An Analysis of a Feminist Critique of the Claim That the Prime Aim of Education is to Develop Critical Thinking

Sheryle Bergmann
University of Manitoba

Critical thinking has typically been touted as a desirable aim of education. I contend that critical thinking can be justified as the prime aim of education. However, this contention has been criticized by some feminist philosophers who suggest that the concept of critical thinking presupposes a male-biased conception of rationality. A number of feminist philosophers have suggested the need for a more inclusive conception of rationality. In this paper I explicate these difficulties as well as propose a definition of critical thinking which averts these difficulties while maintaining an inclusive conception of rationality.

La pensée critique été présentée comme étant un objectif désirable de l'éducation. Je crois même que la pensée critique peut être justifiée comme étant le but premier de l'éducation. Cependant, cette position a été critiquée par certains philosophes féministes qui suggèrent que le concept de pensée critique présuppose une conception de la rationalité biaisée par les hommes. Certains philosophes féministes ont suggéré qu'il y avait un besoin pour une conception plus globale de la rationalité. Dans cet article, j'explore ces difficultés et propose à la fois une définition de la pensée critique qui, je crois, évite ces difficultés tout en maintenant une conception globale de la rationalité.

Critical thinking has been touted by many educators as a desirable aim of education. However, it is my contention that critical thinking can be justified as the prime aim of education. The purpose of this paper is to advance the argument that the prime aim of education should be the development of critical thinking. This discussion is important for both educational thought and practice. It involves concern with how we think about thinking. The implications for practice are obvious. If we argue that the prime aim of education is to develop critical thinking, we must determine if, and how, this is possible. Can critical thinking be inculcated in students? Are there critical thinking skills which can be taught? Before

addressing these questions however, we must first determine whether we have the proper aim in mind.

The claim that the prime aim of education should be to develop critical thinking can be argued for in the following manner. There exists a plethora of educational aims. Some of these aims conflict with one another. For example, some educators feel that the aim of education is to prepare students for their role as good citizens, upholding societal values. Others feel that an educational aim should be the development of persons capable of evaluating and, if need be, changing societal mores. If conflicting aims such as these are to be dealt with, reasons must be presented as to why one aim should be chosen over another. Such an appeal to reason presupposes the position of critical thinking as an educational ideal. Thus, critical thinking is the most basic of educational aims. Siegel (1988) echoes this claim when he states that

> an overriding of critical thinking by a rival educational ideal at one level requires acknowledgment of the reign of critical thinking at the next highest level. In this way critical thinking must preside over and authorize the force of its rivals. (p. 137)

The conclusion that critical thinking is the most basic of educational aims could encounter objections from a number of philosophical arenas. The objection which I wish to discuss arises out of a study of feminist philosophy. Feminist philosophers could present the following objection. The concept of critical thinking which has been presented as the prime aim of education presupposes a certain traditional conception of rationality. The connection between critical thinking and rationality is intimate. As Siegel so aptly puts it,

> there is a deep conceptual connection, by way of the notion of reasons, between critical thinkers and rational persons ... and education aimed at the promulgation of critical thinking is nothing less than education aimed at the fostering of rationality and the development of rational persons. (p. 32)

However, our traditional conception of rationality has not gone unquestioned.

According to some feminist philosophers, our traditional conception of rationality has been developed with a male bias. As Salner (1985) says, "bias extends to the very philosophical foundation of how inquiry is conceptualized. It extends to theories about how we think and to judgments about what constitutes 'good thinking'" (p.46). Harding (1982) reiterates this notion.

> Once we recognize that the history of Western thought is the history of thought by members of a group with a distinctive social experience — namely, men — then we are led to a new set of questions about the social nature of that thought and about the justifiability and reliability of the interpretation of nature and social life emerging from that thought. We need to understand the distribution by gender of conceptions of rationality. (p. 227)

The question, then, is whether Siegel's definition of critical thinking is based on a conception of rationality that is distinctively male. That is, when Siegel says that "education aimed at the promulgation of critical thinking is nothing less than education aimed at the development of rational persons" (p. 52) are the persons both male and female or, as Harding would seem to infer, do women conceptualize the ideally rational person differently than men? If this is the case, what are the implications for the thesis that the prime aim of education should be the development of critical thinking?

