

Not by Skill Alone: The Centrality of Character to Critical Thinking¹

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Abstract: Connie Missimer (1990) challenges what she calls the Character View, according to which critical thinking involves both skill and character, and argues for a rival conception—the Skill View—according to which critical thinking is a matter of skill alone. In this paper I criticize the Skill View and defend the Character View from Missimer's critical arguments.

In her challenging paper (1990), Connie Missimer argues that “a view dominant among theoreticians of critical thinking” (145)², according to which critical thinking involves not only thinking skills, but character traits, dispositions, attitudes, and habits of mind as well—which complex I have elsewhere called the “critical spirit” (Siegel (1988))—is questionable. Missimer contrasts this dominant view, which she labels the “Character View”, with her preferred alternative conception of critical thinking and the critical thinker—which she labels the “Skill View”—according to which critical thinking is a matter of skill alone, and does not involve any aspect of the critical spirit.³ Missimer argues that the Character View has important defects, that the Skill View has important advantages over its rival, and that therefore the Skill View is a more adequate conception of critical thinking than the Character View.

In what follows I examine Missimer's arguments against the Character View, and in support of the Skill View. I argue that most of those arguments fail, that Missimer fails to address important arguments against the Skill View and in favor of the

Character View, and that the dominant view is justifiably dominant, in that it is a more adequate conception of critical thinking than Missimer's recommended alternative.⁴

1. What's Wrong with the Character View?

According to Missimer, the Character View suffers from a number of defects. First, the various dispositions and character traits which make it up, and the interrelationships between them, are not adequately specified. Second, those dispositions and character traits are characterized differently by different theorists, with the result that different accounts of the Character View appear to be inconsistent with one another. Third, and most important, the Character View appears to have the unpalatable (to Missimer) result that a significant number of “celebrated” (147) and “great” (148) thinkers, indeed “intellectual giants” (145), turn out on it not to be critical thinkers at all. Fourth, the Character View “smuggle[s] in moral prescriptions” (145) to its conception of critical thinking, thus making those prescriptions liable to uncritical acceptance. Let us consider these alleged defects in turn.

(a) The Relevant Character Traits Are Inadequately Specified

Missimer is I think right about this. To take her examples (146), it is unclear how much patience a reasoner must have, or just how impartial a reasoner must be, in order for her to be rightly said to possess the relevant character traits. But it is far from clear that this is a serious criticism of

the Character View. For one thing, such traits as these are notoriously difficult to measure or quantify; as Aristotle urged, we ought not to strive for a standard of precision inappropriate to the subject matter involved. For another, the having of these character traits is clearly a matter of degree; the Character View typically treats them as ideals to be aimed at, and as only imperfectly achieved even by superior critical thinkers (e.g. Siegel (1988), p. 47; p.153 note 34). In so far as having them is a matter of degree, that it is difficult to say how much is enough is a point which the proponent of the Character View can acknowledge with equanimity; this difficulty is completely compatible with that view.

Finally, Missimer claims that having or not having these character traits "tell[s] us nothing about the *quality* of [a person's] thought." (146, emphasis in original) This charge is ambiguous. If read as a comment on a person's reasoning *process*, then having or not having them *does* tell us about the quality of that process: a process of reasoning which fails to manifest impartiality is of lower quality than a comparable process which (to a greater extent) does. If read as a comment on the product of that process, or about a person's reasoning conceived as a relation among sentences or propositions, then Missimer is right: my thinking may be highly skilled, and of high quality, when understood in this propositional way, even though I failed to be (e.g.) impartial in my reasoning process. But this is in no way troublesome for the proponent of the Character View. Indeed, it is explicitly recognized in the distinction between the critical spirit and reason assessment components of critical thinking (Siegel (1988), chapter 2), the very point of which is to note that reasoning can be of high quality in the latter sense while being of low quality in the former. Thus this first criticism of the Character View fails seriously to challenge that view. Proponents of that view can quite happily regard the need for further specification of the dispositions,

attitudes, habits of mind and character traits constitutive of the critical spirit, and their interrelationships, as a proper subject of further philosophical research, rather than a significant objection to it. They can and should also agree that issues of character are irrelevant to the determination of the quality of the (propositional) products of thought.

(b) These Character Traits Are Characterized Differently by Different Theorists

Here too Missimer is I think right, but only innocuously so. The fact that different theorists characterize the features of the critical spirit differently is no more bothersome to the Character View than the fact that different theorists characterize the skills which are constitutive of critical thinking differently should be seen as problematic for the Skill View.⁵ Proponents of the Skill View need not say that theorists who advocate that view are unanimously agreed as to the precise specification of those skills; similarly, proponents of the Character View need not pretend they share a complete, detailed characterization of the character traits which are constitutive of it. Here, as earlier, disagreement is rightly regarded as a call for further reflection, not for the abandonment of the view. If so, then the fact that some rival characterizations of the Character View conflict in no way challenges that view.

