads to the awkward conclusion that in order to know that the claims made from one context did not translate into another, one would first have to understand the claims, which is to translate them into one's own context. Such a position is logically incoherent. So, if there were such non-translatable contexts, no one could know it, for to know it requires at least some translatability.<sup>22</sup>

**Conclusion.** The point by now should be obvious. While contextual epistemologies in one stripe or another have become very popular and have what Rorty calls "a deliciously naughty" appeal, there are serious philosophical problems with trying to make sense of them, not the least being logical incoherence. Teachers of critical thinking (and anyone else who is committed to teaching the virtues of objective inquiry and rationality) are well within their epistemic rights to continue to do so, and have good reasons to reject postmodern epistemologies or those philosophical positions which might logically entail them.

Postmodern thinking has proclaimed that the Enlightenment ideals of objectivity and rationality are dead.<sup>23</sup> What I have tried to show is that if we accept the postmodern position as one open for critical discussion, then certain constitutive practices or principles which apply to any critical discussion must be upheld. These included upholding the Principle of Non-contradiction, which provides us with a way of rejecting incoherent beliefs; endorsing the Principle of Reciprocity with re-

spect to arguments; maintaining an appeal to reasons and evidence as a way of settling disagreements, i.e., “the Reasons Principle”; and making sure that persons in the dispute understand the key concepts involved, i.e., endorsing the Clarification Principle. I then argued that if we accept the contextualist epistemology which underlies the current critique of rationality, we must then throw out the principles or practices which presumably allowed postmodern critics of rationality to arrive at and articulate their own positions. Hence we have good reasons to endorse these general principles of rational evaluation that are assumed in any critical discussion and common to critical thinking courses.

There is something to be gained from the postmodern critique of rationality. First, I believe their critique assumes a very narrow notion of a rationally grounded belief, i.e., Cartesian foundationalism. We are able, however, to evaluate rational and irrational beliefs and practices quite apart from an appeal to certainty and universal standards of rationality sought by Descartes. If the dilemma is either foundationalism or relativism, clearly the dilemma is false. If critical thinkers can talk of rational and irrational beliefs quite apart from an appeal to foundationalism *and* also show that the postmodern relativist

epistemologies are flawed, then the methods of critical thinking need not be seen as just one approach among many equally valid ways. Critical thinking techniques gain a favored status.

Indeed, we live in a postmodern age, an age with a plurality of points of view, frameworks, and ideologies. One important role of critical thinking is to evaluate the reasonableness of these competing perspectives and positions. The great service that the postmodern challenge to rationality has provided is to force us to re-think our own methodologies and assumptions, and to re-examine the nature of inference, evidence, and reasoning. The postmodern challenge has forced us to remember the fallibilistic origins of critical thinking; i.e., Mill, Peirce, and Popper’s insight that all positions require continued testing, critique, and refinement. After continued analysis and criticism, it may turn out that some of the principles that lie at the foundation of our critical methodologies must themselves be refined. But to treat the notion of rationality as if it were only one perspective among others would be a terrible mistake, leaving us with no tools to analyze and critique such competing positions.

Our logical and analytic tools may not be perfect, but it seems reasonable to use them until better alternatives arise.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karl Popper, “The Myth of the Framework,” in *The Abdication of Philosophy* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1976), p. 23. For an example of teachers of critical thinking endorsing epistemological relativism, see Robert C. Sutton’s “The Right Method?,” *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, 11 (Feb., 1993): 12-14. In a critique of my article, “Epistemology and Pedagogy,” in *Inquiry* 10 (Oct., 1992), Sutton endorses Rorty’s critique of the possibility of objective standards of rationality and opts instead for a discipline dependent approach.

<sup>2</sup> It is not necessary for the purposes of this paper to describe fully the meaning of each of these terms. A brief explanation should suffice.

“Comportment” is Heidegger’s term for our specific orientation toward the world which yields a corresponding manner of experience. For a discussion of this see his essay “The Essence of Truth” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 124-125. For Heidegger, people with different comportments will experience the world differently.

