Critical Thinking and Transcendence, Towards Kantian Ideals of Reason

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Christina Hendricks, UW – Rock County

In *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt portrays thinking as a means of transcendence. According to Arendt, thinking "always transcends the sheer givenness of whatever may have aroused its attention," and thus, though we are "totally conditioned existentially," we can "mentally transcend all these conditions" (Arendt 1981, 74, 70). Thinking allows us to go beyond who, what and where we are, because it is a means of withdrawing from the world: "thinking always . . . removes itself from what is present and close at hand"; "reality and existence . . . can be temporarily suspended" (199).[1] Thinking therefore requires a "stop-and-think," an interruption of "any doing, any ordinary activities," a suspension of action and habitual thought processes to allow for reflection that makes transcendence possible (78).

Critical thinking is often conceived in a similar fashion, as a means by which individuals are able to stop and reflect on their beliefs, values and actions, evaluate and transcend them. John Dewey argues that "the essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment": it begins with a dilemma that "brings us . . . to a pause," a stopping point that he refers to as "the suspense of uncertainty" (Dewey 1997, 74, 11). This suspense allows us to stand back to reflect, to "metaphorically climb a tree . . . [to get] a more commanding view of the situation" (11). By pausing for reflection we can transcend and escape from "purely impulsive or purely routine action," from "instincts and appetites," and from the "leading strings of others" in our thinking (14, 64). For Ronald Barnett, similarly, "critical thought is potentially emancipatory for individuals" in that through it they can "free themselves from dependency on their former taken-for-granted worlds" (Barnett 1997, 4).[2] A critical person, in his view, does not "kowtow" to what appears to be

"given" in the world; s/he "stands apart from that givenness" and works to transform the ways the world is understood by him/herself and by others (87).

Though many theorists of critical thinking may agree on its crucial connection to ideals of transcendence and transformation, the means to achieve these ideals is a source of contention. Arendt's claim that thinking operates beyond the boundaries of time and space is not enough – thinking can still too easily be used to further entrench biases and prejudices that ought to be questioned.[3] How can thinking best be used to transcend habitual beliefs, values and practices, to evaluate and transform them if necessary? Within the literature on critical thinking, it is possible to locate theorists who fall roughly on two sides of this question, with each side arguing that the other does not promote enough transcendence. One side charges the other with strengthening already-accepted beliefs and values rather than questioning them, by focusing too much on impartiality and ignoring the ways in which purportedly universal views are still partial ones. The other side responds by charging that such criticisms reduce the transcendent capacity of critical thinking by assuming we are stuck in epistemological and evaluational contexts from which we can never escape. I argue that it may be helpful to navigate between these views by conceiving of critical thinking as a boundary concept, an activity that occurs in a suspension between immanence within habitual beliefs, values and patterns of thought, and transcendence of them.

Critical thinking, in my view, is a process of moving through and across the boundaries of our contexts of thought towards transcendence, requiring recognition both of the ways in which thought is tied to particular contexts, and of the ways in which we can and do move beyond these. I appeal to Kant's notion of "ideas of reason" as a model for considering critical thinking as an activity of progression towards transcendence. For Kant, such ideas serve as goals for thought towards which we ought to strive, but which may never be reached. Similarly, I argue that critical thinking may best be conceived as a perpetual striving towards transcendence that may only ever

progress closer and closer to a goal we may never reach. Considering critical thinking as a movement in-between immanence and transcendence may not only help better frame and perhaps resolve some theoretical debates in the conception of critical thinking, it may also help students and teachers better grasp what it is they're trying to do when they attempt to undertake it as a practice.

I

Some theorists of critical thinking in the recent literature charge others with attempting too much transcendence and thereby not achieving enough, by requiring individuals to think from an impartial, universal viewpoint. This focus on impartiality, such theorists say, may lead us to ignore the ways in which our thinking is embedded in contexts, with the result that we may portray the results of partial thought as if they were universal truths. As a consequence, we are likely to further embed thinking within contexts we should rather be transcending, by acting as if we have already achieved transcendence when we have not.

