

Critical Thinking and Transcendence: Towards Kantian Ideals of Reason

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In *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt portrays thinking as a means of transcendence.

According to Arendt, thinking “always transcends the sheer givenness of whatever may have aroused its attention,” and thus, though we are “totally conditioned existentially,” we can “mentally transcend all these conditions” (Arendt 1981, 74, 70). Thinking allows us to go beyond who, what and where we are, because it is a means of withdrawing from the world: “thinking always deals with absences and removes itself from what is present and close at hand,” and thus “reality and existence . . . can be temporarily suspended” (199).¹ When we “stop-and-think,” as Arendt puts it (78), we fix in place the object of our thought, hold it steady long enough to examine it from a distance, as it were. Instead of unthinkingly adhering to and utilizing habitual beliefs, values and practices, we are able to pull away from them in thought and thereby free ourselves from them.

Critical thinking, as the term is used in recent literature in philosophy and education, is often described similarly, as a means by which individuals are able to stop and reflect on their beliefs, values and actions, and transcend and evaluate them for the sake of greater freedom and autonomy. John Dewey argues that “the essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment,” it involves a pause that allows us to stand back to reflect, to “metaphorically climb a tree . . . [to get] a more commanding view of the situation” (Dewey 1997, 74, 11). By pausing for reflection we can escape from “purely impulsive or purely routine action,” from “instincts and appetites,” and from the “leading strings of others” to experience “freedom of mind” (14, 64). Ronald Barnett similarly focuses on the liberatory transcendence involved in critical thinking. For Barnett, “critical thought is potentially emancipatory for individuals” in that through it they can “free themselves from dependency on their former taken-for-granted worlds” (Barnett 1997, 4).² Harvey Siegel argues that a critical thinker is “a *liberated* person . . . free from the

unwarranted and undesirable control of unjustified beliefs, unsupportable attitudes, and paucity of abilities . . .” (Siegel 1988, 58).

Though many theorists of critical thinking (CT) may agree on its crucial connection to ideals of transcendence and the freedom that accompanies it, the means to achieve these ideals is a source of contention. How can thinking best be undertaken to transcend habitual beliefs, values and practices? Within the literature on CT, it is possible to locate a few theorists who fall roughly on two sides of this question, with each side arguing that the other does not promote enough transcendence. One side charges the other with attempting too much transcendence by encouraging individuals to think neutrally and impartially when this is impossible, with the result that already-accepted beliefs and values are strengthened rather than questioned. The other side responds by charging that such criticisms reduce the transcendent capacity of CT by assuming we are stuck in epistemological and evaluational contexts from which we can never escape.

I argue that it may be helpful to navigate between these views by conceiving of critical thinking as a perpetual, dynamic process of crossing boundaries, an activity that occurs in-between utter immanence in habitual beliefs, values and patterns of thought, and complete transcendence of them. Critical thinking involves moving through and across the boundaries of our current modes and objects of thinking towards transcendence of these, requiring recognition both of the ways in which thought is tied to particular contexts, and of the ways in which we can and do move beyond these. I appeal to Immanuel Kant’s notion of “ideas of reason” (as described in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) as a model for considering CT as an activity of progression towards transcendence – for Kant, such ideas serve as goals for thought towards which we ought to strive, but which can never ultimately be reached. Similarly, I argue that CT may best be conceived of as a perpetual striving towards transcendence that may only ever progress closer and closer to an impossible goal. Considering CT as a movement in-between immanence and transcendence may not only help better frame and perhaps resolve some

theoretical debates in the conception of critical thinking, it may also help students and teachers better grasp what it is they're trying to do when they attempt to undertake it as a practice.

