

PENNYPACKER PRODUCES A PROBLEM OR THE USEFULNESS OF CRITICISM

Wherever a problem is not obviously manifest in the affairs of people, bringing up a criticism or inquiring about the truth, effectiveness or value of a belief or practice often creates conflict. Questioning the status quo tends to throw otherwise stable situations into discord, making those involved uncomfortable, unhappy and even angry. Yet without such questioning, beliefs and habits of conduct tend to stagnate, become lifeless, and may even fail to alter direction when the need for change arises.

Near the end of chapter 2 of *Lisa*, the students are forced to confront this conflict. Mr. Pennypacker, the interim principal, has come on the scene filled with energy for changes in the school. The students note these attempts and become bemused. At around the same time, Mr. Spence's class resumes their "community of inquiry" from the year before. Mr. Pennypacker makes a visit to the class, and suggests that the students direct their inquiry at some actual problems in the school, indeed, even at his own actions.

Pennypacker's suggestion sparks a debate in the class as to whether the students should take him up on his idea, or remain concerned strictly with mental processes. Mark, and of course Harry, show an interest in this. "There are things that maybe have to get done," says Harry, "but there's still a right way and a wrong way to do them."(1) Some inquiry as to the criticisms (and how to go about those criticisms) seems to be in order.

Maria and Luther, on the other hand, disagree. Such inquiry will just cause trouble, maintains Luther, "He's just gonna stir up a mess he's got no way of solving."(2) Anyway, adds Maria, "It's none of our business."(3) Which side is correct? One wants to have sympathy with Pennypacker's generous offer, and applying their inquiry towards immediate practical concerns certainly seems a positive step for the students. Yet there is a prophetic ring to Luther's warning, as hinted at in the end of the chapter. For some help in this issue, let's turn to Mill and Peirce.

Although John Stuart Mill mentions in passing that liberty of criticism is applicable only to mature societies, i.e., "those capable of being improved by free and equal discussion" (4), he offers a host of arguments in support of critical inquiry. We will assume that Harry and his cohorts fall under this description. For Mill, criticism of beliefs is necessary for three different reasons. Firstly, the criticism may be true, exposing the falsehood and inadequacy of past beliefs. Unless our beliefs are open to criticism, we can have no real confidence in our judgments. "On no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right."(5) Mill also mentions that we are able to right our mistakes "...by discussion and experience, not by experience alone."(6) Only by engaging criticism can we improve our beliefs.

Secondly, a criticism may be in error, but may contain a seed of truth. Since any truthful criticism is useful to us, closing ourselves completely to even apparently invalid criticism is detrimental to our own good.

Finally, Mill asserts that the very engagement with criticism, on its own, can only strengthen our beliefs. The more grounds we can give for believing what we do, the firmer is our belief, and this can only be done by confronting all possible criticisms, so that no valid alternatives are left unnoticed. In ignoring or avoiding criticism,

moreover, our beliefs eventually become stale and lifeless, for we forget the *reason why* we believe as we do.

Such avoidance of criticism is a comfortable and common thing for us to do, writes Charles Peirce. He labels this phenomenon the "fixation of belief." "Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state," he maintains, "from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into a state of belief."⁽⁷⁾ People prefer to be safe and undisturbed, and thus, "...cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what (they) do believe."⁽⁸⁾

Yet we want a system of beliefs which will usefully guide our actions so that we can interact with the world in the most fruitful ways. Since such interaction is in flux, fixation of belief must eventually lead us astray. The cure for this is to act on our doubt, and engage in inquiry to eliminate honestly this doubt. Thus, "...to avoid looking into the support of any belief from a fear that it may turn out rotten is quite as immoral as it is disadvantageous."⁽⁹⁾

Mr. Pennypacker may indeed have stirred up trouble, but the students will have benefited if they learned not to fear criticism and its applications in inquiry.

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Footnotes

1. Matthew Lipman. Lisa. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1983, p. 17.
2. Ibid, p. 16.
3. Ibid, p. 17.
4. John Stuart Mill. On Liberty. New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956, originally published 1859, p. 14.
5. Ibid, p. 24.
6. Ibid, p. 25.
7. Charles Peirce. Selected Writings, Philip Wiener, ed. New York: Dover Publications, 1958, p. 99.
8. Ibid, p. 99.
9. Ibid, p. 111.