Harvey Siegel is often cited as a target of this kind of charge, since in *Educating Reason* he argues that "critical thinking is impartial, consistent, and non-arbitrary, and the critical thinker both thinks and acts in accordance with, and values, consistency, fairness, and impartiality of judgment and action" (Siegel 1988, 34). For Siegel, a critical thinker is "appropriately moved by reasons" in that s/he has the ability and propensity to properly assess and act in accordance with reasons (23). Proper assessment of reasons requires impartiality, through a commitment to principles "taken to be universal and objective," to standards that are consistently and impartially applied to all similar cases (34).[4]

Connie Missimer, Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, and Henry Giroux, among others, criticize the requirement that critical thinkers attempt to pull themselves away from their own situatedness to think impartially. The best way to transcend our present contexts of thought, such critics argue, is to pay more attention to the ways in which we are embedded in them, so as to better understand how

to move beyond them. For the sake of convenience of discussion in this essay, I will label the views of such critics as "contextualist" (since they focus on the ways in which thought is embedded in contexts), and the views they criticize as "universalist" (since these focus on appealing to universal principles impartially discovered and applied).[5]

Connie Missimer argues that the "dominant view of critical thinking" focuses on individuals in that it "conceives of critical thinking as a reasoned judgment by an individual at any given moment" (Missimer 1994, 119). This "Individual View," as she calls it, also has elements of the universalist view of critical thinking as described here, since it requires that individual judgments "be not only sound by logical principles but free of bias and prejudice, reflecting an impartial mind" (119). The critical thinker is to strive for impartiality, and to use reason and logic to come up with appropriate judgments on his/her own (121). Missimer refers to Harvey Siegel as one of the most prominent proponents of the Individual View, since he focuses largely on the individual and the character traits s/he should have to be a critical thinker (121).[6]

Missimer criticizes the focus on universality and impartiality expressed by theorists such as Siegel, because it seems to presume that individuals can engage in critical thinking and reason assessment on their own, by striving for impartiality in a solitary fashion.[7] Missimer explains that in the Individual View, the "onus of rightness or justification falls on each act of critical thinking and on the individual doing the critical thinking," and thus it is important that abilities and dispositions such as impartiality and appropriate reason assessment be fostered in the individual (Missimer 1994, 121, 125). But according to Missimer, this conception of critical thinking is "chimeric," because it is impossible for an individual to be impartial without the input of others, and to correctly assess individual arguments in isolation from alternative ones (123). The assessment of reasons, Missimer argues, must be undertaken in "in relationship to alternative reasons," since "[a]ny argument will look reasonable or seem the appropriate view if it is the only argument that one is

aware of" (121). For Missimer, "[t]he Individual View that one person should perfectly assess an argument is a false ideal. No man is an impartial island. No argument is an intellectual island" (123).

Missimer offers a "Social View" of critical thinking as an alternative, according to which individuals contribute arguments and ideas to a "socially wrought conceptual fabric of theories" (Missimer 1994, 122). In the Social View, what is important is not that individuals be able to fully evaluate arguments in isolation, but that they be able to assess the connections between particular arguments and their conceptual background and alternatives. An individual who is thinking critically according to this view "takes account of one or more alternatives and compares their evidence," attaching new views to "at least some of the existing theoretical fabric" (120). Missimer considers critical thinking as part of a larger social process, wherein many individuals, offering alternative views, contribute to the goal of progressing further towards knowledge: "It is widespread use of critical thinking by many people over the long haul that produces greater reasonableness" (125). For Missimer, it is "too large a burden" to place "the onus of being right or correct" on the individual -- the evaluation of arguments comes through a collective, rather than an individual process (121).

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon also criticizes universalist views of critical thinking, arguing that they are often predicated on a false hope that individuals can, using reason, reach a neutral perspective from which to make objective and universal judgments. According to Thayer-Bacon, the emphasis on individuals using their reason autonomously to reach knowledge on their own can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, both of whom argue that reason and logical thinking are context-neutral tools that can allow an individual to achieve universal knowledge in a solitary way.[8] Thayer-Bacon appeals to pragmatist philosophy to argue that reason cannot be used to transcend social context and individual bias completely, for the sake of impartially and objectively grasping

truth. For too long, she argues, reason has been thought to be "above or beyond the tainting of cultural influences," operating with "a life of its own, unconnected to human input" (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 4). She agrees instead with the pragmatists Peirce, James and Dewey that as individuals, we are each contextually embedded and fallible, and thus "what we need to do is work with others, as a community of rational inquirers, to help further our knowledge and understanding" (42).[9] According to Thayer-Bacon, "none of us is ever completely objective"; yet by communicating our partial and limited views to each other, "we help each other compensate, adjust, and correct for our own subjectivity ,"and therefore "[t]he more we widen the community of others we share our perspectives with, the more objective we can become" (139).

