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Reply to Commentary on “Thinking Critically About Beliefs it’s Hard to Think Critically About”

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1. Introduction

We appreciate Ben Hamby’s detailed pedagogical suggestions about ways to get students to begin thinking critically about their own beliefs: his group inquiry exercise, in particular, is one that we will try in our own teaching. In this response we will pick up on a couple of points, one concerning the aims of critical thinking and of critical thinking pedagogy and one concerning whether there is anything useful to say about what we call “intransigent” beliefs beyond what there is to say about what Hamby calls “settled” beliefs.

2. The aims of critical thinking and of critical thinking pedagogy

When we say that “the very point of critical thinking is the forming of true beliefs and the avoidance of false ones,” we mean that this is the overarching aim of the enterprise. Why is it good to conscientiously evaluate reasons and try to form only beliefs that are well-supported by the evidence? Because that is a good overall strategy for forming true beliefs and avoiding false ones, and having true beliefs rather than false ones puts you in a good position to successfully navigate the world.

The aim of critical thinking *pedagogy*, we think (for more on this, see *Bowell and Kingsbury 2015*), is to begin the process of getting students into the habit of giving and asking for reasons and the habit of evaluating those reasons. We do not, of course, assess our students’ arguments on the basis of whether or not their conclusions are true, but on the basis of how cogent their reasoning is. We doubt that there is any disagreement between us and Hamby on any of this.

3. “Settled” beliefs and “intransigent” beliefs

Hamby suggests that every settled belief is hard to think critically about, both because it is *settled* and because critical thinking just is hard work. Thus he thinks there is nothing in particular to be said about “intransigent” beliefs – all settled beliefs are intransigent.

By “intransigent beliefs” we simply mean “beliefs that are particularly resistant to critical thinking” – we do not think such beliefs are all of a kind in any other respect.

What counts as a *settled* belief? If it is a belief that the believer has thought through the reasons for and consciously adopted, then some of our examples of intransigent beliefs are not settled beliefs; one of the reasons a belief may be intransigent is that the believer may not know they have it, and another is that although they know they have it they don’t know why they do. Consequently if a settled belief is one that has been thought through, there is still value in considering strategies for dealing with (at least some kinds of) intransigent beliefs.

Another construal of “settled” is that *any* genuine belief is a settled belief (where a test of whether someone genuinely has a particular belief is something like whether they will assert it if Socratically questioned). Something like this is perhaps what Hamby has in mind. But then it isn’t clear why we should think that all settled beliefs are hard to think critically about. Consider a teenager (call him Tim) who has always thought that fairness requires that everyone in a society should be treated exactly the same. Tim takes this for granted: he has never considered that it might be otherwise. When he hears of a case in which members of a minority defend what would otherwise be unlawful conduct by appealing to the need to protect the recent and struggling renaissance of their culture, he thinks they should be treated like any other person who did the things they did. Then Tim’s brother comes home from university for the holidays and suggests that if you treat everyone exactly the same, the outcomes are not the same for everyone, and *that’s* what we should be more interested in if we are concerned with fairness. Tim has never considered this before, but he immediately sees the force of it when it is put to him. Just like that, he changes his view.

Is Tim thinking critically? Unless difficulty is part of the very *definition* of what it is to think critically, it seems that he is. He is responding to good reasons by seeing that they are good reasons and modifying his view accordingly. It is a mistake, we think, to suppose that every instance of critical thinking, or even every instance of critical thinking about one’s own beliefs, must be effortful. Indeed part of what we hope can be achieved by getting students into good epistemic habits is that they will get to a point at which in some contexts critical thinking will be automatic – that it will become second nature to them to think critically.

We agree with Hamby that we should be trying to get our students to think critically about all of their beliefs. But we don’t think that this is equally difficult in all cases, and if that’s right, there may be some value in tailoring our interventions to particular sources of intransigence – the clearest case being that a belief someone doesn’t know they have, and perhaps has reasons to be reluctant to acknowledge that they have, will need different and careful handling.

References

Bowell, T. and Kingsbury, J. (2015) Virtue and enquiry: Bridging the transfer gap. In: M. Davies and R. Barnett (Eds.), *Critical Thinking in Higher Education*, Palgrave MacMillan.