I

Some current theorists of CT charge others with attempting too much transcendence and not achieving enough in the process, by requiring that individuals think from an impossibly impartial, universal viewpoint. Harvey Siegel is often cited as a target of this kind of charge, since in *Educating Reason* he argues that “critical thinking is impartial, consistent, and non-arbitrary, and the critical thinker both thinks and acts in accordance with, and values, consistency, fairness, and impartiality of judgment and action” (Siegel 1988, 34). For Siegel, critical thinkers are impartial in that they are committed to principles “taken to be universal and objective,” to standards that are consistently and impartially applied to all similar cases (34).³ Connie Missimer, Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, and Henry Giroux, among others, criticize the requirement that critical thinkers attempt to pull themselves away from their own situatedness to think impartially. Such theorists argue that requiring impartiality in thinking may lead us to ignore the ways in which our thinking is embedded in contexts, with the result that we may portray the results of partial thought as if they were universal. As a consequence, we are likely to further embed thinking within contexts we should instead be transcending, by acting as if we have already achieved transcendence when we have not. The best way to transcend our present contexts of thought, such critics argue, is to pay more attention to the ways in which we are embedded in them, so as to better understand how to move beyond them.

For the sake of convenience of discussion in this essay, I label the views of critics such as Missimer, Thayer-Bacon, and Giroux as “contextualist” (since they focus on the ways in which thought is embedded in contexts). On the other side, I call the views of those theorists who emphasize the need to think as impartially as possible by appeal to universal principles, “universalist.”⁴ I consider the views of only a few representative proponents of each approach, to illustrate the main sources of contention between them.

Contextualist theorists of CT argue that encouraging individuals to use their reason purely impartially and by appeal to universal principles is asking the impossible. Connie Missimer characterizes the “dominant view of critical thinking” as “a reasoned judgment by an individual at any given moment,” where that judgment must be “not only sound by logical principles but free of bias and prejudice, reflecting an impartial mind” (Missimer 1994, 119).⁵ Missimer argues that this conception of critical thinking is “chimeric,” because it assumes that individuals can use their reason to think impartially, on their own (123). For Missimer, it is impossible for an individual to be impartial without the input of others, and to correctly assess individual arguments in isolation from alternative ones.⁶ Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon similarly criticizes the belief that individuals can, using reason, reach a neutral perspective from which to impartially and objectively assess arguments on their own. Thayer-Bacon appeals to pragmatist philosophy to argue that reason is not, as is sometimes thought, “above or beyond the tainting of cultural influences,” operating with “a life of its own, unconnected to human input”; rather, it is always contextually embedded and fallible (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 4, 42-47).⁷ Henry Giroux agrees, arguing that “[i]ntellectual inquiry and research free from values and norms are impossible to achieve” (Giroux 1988, 14). Richard W. Paul criticizes any view of CT that emphasizes technical, logical skills as if they could be used by individuals to impartially evaluate arguments apart from the “frames of reference” and “worldviews” that always influence our reasoning processes (Paul 1994, 186). For Paul, “[w]e do not deal with the world-in-itself but the world-as-we-define-it in relation to our interests, perspective, and point of view” (Paul 1993c, 337).⁸ For each of these theorists, the ideal of the individual thinking purely impartially is, as Missimer puts it, a “false ideal”: “No man is an impartial island” (Missimer 1994, 123).

For contextualists, the problem with universalist views of CT is not simply that they require individuals to attempt an impossible impartiality in thinking; the more pressing problem is that doing so can encourage the belief that one is being impartial when one is not, thereby ignoring the ways in which one’s thinking is still embedded in particular contexts. If we believe we have emerged from partial

perspectives when we have not, we promote a limited perspective as if it were impartial and universal; and doing so means we are not likely to try to change, or even recognize, the ways in which we are still embedded in contextualized thinking. Believing we have reached an impossibly neutral viewpoint, according to contextualists,

create[s] a false illusion of fair-mindedness and openness that is dishonest at best and dangerous and destructive at worst; (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 35)⁹

universalizes dominant norms, values, and perspectives that represent interpretive and normative perspectives on social reality; [and] socialize[s] students into accepting and reproducing the existing society; (Giroux 1988, 61, 62)

[leads thinkers to be] *more* sophistic rather than less so, more skilled in rationalizing and intellectualizing their biases. (Paul 1994, 184)¹⁰