For Missimer and Thayer-Bacon, conceiving of critical thinking as an activity undertaken by impartial individuals requires attempting too much transcendence from the ways in which individuals' thinking is contextually embedded. Because transcendence to neutral impartiality is impossible on an individual level, according to these theorists, acting as if we have achieved it is problematic. Thayer-Bacon argues that thinking we have reached an impossibly neutral viewpoint means presenting a "false illusion of fair-mindedness and openness that is dishonest at best and dangerous and destructive at worst" (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 35). If we believe we have emerged from partial perspectives when we have not, we promote a limited perspective as if it were impartial and universal; and doing so means we are not likely to try to change, or even recognize, the ways in which we are still embedded in contextualized thinking.[10] Henry Giroux agrees, arguing that "[i]ntellectual inquiry and research free from values and norms are impossible to achieve," and to assume that we have achieved them can lead to "universaliz[ing] dominant norms, values, and perspectives that represent interpretive and normative perspectives on social reality" (Giroux 1988, 14, 61). If this occurs, Giroux argues, we will likely "socialize students into accepting and reproducing the existing society," into accommodation rather than transcendence (62).

Richard W. Paul also makes some contextualist claims in his distinction between "weak" and "strong" critical thinking. Paul argues that critical thinking is "weak" if it focuses only on analyzing and evaluating isolated arguments, since individuals could do this while keeping the "biased assumptions, stereotypes, egocentric and sociocentric beliefs" with which they began (Paul 1994, 184). If thinkers are encouraged to analyze arguments as if they were isolated entities, without consideration of the larger contexts in which they are embedded, they may perform argument assessment within unquestioned worldviews and systems of thought as if these were neutral and universal. Thinkers operating in this way tend to become "*more* sophistic rather than less so, more skilled in rationalizing and intellectualizing their biases" (184). Paul argues that "strong" critical thinking requires consideration of one's contextual embeddedness: "Critical thinking . . . is defined in the strong sense as inescapably connected with discovering both that one thinks within 'systems,' and that one continually needs to strive to transcend any given 'system' in which one is presently thinking" (182).[11] Such transcendence requires recognizing and focusing on the context of our thought processes, not attempting to ignore them.

Thus for some contextualists, such as Missimer, Thayer-Bacon, Giroux, and Paul, universalist views of critical thinking that require neutrality and impartiality attempt too much transcendence, and this can easily mean not promoting enough. These critics argue that in order to better move beyond our current systems of thought, we must first recognize the extent to which we have not or even cannot do so.

II

For their part, universalist theorists of critical thinking often argue in response that placing too much emphasis on the immanence of our thinking within particular contexts could itself make transcendence difficult or impossible. Universalist theorists such as Harvey Siegel and Ronald Barnett also seek to promote transcendence as an ultimate goal of critical thinking, but they argue

that the contextualist focus on the ways in which thought is embedded may go so far as to make movement beyond our contexts seem impossible to achieve. Thus, while the contextualists criticize universalist theorists for acting as if we have achieved transcendence when we have not, the latter criticize contextualists for acting as if we are deeply embedded when we are not.

Harvey Siegel argues that even if our judgments always occur from within a partial perspective, this does not mean that claiming universality for them must be unjustified. Siegel agrees with the contextualist claim that our thinking is always embedded in a particular context:

> We always judge from the perspective of our own conceptual scheme; there is no way to escape from all schemes and judge from a God's-eye point of view. Since our schemes reflect our cultural/historical circumstances, then these circumstances constitute limits on our judgment; we can't escape them entirely. (Siegel 1997,175)

But this does not mean, he argues, that judgments made from particular, local viewpoints cannot have any universal applicability or legitimacy – it is not the case that since "universality, or a perspective unencumbered by our particular situation, is impossible," then "our judgments cannot, in principle, have any force beyond the bounds of our own location or scheme" (175). Siegel lists mathematical and scientific judgments as examples that, though always made from within particular contexts and systems of thought, are readily considered to have universal applicability and legitimacy (176). He argues in addition that "[m]oral and social/political judgments also aspire to, and sometimes achieve, extra-scheme legitimacy": "For example, our judgment that oppression and marginalization are wrong, though made from the perspective of our own scheme, is thought (by us) to have legitimacy beyond the sharers of that scheme" (176). When we argue that oppression is wrong, we are usually claiming either implicitly or explicitly that it is wrong for all people – not just those who share in our conceptual scheme.[12] According to Siegel, we very often make judgments that, "while immanent, strive also for transcendence," and there is no good reason to think "that it is impossible in principle that they might" attain it (177).