In order to understand how conceptions of rationality could vary based on gender, it is helpful to examine some psychological theories, in particular, gender theory. This theory proposes that gender is indeed learned. I must reiterate at this point that I am conducting an analysis of *a* feminist critique, not *the* feminist critique. Whether or not there are empirical grounds on which to base gender theory is still being contested among feminist theory circles. Harding (1992) summarizes gender theory in the following manner:

> Gender theory shows how the different experiences male and female infants have of the division of labor by sex/gender with which they interact accounts for the reproduction generation after generation of certain general and nearly universal differences which

> characterize masculine and feminine senses of self, others, and the appropriate relationship between self and others. It is the virtually universal, but nevertheless socially arranged, male-dominated social division of labor by sex/gender which "causes" the inextricably intertwined, simultaneous production of gender and personhood. The infant's experience of this division of labor by sex/gender creates an "objectifying" sense of self in men and a "relational" sense of self in women. (p. 233)

This "objectifying" sense of self in men is a result, suggest gender theorists, (e.g., Chodorow, Flax) of the male's separation and individuation from a kind of person whom he cannot become biologically. However, the process by which female infants experience separation and individuation is not so critically tied to their gender identity. This results in a more *relational* sense of self in women.

Harding suggests that these different developmental processes undergone by girls and boys could result in different conceptions of a rational person in the following way:

> A rational person, for women, values highly her abilities to empathize and "connect" with particular others and wants to learn more complex and satisfying ways to take the role of the particular other in relationships. A rational person naturally has problems when there is too little connection with particular others and when she is expected only to take the role of the generalized other. Furthermore, a rational person's self-identity should be relatively little associated with the firmness of one's gender identity. For men, in contrast a rational person values highly his ability to separate himself from others and to make decisions independent of what others think — to develop "autonomy". And he wants to learn more complex and satisfying ways to take the role of the generalized other. A rational person naturally has problems when there is too great intimacy or connectedness with particular others, or when expected to take the role of a particular other. And a rational person's self-identity should be relatively highly connected with the firmness of one's gender identity. No wonder women's relational rationality appears to men immature, subhuman, and threatening. No wonder men's objectifying rationality appears to women alien, inhuman, and frightening. (1982, p. 236)

What Harding might be implying here is that males with their "objectifying" rationality would evaluate reasons differently than females with their "relational" rationality. That is, these different conceptions of rationality could translate into different processes of inquiry. Salner (1985) reiterates this notion when she suggests that

> men as a group are more likely to feel comfortable with, or possibly in need of intellectual tools that reinforce the removal of the self from the inquiry process. Women, on the other hand, may find this objective role to be artificial when experienced against the unconscious structure of the self-in-world. Beyond that, it may feel alienating and may even be experienced as a downright threat to the integrity of her cognitive organization. (p. 52)

These different tools of which Salner speaks may be evidenced in different research methods. The most notable difference in research methods would have to be the qualitative/quantitative distinction. This distinction reflects the relational/objectifying senses of rationality in that qualitative researchers do not distance themselves from their objects of research to the same extent that researchers employing quantitative methods do. For example, a qualitative researcher conducting an ethnographic study would take the role of a participant-observer in studying some particular subculture. Many quantitative researchers would refer to such an ethnographic approach as *soft* research. This descriptor illuminates another underlying dichotomy reflected in the qualitative/quantitative distinction and that is the time-honored affective/cognitive dichotomy. Qualitative research methods are often criticized by quantitative researchers as not being conducive to the disregarding of feelings or values of the participant-observers. Qualitative researchers would respond by suggesting that they do not pretend to disregard feelings and values but rather that they admit that such affective attributes exist and that they must be accepted as part of the research tools, which are the researchers themselves. I discuss this apparent dissolution of the affective/cognitive dichotomy later in this article.

If processes of inquiry are affected by a prior conception of rationality and if conceptions of rationality are affected by gender, what are their

implications for the thesis that the prime aim of education should be the development of critical thinking? Many feminist philosophers would object to the notion that critical thinking should be the prime aim of education because the conception of rationality upon which it rests is too narrow; that is, it does not include both male and female "ways of thinking." The development of a more "inclusive rationality" has been suggested by a number of feminist philosophers. Code (1981) suggests that "perhaps the admission of women to the kingdom of knowers, on an equal footing, will effect a shift in the standard evaluation of knowledge claims, granting greater respectability to the contribution made by the affective side of human nature" (p. 276). Salner (1985) suggests that

> the feminine qualities, including an epistemology that assumes a subject/object connectedness rather than separation, requires legitimation .... Genderized epistemological assumptions and genderized definitions of intellect are at issue because of what is omitted — the feminist genderized traits. By reinstating them in our definitions of science and scholarship, we are not thereby consigning them to women but rather making them part of what we value both academically and socially. (p. 57)

In calling for the legitimation of the affective side of human nature, or in other words, a subject/object connectedness rather than separation, few, if any, feminist philosophers have really fleshed out what an "inclusive rationality" would look like. This is not the only difficulty with this feminist critique of rationality. It is to an analysis of this critique that I now turn.

