

# discussion notes

## A More Charitable Principle of Charity

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The Principle of Charity, in whatever form, is action-guiding; the behaviour over which it ranges includes, but is not limited to, argument analysis. The debate which has been aired in this newsletter has been curiously silent on one point, and that is that as an action-guiding principle, the Principle of Charity governs, or should govern, the behaviour of someone (everyone?) in some situations.

As teachers, we appeal to the Principle of Charity in order to influence our students' behaviour; as philosophers, we appeal to it, typically, to comment on the behaviour of other philosophers. In deciding how we ought to interpret the principle, we must be sensitive to our purposes. Do we want to chide a historian for a less than careful reconstruction of an argument in Hobbes, or do we want to encourage our students to see the argument in the letter to the editor?

My purpose here will be to defend a strong version of the Principle of Charity that we can, in good conscience, encourage our students to use. My version is:

In schematizing an argument, make the argument as strong as possible, while capturing the author's intent.

When making the argument as strong as possible, the students ought to pay attention to two different strategies of argument evaluation. Larry Wright calls these the "link question" and the "truth question".<sup>1</sup> I pose the link question in the following way: If we assume that the premises are true, is the argument as strong as it ought to be? In posing the question this way, I hope to get my students to see that there is no mechanical standard of strength. An argument by a prosecuting attorney for the claim that I ought to go to prison had better be strong; we insist on high standards of evidence in this case, and for good reason. An astronomer who was arguing for a claim about black holes would almost certainly not have an argument that was as strong as the prosecutor's; we simply know very little about black holes. But this would not be a criticism of the astronomer's argument.

I do not encourage my students to worry too much about presuppositions. I find that my student's natural, and very strong, inclination is to take the suggestion to look for presuppositions as an invitation to make the argument deductive, even if doing so requires that they attribute to the author a very general claim that is almost certainly false.<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to the second line of evaluation, the truth question. Here, I simply ask my students to pay attention to the individual premises and ask whether they are true, or at least reasonable.

In schematizing an argument, these two strategies for evaluation figure in the following way. The students are urged to include all the relevant support, filling in any "missing" premises only if the argument clearly requires that they be included, and only if doing so is at least compatible with the goal of capturing the author's intent. I encourage them to paraphrase when they list the premises only when they must in order to preserve truth (often the author will exaggerate; here, the students are encouraged to tone down the claim), clarity, and economy, and only when doing so does capture the author's intent.

The goal of capturing the author's intent is less easy to describe, but the students do develop some facility in achieving it, in spite of my inability to characterize the goal in more detail.

The students are also encouraged to appeal to the Principle of Charity when deciding whether a passage contains an argument. Here, the appropriate question is: Is it reasonable to suppose that the author intended an argument?

I do not think that the two clauses of the Principle of Charity are incompatible, though there is sometimes some tension between them. I invite my students to put themselves in the author's place and I ask them how they would feel if we, say, left something out. If they would feel patronized, for example, we leave it in.

I propose this strong version of the Principle of Charity to my students in part because, when they begin the class, they typically exhibit behaviour which I want to discourage.

1. They fail to separate the argument from their evaluation of it. When the typical beginning informal logic student reads a passage which contains an argument, she comes away from it with only an impression of the issue. She is able to give you her conclusion about the issue, but not the author's. The student is being efficient, in a way; she combines analysis and evaluation. Our job is to get her to see that this kind of efficiency will cause her to miss many important details. Hence, we urge her to consider the author's intent.

2. Students do not make accurate discriminations about what is relevant. This is connected with a strong desire for conclusive reasons. This predisposes them to make two mistakes: to leave out premises which, though relevant, do not contain conclusive reasons, and to put in very general claims which are not needed and which, because of this generality, are likely to be false. An emphasis on the link question helps them to give up the first vice, and an emphasis on the truth question helps them to resist the second. Here, then, focusing on the first clause of the Principle of Charity will help them.

We do not make the same mistakes as our students do (we do not make them as often or as seriously, at any rate), so we do not need to keep this same version of the Principle of Charity always before us. I do not mean to suggest here that we are not equally obligated to consider it; I would argue that some of the reasons for accepting it are moral reasons which obligate us all. But we do conform to the principle already, and in ways that our students do not. Hence, we seldom need to appeal to this fuller version of the Principle when we criticize each other.

The claim that this strong version of the Principle of Charity obligates us all is a controversial claim, and I shall argue for it in another paper. Here, I make the more modest claim that we ought to encourage our students to take this strong version of the Principle of Charity very seriously because it is a very effective way to help them to resist some common, and serious, intellectual temptations.