Ronald Barnett agrees with Siegel that rather than being stuck in our own frames of reference, we already do strive for, and to some degree achieve transcendence beyond these to more general principles and shared criteria for thought. According to Barnett, it would be unproductive and ultimately conservative to claim that different individuals and/or groups are always stuck within separate frames of reference, "each with its own conception of what is to count as rational, as worthwhile and as intelligible" (Barnett 1997, 25). If this were so, then we would be unable to communicate across contexts, and we would be left with "just a number of tongues talking different and mutually incomprehensible languages" (25, 26). Contextualists often argue for the value of considering multiple viewpoints and approaches to supplement our own partial ones (Missimer 1994, 131; Thayer-Bacon 2000, 167-170; Giroux 1988, 63; Paul 1994, 194). But, Barnett points out, in order to fruitfully engage alternatives we must be able to appeal to beliefs, values, and principles that are shared across contexts. Siegel insists, similarly, that without "world view neutral" criteria there seems to be no reason to value consideration of other perspectives for the sake of critically evaluating our own (Siegel 1988, 14-15; 1987, 43).

Siegel argues that contextualists do in fact appeal to world view neutral criteria and principles in their judgments, they just don't readily acknowledge this. According to Siegel, by emphasizing how exclusion, marginalization and oppression can result from expressing the partial as the universal, contextualists appeal to both moral and epistemological principles that are treated as universal. Contextualist claims rely upon principles concerning reason and rational justification that purport to have force for all rational thinkers (at the very least, they agree upon basic rules of reason and logic that support what counts as justification for a claim); and they also rely upon moral principles that have universal force, such as the principle cited above that oppression and marginalization are wrong (Siegel 1997, 145). Siegel points out that such moral principles are treated by contextualists (and most rational thinkers) as if they are universally legitimate: "the

principles which establish that marginalized persons and groups are treated wrongly and deserve better treatment . . . are themselves person- and culture-neutral in that that they apply with equal force to all persons and cultures" (144).

To summarize, universalists such as Siegel and Barnett argue that contextualists can go too far in their focus on the partiality and embeddedness of our thinking, making transcendence seem impossible. Though they may admit that thinking takes place from a partial perspective rather than a neutral one, they argue that we can and do move beyond this limited view by appeal to principles that have a wider scope. Indeed, even contextualists themselves engage in transcendence of this type by their use of universalist logical and ethical principles.

Contextualists might be likely to respond to Siegel and Barnett that while we do often make judgments with purportedly universal force, we are not always correct in doing so – we may think we have reached a neutral, transcendent position from which to make such judgments, but we may be wrong about this. And if we are, then we falsely and dangerously perpetuate partial truths as universal ones, contributing to marginalization and oppression in the process. Siegel agrees that this is an important danger, and he argues therefore for a type of fallibilist absolutism, one which "provides for objectivity in the evaluation of knowledge-claims and the possibility of criticism and improvement of criteria which guide such evaluation" (Siegel 1987, 162). In other words, it is possible to appeal to putatively objective and universal criteria for assessing knowledge and truth, while acknowledging their fallibility and potential need for correction. We can and do make appeal to standards and truths that have force beyond our contextual boundaries, and acknowledging our fallibility just means we should consider correcting these as necessary, rather than saying they are impossible: "it is a mistake to think that . . . championing 'immanence' precludes our striving for 'transcendence'" (Siegel 1997, 177-178).

III

There is an interesting pattern to the disagreements between universalists and contextualists as described here. Contextualists argue that universalists go too far in promoting transcendence by implying that we have achieved it when we have not, and universalists argue that contextualists go too far in promoting immanence by implying that we are stuck in our current contexts when we are not. Both are right in criticizing the extremes; but the theorists discussed here do not actually argue for these extremes. As already noted, Harvey Siegel does not insist that individuals can reach neutral and objective viewpoints, but admits that we always think from within a context; and it seems clear that the contextualists discussed above *do* appeal to cross-contextual values and principles rather than arguing that we are inescapably embedded in particular contexts of thought. Both types of views aim towards a similar goal of transcendence, of promoting methods of thought that allow us to move beyond and evaluate the beliefs, values and practices to which we currently subscribe. The difference seems largely one of emphasis: do we promote transcendence by focusing on the ways in which we are embedded in particular contexts of thought, or on the ways in which we are able to move beyond these?