My response to the objection regarding the traditional conception of rationality is simple. This feminist critique levied against the traditional conception of rationality demonstrates the employment of reason assessment and a critical attitude. Such a critique therefore, does not damage the claim that critical thinking should be the prime educational aim. Although such a response may appear "quick and dirty," I feel that the utilization by feminist philosophers of the intellectual tools of which they are critical, may suggest that methods of justification are not masculine. I would agree with Shogan (1987) who says that

> if philosophy is indeed masculine, a feminist philosopher is a contradiction in terms. Moreover, if philosophy is masculine, the techniques which philosophers claim to be able to utilize — clarification, justification, conceptualization, deliberation, speculation, and so on, are techniques that feminism must reject. (p. 10)

A rejection of such techniques would be self-defeating; they are necessary not only for scrutinizing historically male-dominated enterprises but also as tools for self-scrutiny. Shogan suggests that "it is only by addressing criticism, preferably as a result of self-scrutiny, that feminism will continue to develop as a powerful, intellectual and political challenge to the assumptions of those in enterprises which would presume to exclude women (p. 12).

Another argument against the genderization of intellectual techniques and conceptualizations is that such genderization is not always characteristic of all members of a particular gender. Regarding the identification of abstract reason as masculine, Grimshaw (1986) recounts a study by Paul Willis which shows that conceptions of masculinity often differ according to class. In this study, conducted in a working-class British school, a rebellious (and male) "counter-school culture" disdained academic work and thought manual labor, not abstract reason, to be masculine (p. 62).

Grimshaw expands on this thesis by stating that "whatever theme or opposition is identified as male, it is always possible to find male philosophers who have profoundly disagreed" (pp. 65-66). The notion that particular themes should not always be identified as male (or female) is also suggested by Gilligan. In describing the "different voices" in the area of moral development, Gilligan (1982) acknowledges this as "characterized not by gender but by theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation ... but this association is not absolute" (p. 2). Although differences in thinking styles and conceptions of rationality are often associated with particular genders, I would suggest that this need not necessarily be the case. Thus, techniques such as justification should not be considered as solely masculine.

Although I disagree with feminist philosophers who genderize intellectual techniques and conceptualizations, I do agree with their desire for a more inclusive conception of rationality. However, I feel that Siegel's definition of critical thinking meets this demand. According to Siegel (1989) a critical thinker is someone appropriately moved by reasons. Thus, his account of critical thinking involves both a reason assessment component and a critical attitude component. According to Siegel, the basic idea of the reason assessment component is

> simple enough: A critical thinker must be able to assess reasons and their ability to warrant beliefs, claims and actions properly. This means that the critical thinker must have a good understanding of, and the ability to utilize, principles governing the assessment of reasons. (p. 34)

However, there is more to critical thinking than reason assessment. Siegel aptly describes the critical attitude component.

> As important to critical thinking as rational action is, however, it is crucial to see that critical thinking far outstrips rational action. For a critical thinker is not simply a person who acts rationally (and who has well-developed skills of reason assessment). A critical thinker is, in addition, a certain sort of person. Dispositions, inclinations, habits of mind, character traits — these features of the critical thinker are present, and definitive of the critical thinker, even when they are not being utilized or acted upon. (p. 41)

Thus, Siegel's "appropriately moved by reasons" conception of critical thinking is an inclusive account, giving equal weight to both components: reason assessment and critical attitude.

Although rationality is often conceived of as incorporating the traditional cognitive/affective dichotomy, I argue that this is a false dichotomy. Siegel's view of rationality supports this notion.