Moreover, at least some of the sorts of conflict which Missimer here discusses rests upon a misunderstanding of the character traits involved. In her Susan/Margaret case (146), it is unclear how Missimer is understanding "respect for [a] considered argument", since the Character View values the character trait of respect when applied to persons—we respect a person's right to formulate her own independent judgment; we respect her right to demand reasons, etc.—but not when applied to "considered arguments", especially ones which we think "contain

distortions". Indeed, it is unclear what "respect for a considered argument" might mean, other than that an argument should be esteemed in accordance with its merits—which is exactly the attitude recommended by the Character View. Furthermore, a critical thinker who appropriately feels "revulsion at her earlier argument" because she now realizes that that argument contains distortions can also, on the Character View, "experience surprise or delight at the new theoretical possibilities that she now sees". (146) Missimer suggests that on that view, if one feels the former one is somehow not allowed to feel the latter. But the Character View in no way prohibits or disapproves of the latter experience.⁶ Missimer concludes: "It is difficult to see why we must conclude that Susan was not thinking critically just because she failed to respond in a manner prescribed by a version of the Character View." (146) But it is not difficult to see this at all: to the extent that Susan failed to respond appropriately to her reflective circumstances—in Missimer's example, to the extent that Susan did not revise downward her estimate of the adequacy of her earlier argument, in response to her discovery that that argument contained distortions—to that extent, she is thinking uncritically. But that downward revision, and concomitant feeling of revulsion, is completely compatible with Susan's also experiencing surprise or delight at the new possibilities she now sees. Again, no difficulty is raised here for the Character View.⁷

(c) Great Thinkers with Venal Characters Are Not Critical Thinkers

Here we come closer to the heart of Missimer's opposition to the Character View. Missimer argues that that view is deficient because it yields the unpalatable result that "great thinkers" and "intellectual giants" who have "venal" characters (147) are, because of their venal characters, *uncritical*, despite their superior intellects and intellectual achievements. She holds that

there is better evidence that the intellectual merits of a thinker, and her status as a critical thinker, are independent of that thinker's character; her major argument against the Character View is just that it has this seemingly absurd consequence. Thus, since thinkers of the stature of Newton, Russell, Rousseau, Marx, Galois, Harvey, Bacon, and Freud are "acknowledged great thinkers" (147), but some of these "celebrated thinkers were venal" (147), then—since venal characters fail to meet the character requirements deemed by the Character View to be necessary for critical thinking—these acknowledged great thinkers fail to qualify as critical thinkers. This, Missimer suggests, is tantamount to a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Character View.

There is much amiss with this argument against the Character View. First, that view does not hold that a thinker has to be completely moral, or have a perfect character, in order to qualify as a critical thinker. As we have seen, having the relevant character traits, and indeed being a critical thinker, are on that view a matter of degree. So no argument which goes from "S has a defective character" to "S is therefore not a critical thinker" or "S does not qualify for the label 'critical thinker'" will go through. The most that can be said is something like: To the extent that a thinker suffers from relevant character defects, to that extent that thinker fails to be a critical thinker. For being/not being a critical thinker, on the Character View, is a matter of degree.⁸

Second, and more importantly, Missimer writes as if the Character View holds that *all* character traits are relevant to a thinker's status as a critical thinker, so that a person who speaks rudely to others, or is overly insensitive to the plight or feelings of others, or plays the horses with the family savings, is deficient as a critical thinker. This is a serious distortion of the Character View. Of course if the person in question is thinking about the goodness or justifiability of those very character traits,

then to the extent she maintains clearly defective traits, her having them reflects deficient, and to that extent uncritical, thinking. But in general, the character traits deemed by the Character View to be important to our conception of critical thinking are not the entire panoply of such traits, but rather only *those which are involved in our efforts to think critically*. Thus traits such as a willingness to follow an argument where it leads, a disposition to demand evidence for candidate beliefs, a propensity to weigh relevant evidence fairly, a tendency to believe in accordance with such evidence, a frank acknowledgment of fallibility, a willingness to take seriously the arguments of others which challenge one's own basic beliefs and commitments, and the like, are the traits emphasized by the Character View as relevant to one's status as a critical thinker. Other traits, such as fiscal irresponsibility, rudeness, etc., while admittedly defective, are not relevant to that status—except, as already noted, in the special case in which one is thinking about the evaluative status of those very traits.

Once this point is grasped, most if not all of Missimer's examples of great thinkers with venal characters miss their intended target, since the venal character traits Missimer points to are not traits relevant to those thinkers' status as critical (or as great or celebrated) thinkers. Missimer is quite clear that the thinkers she has in mind are those "whose thinking has by common consensus demonstrated great critical acumen". (147) She thus regards Newton's sensitivity to criticism, Russell's lying about his earlier views concerning a preemptive nuclear war against Russia, and Feynman's playfulness, rudeness, and hedonism, as evidence against the adequacy of their characters, and thus as evidence, on the Character View, against their status as critical thinkers. More outrageously, the venality of Rousseau's self-servingness, paranoia, and superiority complex; of Marx's anti-Semitism, tendency to cheat

tradespeople, and treatment of his servant; of Galois's hotheadedness; of Harvey's temperamentality and eccentricity; of Bacon's coldness and betrayal; and of Freud's misrepresentations, distortions, self-serving clinical advice, and secrecy—all this venality, Missimer suggests, forces the conclusion (on the Character View) that these luminaries were not critical thinkers, despite their obvious intellectual achievements. But they were critical thinkers, and obviously so, Missimer suggests. Thus the Character View, which forces the opposite conclusion, is (by contraposition) mistaken.