I believe critical thinking can best be conceived of as a process of *transcending* that requires both of these emphases. It is a *striving towards* transcendence, a movement for which we should focus both on the goal we are moving towards and on our progress – we must be able to say where we are going, how far we have come, and how far we have yet to go. Considered this way, we could say that universalists and contextualists differ in terms of their emphasis on different aspects of the same process of critical thinking as a movement from immanence to transcendence. Universalists emphasize the goal to be achieved – transcendence from our current contexts, and evaluation of those according to cross-contextual, generalizable or universalizable principles – and the degree to which we have positively moved towards this goal. Contextualists emphasize the

degree to which we have not yet achieved the goal, the partiality we still have that represents the progress we have yet to make.

A crucial question here, however, is whether or not we should consider the goal of complete neutrality and impartiality in thinking as something we can actually achieve. Should individual thinkers strive for an ideal of neutral impartiality as if it can be achieved, or is it the case that since such a goal may be impossible to reach, aiming for it would encourage individuals to think they have gotten there when they have not?[13] It is not my purpose here to resolve the question of whether or not fully neutral impartiality is possible for individuals. Instead, I offer a view of critical thinking that could be compatible with uncertainty about the answer to this question: by appealing to the Kantian notion of "ideas of reason," I argue that we could fruitfully consider critical thinking as a movement towards full impartiality as a goal, but one that may never be reached. Complete neutrality and impartiality, like Kantian ideas of reason, may be a goal to strive for while recognizing that we may never reach it (or, which amounts to the same thing, we may never be able to *know* if we have reached it). Still, we can say that critical thinking is a process of striving towards impartiality as an ideal towards which we can progress ever further, even if we may never reach it in the end.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant defines an idea of reason as "a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense-experience" (Kant 1965, 318). An idea of reason serves a "regulative" function only, as "a principle of reason which serves as a rule" for the direction of thought, orienting it around the possibility of something whose existence we can never meet with or know for certain (450). For example, we use ideas of reason to order our knowledge and concepts into a system, "to exhibit the connection of its parts in conformity with a single principle" (534). We seek to organize the system of conditions for each conditioned aspect of knowledge into a whole, unifying it all under a single, unconditioned principle (391). But our

reason can never reach this ultimate unconditioned – it is an "idea" of reason only, that "can do no more than prescribe a rule to the regressive synthesis in the series of conditions" (451).[14] The idea of an absolute principle underlying all knowledge can be considered as a goal by which to regulate the operations of reason, but it can never itself be met with in experience and therefore can never be an object of knowledge.[15] Reason directs the understanding "towards a certain unity of which it has itself no concept, "yet which it strives to reach nonetheless" (318).[16]

Conceiving of critical thinking as a movement towards the goal of transcendence, we could consider this goal along the lines of Kantian ideas of reason -- a goal we may never reach, but which we should continue to move towards nonetheless. Kant insists that even if reason's ideas can themselves never be found in experience, yet they can serve as "archetypes" towards which we can and should continue to strive, since by doing so we may come closer than we would otherwise have thought possible (Kant 1965, 312). We can use such archetypes as standards "with which we [can] compare and judge ourselves, and so reform ourselves, although we can never attain to the perfection thereby prescribed" (486).[17] Ideas of reason provide goals that allow us to move towards some end, to judge how far we have come, and also how far we have yet to go.

As Kant says reason works to unify the various parts of knowledge under more and more general principles, we could say that in critical thinking we attempt to formulate principles and criteria for judgment that are more and more general in their force and legitimacy, while potentially always needing further correction. This seems a useful way to capture the "in-between" character of critical thinking, the notion that it takes place in immanence but moves beyond towards transcendence. Ronald Barnett argues that living, thinking and acting critically means being *in* the world but not *of* it – one must "maintain [a] distance from the world but be an effective actor in the world" (Barnett 1997, 177). Critical thinking must be immanent *and* transcendent – transcendent enough to recognize where change may be needed, and immanent enough to recognize how to

transform oneself and others from within the context one inhabits.[18] Critical thinking as taking place in-between immanence and transcendence is a complex activity that is difficult to describe, attempt, and carry through. Offering Kant's notion of "ideas of reason" is meant as a guiding metaphor to better characterize its nature, and to bring out the possibility of reconciling "contextualist" and "universalist" views of critical thinking by revealing how they differ more in emphasis than in substance.

Should this process of critical thinking as striving towards impartiality be undertaken on an individual level, as Siegel emphasizes, or on a social level, as Missimer argues? I think both are needed – Siegel is right to point out that individuals can seek to follow principles and criteria for thought that are impartial and universal, while recognizing that they may not be so; and Missimer is right to point out that the burden of determining what is to count as universal principles may best fall upon groups of thinkers operating over time, considering and evaluating many different alternatives. The critical thinker performs a valuable role in contributing to the social process of moving closer to universality and impartiality, and by taking up the principles thus developed, s/he can, on an individual level, move closer towards the goal of impartiality as well.