### Notes

1. I have been using the Wright book in my informal logic classes since Winter quarter of last year. Though the exposition is not always clear, I am very sympathetic with the overall strategy of the book. Wright is clearly depending on a fairly strong Principle of Charity, though not, perhaps, as strong as the version which I defend. The discussion of link and truth questions appears in Chapter II. Larry Wright, **Better Reasoning: Techniques for Handling Argument Evidence, and Abstraction** (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982)

2. See Wright, Chapter Two, for discussion of this point. ●

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# Systematic Interpretation and the Principle of Charity

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In his response to Ralph Johnson's "Charity Begins at Home," Jonathan E. Adler argues that the ethical and prudential justifications for the Principle of Charity—as advanced by Johnson and Michael Scriven—are less satisfactory.<sup>1</sup> A better reason for it can be constructed if we start from a point central to Popper's philosophy of science: we want to formulate arguments at their best or greatest strength because that makes the assessment of them a more severe test.

This view is rather similar to the one I have expounded in a recently published book called **Political Reasoning**.<sup>2</sup> My line of argument, however, may be somewhat broader in scope in that it takes place in the context of an exposition of interpretational methods in general. It is also argued that the Principle is applicable to some interpretational situations but not to others.

Four kinds of interpretations are identified and discussed in **Political Reasoning**:

1. literal interpretations;
2. systematic interpretations;
3. intentionalist interpretations; and
4. reconstructive interpretations.

In **The Open Society and its Enemies** and **The Poverty of Historicism** Popper has advocated a type of systematic approach to textual exegesis that I have coined the ameliorative systematic method. The thrust of this method is to "ameliorate" the reasoning under scrutiny by (a) eliminating contradictions in the text to be analyzed and (b) adding reasons not even offered by its author so as to state a position really worth attacking.

Then, my reasoning goes as follows. The ameliorative systematic method of interpretation is very similar to the Principle of Charity. This is an important guideline for argument analysis, requiring that we try to make the best, rather than the worst, possible interpretation of the material under study. Michael Scriven describes it as ... an ethical rule requiring criticisms to be generous, fair, or just. We should not take advantage of a mere slip of the tongue or make a big thing out of

some irrelevant point that was not put quite right. Indeed, adherence to this rule of conduct is also sound practical advice since it makes us less vulnerable to counterattack. We should choose that interpretation of an argument that makes it most sensible and forceful; otherwise, a slight reformulation of the argument will nullify our objections...

These two reasons for using the charity principle were formulated by Michael Scriven. His reasoning seems compelling. It might seem that this principle should be put to general use in order to create the strongest possible foundation for a forceful rational assessment. That conclusion, however, is hardly well considered.

The usefulness of a method of interpretation must always be appraised with respect to the aim of the investigation. A rational assessment always aims to test the validity of a message. Within the framework of this goal, we can discern, roughly, three levels of ambition. It is my opinion that the ameliorative systematic method and the **principle of charity should be permitted a significant role in only one of these three cases.**

In the **first** case, our aim is to test the validity of a position assumed by some specific actor. We might, for example, want to effect more rational decision making in a situation where the participants already support certain alternatives and have locked themselves into certain reasons for supporting their positions. The declarations may even be fixed as national policy goals and as notions about how government should act to attain them. In these cases it may be justified to try to determine exactly how the participants have reasoned. Their opinions are of such social and political import that it is legitimate to ignore the principle of charity entirely and to discover exactly how they think or thought. The ameliorative systematic method and the charity principle are less useful here. Instead, the literal method combined with the intentionalist method can lay the foundation for a validity test...

Our aim in the **second** case is also to appraise the validity of a certain actor's position. In this case, we are more interested in the position *per se* than in the agent's concrete formulation of it. Nothing prevents us from testing various alternative renderings of the position and reasons in order to determine which of them best stands up to our appraisal. We can be consistently benevolent and interpret the arguments according to the principle of charity. We might, in accordance with the ameliorative systematic method, add our own reasons for or against in order to further test whether the position is really valid. However, the criterion of whether an interpretation is reasonable is still whether the participant whose viewpoint is being assessed could accept the interpretation if he were given the chance to familiarize himself with it and think it through.

The reason that we apply the principle of charity in this situation is not—as Scriven argues—because it is a good ethical principle for how we should behave in a debate, nor is it due to fear of leaving ourselves open to justified counterattacks. The reason is more positive: We are genuinely interested in the thing we are dealing with and so want to obtain the best possible

formulation of what the participant has said. It is precisely this aim for which the ameliorative systematic method and the principle of charity are useful.