To see what is wrong with this argument, we need only recall her own claim that these thinkers are those "whose thinking has by common consensus demonstrated great critical acumen". (147) What makes them critical thinkers, on Missimer's view, is their extraordinary intellectual achievements: Newtonian physics; *Principia Mathematica* and other logical and philosophical contributions of Russell; quantum chromodynamics; Rousseau's Social Contract theory; *Das Kapital* and the theory of Communism; the mathematical theory of equations; the theory of the circulation of the blood; Freudian psychology; etc. Now, were these intellectual achievements marred by the venal traits just mentioned? On the whole, obviously not, Missimer and I are agreed: however horrible to his servant Marx was, however paranoid Rousseau was, however rude Feynman was, their intellectual achievements are not marred by these character traits. That is because, on the Character View as much as on Missimer's, those traits are irrelevant to the excellence of those achievements, and so are not decisive with respect to the status of those thinkers as critical thinkers. The traits Missimer's argument seizes upon are not the traits which the Character View regards as centrally relevant to one's status as a critical thinker.⁹

On the other hand, if Newton's scientific achievements did not manifest a

willingness to follow the arguments wherever they led; if Russell's great logical and epistemological works did not manifest a disposition to demand evidence for candidate beliefs; if Feynman's theorizing did not exhibit a tendency to believe in accordance with relevant evidence; if Rousseau's or Marx's social-philosophical writings did not manifest a frank acknowledgement of fallibility, and therefore a systematic scrutiny of their own arguments (and potential counter-arguments) in an effort to render those arguments as strong as they could; if Harvey's, Bacon's, and Freud's great works did not manifest a willingness to take seriously the arguments of others which challenged their own basic beliefs and commitments¹⁰; if these thinkers weren't disposed to weigh relevant evidence, to consider the totality of relevant evidence, and to judge in accordance with that evidence—if *these* character flaws were manifested by these thinkers, then we would have every reason to call their status as critical thinkers into question, despite the quality of their achievements. The plausibility of Missimer's argument hinges on her reliance on character traits which are to a significant degree irrelevant, according to the Character View, to the status as critical thinkers of persons who have those traits. Once the right set of character traits are considered, that plausibility collapses.

The case against the Character View suffers further when it is recalled, as noted above, that the Character View acknowledges at its heart the distinction between the process by which a potentially critical judgment is reached, on the one hand, and the relationship between a judgment and its supporting reasons, construed propositionally, on the other. Let us agree for the sake of argument that the theories and arguments set forth by these thinkers, which constitute their major intellectual achievements, are of exceedingly high quality and originality. Does it follow that the status of these thinkers *as critical thinkers* is

assured? To answer this question affirmatively, as Missimer does, is to deny that the process by which an achievement of significance is achieved is relevant to a thinker's status as a critical thinker. All that counts for the determination of that status is the product achieved. But as argued above, a worthy product can be achieved by the most uncritical of means: a theorist can fail to consider all relevant evidence, evaluate evidence inappropriately, fail to take seriously potentially important criticism, even fail to think at all.¹¹ Thus the propositional worthiness of an achievement is for Missimer the *only* relevant criterion for determining one's status as a critical thinker. But if it is agreed that a propositionally worthy achievement can be reached by inappropriate or less than wonderful means, and that a thinker's process of reasoning is relevant to her status as a critical thinker—as the Character View insists—then it will not do to rest that status entirely on the quality of the end product itself. But it is that to which the Skill View is committed.¹²

Once it is clear that a piece of thinking, construed propositionally, can be of high quality without the thinker in question having reasoned, procedurally, particularly well, the supposed advantages of the Skill View disappear. I have suggested above that on the Character View the "great thinkers" Missimer discusses turn out to be, on the whole, highly critical thinkers, at least with respect to the products of the thinking on which that greatness rests. But it would be no embarrassment for the Character View if such thinkers turn out on occasion to be less than exceptionally high quality critical thinkers, or even highly uncritical thinkers. For, as just noted, one's status as a critical thinker depends not only on the (propositional) products of one's thought. It depends as well on the process of that thought. It is here that considerations of character arise. That persons of venal character have sometimes thought well, and produced exceptionally high

quality thought, is a result that proponents of the Character View can happily accept. So is the result that some persons who have produced such thought are relatively uncritical thinkers. The Skill View regards a thinker's status as a critical thinker as being determined entirely by the (propositional) quality of produced thought. Once process is acknowledged as relevant to that determination, as I have argued it must be, the Character View is home free.

For all the reasons adduced in this section, I conclude that the biographical evidence Missimer raises to challenge the Character View fails seriously to challenge it.¹³

(d) Important Ethical Issues Are Placed Beyond the Boundary of Critical Thinking

Finally, Missimer argues that the Character View "smuggle[s] in moral prescriptions" to its conception of critical thinking, thus "leaving ethics [outside] the scrutiny of critical thought". (145) It thus prohibits "free ethical theorizing". (151)

This objection can be dealt with briefly: the allegation is simply false. According to the Character View, *everything* is open to critical thought and "free theorizing", including the nature of critical thinking and the ethical dimensions thereof. Proponents of the Character View do not regard their own views of critical thinking as themselves immune from critical scrutiny. Why Missimer thinks they (i.e. we) do is a mystery to me, since she quotes two of them to the contrary (Scheffler on 151; me on 153, note 24).¹⁴