Hannah Arendt points out that while thinking takes place in a withdrawal from the world, through mental activities invisible from the outside, it returns to the present in which we exist with others, makes itself manifest, through speech and reason (Arendt 1981, 98-99). Thinking, though it seems a solitary activity, is accompanied by an "urge to speak"; and because humans exist "in the plural" our "reason, too, wants communication and is likely to go astray if deprived of it" (99). The critical thinker, in my view, is someone who withdraws from his/her habitual views and practices for the sake of transcendence, who strives for impartiality in doing so while recognizing s/he may never reach it, and who shares his/her thoughts and reasons with others in order to further the transcendent capacities of each and all.

Notes

[1] Arendt notes that though mental activities allow us to travel quickly across spatial and temporal boundaries and thus transcend the conditions in which we find ourselves, they cannot, of course, "directly change reality" (Arendt 1981, 71). However, they do not thereby simply create fantasies in our minds, because the mental transcendence thus achieved can indirectly change reality by structuring our actions: "the principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind" (71).

[2] In this text Barnett carefully distinguishes between critical thinking, critical thought, and critique – a distinction I am not following directly here by connecting his view of critical thought to a discussion of critical thinking in general. For Barnett, whereas critical thinking describes cognitive actions performed by individuals, critical thought describes ways in which thought operates collectively, through discussions and debates within fields and disciplines (Barnett 1997, 16-17). Critical thought operates through groups of people discussing issues together according to accepted criteria within a discipline. Critique, according to Barnett, is a form of criticism of a discipline according to standards from outside the discipline itself – it involves taking a perspective beyond a field of study, a body of knowledge, and analyzing/evaluating it from there (18). For Barnett, the move from critical thinking to critical thought to critique involves taking progressively wider perspectives, from one's individual activities to those of a group within a field, to a perspective beyond that. With each enlargement of perspective, thought becomes more and more critical (19); and, Barnett implies, along the way individuals and collectivities (e.g. , practitioners of disciplines, societies) can better free themselves from beliefs and practices that were previously accepted as given.

[3] Richard W. Paul eloquently points this out in his distinction between "weak" and "strong" critical thinking, as discussed further below.

[4] Siegel bases many of these points on Israel Scheffler's characterization of rationality (Siegel 1988, 30, 32-33). According to Scheffler, a rational person "is one who is consistent in thought and in action, abiding by impartial and generalizable principles freely chosen as binding upon himself" (Scheffler 1973, 76). Scheffler explicitly links this conception of rationality to Kant: "Rationality, for Kant, means impartiality and fairness of judgment; the conforming of one's actions to general rules which one has freely accepted for oneself" (Scheffler 1973, 63). Critical thinking, Siegel argues, is "the *educational cognate* of rationality – it describes the skills, abilities, and dispositions that education for rationality should attempt to develop in students" (32).

[5] These terms, which are nowhere used in the literature in quite this mode (so far as I know), name rough categories only. The theorists I discuss here differ widely in the details of their views and arguments, but there are enough similarities between them to place them roughly into two sides on the issue of critical thinking and transcendence – those who emphasize the need to think as impartially as possible, and those who emphasize the need to focus on the ways in which we think within contexts. Other theorists who could be put into these categories include Robert H. Ennis (1962, 1987) as offering a universalist view, and Nicholas C. Burbules (1991), Kerry S. Walters (1994) and Karl Hostetler (1994) as offering contextualist views and criticisms of universalist theorists. As I argue below, the criticisms of each side by the other may not be entirely accurate – each side accuses the other of extremes that are not always reflected in the writings of their targets.

[6] Siegel argues explicitly in *Educating Reason* that his view of critical thinking is focused in a significant way on the individual as a critical thinker, on the type of person one should be in order to be a critical thinker: "The conception of critical thinking being offered here is as much a conception of a certain sort of person as it is a conception of a certain set of activities and skills. When we take it upon ourselves to educate students so as to foster critical thinking, we are committing ourselves to nothing less than the development of a certain sort of person" (Siegel 1988, 41). It is the focus on the individual, and the kinds of traits s/he should have, that Missimer is criticizing. She argues (as discussed further below) that it is too much to ask to require individuals to become, on their own, the kinds of impartial reasoners Siegel sets as an objective.

