

Education's Epistemology

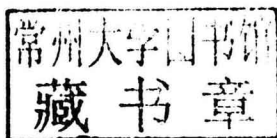
*Rationality, Diversity,
and Critical Thinking*

Harvey Siegel

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Rationality, Diversity, and Critical Thinking

HARVEY SIEGEL



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INTRODUCTION

In 1988 I published *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education*, followed in 1997 by *Rationality Redeemed?: Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal*. In both books I articulated and defended my “reasons conception” of critical thinking as an educational ideal, and in the second I responded to criticisms of the first as well. In the intervening years I have developed my view in both philosophical and educational directions and addressed still more criticisms. This volume collects seventeen of those more recent papers published between 1999 and 2017.

Part I collects three papers that set out and develop my positive view. Chapter 1 begins with a streamlined articulation of the *reasons conception*, briefly relates it to those of historically important philosophers and philosophers of education, and addresses challenges flowing from epistemological relativism, epistemic dependence, and feminist and postmodernist presuppositions. Chapter 2 contrasts my account with John McDowell’s influential account of the development of mind, inspired by Wilfrid Sellars, that features “initiation into the space of reasons.” Here I argue that my account is compatible with Sellarsian insights concerning the space of reasons, and with McDowell’s (and R. S. Peters’) idea that education is a matter of initiation, but that the Sellars/McDowell alternative does insufficient justice to the centrality, in my account, of the *epistemic quality* that is a fundamental requirement of critical thinking. Chapter 3 clarifies the relation between the “reason assessment” and “critical spirit” components of the reasons conception, the role of the Kantian principle of respect for persons in justifying it, the characters and roles of the normative and motivational forces of reasons in it, and the relation between the educational ideal of critical thinking and the complementary ideal of autonomy.

Part II includes five papers that deal with the *dispositions* and *virtues* that are central to the reasons conception, and with the proper characterization of *indoctrination*. Chapter 4 offers an account of thinking dispositions (including critical thinking dispositions), explains why they are central to critical thinking,

and rebuts several extant criticisms of them. Chapter 5 amplifies that account and relates it to the avoidance of indoctrination—a fundamental issue for philosophy of education. Chapter 6 explores the role of reasons in moral education. Chapter 7 assesses the relationship between critical thinking and the intellectual virtues. It engages the virtue epistemology literature and argues against conceiving of critical thinking in solely virtue-epistemic terms. Chapter 8 explores further the character of indoctrination and assesses the relationship between critical thinking and a particular intellectual virtue, that of open-mindedness. Of these two, it is argued that critical thinking is the more fundamental.

Part III collects four papers that develop further the normative, epistemic dimension of critical thinking, particularly the nature of epistemic rationality, its place in the reasons conception, and the value of rationality so conceived. Chapter 9 serves as a bridge connecting Parts II and III by connecting the intellectual virtues considered in Part II to issues concerning rationality, epistemic normativity, and virtue epistemology more broadly. It argues that education is a “thick” concept in that it has both descriptive and normative dimensions, and that its value is both moral and epistemic. Chapter 10 systematically evaluates Alvin Goldman’s claims that truth is both the ultimate epistemological value and the fundamental epistemic goal of education, and that critical thinking/rationality is of instrumental value only in that it helps us to achieve true beliefs. In it I argue against Goldman’s claim that critical thinking is of instrumental value only. Rather, critical thinking and rationality are themselves of value independently of their instrumental tie to truth. Chapter 11 advances a view of rationality according to which it requires both rules and judgment, thus challenging both rules-only (the so-called Classical Account of Rationality) and judgment-only conceptions. These three chapters are epistemology-focused and illustrate the high degree of inter-relevance of epistemology and philosophy of education. Chapter 12 systematically responds to a Heidegger-inspired critique of this epistemological focus that argues that the reasons conception is deficient as an account of critical thinking precisely because it is overly focused on matters epistemological.