According to the Character View, critical thinking is justified as an educational ideal in part on moral grounds. Indeed, I have argued that education aimed at the fostering of critical thinking is morally obligatory. (1988, chapter 3) If that argument is successful, then that sort of education is obligatory. But whether or not that argument is successful, and so whether or not that sort of education is obligatory, are of course questions which are completely

open to further critical scrutiny. So are questions concerning the (moral) character of putative critical thinkers. Thus when Missimer suggests that

One way is to teach critical thinking as though it were *necessitated* by (a version of) morality, for instance justice, humility and so forth. This method seems to entail an uncritical acceptance of those morals, since they have been defined as necessary for critical thought in the first place. This uncritical "morality of critical thinking" seems to be what the Character View espouses. (151, emphasis in original)

she is mistaken. First, as just noted, the Character View in general, and its moral dimension in particular, are open—as everything is—to critical scrutiny, according to the proponents of that view.¹⁵ Contrary to Missimer, there is nothing *uncritical* about the "morality of critical thinking" espoused by the Character View; nor is it immune from critical scrutiny. Moreover, this supposed uncriticality is a product of confusion. The first sentence of the just-cited passage suggests that a particular moral viewpoint implies that education aimed at the fostering of critical thinking is morally required. That is indeed what I argue in (1988). But the second sentence of that passage suggests instead that that particular moral viewpoint is itself entailed by critical thinking, since that viewpoint is "necessary for critical thought in the first place". This is a fundamental confusion; the second sentence reverses the direction of implication of the first. Contrary to this mistaken allegation, it is part and parcel of the Character View that students "decide for themselves whether specific virtues are important in life (or necessary for critical thought)". (151) Thus Missimer was wise to write "*seems to entail*", rather than "*entails*", at the outset of the second cited sentence. The entailment she imagines here is not an entailment endorsed by the Character View.¹⁶

I conclude that none of Missimer's objections to the Character View are telling.

Let us briefly turn our attention to the supposed advantages of the Skill View.

2. What's Right about the Skill View?

Missimer argues that the Skill View enjoys certain advantages when compared with the Character View:

...the evidence in its favor would appear to be stronger; it has the advantage of theoretical simplicity; and it does not smuggle in moral prescriptions, leaving ethics instead to the scrutiny of critical thought. Finally, it is arguable that an historical version of the Skill View can show critical thinking to be more exciting than any version which the Character View has offered thus far. (145)

What shall we say of these alleged advantages?

We have already addressed the first and third of these. As argued above, the biographical evidence Missimer presents on its behalf fails to support the Skill View, and fails to challenge the Character View; and the claim that the Character View “smuggle[s] in moral prescriptions” and in doing so places ethics beyond “the scrutiny of critical thought” is false.

It is true that the Skill View is simpler than the Character View—it recognizes only the skill component of critical thinking, whereas the Character View recognizes both that component and a character or critical spirit component as well. Does this simplicity of the former view constitute an advantage over the latter? It does so only if the case is made that the skill component is the only component of critical thinking. I have argued here that that case has not been made, and that there remain good reasons to regard character traits as an essential component of critical thinking. (I shall add a further argument to that effect below.) If so, then “the advantage of theoretical simplicity” (151) turns out rather to be the disadvantage of oversimplification.

What, finally, of Missimer’s contention that one version of the Skill View is “more exciting” than extant versions of the

Character View? The exciting version she has in mind is one in which students are exposed to the historical “accretion of reasoned judgments on a myriad of issues by many people over time. This conception entails the notion that contrasting arguments on issues are vitally important to intellectual progress”. (150) This conception is exciting largely for its pedagogical virtues: “One can offer this historical view as an argument that the skill of critical thinking has wrought immense good—and encourage students to argue against this view. The point is for students to consider past examples of critical thinking while practicing the skill. According to this version of the Skill View, if students get a glimpse of the wealth of theories which exist in every discipline and activity, they will be more likely to start on a lifetime intellectual journey”. (150)

I quite agree with Missimer about the pedagogical virtues of this sort of historical study—indeed, I recommend much the same role for the history of science in my discussion of science education. (Siegel (1988), chapter 6) But is this an advantage which the Skill View enjoys over the Character View? No. What Missimer has here is an exciting way to *teach* for critical thinking. But this is irrelevant to the question of how best to *conceptualize* critical thinking. The Character View can readily acknowledge that Missimer’s suggestion constitutes an “exciting” way to foster critical thinking. The suggestion on the table conflates two distinct questions: What is the best way to conceptualize critical thinking?; and, What is the best way to teach so as to foster critical thinking? The Character View has no special answer to the latter question; neither, I would have thought, should the Skill View. The dispute between these two views concerns the former question, not the latter.

Missimer seems to think that the Character View recommends teaching for critical thinking by preaching about the moral virtues of particular character traits

(e.g. 149), and by studying the characters of thinkers: she recommends her “exciting” suggestion by noting that “[i]t focuses on great arguments, past and present, not on the arguers”. (151) The clear suggestion here is that the Character View recommends teaching for critical thinking by studying arguers rather than arguments. This is absurd. Arguing that character is central to an adequate *conception* of critical thinking in no way amounts to the quite different idea that the study of character must be an essential aspect of the *pedagogy* of critical thinking. Missimer’s discussion of excitement simply confuses these two concerns. Once they are distinguished, this supposed advantage of the Skill View disappears. Indeed, what is called here a “version of the Skill View” (151) is no such thing, if that view is a view about the proper *conception* of critical thinking. It is rather a suggestion—a good one, I think—about critical thinking pedagogy.