In the **third** and final case, we are concerned exclusively with appraising the validity of a position, regardless of which participant formulated it. We may, of course, take as our point of departure a specific participant's formulations of the arguments and the position. We can assess alternative interpretations of this participant's position and see which one best meets the test. We can add reasons not presented by the participant. The difference between this and the second case is that we do not have to concern ourselves at all with whether the author of the text we are working with would agree with our interpretations or not. We do not claim to present a precise rendering of a specific participant's formulation of the subject. We are interested in the position as such, regardless of who presented it. Our interpretation, or rather our presentation, should not be made on the basis of who happened to say something, but on the basis of what we judge to be relevant to an appraisal of a position's validity. All relevant formulations of positions and reasons—regardless of who conceived them—are admissible in the analysis. This is the most general form of rational assessment.

Even in this third case, the literal method, the systematic method or the intentionalist method can, of course, be useful, but a fourth method—the reconstructive method of interpretation—becomes even more important.

### Notes

1. Ralph H. Johnson, "Charity Begins at Home," *Informal Logic Newsletter*, June 1981. Jonathan A. Adler, "Why Be Charitable?" *Informal Logic Newsletter*, May 1982. Michael Scriven, *Reasoning*, New York. McGraw-Hill, 1976, 71 ff.
2. Evert Vedung, *Political Reasoning*, Beverly Hills, CA. Sage, 1982. ●

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## A Comment on Fallacies and Argument Analysis

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Trudy Govier raises the issue of the meaning of the term 'fallacy', and the relationships of fallacies to arguments,

in her article "Who says There Are No Fallacies?" (ILN, v.1, Dec. 1982) She clearly demonstrates that one's notion of what a fallacy is depends on what one conceives an argument to be, as well as on what one conceives argument **analysis** to consist of. Yet, I believe her own view of fallacies is flawed, and perhaps, as a result, so is her view of argument and argument analysis.

Govier defines a fallacy as "a mistake in reasoning, a mistake which occurs with some frequency in real arguments and which is characteristically deceptive." According to this definition, it should not make sense to speak of "infrequently occurring fallacies." Yet, this expression seems sensible, even without arguing about the meaning of the vague term 'infrequently.'<sup>1</sup> In any case, how often an error in reasoning actually occurs seems irrelevant to the issue of what a fallacy is. To support my position I appeal to common usage, including the usage of logicians and textbook authors. It is true, such usage is diverse. And, some texts continue to include sections on fallacies which haven't occurred since the thirteenth century (just as some authors continue to emphasize argument forms last popular several hundred years ago). Also, there is nothing wrong with **stipulating** that a fallacy be a "common" error in reasoning. I simply see nothing gained by it and so consider it irrelevant. Nevertheless, I believe it would be wise for writers and teachers in the field of informal logic to omit in their texts and courses consideration of uncommon, infrequent types of errors in reasoning. There is enough to do dealing with the common errors.

Govier also considers **deception** to be an essential element of a fallacy. I do not. If a person believes it is relevant to support the point that "the seal hunt is not rightly criticized by its critics" by claiming that the critics "condone methods of killing animals which are less humane than those used in the seal hunt," that person commits a fallacy (the two-wrongs-make-a-right fallacy, as Govier notes) whether or not the person intends to or actually does deceive anyone. Again, one could stipulate that errors in reason, however, common, are not to be called fallacies if they are aren't **deceptive** in some way. But to do so as a matter of definition is less advisable — in my opinion — than omitting treatment and discussion of fallacies which are rarely, if ever, accepted as sound reasoning.

My own view of argument and argument analysis includes the belief that all arguments emerge out of the arguer's "worldview." By worldview I mean the conceptual and perceptual framework a person uses to interpret and evaluate new experiences and proposed beliefs. The framework includes a person's beliefs, attitudes, desires, hopes, fears, and dispositions. The soundness of an argument depends, in part, on the soundness of one's worldview. To understand another's argument involves, in part, understanding that person's worldview. And, some errors in reasoning are due to faulty worldviews, including false beliefs which often are the basis for a person's reasoning. That is why formal analysis is inadequate for analyzing natural arguments. It is also why fallacy analysis, in my view should not restrict itself to looking for **mistakes or tricks** in arguing. For, many fallacies are due to **faulty assumptions**. Likewise, many erroneous analyses of arguments are due to not understanding the argument's presuppositions, i.e., the arguer's worldview.

If one sees argument analysis in terms of finding errors — the mistakes and tricks — of arguers, then one is not

very likely to approve of the so-called Principle of Charity. (Govier admits that she has serious doubts about this so-called principle, which I think is understandable given her views of fallacy and argument.) The Principle of Charity issues from an approach to argument analysis which focuses on understanding, and, perhaps, learning from the argument.

In conclusion, I would advocate an approach to fallacies and argument analysis which emphasizes both the type of fallacy which is based on mistakes, tricks, and deception, as well as the type of fallacy which is based on faulty worldviews, and which emphasizes understanding and learning from arguments as much as it emphasizes finding errors.