> Such a view as this, which includes attitudes, dispositions, habits of mind, and traits of character in a conception of critical thinking, seems to violate the time-honored distinction between cognition and affect (or thinking and feeling, or thought and value, or reason and

> emotion). This violation, however, is as it should be .... The conceptions of the reasonable person as one without emotion, and as one who "turns off" her emotions while engaging in reason, are untenable. Rather, the reasonable person has integrated with her reason assessment skills a host of rational passions, which together constitute and instantiate the critical attitude. (p. 40)

On the surface, it may appear that Siegel has dissolved the cognitive/affective dichotomy within his conception of critical thinking but some feminist philosophers would disagree. Martin (1989, p. 30) agrees that Siegel's conception of critical thinking involves emotions but she suggests that the objects of such emotions are epistemic (e.g., the critical thinker loves truth and rationality). She contrasts this with a love not only for truth but for subject matters or objects of inquiry. She cites as an example of this sort of love for subject matter the research style of scientist Barbara McClintock.

> A rigorous sophisticated theoretician, McClintock's research is nevertheless grounded in the concrete life and times of the corn plant she studies .... As in cases of friendship between humans, McClintock feels affection for her materials and pays attention to the individuals constituting it as individuals. (p. 7)

Although Martin's distinction between emotion directed at truth and emotion directed at people may appear to uphold a reason/emotion dichotomy, I feel that this is not the case. On the contrary, there is an interplay between reason and emotion. As Bailin (1991) points out,

> reason and emotion are not necessarily opposed to one another, but are, in fact, closely intertwined. Emotions play an important role in cognition in a number of ways. First, reasoned assessments are at the basis of many emotions. We experience fear because we judge a certain set of circumstances to be dangerous. Moreover, cognition is necessarily suffused with emotion, providing cues for further thought and action .... Thus we may experience fear upon encountering a situation which is similar to one which has been assessed as dangerous in the past even before having the opportunity to fully assess the present situation. And this may be useful, as taking precautionary measures may have more survival

> value than taking the time to make a full rational assessment. (p. 23)

This interplay between reason and emotion is also evident in Martin's example of McClintock's research style. Martin compares McClintock's affection for her plants to cases of friendship between humans. Although emotions such as these (i.e., directed at humans) may appear nonrational, they actually have, on closer scrutiny, some rational underpinnings. Bailin, in a discussion on intuition, cites Agyakwa as stating that "sweethearts and friends are not chosen on the basis of empirical analysis, e.g., by considering the vital statistics" (p. 18). Although Bailin agrees that we do not generally fall in love based on a checklist of qualities,

> nonetheless our conceptual understanding of the person's qualities is not totally irrelevant. Thus we would find it odd if someone viewed another individual as ugly, base and dull, but nonetheless was romantically attracted to him. We would find it similarly peculiar if a person's view of another person as having a remarkable intellect, an irrepressible zest for life, and a devastating smile were totally unconnected with her attraction to him. (p. 22)

Once emotions are viewed as having such rational underpinnings, the dichotomy between reason and emotion disappears. Thus, emotions directed at persons are no less at odds with the concept of reason assessment than are emotions directed at epistemic objects. Martin's critique of Siegel's conception of critical thinking as not encompassing all emotions fails. With Siegel's inclusive definition of critical thinking left intact, I feel that such a conception of critical thinking can, for the reasons cited above, be justified as the prime aim of education.

There is one further objection which has been levied against Siegel's "appropriately moved by reason" conception of critical thinking which must be considered before a final conclusion can be drawn. Although I have argued for the degenderization of conceptions of rationality, stating that feminist critiques utilize reasons, I drew no explicit conclusion as to whether what constitutes good reasons can be linked to gender. Although I would argue that such a connection cannot be made (based once again on the argument that the characterization of what constitute good reasons

is not always shared by all members of a particular gender), this does not preclude the possibility that people may have different ideas as to what constitutes a good reason. Using Siegel's terms, people may have a different notion as to what it is to be appropriately moved by reason. The objection could be phrased within the question: Are standards of appropriateness regarding reasons relative? If so, does this imply a relativism which appears to undermine the very notion of critical thinking?

The advocates of critical thinking would have to admit that they are assuming there would be some agreement as to what constitutes a good reason. To some degree this is a safe assumption. If there were no agreement as to what constituted good reasons, people would be unable to convince others to follow particular courses of action. This situation may not always have serious consequences but there is one situation where the impossibility of agreement would have disastrous results for humankind. This situation would arise if some people decided that it would be better to extinguish the human race than to allow for its continued existence. It is only through agreement among the rest of humankind that such an action might be averted. Without the possibility of agreement as to what constitutes a good reason to follow a course of action, (e.g., that such an action would be conducive for survival), the consequences could be the end of humankind. Thus, there appears to be at least one reason which humankind would agree is "appropriate to be moved by." As long as there exists this one commonly agreed upon reason, rationality does not lapse into a relativity which would undermine its existence. This notion would be similar to that expressed by Kant (1785/1959) in his foundational statement, "Rational nature exists as an end in itself" (p. 47).