I conclude that Missimer has not provided any good reason to think that the Skill View enjoys any significant advantage over the Character View.

3. The Main, but Unmentioned, Argument for the Character View

A striking fact about Missimer’s discussion is that it does not even acknowledge, let alone seriously consider, the main extant argument for the Character View. That argument (cluster) suggests that the Skill View fails adequately to characterize critical thinking, and that the Character View provides a more adequate characterization.

The argument is made in different ways by different proponents of the Character View. Perhaps the best known version is Richard Paul’s. Paul distinguishes between “weak sense” and “strong sense” critical thinking, and argues that the former, which is very much like the Skill View, is an inadequate conception of critical thinking because it entails that sophists—thinkers “who are adept at

manipulating argumentative exchanges in such a way that they can always ‘demonstrate,’ or at least protect from challenge, those deep-seated beliefs and commitments which they are not willing to explore or reject”—are full fledged critical thinkers. (Siegel (1988), p. 11) But Paul suggests that such thinkers, however skilled, should not be so regarded:

I take it to be self-evident that virtually all teachers of critical thinking want their teaching to have a global “Socratic” effect, making some significant inroads into the everyday reasoning of the student, enhancing to some degree that healthy, practical and skilled skepticism one naturally and rightly associates with the *rational* person. This necessarily encompasses, it seems to me, some experience in seriously questioning previously held beliefs and assumptions and in identifying contradictions and inconsistencies in personal and social life. (Paul (1982), p. 3, emphasis in original)

Paul goes on to argue, in this and many other papers, that an adequate conception of critical thinking must go beyond skills, and include the dispositions and character traits relevant to the use and appreciation of those skills. His idea that critical thinking is importantly “Socratic”, in a way which demands that critical thinking involves in particular ways the character or “critical spirit” of the thinker, is (I would have thought) one of the few generally accepted theses among otherwise contentious critical thinking scholars. In any case, on Paul’s view the weak sense critical thinker is a skilled critical thinker. But she is nevertheless not a fully adequate critical thinker. What is missing is her failure to appreciate the importance of those skills and their relevance to her overall system of belief, and so her failure to utilize her skills in ways which impact on herself. That is to say, what the weak sense critical thinker is lacking is exactly the attitudes, dispositions, habits of mind and character traits regarded by the Character View as an essential component of an adequate conception of critical thinking.

Israel Scheffler makes a similar point, when he writes:

we talk of "citizenship" as if it were a set of skills, whereas our educational aim is, in fact, not merely to teach people *how* to be good citizens but, in particular, to *be* good citizens, not merely *how* to go about voting, but *to* vote. We talk about giving them "the skills required for democratic living," when actually we are concerned that they acquire democratic habits, norms, propensities. To take another example, we talk of giving pupils the "ability to think critically" when what we really want is for them to acquire the habits and norms of critical thought. (Scheffler (1960), pp. 98-9, emphases in original)

Scheffler's claim is that skill is not enough; that the "habits and norms of critical thought" are essential to an adequate understanding of critical thinking as an educational ideal. He offers a powerful and systematic conception of education which he thinks entails that conclusion.

Both of these proponents of the Character View offer arguments against the adequacy of the Skill View conception of critical thinking, and in favor of the Character View. I have as well. None of these arguments are discussed in Missimer's article. She writes that versions of the Character View "have been advanced without much analysis". (145) Nothing could be further from the truth.

Missimer makes the point (which, with minor qualification, I accept) that a person could not be skilled at critical thinking without having practiced it: "'pure skill' in the sense of skill devoid of practice does not exist—no person could be a critical thinker who had never, or only infrequently, thought critically, just as we know of no mathematician who had never, or only infrequently, done mathematics". (150)¹⁷ She (apparently) infers from this that the kind of person Paul and Scheffler mention—that is, a person who is able to reason skillfully but does not—is a conceptual impossibility. But this inference is erroneous; in

any case there are countless counterexamples to which one could appeal. Grant that skill requires practice. It is nevertheless the case that many people who are practiced in and skilled at critical thinking nevertheless fail, at least occasionally but often routinely and systematically, to think critically. One can be practiced in and skilled at critical thinking but routinely and importantly fail to engage in it. If so, then Missimer's point about practice will not suffice to mute Paul's and Scheffler's complaint that such a person is fundamentally deficient with respect to critical thinking. That deficiency, as they (and I) argue, is best understood as one of character.

Concluding Difficulties

I have argued that Missimer's criticism of the Character View fails, and that her advocacy of the Skill View fails as well. I would like simply to conclude on that note. But there are several further points which I am obliged to mention, even though I cannot discuss them fully here.

(a) *The Skill View Actually Involves Character*

The Skill View recommends instilling the "disposition/habit to think critically" (149); according to that view this disposition/habit, and the relevant attitude toward it, is a necessary condition of being a critical thinker, since "[t]o be considered a critical thinker you must do a lot of critical thinking *as a result of having wanted to*". (149, emphasis added) If so, then the Skill View actually accepts the central tenet of the Character View.

