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Abstract

Commentary on “Rethinking Critical Thinking: A Relational and Contextual Approach” (Bowker & Fazioli, 2016).

Keywords

Commentary, critical thinking, autonomy, pedagogy

Cover Page Footnote

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Thinking for yourself and answering for yourself

Austin Dacey¹

A Commentary on “Rethinking Critical Thinking: A Relational and Contextual Approach” by Matthew H. Bowker and K. Patrick Fazioli (2016)

Suppose I’m an intellectual lemming. Can you make me think for myself? You can tell me, “Think for yourself.” I might ignore your injunction, in which case I would go on failing to think for myself. Or I might follow it, in which case I would be thinking for myself just because you told me to and thereby failing to think for myself. Is there hope for me?

Matthew H. Bowker and K. Patrick Fazioli believe that teachers of critical thinking confront something like this problem and that the solution lies in a form of autonomy. In their ambitious and provocative paper, “Rethinking Critical Thinking: A Relational and Contextual Approach,” Bowker and Fazioli advance a new analysis of critical thinking in terms of “autonomous thinking-relationships” and suggest that it helps address problems in critical thinking pedagogy (Bowker & Fazioli, 2016). Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, the authors describe numerous ways that personal and institutional desires, defenses, and fantasies can interact to undermine student autonomy. Endorsing an ethics of autonomy, they conclude that “the facilitation of critical thinking is an ethical endeavor” (p. 18).

Bowker and Fazioli’s nuanced portrait of the psychological and social dynamics of the critical thinking classroom teems with provocative ideas and questions, most of which I will have to pass over in silence. Instead, I will investigate the role of autonomy in their theory and pedagogy of critical thinking. After briefly stating some reservations about the framing of their theory, I consider a number of conceptions of autonomy invoked in their work, arguing that none is sufficient to explain the nature of critical thinking. I conclude by exploring a more promising conception of autonomy and joining the authors in reflecting on a connection between ethics and critical thinking.

The relational model of critical thinking

Bowker and Fazioli analyze critical thinking (CT) as a “capacity to develop flexible and autonomous thinking-relationships not only with the objects of one’s thought, but with one’s own thinking-relationships” (p. 5). One’s thinking-relationship to a thought-object, *O*, includes attitudes such as “enjoyment of topics related to *O*” and “fears related to the possible manifestations of *O*” (p. 5). One thinks about one’s thinking-relationships when one examines “their sources, their tendencies and patterns, and the motivations, desires, fears, and fantasies operating in them” (p. 5).

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Why do the authors favor the term “thinking-relationships” over the more common “metacognition”? They say that it helps us to better understand the educational context, in which relationships – between teachers, students, and institutions – are pedagogically and ethically crucial.² They also believe it is important theoretically and pedagogically to see CT as a capacity in contrast to a “bundle” of “knowledge, skills, and attitudes,” and they believe that the relationship formulation “permits us to focus on the capacity” (p. 5). The capacity view is necessary to avoid the “banking concept of education,” which Paulo Freire used to label a pedagogical model that conceives of teachers as making “deposits” into essentially inert, empty, and docile students.³

Bowker and Fazioli rely heavily on the argument that because critical thinking is a capacity, it cannot be “directly taught, but only facilitated” (p. 18). The idea seems to be that capacities cannot be provided to people (the banking view); they must be “facilitated” and “developed.” A common sense way to think about the CT capacity is that a person has it *in virtue of* having the right knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the relevant environment. The capacity is grounded in the aggregate: without it, there is no capacity.⁴ Thus, the way to teach the capacity is to teach the knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Of course, it would sound implausible to say that you *made* me critical just by *giving* me this bundle. But this is because acquiring a complex ability demands a great deal of agency and practice from the learner, not because capacities cannot be taught. It would sound no less implausible to say that you made me critical just by giving me the capacity.

Autonomy as self-determination

On the relational view, the CT capacity “depends upon the individual’s achievement of an intellectual and psychological self-organization in which she is able to discover a form of autonomy within her relationships to her own thinking-habits, assumptions, and thought-objects” (p. 4). Bowker and Fazioli do not specify the notion of autonomy they wish to use. What can be gathered from their text?