The five papers collected in Part IV address the contested connection between rationality and diversity. Chapter 13 defends the possibility, and actuality, of “transcultural,” “universal” ideals from the criticism, made by Richard Rorty and many others, that all such allegedly universal ideals—such as that education should do its best to foster the abilities and dispositions of the critical thinker, or that education should strive to foster students’ rationality—are not only deficient, but are also morally and politically noxious in that they illegitimately impose merely local ideals on hegemonically oppressed others. Chapter 14 examines the issue as it manifests itself in the context of argument evaluation, the suggestion here being that the quality of an argument is culture-relative in that a given argument may be good in one culture but bad in another. Chapter 15

continues the analysis by critically engaging with Stanley Fish's argument against the very coherence of multiculturalism, and with the cultural anthropologist Richard Schweder's case for the claim that critiques of culturally located values and ideals "from the outside" are illegitimate. In these chapters I defend the possibilities (and actualities) of objective, nonrelative argument evaluation, and of transcultural, universal ideals in both philosophy and education, in several ways—most fundamentally by showing that criticisms of these possibilities presuppose the very universality they hope to challenge. Chapter 16 addresses the same cluster of issues as they have been raised by educational researchers in terms of "epistemological diversity." Here, too, I argue that while such diversity is genuine, it has to be handled with care, and that its epistemological and educational ramifications are rather less than its defenders often suggest. Finally, Chapter 17 defends the thesis that in cases in which democratic values conflict with non- or antidemocratic cultural values in democratic multicultural societies, *democracy trumps cultural difference*: that is, while education in democratic multicultural states must honor and respect cultural difference as much as possible, it cannot and should not honor antidemocratic cultural values that conflict with the imperatives of democratic education themselves.

Together, the essays do several things. First, they further develop my "reasons conception" of critical thinking, and relate it to ongoing disputes in both epistemology and philosophy of education. Second, they continue to engage with critics and substantive criticisms. I am most grateful to my critics (including Harold Brown, Nicholas Burbules, Eamonn Callan and Dylan Arena, Stefaan Cuypers, Alvin Goldman, Trudy Govier, Chris Hanks, and Emma Williams) and to those whose work prompted my engagement and afforded the opportunity to develop my views further (including Jason Baehr, Paul Feyerabend, Stanley Fish, David Theo Goldberg, Alvin Goldman, William Hare, John McDowell, John Hardwig, Emily Robertson, Richard Rorty, David Shweder, Wilfrid Sellars, Ben Spiecker, and Jan Steutel). As should be clear from even a cursory reading, my positive stances have been refined, qualified, and occasionally corrected by that engagement.

Third, they further develop the epistemological side of philosophy of education—something I view as important in light of the subdiscipline's tendency to focus on moral/political matters. (The latter are important, of course; I have no wish to challenge their importance. But it is a mistake, I think, to lose sight of the fundamental epistemological dimensions addressed here.) Fourth, they demonstrate some of the ways in which epistemology can inform philosophy of education, as well as ways in which the latter can inform the former. Fifth, they engage a broad range of important work launched from a range of rival, too often antagonistic, traditions in philosophy, education, and anthropology, from classic figures to well-known and highly regarded contemporary philosophers, social scientists, public intellectuals, and social commentators. I continue to

hold out hope for fruitful philosophical communication across rival traditions, and, in challenging popular “critiques of reason” emanating from some of those traditions, to have shown that honoring diversity is completely compatible with valuing rationality and critical thinking as fundamental philosophical and educational ideals.

The essays promulgate several theses: (1) that critical thinking is an important, and arguably the preeminent, educational ideal; (2) that it is best understood and most effectively defended in “reasons conception” terms, according to which the critical thinker has both the abilities required to evaluate reasons well and the dispositions, habits of mind, and character traits required to routinely engage in and be guided by such evaluations; (3) that evaluating reasons *well* is an epistemic matter, requiring the invocation of criteria of epistemic evaluation and, ultimately, epistemic rationality; (4) that rationality is best understood as fundamentally normative, both having and conferring value, and involving both rules and judgment; and (5) that cultural (and racial, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other sorts of) diversity is crucially important, morally and sociopolitically, but is less significant epistemically than it is often supposed to be.

The chapters have been lightly edited, but appear in most respects as originally published. Changes of substance, few in number, have been indicated in the chapter endnotes. I have updated a few references where it seemed important to do so.