By arguing that there is at least this common standard of appropriateness, I hope that I have opened the door for further inquiries into other common standards of appropriateness. I would suggest that other common standards can be found within the laws of logic. Although systems of logic have been criticized by some feminists as being male (as a result of these systems having been developed by men), I fail to see how these feminists could even communicate their ideas without some basic laws of logic. One such law would have to be the law of noncontradiction; that

is, no statement is both true and false at the same time. Such reference to truth and falsity has been questioned by some feminists. Thus we have Nye (1990) sharing with us the following beliefs:

> I believe that all human communication including logic, is motivated. I believe that, although a word processor may print out truths mechanically, people when they speak or write always want something and hope for something with passion and concern, even when part of that passion and concern is to deny it. In my readings of logic I have tried to understand such a denial. I do not see how any judgment on the "truth" or "falsity," or correctness of what logicians say can be made until what logic "means" in this deeper sense is made clear. If truth is more than a sterile formality, more than a mechanical semantic matching of formulae with other formulae, we must first know the meaning of the words that we are to judge true and false. (p. 174)

If we concede to Nye the necessity of knowing the meaning of words before we judge truth or falsity, we might ask how this is to be achieved without assuming the law of noncontradiction.

Nye endeavors to understand the meaning of logic. She attempts this through a "reading" of the logical systems of historical figures, noting not only their "logics" but also the situation and concerns out of which they wrote, the audience to whom they wrote, and the sort of men that they were. Nye claims that such a reading exposes the claims of logic to be "a particular project of domination." She suggests that with this exposure, "it becomes possible to undertake a new feminist study of thought and language free from the logicist assumptions that dominate contemporary linguistics and epistemology" (p. 179). One has to wonder how such feminist studies can be free of all laws of logic. For example, the law of noncontradiction must be assumed if one is to rely on historical data to illuminate the motivation for the development of particular systems of logic. If statements could be true and false at the same time, how could one rely on statements of historical "facts" to support the notion that the claims of logic are a particular project of domination?

Thus, it would appear that the law of noncontradiction is a standard of appropriateness which is assumed by both the historically dominated and those who have historically been in the position of dominator. This one example of a common law of logic (in other words, a common standard of appropriateness) should lend support to the nonrelativeness of critical thinking. Although I have only opened the door in the search for standards of appropriateness which can be shared by all people, I hope that other standards will be illuminated and agreed upon by both men and women. At the risk of sounding circular, I propose that this task can only be met through the work of critical thinkers (i.e., those appropriately moved by reason, as evidenced by acceptance of the preceding example regarding the law of noncontradiction). The necessity of the task of illuminating common standards of appropriateness reinforces my thesis that the prime aim of education should be to develop critical thinking.

REFERENCES

Bailin, S. (1991). Rationality and intuition. *Paideusis, 4*(2), 17-25.

Chodorow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Code, L. (1981). Is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant? *Metaphilosophy, 12*(1), 267-276.

Flax, J. (1978). The conflict between nurturance and autonomy in mother-daughter relationships and within feminism. *Feminist Studies, 4*(2), 171-191.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Grimshaw, J. (1986). *Philosophy and feminist thinking.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harding, S. (1982). Is gender a variable in conception of rationality: A survey of issues. *Dialectica, 36*(1), 225-242.

Kant, I. (1959). *Foundations of the metaphysics of morals.* (L. W. Beck, Trans.). New York: Bobbs-Merrill. (Original work published 1785).

Martin, J. (1989). *Critical thinking for a humane world.* Paper presented at the conference of the Generalizability of Critical Thinking, St. John's, Nfld.

Nye, A. (1990). *Words of power: A feminist reading of the history of logic.* New York: Routledge.

Salner, M. (1985). Women, graduate education, and feminist knowledge. *Journal of Education, 167*(3), 46-58.

Shogan, D. (1987). The philosophy question in feminism. *Resources for Feminist Research, 16*(3), 10-15.

Siegel, H. (1988). *Education reason.* New York: Routledge.