(b) *The Relevance of Empirical Evidence to the Justification of a Conception of Critical Thinking*

Missimer argues that justifying one or the other of these conceptions of critical thinking depends on empirical evidence: "even in the realm of choosing among ideals we are cast back upon some kind of appeal to experience as arbiter; intellectual

history has shown that gathering evidence is less risky than relying on opinion alone". (146-7) I wonder what branch of intellectual history Missimer has in mind here: which philosophical dispute about ideals (say of justice, or political organization, or knowledge) has been settled, or even importantly addressed, by some kind of appeal to experience? Despite her discussion on these pages, the sort of evidence she appeals to is, as argued above, not relevant to the settling of this dispute. Moreover, her claim that in the absence of appeals to experience we are "relying on opinion alone" betrays a quite radical rejection of philosophical argument as a possible source of evidence for conclusions about ethical, epistemological, educational or other ideals. This rejection involves deep metaphilosophical issues (e.g. concerning naturalism) which Missimer neither acknowledges nor addresses. To say that *empirical* evidence is irrelevant to the settling of this dispute is *not* to say that "evidence here is irrelevant" (146) *simpliciter*. Her rejection of the very possibility of non-empirical evidence is extremely contentious and (I would say) problematic, but it is unargued for.¹⁸ The autonomy of philosophy cannot so easily be dismissed. In any case, the character traits advocated by the Character View do not spring from "opinion alone"; rather they spring from philosophical, specifically moral and educational, theory.

(c) *Causes and Conceptions*

Missimer suggests in several places that the Character View invokes dispositions and character traits in order to causally explain episodes of critical thinking; she suggests that that view fails because these dispositions and traits fail to so explain. (148, 149, 150) This is a fundamental confusion. The Character View is not claiming anything in particular about the causes of critical thinking. It is rather offering a conception of critical thinking. Missimer may well be right that the cause of particular episodes of critical thinking is "the habit of

critical thought" (150)—although that is a tricky thing for her to claim, in view of her contention, just discussed, that that habit can equally be seen as a disposition. In any case, the causes of critical thinking are irrelevant to questions about its proper conceptualization. If episodes of critical thinking were caused by ingesting some chemical concoction, it would remain an open question whether the Skill or the Character View was the more adequate conception. Causal worries are simply irrelevant here.

Missimer contends (personal communication, July 30, 1992) that when proponents of the Character View say, as I do above, that an adequate conception of critical thinking *demand*s or *require*s that the critical thinker have the relevant dispositions or character traits, they are implicitly implying a causal connection between those character traits and success at critical thinking; if not, then this language "is, to say the least, misleading". I confess that it never occurred to me to interpret the relevant language as Missimer does; if it had, I would have tried to explain myself more clearly. But I think that Missimer's interpretation is unorthodox. Philosophers frequently make claims using this sort of language. When they do, they typically take themselves to be making not causal claims, but *constitutive* ones. Consider:

1. In order to be a physical object, an entity must have extension.
2. Democracy *requires* a free press.
3. Justice *demand*s treating like cases alike.
4. Critical thinking *requires* the comparing of alternative theories in light of their evidence.

Would anyone interpret the first as implying that having extension *causes* an entity to be a physical object? Or the second as implying that a free press *causes* democracy? Or the third as implying that treating like cases alike *causes* such treatment to be just? I think not. These claims suggest rather that these properties are *necessary*

(and sometimes sufficient) *conditions* for the relevant states to be successfully realized. Thus the first asserts that if something fails to have extension, it fails to be a physical object; the second that if some government does not have a free press, it does not count as democratic; the third that if relevantly like cases are not treated alike, that treatment is not just. What is asserted, that is, is that the property is constitutive of the state: part of what it is to be a physical object is to have extension; part of what it is to be a democracy is to have a free press; part of what it is to treat justly is to treat like cases alike. I am not claiming that these assertions are correct. I am claiming only that this is the most plausible interpretation of these claims.

Apply this interpretation to the fourth case listed, which is actually Missimer's favored interpretation of critical thinking (and which is discussed further below). Is it best interpreted as implying that the comparing of alternative theories in light of their evidence *causes* critical thinking? Perhaps Missimer indeed intends this. But this interpretation faces an obvious and overwhelming difficulty: the comparing is indistinguishable from the thinking, which entails that on this interpretation critical thinking causes itself—hardly a plausible or helpful account of the cause of critical thinking. A more plausible, and charitable, interpretation is rather that Missimer is asserting that comparing alternatives is a necessary condition of, or is constitutive of, critical thinking—so that on her view if thinking does not involve such comparison, it does not qualify as critical thinking. This interpretation does not render the claim unproblematic (see below), but it does render it in a way which is not immediately overcome by the problem facing the causal interpretation just noted. Thus even her own view is best interpreted as constitutive rather than causal.