² They also favor the formulation because it is “more exact” than Elder and Paul’s “well-known summary of critical thinking as ‘thinking about thinking.’” The relational model has numerous competitors. Showing that it is preferable to the Paul-Elder model is not equivalent to showing that it is preferable all in all. In any event, “thinking about thinking” is not a fair characterization of Paul and Elder’s model. In their standard formulation, CT is analyzed as self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking, and critical thinkers are described as developing and exemplifying traits of intellectual humility, integrity, autonomy, confidence in reason, courage, empathy, perseverance and fair-mindedness (Paul & Elder, 2014).

³ Bowker and Fazioli admit that the banking model is widely rejected, but they claim that its “basic assumptions” are found “throughout” contemporary literature on CT (p. 3). It is telling that in order to locate examples, they must expand the financial metaphor to encompass any talk of CT offering a “long-term yield” for students or even a “value” that is retained beyond the end of the academic year. I imagine that bell hooks, who expounds on the value of critical thinking for personal empowerment and social change, would be surprised to hear that she is guilty of treating her students as depositories (hooks, 2010).

⁴ Perhaps Bowker and Fazioli would want to maintain, against the Humean metaphysics of our age, that the critical thinking capacity is irreducible to some more categorical properties simply because *every* disposition, power, or capacity is so irreducible (see Cartwright, 1999; Groff & Greco, 2013). I admit to being relieved that they offer no such argument—responding to it would be beyond my capacity.

In her recent review of the philosophical literature, Catriona Mackenzie delineates three “dimensions” of the autonomy concept, each with its own conditions for realization: *self-determination*, *self-government*, and *self-authorization* (Mackenzie, 2014). The first of these depends on conditions of *opportunity*, or equal access to a range of valuable options, and *freedom* from violence, assault, coercion, manipulation, exploitation and other forms of interference and domination by others (p. 26). Bowker and Fazioli invoke autonomy as self-determination in a number of passages.

Their main pedagogical aim is “to ensure that the relationship between teacher and student facilitates rather than contravenes the relationships between the student and his thinking-relationships” (p. 6). Relationships between teachers, students, and institutions “must not be governed by exploitation or abuse if they are to serve the genuine interests of students.” In another context, the authors speak of a student’s “rebellion against being used by the teacher” as “an expression of autonomy and independence from the teacher” (p. 14).

How are the conditions of self-determination related to the conditions of criticality? Although believing that *P* may be outside of your direct voluntary control, and therefore beyond my coercive control of your will, your belief is subject to indirect control insofar as it is within my power to cause you—by kindly paternalism, non-conscious manipulation, deceit, sheer force—to be in circumstances in which you are likely to come to believe *P*.⁵ Freedom from such forms of control can be said to be a necessary condition for criticality. However, it does not appear to be sufficient. I can enjoy a range of options and freedom from domination while refusing to consider available evidence that disconfirms my beliefs. My confirmation bias can be “flexible” as well, adapting to work in various circumstances. I agree with Bowker and Fazioli that domination in the classroom is an important problem that educators must confront. Still, critical thinking means more than self-determination.

Autonomy as self-governance

Another conception of autonomy that has received a great deal of attention in philosophy is *authenticity*—the notion that one’s commitments and decisions are genuinely one’s own, which Mackenzie includes among the conditions of self-government along with minimal cognitive and volitional competence. Bowker and Fazioli use the language of authenticity.⁶ Reflecting on the desire to fulfill the desire of the other, they write:

Whether the teacher makes his desires clear or hides them, and whether the student is aware of her desire to fulfill the teacher’s desire or not, how can a student develop a *genuine, authentic, and creative* relationship between herself

⁵ Here I will ignore the debates over *doxastic voluntarism*: Whether and in what respect belief can be willed.