[7] For Siegel, as for Kant, rationality and critical thought are directly linked to autonomy: "The critical thinker must be *autonomous* – that is, free to act and judge independently of external constraint, on the basis of her own reasoned appraisal of the matter at hand" (Siegel 1988, 54). Scheffler argues similarly, saying that rationality involves "a primary concern for the free and critical judgment of the free mind in all realms, and a pervasive attempt to strengthen its autonomy and responsibility," and that "the student [should] confront reality for himself so that his mind may be illuminated by the truth" (Scheffler 1973, 62, 63).

[8] For Plato, our souls already have this knowledge, we just need to "recollect" it; and our own reason will let us know, autonomously, when we have achieved this recollection (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 20-21). Aristotle, Thayer-Bacon argues, relies on individual perceptual experience, intuition, and logical argument to signal that one has reached the

truth, meaning that an individual can achieve knowledge using these tools on his/her own (24-26). Though, of course, the thinker may need the help of others in terms of receiving an education, or having his/her basic needs taken care of so s/he has the leisure time to think, I agree for the most part with Thayer-Bacon that for both Plato and Aristotle there is a sense in which the thinker can, on his/her own, find the truth. Plato's theory of "recollection" places the truth within each one of us, waiting to be uncovered in ways that could be done without others, after one has been trained in reason and logic. Still, since Plato's writings are in the form of dialogues, there may very well be an implication of required discussion and dialogue to which Thayer-Bacon does not pay enough attention. Thayer-Bacon could also have discussed Descartes to support her point, as his *Meditations* could be said to directly imply that individuals can use reason by themselves to determine the basic truths upon which all knowledge rests.

[9] Thayer-Bacon agrees with the pragmatist view that it is not possible to achieve a radical separation between ourselves as knowers and the objects of our knowledge, that we cannot fully escape from our social, historical and personal context to reach a neutral viewpoint (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 31-34). Since "there is no point of view absolutely public and universal," no one person can have a "God's Eye view of truth" (44, 45).

[10] Missimer argues similarly when she points out that the Individual View tends to downplay creativity due to its emphasis on "reasonableness and appropriateness" (Missimer 1994, 126). If critical thinking means individually attempting impartiality so as to assess reasons and arguments appropriately, it is going to tend to lean towards the already-accepted, "since what is new is often thought odd or unreasonable" (126). If one could achieve impartiality on one's own, perhaps one's reason-assessment would be appropriate; but since for Missimer partiality can only be overcome over time, through the contributions of many individuals, thinking one has achieved impartiality in solitude is likely to lead to rejecting innovations in the name of putatively universal criteria that are instead biased.

[11] Though I have put them in a rough category together, Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon actually criticizes Richard W. Paul's view of strong sense critical thinking. She interprets him as saying that we ought to try to get away from our particular perspectives, since our contextuality "ultimately makes us selfish and gets in our way" (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 62). According to Thayer-Bacon, Paul stresses "removing the self from the critical thinking process," because we too often think within the context of our own biases, interests, and goals (62). Paul does argue that critical thinking should aim to get students to recognize their own egocentrism, how their thought processes are often rooted in "their own desires, pains, thoughts, and feelings" (Paul and Elder 1997, 1-2). Because "egocentric thinkers have no real insight into the nature of their own thinking and emotions," Paul argues, it is important that students "discover that there is such a thing as non-egocentric thought" (1-3). This does sound as if Paul is suggesting that critical thinkers take the self and the ego out of their thought processes. Yet non-egocentric thinking need not mean the complete erasure of the self. Elsewhere Paul emphasizes the need to recognize the systems in which we do think (rather than arguing that we could get out of them entirely), to become aware of our own limitations due to our own embeddedness in contexts (Paul 1994, 182-183, 187-188). He argues that what makes for critical thinking is not the kind of worldviews we hold, but the *way* in which we hold them – critical thinkers are those who recognize not only that they think within particular systems, but that those systems may be in part (or whole) mistaken, and thus that they may need to take into account alternatives (183, 196-197). Paul argues for expanding worldviews, thinking from more than one frame of reference (194) – not necessarily attempting to think without any particular frames at all.

This actually resembles very much Thayer-Bacon's own conclusions, that we should acknowledge the partiality and contextuality of our views, and work with others and their partial views to come up with more reliable and objective knowledge: "The more we are able to communicate and relate to others, the more we become aware of our own selective process, and the more we are able to therefore critique our own and others' influences on our constructing of knowledge" (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 170). For Thayer-Bacon, we can interact and communicate with others to "gain perspectives on our own contextuality" and to "begin to develop an enlarged view" (169, 167). Paul, too, argues that we can achieve "a greater measure of objectivity" by recognizing the systems within which we think, and acknowledging the possibility of thinking in alternative ways (Paul 1994, 197). Thus I find Paul and Thayer-Bacon to be alike enough in their views to make it reasonable to them together under the heading of "contextualists." Both theorists are arguing for a recognition of our own perspectives and a consideration of alternatives in order to begin to shift and enlarge these perspectives.