The same goes for the statements of the Character View Missimer interprets as implying causal connections between character

and critical thinking. Those statements make not causal, but rather constitutive, claims, concerning what is involved in (is a necessary condition of) being a critical thinker. I deny that they are misleading in the way Missimer suggests. She is simply misreading them. Conceptions are not causes.¹⁹

(d) *The Character View Commits the Ad Hominem Fallacy*

Missimer suggests that the Character View is guilty of the *ad hominem* fallacy: "Why should we tear the mantle of critical thinker from a Marx or a Rousseau on the basis of how they lived? To do so is to reason in an *ad hominem* fashion....To insist that their lives have any bearing on the truth of their theories seems quite beside the point. Yet the Character View enjoys this unfortunate entanglement". (149)

This charge is without merit. The Character View in no way suggests that a person's character has any bearing on the truth of her belief. What it suggests, rather, is that the truth—or, rather, the epistemic status²⁰—of a person's beliefs is only part of what is relevant to that person's status as a critical thinker. One can deny that that status is determined solely by the quality of one's beliefs without thereby committing the *ad hominem*.

(e) *The Definition of Critical Thinking*

Missimer defines critical thinking as "the consideration of alternative theories in light of their evidence". (145; see also 150; 153, note 16; Missimer (1988)) While her discussion does not depend on this definition, a brief comment about it is in order.

The claim that the consideration of alternatives is necessary for critical thinking is—like so many superficially promising philosophical claims—either trivial or false. On a weak reading, it amounts simply to the idea that all evidence for a claim needs to be taken into account, and that that evidence typically includes evidence concerning the merits of alternatives. On this reading, the

claim is trivially true. All extant accounts of critical thinking, including my own, endorse it; it adds nothing to those accounts.

On a strong reading, however, the claim is that no theory or argument can be critically evaluated without explicit attention to its alternatives; that such comparison is necessary for argument evaluation to be critical. This is false. One can, for example, critically evaluate an argument, and judge it appropriately, without contemplating any alternatives. Missimer explicitly denies this. (153, note 16; (1988)) Thus on this strong reading one cannot critically determine that an argument, e.g., begs the question, or generalizes on the basis of an overly small sample, without considering alternatives. But this is transparently false: if I am presented with an argument of the form “‘A’, therefore ‘A’”, for example, I can surely judge it to be question-begging without considering any other argument.²¹ Similarly for other errors (and strengths) of arguments.²² As Bailin says, while critical thinking is not wholly a matter of evaluating individual arguments, “critically examining individual arguments is part of the job”. (Bailin (1988), p. 404)

Moreover, considering alternatives “in light of their evidence” is too weak, in that

it completely ignores relevant standards in accordance with which evidence must be evaluated if such consideration is to count as critical. Suppose I am considering alternative theories in light of their evidence, and I find the evidence for T_1 more compelling than the evidence for T_2 , because the former evidence is composed of sentences with even numbers of words, or is advanced by Jews, or because so regarding it will advance my career. Here I am considering alternative theories in light of their evidence, but am hardly doing so critically. Entirely missing from Missimer’s account is any acknowledgement of standards or criteria in accordance with which evidence is properly assessed. Given this absence, it is unclear why critical thinking is to be preferred to uncritical thinking.

I have gone on far too long. I am grateful to Missimer for her provocative article, which has prompted me to rethink my conception and defense of the Character View in some detail. Nevertheless, for the many reasons given above, I continue to think that the Character View is a more adequate conception of critical thinking than the Skill View. Critical thinking can be adequately conceptualized, but not by skill alone.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking (AILACT) during the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Portland, Oregon on March 26, 1992. I am grateful to my respondent, Mark Battersby, to the members of the audience on that occasion, and especially to Connie Missimer for helpful and insightful criticisms and suggestions.

² Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical page references in the text are to Missimer (1990).

³ Except the disposition to think critically, which Missimer claims can as readily be characterized as a habit. For discussion of this exception, see below.

⁴ In what follows I rely on my own version of the Character View. I apologize in advance to proponents of other versions of that view who might think I am wrongly representing their views. I here speak only for myself—though I hope that what I say is acceptable to Paul, Scheffler, and other proponents of the Character View mentioned by Missimer. Missimer declines to count Ennis as a proponent of the Character View (152, note 2), but Ennis insists that he be so counted (personal communication, September 8, 1992).

⁵ Missimer writes as if the skills relevant to critical thinking are clearly specified and universally agreed upon. But one has but to see that her (quite general and non-specific) character-

ization of those skills differs from McPeck's, which differs from Ennis's, which differs from Paul's, etc., to see that these differences in no way challenge the thesis that reasoning skills are a necessary ingredient of an adequate conception of critical thinking. The case is the same for the heterogeneity of the specifications of the character traits emphasized by the Character View.

⁶ Missimer is aware of this, as her note 5 (153) cites Scheffler as insisting on the legitimacy of both the feeling of revulsion and the experiencing of surprise and delight. But she continues nonetheless to suggest, incorrectly, that the Character View cannot acknowledge them both.

⁷ I note here in passing that Missimer's citation of the character traits I have argued are central to critical thinking (145, citing Siegel (1988), p. 41) is erroneous. The features of the critical spirit I emphasize—a disposition to engage in reason assessment; a willingness to conform judgment and action to principle; an inclination to seek, and to base judgment and action upon, reasons; a tendency to challenge currently held beliefs, and to demand justification for candidate beliefs; etc. (Siegel (1988), p. 39)—are not mentioned by Missimer. Instead, the character traits she attributes to me (145) are mentioned by me not as character traits, but as aspects of the *psychology* of the critical thinker. (Siegel (1988), p. 41) While Missimer runs these together, in my view they are quite distinct.