⁶ In light of their passionate defense of student autonomy, it is interesting that the authors seem drawn to an account that would aim for students’ “genuine” and “authentic” assent to the material they encounter in class. Students rooted in certain authoritarian belief systems, for example, might autonomously prefer to satisfy the minimal course requirements and finish with their beliefs intact instead.

and her own thinking-relationships if she must contend with—but never consciously confront—the effects that the interaction of her desires and the teacher’s desires have upon her? (p. 13-14) [my emphasis]

Bowker and Fazioli do not articulate an account of authenticity, but according to the most influential accounts it is a form of coherence between an agent’s motives and some point of view from which she can identify with those motives, explicated variously as the agent’s reflective endorsement or non-alienation upon consideration of the history of her motives, her higher-order desires, or “integrated” psychological states, among others (Buss, 2013). This notion of identification echoes the slogan that critical thinking is thinking for oneself.

One charge against such coherence-based accounts of authenticity, often leveled by advocates of feminist or relational accounts, is that they cannot adequately “account for the internalized effects of psychological oppression; that is, the way oppression shapes agents’ practical identities and motivational structures, for example their preferences, values, and cares” (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 31). Similarly, a model of CT as authenticity must account for irrational beliefs that are habitual, spontaneous, or intuitive. To the extent that my own biases present themselves to me as “natural” and familiar, for example, critical interruption of these biases will present itself as an alien impulse that is incoherent with my identity. In this case, critical thought will be inauthentic thought. The authenticity condition, it seems, is neither necessary nor sufficient for criticality.

I have argued that the conditions of self-determination and self-governance are not criteria sufficient for CT because these conditions could be satisfied, jointly or severally, by agents whose thought is habitually dogmatic, closed-minded, or monologic. The authors could reply by denying that an adequate model of CT must exclude these forms of thought from the realm of the critical. Neglecting relevant available evidence may violate norms of epistemic rationality, but perhaps theories of CT, properly understood, are not attempts to model epistemic rationality.

This reply would represent a radical departure from the First Wave critical thinking movement, in which questions of epistemic rationality are central, as Bowker and Fazioli are aware (p. 2). A theorist in the First Wave tradition could object that they are changing the subject: they may be talking about a valuable capacity, but that capacity is not critical thinking. Insofar as their project is intended to appeal to both Critical Pedagogy and First Wave theorists, severing the connection to epistemic rationality would compromise it.⁷

⁷ Severing the connection to epistemic rationality would also be problematic because the value of epistemic rationality in part explains the value of autonomy. Many theories of autonomy maintain that self-government demands not only an agent’s identification with her commitments but also the *competence* to make them. Competence for self-rule includes cognitive competencies, from minimal “capacities to understand and process information to more complex capacities for critical reflection and reasons responsiveness,” along with volitional competencies such as “self-control” and “decisiveness” (Mackenzie, 2014, pp. 32-33). One reason a theory of “autonomous thinking-relationships” is appealing is that we value autonomy. But one reason we value autonomy is that we value the capacity for actual self-rule, and the capacity for self-rule presupposes

Perhaps Bowker and Fazioli are most plausibly read not as advancing an analysis of the *concept* of critical thinking, but rather a characterization of one important contributing *causal factor* in a person's critical thinking capacity. In this case, while what it means to possess the CT capacity could be specified without specifying any autonomy conditions, these conditions would be cited typically to explain causally why and how some people possess that capacity to the extent that they do. Bowker and Fazioli have drawn attention to a number of ways in which the pedagogical relationships between teachers, institutions, and students can sometimes undermine or fail to promote student autonomy. It is one thing to argue that students' self-determination or self-governance is causally conducive to their development of autonomy. It is another to argue that critical thinking just is the enjoyment of self-determination or self-governance. The authors could relinquish the latter aim while retaining the former.

Autonomy as answerability for the self

In a concluding section that unites critical thinking and ethics around the concept of moral agency or "personhood," Bowker and Fazioli cite Isaiah Berlin on freedom: "I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes," (p. 16). I suggest that this dimension of autonomy, classified by Mackenzie as self-authorization, may hold the most promise for explaining the nature of critical thinking.