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PART ONE

RECENT STATEMENTS AND
DEVELOPMENTS OF THE THEORY

Cultivating Reason

1. Introduction

In the Western philosophical tradition, reason and rationality have long been regarded as important intellectual ideals. In the philosophy of education, their cultivation has been similarly esteemed as a central educational aim or ideal. Historically, philosophers of education whose positions otherwise diverge dramatically have consistently articulated, endorsed, and defended (with various qualifications) educational visions in which the cultivation of reason, or the fostering of rationality, has been central. Socrates is perhaps the clearest example of a philosopher who urged that education should encourage in all students and persons, to the greatest extent possible, the pursuit of the life of reason. Plato similarly venerated rationality, although he was a bit less sanguine concerning the degree to which the ideal could be successfully realized. Aristotle, too, championed rationality, both in theory and in practice, and he uttered remarkably modern-sounding ideas concerning education's duty to develop the character traits we now associate with the rational person. The great philosophers of the Middle Ages, no less than those of Antiquity, similarly championed an education aimed at the fostering and development of rationality, believing it to be requisite for a full realization of Christian faith. Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Mill, and other great figures of the modern and Enlightenment periods also venerated rationality and praised it as an educational aim, the realization of which would enable humans to achieve their full potential as rational beings. More recently, Bertrand Russell extolled the virtues of an education in service of the cultivation of reason, and John Dewey developed a highly refined philosophy of education that placed his pragmatic conception of rationality at its center. More recently still, R. S. Peters and his British associates endorsed a version of the ideal of the cultivation of reason, placing reasons and rationality at the heart of their educational philosophy. The preeminent contemporary philosopher of education, Israel Scheffler, has similarly urged that rationality, reasons, and reasoned criticism be made basic to educational endeavors. Although no doubt an overly

simple historical generalization, it seems clear that the overwhelming majority of philosophers of education, from Socrates to the present—despite sometimes dramatic differences in their overall views, and with various reservations and qualifications—have championed rationality and its cultivation as fundamental educational desiderata. No other proposed aim of education—knowledge, happiness, community, civic-mindedness, social solidarity, docility and obedience to authority, creativity, spiritual fulfillment, the fulfillment of potential, etc.—has enjoyed the virtually unanimous endorsement of historically important philosophers of education that reason and rationality have.

In contemporary discussions, the cultivation of reason continues to be defended by many as an important educational aim or ideal. Unlike some historical predecessors, contemporary advocates of the ideal do not understand reason as a special psychological “faculty”; in defending rationality, they do not align themselves with the historical movement known as Continental Rationalism, according to which knowledge is based on the perception or intuition afforded by such a faculty. Rather, what is advocated is that education should have as a fundamental aim the fostering in students of (1) the ability to reason well, that is, to construct and properly evaluate the various reasons which have been or can be offered in support or criticism of candidate beliefs, judgments, and actions; and (2) the disposition or inclination to be guided by reasons so evaluated, that is, actually to believe, judge, and act in accordance with the results of such reasoned evaluations. Students (and people generally) are rational, or reasonable, to the extent that they believe, judge, and act on the basis of (competently evaluated) reasons. Consequently, to regard the cultivation of reason as a fundamental educational aim or ideal is to hold that the fostering in students of the ability to reason well and the disposition to be guided by reasons is of central educational importance.

The two aspects of the ideal just mentioned deserve further comment. The first—the ability to reason well—presupposes an account of the constitution of good reasons upon which the ideal must inevitably rest. How do we determine that a proposed reason for some belief, judgment, or action is a good or forceful one (or not)? What are the guidelines, criteria, or principles in accordance with which the goodness of candidate reasons is to be ascertained? What is the nature of such principles? How are they themselves justified? These questions are epistemological in nature; they call for a general account of the relationship between a putative reason and the belief, judgment, or action for which it is a reason. Such an epistemological account will have to grapple with deep questions concerning the nature of epistemic justification, the relationship between justification and truth (and so the nature of truth), the relativity (or absoluteness) of principles of reason evaluation, and so forth. In this sense, the educational ideals of reason and rationality depend, for their own justification, on an

adequately articulated and defended underlying epistemology. (Some of these questions are addressed below; see also Siegel 1988a, 1989a, 1997, 1998.)