"Conceptual frame" refers to the idea that humans employ various conceptual schemes which give order to the world. For a Kantian, we all share the same *a priori* framework. For postmoderns, the frame varies from culture to culture or from one language to another. How the world appears or what is reasonable to believe varies from one conceptual frame to the other.

"Style of reasoning" is Ian Hacking's term in his "Language, Truth, and Reason" in *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986.) Hacking says "the sense of a proposition *p*, the way it points to truth or falsehood, hinges on the style of reasoning appropriate to *p*. Hence, we cannot criticize that style of reasoning, as a way of getting to *p*, or to  $\neg p$ , because *p* simply is that proposition whose truth value is determined in this way (by that particular style of reasoning)." pp. 49.

"Background knowledge" refers to the pragmatist D. S. Clarke, Jr.'s notion of "that set of propositions assumed to be true and whose assumption guides inquiry. Our background knowledge thus consists of those 'facts' taken for granted as we pose questions and attempt to answer them. These assumptions may include many that we cannot explicitly formulate....these propositions *function* for us *as if* they were true, as not open to serious doubt, and in this capacity guide our inquiry." *An Outline of a Pragmatist Epistemology* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1989). p.12.

"Scientific paradigm" is Thomas Kuhn's central, but "ill-defined," concept found throughout his influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.) I say "ill-defined" because Margaret Masterman has pointed out no fewer than twenty-one meanings of "paradigm" in Kuhn's book. See her article "The Nature of a Paradigm," in Lakatos and Musgrave (eds.) *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) pp. 59-89. In the preface to *SSR*, Kuhn defines paradigm as "...universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners." (*SSR*, x) From the paradigmatic model, we abstract certain procedural or methodological rules. The problem is that there is no reason to believe that the rules that apply to the practice of physics should apply to other disciplines.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, by "epistemological relativism" I mean a belief that there are no higher standards or criteria for truth, no overarching frameworks, or "metanarratives" than our conceptual schemes, social practices, language games, paradigm, academic disciplines, etc. In other words, the truth or reasonableness of a claim is always context dependent, and when contexts disagree, there is no higher context to which we can appeal. For discussions of the various forms of epistemological relativism see Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 8-16 and Harvey Siegel's *Relativism Refuted* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1987), especially chapters 1,2, and 8.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of Rorty's critique of the general Enlightenment project, as well as traditional philosophy, see his "Pragmatism and Philosophy," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. viii-xvii. In response to Descartes' search for absolute certainty based on the *cogito's* ability to intuit the truth of "clear and distinct ideas," Rorty claims that "...there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argument that is not obedience to our own conventions" (p. xiii). While I agree that the standards of rationality most often associated with critical thinking can be understood as growing out of human practice, I think to characterize them as mere "conventions" is too strong a claim. My argument will be that the standards of rationality I have in mind are not conventions for just any practice, but, to use Kantian language, the very conditions for the possibility of human discourse and inquiry.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Bridges, "Modern Political Theory and the Multivocality of Postmodern Critical Discourses," *INQUIRY: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Sept. 1991, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> This is John McPeck's position in his *Critical Thinking and Education* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981). There he claims that critical thinking is always about some specific subject, and it is wrong to teach critical thinking *per se*. According to McPeck, "The

statement 'I teach critical thinking,' *simpliciter*, is vacuous because there is no generalized skill properly call critical thinking." (p. 5) McPeck's position has been carefully critiqued in the first chapter of Harvey Siegel's book *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> This is Kuhn's position in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Ultimately, the choice between competing paradigms is "like the choice between incompatible modes of community life. Because it has this character, the choice is not and cannot be determined merely by the evaluative procedures characteristic of normal science, for these depend in part upon a particular paradigm, and that paradigm is at issue" (p.92). Each paradigm determines what will count for evidence, and this, for Kuhn, means that evidence is "paradigm dependent."

