

REVIEW OF EDUCATING REASON: RATIONALITY, CRITICAL THINKING, AND EDUCATION

Harvey Siegel
New York: Routledge
1988 192pp \$25.00

What is "critical thinking"? Is it something that is general across disciplines, or a different entity in each discipline? Should we teach it, and if so, why? These are the kinds of questions Harvey Siegel addresses in his book on Educating Reason. As is true in any book of this kind, some questions are answered better than others.

The book is divided into an introduction, seven chapters, and a postscript. The early chapters deal with the nature of critical thinking and its role in education. Subsequent chapters deal with objections to the concept and teaching of critical thinking, and concluding chapters deal with special topics such as science education and minimum competency testing. There is something for almost everyone interested in the topic.

Investigators and educators in a number of disciplines are interested in the issue of critical thinking. Two of the most active disciplines involved in the study of critical thinking have been psychology and philosophy. This book is squarely in the philosophical camp. The style, logic of argumentation, and cited work are all in the philosophical tradition. In fact, I was able to find only one psychologist cited in the references. This limitation means that a number of active researchers in the field--John Bransford, Ann Brown, Reuven Feuerstein, Howard Gardner, Art Costa, Jonathan Baron, and myself, to name a few--are never cited at all. Oddly enough, even some of the major philosophical contributors to the field, such as Matthew Lipman and Bob Swartz, aren't cited either. The book would have been improved by wider coverage of the ideas out in the field.

I enjoyed reading this book, but I had problems with it from the beginning, as my comments above on scope suggest. I wasn't taken with Siegel's definition of the critical thinker, either. The definition is "one who is appropriately moved by reasons" (italics Siegel's). What kinds of reasons? What does it mean that one is "moved by" reasons? Are we talking about movement through action, being emotionally moved, or some other kind of movement (the possibilities are extensive)? And who is to decide what is "appropriate" movement? I doubt many people will find their understanding of critical thinking clarified by Siegel's definition.

Siegel views critical thinking as equivalent to rationality, a view that I find narrow and disappointing. Siegel never deals with issues such as intuition, insight, creativity, flexibility, and the like, topics that are as much a part of the philosophical tradition as of the psychological one. He is critical of those who place less value on rationality than he does, and then resorts to curious verbal somersaults to deal with the limits of rationality. He admits that we need not always be rational, but does not even begin to specify a set of guidelines for when rationality is appropriate, and when it is not. He ends up telling us that sometimes it is "rational to be irrational," a formulation that is hardly going to help people who want to understand the limits of rationality. In fairness, it should be said that Siegel gives a couple of examples of times when rationality may not be called for--playing a musical instrument and making love (no surprises there)--but a couple of examples does not a set of guidelines make.

After criticizing others' justifications of critical thinking as an educational ideal, Siegel provides his own justifications, which are just as susceptible to criticism as anyone else's. The first justification is respect for persons. We learn that all "other persons are of equal moral worth" (p. 56), which makes one wonder whether Stalin, Hitler, and Genghis Khan made it to heaven after all. He also believes that "all persons, in all

situations, deserve to be treated with respect" (p. 56), a statement that might not have gone over well with inmates of concentration camps who may have questioned whether their executioners deserved to be treated with respect. This moralistic tone pervades the book, and indeed, Siegel seems to believe that he has solved the problem of how to integrate morals and ethics into the teaching of critical thinking. He believes that "educators are bound, both morally and practically, to contribute to the moral education of the learner," but we are then treated to Siegel's own views on what is moral and ethical. The subsequent justifications for the teaching of critical thinking aren't a lot more compelling than the first. They include the need for self-sufficiency, which is a cultural value in the United States but not in all other countries and cultures; the importance of democratic living, which also works out well if one happens to be a member of our culture; and initiation into the rational traditions, which I can accept except that it begs the question by saying that you should teach critical thinking, which is equivalent to rationality, because of the importance of teaching rationality.

The chapter on science education is interesting, although somewhat strange. Most of the chapter is devoted to the viewpoint that, contrary to the views of Thomas Kuhn, we ought to teach the views of Thomas Kuhn (no misprint). Siegel seems to believe that Kuhn believes that Kuhn's views should be carefully hidden from science students, and that they should be taught in a way that encourages only normal science. I do not believe that Siegel's reading of Kuhn is totally off, but I do believe that Kuhn's view is that in order to go beyond a paradigm, students need first to learn about and understand the paradigm that they may eventually go beyond. I am, of course, sympathetic to Siegel's view that it is important to teach the future scientists of America or anyplace else to think critically.

The book ends by stating that a theory of rationality needs to justify rationality, and that this is easy, because rationality is self-justifying (p. 132). I'm not sure I understand why rationality is self-justifying, but if it is, other readers may join me in wondering why Siegel has spent so many pages justifying critical thinking, which he has told us is coextensive with rationality. Why did he bother? Why did we?

Perhaps I would have reacted more favorably to this book if Siegel were more generous in acknowledging the contributions of others whom he does not cite, and if he were less critical of those he does cite. The three leaders who receive any attention at all--Robert Ennis, Richard Paul, and John McPeck--come in for some pretty heavy broadsides. Were Siegel's contributions greater than theirs, or even a significant extension of theirs, perhaps I would have been less annoyed. But I found Siegel's self-righteousness inappropriate, if only because, at least in my view, his contribution neither exceeds nor significantly extends theirs.

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