### Note

1. And even without quibbling over the "moment" an error in reasoning "becomes" a fallacy. For, on her view the first use (or second, third, fourth, and who knows how many more—until the use becomes "frequent") of the most egregious form of reasoning is not a fallacy. ●

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# An Agenda Item for the Informal Logic/ Critical Thinking Movement

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In the last issue of the *American Educator*, Jon Moline, in a review of Susan Resneck Parr's book, *The Moral of the Story*, characterized college students in the following way:

...widespread moral apathy, lack of reflectiveness, lack of perspective on their own past or on their continuity with previous generations, poor analytic skills, cynical or naive misconceptions about human motivation,... inability to conceptualize, lack of realism about personal efficacy and power, fatalism, passivity, vulnerability to promises of easy solutions, egoism, and tendency to isolate from experience what they know and what they believe to be right and wrong.

The problem of attempting to teach critical and conceptual skills to such students is familiar to all of us certainly, and it highlights the need—for those committed to more than palliative therapy—of interesting ourselves in restructuring the process that shapes the minds of our students **before** they arrive on campus. Indeed, an informal check among colleagues has indicated a growing number of cooperative ventures designed to bring informal logic and critical thinking skills into either elementary or high school settings (those I know of include myself, Johnson, Blair, Ennis, Ruggiero, Barry, and Engel (via TV)).

However, to parody Alexander Pope, a little learning (about the state of the public schools) is a **sobering** thing. There certainly is growing enthusiasm across the U.S. and Canada for the need to teach critical thinking and logical thought processes, but little realistic sense of what that entails. Aside from the fact that large numbers of teachers' own mental state is probably not too different from Jon Moline's characterization of the incoming college student, many administrators and teachers are looking for and expecting to find a quick-fix, painless seminar, something like "Two Days to Perfect Logic."

Unfortunately, the commercial interests are stepping in and filling that need. One commercially successful program which has gotten a good deal of media hype promises to train a person to become an instructor of thinking skills in 24 instruction hours. Significantly, some major school systems are buying into this.

The danger is obvious. The growing enthusiasm for teaching logical and critical thinking skills may go the way of so many previous reforms: initial trumpeting and splash, simplistic solutions and vulgarizations, and subsequent disillusionment and apathy.

As things now stand, the university based informal logic/critical thinking movement is almost entirely unknown in public school circles. What are known are various, usually psychologist-originated, programs and theories. One hears of Bloom's Taxonomy, Guildford's "Structure of the Intellect," lateral thinking, right brain—left brain discoveries, etc. The fundamental critical/analytic vocabulary of the English Language, the basic skills focused upon by the Watson-Glaser or the Cornell Critical Thinking Test, seem to have little place in the thinking of or programs envisioned by elementary and secondary school educators.

I don't mean to suggest however that there is nothing to learn for the informal logic specialist from the theoreticians and the psychological research to which public school educators typically allude. Indeed, to the contrary, a perusal of the literature here is very useful. One will happen upon a host of stimulating and perceptive ideas, some of which certainly could hopefully be appropriated by "informal" logicians. And in any case, the critique that will sometimes be inspired thereby will give the movement a clearer sense of where things stand.

Furthermore, interest in getting informal logic and critical thinking into the schools will bring one face-to-face with the problem McPeck has highlighted: how to teach informal logic and critical thinking within established subject disciplines. It will also raise—in a **posteriori** rather than in McPeck's **a priori** way—the question as whether, once integrated, informal logic as a field will, as Marx's State, **wither away**.

Personally I think that the time for the establishment of "meta-disciplines" has arrived. That 'philosophy' may remain as the rubric under which such disciplines are classified I do not know.

My view then is that the informal logic/critical thinking movement ought to move to become the professional group that superintends the teaching of logic-critical thinking skills in the public schools and so universalize its influence in education. Until and only to the extent that it does, its impact will be limited to relatively esoteric groups and to that small minority of college students who have been intellectually prepared to digest it. I take it as axiomatic that as a professional group we want to do more than talk to each other and prance around in our classrooms "stalking beasts and swatting flies." (McPeck's metaphor for the present state of affairs.)

I should add that the broadening of perspective and terrain I am suggesting involves analysis of the ultimate ends of education. McPeck's book, **Critical Thinking and Education** was the first foray into the area by someone associated with the movement (though he of course argued that what informal logicians think they are doing in the classroom is impossible).

There is in any case much more to be done in clarifying, unpacking, and developing what the role of informal logic and critical thinking is, and should be, in education and everyday life. If we take on this task we will attract more interest in the movement, I am persuaded, and, given the inertia, the entrenched myopic fixation on training rather than **educating** in the public schools (for that's what's going on), we will need all the help we can get. ●

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