[12] This does not rule out the possibility that though we think this judgment applies to all persons we may still be wrong, and thus that our judgment is not, indeed, universally applicable. As I discuss further below, Siegel argues that we can and should appeal to purportedly universal principles while still acknowledging our fallibility and the need to continually question and revise such principles.

[13] We can connect this point to Siegel's notion of a fallible absolutism. He argues that "[k]nowledge-claims can be objectively assessed in accordance with presently accepted criteria (e.g. of evidential warrant, explanatory power,

perceptual reliability, etc.), which can in turn be critically assessed" (Siegel 1987, 161). Yet these criteria, when they are being used to assess knowledge and truth claims, are taken as objective and universal: in fallibilist absolutism, knowledge-claims are evaluated "in terms of criteria which are taken as absolute but which nonetheless admit of criticism and improvement" (162). The question I am asking here is whether or not it is possible to ever reach the goal of acquiring truly absolute principles and standards; and if we are not sure whether or not it is, would arguing for its possibility encourage the problematic dogmatism that arises when we erroneously think we have reached such a goal?

[14] Kant argues that ideas are necessary to reason, not brought in from outside of it and thus possibly fantastical: "They are not arbitrarily invented; they are imposed by the very nature of reason itself, and therefore stand in necessary relation to the whole employment of understanding" (Kant 1965, 315). "The law of reason which requires us to seek for this unity, is a necessary law, since without it we should have no reason at all" (538). These ideas are beneficial principles, Kant says, in that we must use them guides to thought; but if such ideas are "taken for concepts of real things," they become "delusive," and "reason is led away into mistaken paths" (532, 561).

[15] For Kant, since human knowledge cannot extend beyond the limits of possible experience, whatever is outside these limits (such as ideas of reason) cannot be objects of knowledge for us (Kant 1965, 24, 257, 260).

[16] Kant lists numerous ideas of reason in the first *Critique*, as things of which we cannot have knowledge but which are necessary to believe for the sake of ordering and regulating our thought processes. These include the existence of God, human immortality, human freedom, and the unity of the thinking subject. Other ideas of reason listed in Kant's writings include the "kingdom of ends" posited by Kant in his ethical theory, as A.C. Ewing points out (Ewing 1938, 260). Though we may legitimately work towards an ideal "kingdom of ends" in which all rational beings follow moral laws they have autonomously legislated for themselves, this goal is an ideal we can only ever work towards and never fully achieve. Similarly, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant posits the "highest good" as an ideal to be sought – an ideal that combines moral virtue with happiness. But a condition of this ideal is "the perfect fit of the will to moral law," which is "holiness," and this is "a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable" (Kant 1993, 128-129). Still, the ideal is something towards which it is rational to try to continually progress: our duty to produce the highest good involves "an endless progress to that perfect fitness" (129). Kant also posits his political vision of an ideal state as an "idea of reason": the establishment of a civil society operated in accordance with universal laws that ensure the freedom, equality and independence of each citizen as both sovereigns and subjects (Kant 1983, 72, 77). Kant argues in the first *Critique* that though "[t]his perfect state may never, indeed, come into being; none the less this does not affect the rightfulness of the idea, which, in order to bring the legal organization of mankind ever nearer to its greatest possible perfection, advances this maximum as an archetype" (Kant 1965, 312).

[17] For Kant, such ideal standards help us to better judge the degrees to which we do *not* live up to the goals we seek: they provide "a concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, . . . thereby enabling it to estimate and to measure the degree and the defects of the incomplete" (Kant 1965, 486).

[18] Critical thinking is also "in-between" in the sense that it requires both self-confidence and humility – the confidence to put one's ideas forward and communicate them and their supporting reasons with others, and the humility to recognize and be willing to admit to one's own fallibility. Harvey Siegel argues that the critical thinker must be "emotionally secure, self-confident," with a "positive self-image"; but s/he must also possess "the feeling of humility which is necessary to the whole-hearted acceptance of the possibility that one may be in error" (Siegel 1988, 41, 40). Siegel takes the quote about humility here from R.S. Peters (1973, 75).

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