To be autonomous is to possess not only the competence and freedom to be self-determining and self-governing, but also the *normative authority* to give reasons to oneself and others (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 35). To be a source of reasons, rather than a mere conduit or recorder of the reasons of others, is to be able to answer for them. Normative authority thus entails a form of accountability or answerability to others. In order for a commitment to be one's own, as Andrea Westlund argues, it is not enough to identify with or endorse that commitment upon reflection (Westlund, 2009). One must be disposed to answer for it, to explain it to others, and thereby to take responsibility for it.

An agent who lacks the disposition to answer for herself may be reflectively satisfied with her commitments, but her practical reasoning will be strangely disconnected from, and insensitive to, any justificatory pressures to which she, the agent, is subject. Being impervious to critical challenge in this way seems like an excellent candidate for what it is to be "gripped" by an action-guiding commitment or bit of practical reasoning as opposed to governing it. By contrast, when an agent holds herself answerable for her action-guiding commitments she effectively shows that, however firmly committed she is to certain values, she is not simply under their sway. Her commitment to these values is instead something for which she holds herself responsible. (p. 7)

some minimal epistemic rationality. A theory that lacks this link to minimal epistemic rationality lacks this appeal.

This responsibility for self, Westlund calls a “disposition for dialogical self-answerability.” Even if the others to whom the agent answers “inhabit her own moral imagination rather than her real social environment,” the thought is dialogical in structure because it involves a form of second-personal address.⁸

Autonomy as dialogical self-answerability is attractive for purposes of explicating criticality because it implies a higher standard of *self-criticism* than self-determination or self-governance. Suppose I realize that I am harboring a racist belief that was absorbed at a young age and under considerable pressure from my social environment. When I reflect on this belief and its origins, I may find that I cannot identify with it. Despite this, or in part because of it, I may be disposed to accept responsibility for this racist belief rather than disowning it and transferring blame to others. By answering for the belief—explaining, for example, why I might have been susceptible to it while others in my circumstances were not, and how I deal with such non-“authentic” beliefs—I accept a responsibility for being a good thinker that goes beyond any one belief to encompass my larger epistemic and social habits, and I acknowledge and affirm my dependence on others with whom I am inevitably intertwined in relations of reciprocal epistemic and social trust. Both of these commitments of answerability, I submit, are paradigmatic of the critical mind.

Another advantage of autonomy as answerability is that it connects the conditions of autonomy and criticality to the actual educational experience of students and educators. As teachers and students work together on the development of critical reasoning, dialogue is their principal instrument. Thus, the development of the disposition to answer for one’s commitments will be revealed in verbal exchanges—with the caveat that answerability can also surface in modes other than actual conversation. Even given an account of autonomy as authenticity, with its criterion of “internal” coherence of the agent’s will, the evidence of the development of autonomy will most likely emerge in conversation. Self-answerability fits well with pedagogical practice.

A final advantage of the theory of autonomy as answerability is that it points to a more robustly relational theory of critical thinking. Despite its language, social relations actually have a limited role in Bowker and Fazioli’s “relational” model except as a possible source of threats to autonomy and criticality. Answerability-for-self draws our attention to the constitutive role of dialogical social relations in autonomous and critical thought, and in so doing it adds to the deep consonance between the critical and ethical that the authors identify. The key is not authenticity, but dialogical responsibility.

Just as the ethical orientation is one that accords weight and consideration to the interests of others in reasoning about what to do and what not to do, the critical orientation is one that accords weight and consideration to the perspectives of others in reasoning about what to believe and what not to believe. The critical stance is to epistemic reasoning as the

⁸ On the moral significance of second-personal address, see Darwall (2009). Richard Paul explores dialogical and critical thinking in his fascinating (and underappreciated?) “Dialogical and Dialectical Thinking” (1990).

ethical stance is to practical reasoning. Each is a commitment to listen to others. In each domain, the central vice is explained by the same defect: the defect of egocentric—or more concretely, *monophonic*—reasoning. In deliberations about what to do, monophonic reason is egoistic; in deliberations about what to believe, monophonic reason is uncritical. And against both vices the best protection is the dictum *audi alteram partem*—hear the other side. If you are thinking by yourself, you are not thinking for yourself.

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