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Commentary on Blatz

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Commentary on: C. Blatz's "Ethical Impartiality, an Expression of the Spirit of Critical Thinking?"

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In "Ethical Impartiality, an Expression of the Spirit of Critical Thinking?", Professor Blatz constructs a two-part argument for the claim that in the ethical sphere the spirit of critical thought is expressed as a commitment to a complex form of impartiality. In what follows I will briefly characterize Professor Blatz's argument for this claim and then raise some concerns in the hope of setting the stage for the ensuing discussion. My comments will primarily focus on the first part of Professor Blatz's argument since it is here that Professor Blatz, by appealing to the notion of "the spirit of critical thinking," suggests an interesting solution to the problem of deep disagreement.

In the first stage of the argument Professor Blatz seeks to elucidate the characteristics or virtues of a critical thinker such that she may claim legitimacy for her beliefs on the basis of their personal felt importance, their salience as Blatz would say. Blatz seeks to address this issue by developing a solution to what he takes to be the biggest hurdle associated with the claim that salience ensures legitimacy: deep disagreement. For, if salience is sufficient for legitimacy, then how do we deal with the fact that individuals or groups all too often have conflicting and irresolvable differences with respect to what belief, or kind of belief, is salient? It would seem, then, that in cases involving conflicting beliefs, if we appeal to salience of belief as a grounds for the legitimacy of that belief, "we shall be stuck with the outcome of marking both (or all if there are more than two parties) as legitimate in spite of their conflict" (Blatz 2003, 12). And as Blatz points out this is too high a price to pay.

Before considering Blatz's solution to the problem it is worth saying a bit more about how Blatz thinks the problem of deep disagreement arises. A community of inquiry has both problems to address and procedures for addressing them. Blatz calls these procedures "norms of performance" and asserts that what counts in any given community as a good reason is determined by these norms. Deep disagreement arises from the fact that different communities of inquiry may have different norms of performance. Since reasons are relative to norms of performance, what counts as a reason for one community of inquirers may not count as a reason for another community.

Blatz argues that there are many constraints on both first order norms governing the conduct of inquiry and second order norms that seek to articulate and maintain first order norms that are necessary conditions for the legitimacy of a salient belief. For example, as we have already mentioned, there are first order norms governing the performance of inquiry and the requirement that we pursue our epistemic goals with integrity. Furthermore, there are second order norms, such as functionality-pragmatic concerns-logicality, empowerment, and what Blatz calls respect, a complex norm composed of both a commitment to epistemic charity and an openness to self-criticism. However, Blatz successfully argues that these norms are not sufficient to ensure the legitimacy of a salient belief. This requires something more. To ensure legitimacy these general attitudes and concerns must be, "all wrapped up in an overriding concern for the

sustained flourishing of critical thought" (Blatz 2003, 18). Thus, we can adjudicate between competing first and second order norms by appeal to which norms best serve the goal of the continuation of critical thought. Blatz dubs this overriding concern the spirit of critical thinking and claims, "Thus we might say that the salience felt in the spirit of critical thinking ensures the legitimacy of belief" (Blatz 2003, 18).

In part two of the argument Blatz perceptively argues that if one accepts the constraints on critical reasoners suggested in part one, then one must conclude that the virtues of legitimate ethical reasoning are essentially an expression the very same virtues embodied in the spirit of critical thinking. Moreover, the best way to understand these virtues of critical thought, when extended to ethical reasoning, is by appeal to a complex notion of impartiality. Hence in the realm of the ethical a commitment to the spirit of critical thinking just is, in part, a commitment to impartiality.

I have no concerns about part two of the argument. I do however have two general concerns I would like to raise about part one. First, why it is the case that those who find themselves in the midst of a deep disagreement are bound by the spirit of critical thinking; that is, why are communities of believers bound by a common commitment to "the sustained flourishing of critical thought?" (Blatz 2003, 18) For if they are not bound by such a commitment, then there is every reason to believe that the call to live by the spirit of critical thinking will fall on deaf ears and the deep disagreement will continue with no resolution in sight. Here we have the epistemic version of Hume's knave. And we can imagine a community of such knaves appealing to the spirit of critical thinking when it suits their interests and rejecting it when it does not. It is not clear to me that they are bound by reason to accept this commitment any more than Hume's knave is bound by reason to accept the dictates of morality.

The second general concern centers on Blatz's strategy for resolving deep disagreement: an appeal to very abstract considerations regarding whether or not competing norms of inquiry "will serve the sustained flourishing of critical thought" (Blatz 2003, 18). Is such an abstract appeal substantive enough to ensure legitimacy and thereby resolve deep disagreement? It is hard to see how the spirit of critical thinking is sufficient for the legitimacy of salient beliefs. This is so because it is easy to imagine two communities of inquiry, both of whom accept the spirit of critical thinking as a constraint on legitimacy, but nonetheless continue to disagree. If this is the case, then the appeal to the spirit of critical thinking does not solve the problem of deep disagreement and Blatz is back where he started.

Consider, for example, two communities of inquiry. Let us use Daniel Dennett as the spokesperson for one of the communities and Robert Kane as the spokesperson for the other. Dennett (a sophisticated compatibilist) and Kane (an equally sophisticated libertarian) deeply disagree about the appropriate way to account for free will. How does an appeal to the spirit of critical thinking help us adjudicate the disagreement in this case? Both philosophers will argue that the spirit of critical thinking guides their norms of inquiry and that therefore their beliefs regarding free will are legitimate. And if for example, Dennett claims that Kane's norms do not embody the spirit of critical thinking, Kane will respond by claiming that Dennett is begging the question. Dennett will respond in the same way to any similar claim made by Kane. Perhaps the best we can hope for in a case such as this is the mutual recognition that people of goodwill can and do disagree on this issue, and many others. However, Blatz does not seem to be satisfied with this position. He wants more than a mere recognition of and tolerance for disagreement. He wants nothing less than resolution of disagreement. I, however, am not clear how the spirit of critical thinking suffices to adjudicate what appear to be intractable disagreements like the

disagreement over free will. Progress on this kind of intractable disagreement seems to require not that we appeal to abstract norms regarding the sustained flourishing of critical thought, rather it requires as a necessary first step that we dig into the guts of specific arguments in order to see where disagreement arises.

Let me wrap up my brief comments by suggesting that I suspect my concerns are themselves the result of a deep disagreement with Professor Blatz concerning the nature of deep disagreement itself. Blatz holds that such disagreements are essentially epistemic in nature. As such, an appeal to an epistemic meta-principle like the spirit of critical thinking may be just what is needed to resolve such disagreements. However, I suspect that the most intractable disagreements, like the disagreement over free will, are not solely epistemic in nature. Rather these disagreements are, at least in part, semantic disagreements based on differing normative and metaphysical pictures of the universe and our place in it. It is not clear that philosophers have anything to say about how to adjudicate between radically different normative and metaphysical pictures of the world. And since these pictures inform what interlocutors mean by claims and what counts as relevant it is not clear that an appeal to the spirit of critical thinking will provide a successful way to resolve such disagreements.