The second aspect of the ideal mentioned above—the disposition or inclination to be guided by the results of the reasoned evaluation of reasons—has broader philosophical implications. Here, the ideal recommends not simply the fostering of skills or abilities of reason assessment, but also the fostering of a wide range of attitudes, habits of mind, and character traits thought to be characteristic of the rational or reasonable person (Scheffler 1989; Siegel 1988a). This extends the ideal beyond the bounds of the cognitive, for, so understood, the ideal is one of a certain sort of *person*. In advocating the fostering of particular dispositions, attitudes, and character traits, as well as particular skills and abilities, the proponent of this educational aim denies the legitimacy, or at least the educational relevance, of any sharp distinction between the cognitive and the affective, or the rational and the emotional. The ideal calls for the fostering of certain skills and abilities, *and* for the fostering of a certain sort of character. It is thus a general ideal of a certain sort of person—the sort of person it is the task of education to help to create. This aspect of the educational ideal of rationality aligns it with the complementary ideal of *autonomy*, since a rational person will also be an autonomous one, capable of judging for herself the justifiedness of candidate beliefs and the legitimacy of candidate values.

2. Critical Thinking

In the contemporary educational literature, these ideas are often discussed in terms of *critical thinking*. Advocates of efforts to foster critical thinking in the schools sometimes conceive this aim narrowly, in terms of imparting skills which will enable students to function adequately in their jobs, and in so doing to be economically productive. More often, however, proponents of the educational aim of critical thinking have in mind the broader view of critical thinking as more or less equivalent to the ideal of rationality. In any case, it is only when understood in this broad way that this educational aim can be adequately analyzed and defended (Siegel 1988a, 1997; Bailin and Siegel 2003). So understood, critical thinking is a sort of *good* thinking, so the notion of critical thinking is fundamentally a *normative* one. This distinguishes this understanding of critical thinking from those, common in psychology, which treat the notion as descriptive (Bailin et al. 1999).

To regard critical thinking as a fundamental educational aim is to hold that educational activities ought to be designed and conducted in such a way that the construction and evaluation of reasons (in accordance with relevant criteria) are paramount throughout the curriculum. As Israel Scheffler puts the point:

Critical thought is of the first importance in the conception and organization of educational activities. (1989, p. 1)

Rationality . . . is a matter of *reasons*, and to take it as a fundamental educational ideal is to make as pervasive as possible the free and critical quest for reasons, in all realms of study. (p. 62, emphasis in original)

The fundamental trait to be encouraged is that of reasonableness. . . . In training our students to reason we train them to be critical. (pp. 142-143)

To accord reasonableness central importance in education is not to say that other aims and ideals might not also be of serious importance, but rather that none outrank the primary obligation of educational efforts and institutions to foster critical thinking.

Why should the fostering of critical thinking be considered so important? There are at least four reasons. First, and most importantly, striving to foster critical thinking in students is the only way in which students are treated with *respect as persons*. The moral requirement to treat students with respect as persons requires that we strive to enable them to think for themselves, competently and well, rather than to deny them the fundamental ability to determine for themselves, to the greatest extent possible, the contours of their own minds and lives. Acknowledging them as persons of equal moral worth requires that we treat students as independent centers of consciousness, with needs and interests not less important than our own, who are at least in principle capable of determining for themselves how best to live and who to be. As educators, treating them with respect involves striving to enable them to judge such matters for themselves. Doing so competently requires judging in accordance with criteria governing the quality of reasons. Consequently, treating students with respect requires fostering in them the abilities and dispositions of critical thinking.

A second reason for regarding critical thinking as a fundamental educational ideal involves education's generally recognized task of preparing students for adulthood. Such preparation cannot properly be conceived in terms of preparing students for preconceived roles; rather, it must be understood to involve student self-sufficiency and self-direction. In this the place of critical thinking is manifest. A third reason for regarding the fostering of critical thinking as a central aim of education is the role it plays in the rational traditions which have always been at the center of educational activities and efforts (mathematics, science, literature, art, history, etc.). All these traditions incorporate and rely upon critical thinking; mastering or becoming initiated into the former both requires, and is basic to the fostering and enhancement of, the latter. A fourth reason involves the place of careful analysis, good thinking, and reasoned deliberation