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, for example defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives." *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv. This means that those who practice one discipline cannot judge the rationality of claims made in another. The only acceptable way to legitimize knowledge claims is to do so within each specific discipline. The resemblance between Lyotard's position with respect to metanarratives and John McPeck's denial of general critical thinking procedures that can be applied across the disciplines should be noted. See McPeck's *Critical Thinking and Education* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981). Any criticism of Lyotard's denial of metanarratives will also apply to McPeck's position.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Kerry Walters', "On World Views, Commitment, and Critical Thinking," *Informal Logic* XI, #2, Spring 1989, pp. 75-89 and "Critical Thinking in Liberal Education: A Case for Overkill?," *Liberal Education* 72, #3, 1986, pp. 233-244. For a critique of Walter's position, see my "Is Critical Thinking Guilty of Unwarranted Reductionism?" *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 24, Spring-Summer 1989, pp. 93-111.

<sup>10</sup> Here I am in agreement with Rorty that it is through human practice that we create or discover standards of rationality. We do so be-

cause they are necessary for the desired practices. I think it makes more sense to talk of discovering the principles in so far as a *disjunctive syllogism* surely would be valid, whether humans existed or not.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter Two of Kristin Shrader-Frechette's *Science Policy, Ethics, and Economic Methodology* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 4, Chapters 3-4. In effect, Aristotle is employing the transcendental methodology made famous by Kant. The method is to begin with what is given and seek those *a priori* conditions, "principles which transcend the region of experience," which are necessary for the specific practice, e.g., critical discussion.

<sup>13</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book II, Chap. XXV.

<sup>14</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 15, 90-97. I doubt seriously if the postmoderns have adopted their position on rationality by virtue of a "Kierkegaardian leap" as this would entail that they find their position quite "repulsive to the intellect," and worth believing just because it was the most difficult doctrine to believe.

<sup>15</sup> The idea for such an approach comes from Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst's article "Rules for Argumentation in Dialogues," *Argumentation* 2 (4), November 1988, p. 499-510. For a more complete treatment of the principles needed to lead a critical discussion, see Chapter Two of L. Anne Spencer and my *Reasoning and Writing: An Introduction to Critical Thinking* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 4, Chapter 3, 1005b-1006a.

<sup>17</sup> The proof showing how a contradiction allows us to prove any claim whatsoever is very simple:

1. **p** and not **p**
2. **p** (simp. 1)
3. **p** or **q** (add. 2)
4. **not-p** (simp. 1)
5. Hence, **q** (dis. syl., 3-4)

- <sup>18</sup> For a clear and rigorous treatment of the incoherence argument, see Harvey Siegel's *Relativism Refuted*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987, Chapter One.
- <sup>19</sup> For a clear statement of the self-referential problems with foundationalist epistemologies, see Alvin Plantinga's "Is Belief in God Rational?", in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, G.F. Delaney, ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 7-27.
- <sup>20</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Jean Grimshaw's *Feminism and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Grimshaw criticizes contemporary feminist thinkers for referring to what they call the feminist framework. She too asks the question, what individual differences constitute a framework?
- <sup>21</sup> This same sort of argument can be used against such historical relativists who claim that the notion of objectivity is unacceptable because what counts as reasonable standards for truth or inquiry is relative to particular historical periods or epochs. One can always ask, "What counts for an historical period?" Within any period of time, there is tremendous disagreement over basic issues, just as within any geographical area, people have quite disparate beliefs. The notions of culture, historical period, and "context" are all amorphous ideas that collapse upon analysis.
- <sup>22</sup> This is a version of Donald Davidson's famous argument in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings of the APA*, 1973-74, pp. 5-20. The argument is given in clearer detail in Roger Trigg's 1973 book, *Reason and Commitment*.
- <sup>23</sup> For an excellent discussion of the postmodern critique of "Enlightenment dogmatism," see Susan J. Hekman's *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992). Chapter Two contains clear summaries of Gadamer's, Foucault's, and Derrida's critiques of the notion of rationality that grew out of the Enlightenment. See also Brice R. Wachterhauser's "Introduction: History and Language in Understanding" in his fine anthology *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986). Wachterhauser traces the historical development of the hermeneutic critique of the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues to the present (at least in critical thinking classes), and shows how Heidegger and Gadamer are "the seminal thinkers" who lay the ground work for postmodern thought. The text itself is a nice blend of primary sources, such as Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur, and essays critical of the postmodern contextualism that grows out of the hermeneutic tradition.

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