⁸ For this reason the Character View does not hold that having some specific set of character traits to some specific degree is a necessary condition for being a critical thinker. The only relevant *necessary* condition here is that of having, to at least *some* degree, *some* of the relevant traits. So the Character View does not rule that great thinkers who lack to some degree some of the relevant traits therefore fail to qualify as critical thinkers—though it does hold that the more such thinkers manifest the relevant traits, the more secure is their claim to so qualify.

⁹ Of course to the extent that critical thinking is seen as an ideal, it is general, and applies to everything, including those character traits just dismissed as only indecisively relevant: ideally, a critical thinker is a completely rational, completely moral person. But this is an ideal. These thinkers' character flaws and moral

failings count against their being ideal critical thinkers, but their intellectual achievements argue for their status as (to some significant degree) critical thinkers, despite those flaws and failings. The flaws and failings don't disqualify them as critical thinkers *simpliciter*, though they do disqualify them as *ideal* critical thinkers.

¹⁰ It may be that Freud's did not. If so, then his status as a critical thinker is perhaps less clear than that of Missimer's other examples.

¹¹ All the literature on the discovery/justification distinction—including my (1980)—is relevant here.

¹² This confusion of process and product is well criticized in Bailin (1988), p. 404, which is a response to Missimer (1988).

¹³ If this evidence fails to upend the Character View, is there any evidence which could? Or is that view, Missimer asks, itself immune from criticism, and so at odds with its own embrace of fallibilism? Good question: if no evidence could count against the Character View, even in principle, then Missimer would be right that that view would be of dubious merit. But she is not.

First: it is clear that on the Character View it is possible for evidence to count against judgments of criticality. If we find, in examining the work or character of presumed critical thinkers (like the folks on Missimer's list of examples), either that their work was propositionally inadequate, or that the process by which they achieved that product was problematic, or that they harbor problems of character of the sort specified, then we would have evidence challenging their presumptive status as critical thinkers. So such judgments are clearly open, on the Character View, to evidential support and challenge.

What of the Character View itself: is it open to evidential challenge? Yes—although not the sort of challenge Missimer here considers. That view is a philosophical one; it is open to all the sorts of challenges to which philosophical theses are generally. It can be challenged by internal inconsistency; by defect in supporting argumentation; by counterexample; by criticism levelled by or poor comparison with alternative theoretical views; etc. The Character View is not immune to challenge. On the contrary, Missimer is here challenging it, and the Character View must meet that challenge. If her challenge is

successful, then Missimer will have defeated it. I have been arguing that her challenge does not succeed, but not that no challenge can in principle do so. That View is not immune from challenge, and so is not in conflict with its own embrace of fallibilism.

That it is open to challenge is compatible with its being not open to certain sorts of challenge. See below for further argument that the Character View is not open to the sort of empirical challenge Missimer mounts.

- ¹⁴ In addition to the citations just noted, Missimer could also have cited my (1989), pp. 138-9, or my (1989a), both of which emphasize the importance for critical thinking theory of the fact that our conceptions of critical thinking—including their moral dimensions—must themselves be open to critical scrutiny. Indeed, this is a pervasive theme of my (1988) as well. The parallel point—that conceptions and theories of rationality must themselves be open to rational criticism and defense—is also a staple of my more narrowly epistemological work on naturalism and rationality.
- ¹⁵ See also my (1988), note 23, pp. 156-7, in which I emphasize the further scrutinizability of the moral dimensions of the Character View.
- ¹⁶ Of course proponents of the Character View may well think, as I do, that the moral position in question is the one most able to withstand critical scrutiny, and which emerges as the most adequately justified from the rigors of critical reflection. The point here is just that there is (on the Character View) nothing automatic, necessary, or “beyond scrutiny” about this thesis, despite Missimer’s suggestion to the contrary.

- ¹⁷ Actually, Ramanujan might be a counterexample, if by “doing mathematics” Missimer means attempting to *prove* mathematical theorems. I leave this as a curiosity to ponder.
- ¹⁸ My various papers on naturalized epistemology (1980, 1984, 1989b, 1990, 1993, 1994) argue against the view Missimer here adopts.
- ¹⁹ Missimer suggests (*ibid.*) that there is “no pedagogical upshot to [my] conception of the critical spirit”. But there is: if the Character View is right that that spirit is constitutive of the critical thinker (and that critical thinking is an important educational ideal), then we are obliged to try to foster that spirit. That is an important pedagogical upshot of the Character View’s conception of critical thinking. (How we best do that is a question which is largely independent of the different question which Missimer is pressing: is the Character View in fact correct that the critical spirit is constitutive of critical thinking? See section (2) above.)
- ²⁰ See my (1989) for discussion of the relationships among truth, justification, and critical thinking.
- ²¹ Missimer demurs ((1988), p. 401, note 7), but her point here is just that it is “much likelier” that such arguments are evaluated in comparison with alternatives, not that adequate evaluation *requires* such comparison.
- ²² My point here thus does not rest on examples of arguments which beg the question or involve vicious circularity. For a provocative defense of *some* such arguments, see Sorensen (1991). The present point goes through even if Sorensen’s analysis is correct.

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