Transcendence of our habitual beliefs and ways of thinking can only be achieved, according to contextualists, by recognizing and taking seriously the degree to which our thinking is contextually embedded – we cannot strive to think beyond our systems of thought unless we recognize what those are and how they influence our thinking and reasoning processes.¹¹

They suggest multiplying the perspectives within which one thinks, instead of attempting to transcend them entirely. According to Paul, students should learn “to think within many points of view, many frames of reference, and many worldviews,” since this allows them to transcend their own limited perspectives (Paul 1994, 194). According to Thayer-Bacon, “none of us is ever completely objective”; yet by communicating our partial and limited views to each other, “we help each other compensate, adjust, and correct for our own subjectivity ,”and therefore “[t]he more we widen the community of others we share our perspectives with, the more objective we can become” (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 139).¹² Rather than suggesting we try to aim for objectivity and neutrality in thinking, many contextualist theorists argue that we should accept this as impossible, and instead try to compensate for our individual limitations by combining our partial views with the (inevitably) partial views of others, and enlarge our thinking thereby.

Seemingly paradoxically, then, contextualists argue that trying for too much transcendence of the contexts of our thinking means failing to achieve enough – assuming that by using reason we are being impartial means ignoring the ways in which our partiality continues to affect our thinking. We must instead pay more attention to the ways in which our thinking is still contextually embedded, and work with others who are similarly embedded, to consider alternative viewpoints and thereby better attempt transcendence than we could if we thought we were thinking purely impartially.

II

For their part, universalist theorists of critical thinking often argue in response that placing too much emphasis on the immanence of our thinking within particular contexts could itself make transcendence difficult or impossible. Theorists such as Harvey Siegel and Ronald Barnett also seek to promote transcendence as an ultimate goal of critical thinking, but they argue that the contextualist focus on the ways in which thought is embedded may go so far as to make movement beyond our contexts seem impossible to achieve. Thus, while the contextualists criticize universalist theorists for acting as if we have achieved transcendence when we have not, the latter criticize contextualists for acting as if we are deeply embedded when we are not.

Harvey Siegel argues that even if our judgments always occur from within a partial perspective, this does not mean that claiming universality for them must be unjustified. Siegel does agree with the contextualist claim that our thinking is always embedded in a particular context:

We always judge from the perspective of our own conceptual scheme; there is no way to escape from all schemes and judge from a God's-eye point of view. Since our schemes reflect our cultural/historical circumstances, then these circumstances constitute limits on our judgment; we can't escape them entirely. (Siegel 1997,175)

But this does not mean, he argues, that judgments made from particular, local viewpoints cannot have any universal applicability or legitimacy – it is not the case that since “universality, or a perspective unencumbered by our particular situation, is impossible,” then “our judgments cannot, in principle, have any force beyond the bounds of our own location or scheme” (175). Siegel lists mathematical and

scientific judgments as examples that, though always made from within particular contexts and systems of thought, are readily considered to have universal applicability and legitimacy (176). He argues in addition that “[m]oral and social/political judgments also aspire to, and sometimes achieve, extra-scheme legitimacy”: “For example, our judgment that oppression and marginalization are wrong, though made from the perspective of our own scheme, is thought (by us) to have legitimacy beyond the sharers of that scheme” (176).¹³ According to Siegel, we very often make judgments that, “while immanent, strive also for transcendence,” and there is no good reason to think “that it is impossible in principle that they might” attain it (177).

Siegel argues that contextualists do in fact appeal to principles and criteria for thought that are worldview-neutral, they just don’t readily acknowledge this. Contextualist claims rely upon principles concerning reason and rational justification that purport to have force for all rational thinkers (at the very least, they agree upon basic rules of reason and logic that support what counts as justification for a claim). They also often rely upon moral principles that are treated as if they have universal force: by emphasizing how exclusion, marginalization and oppression can result from expressing the partial as the universal, contextualists appeal to the principle cited above that oppression and marginalization are wrong for all persons, not just for those who share our conceptual scheme (Siegel 1997, 144-145).

Contextualists might be likely to respond that while we do often make judgments with purportedly universal force, we are not always correct in doing so – we may think we have reached a neutral, transcendent position from which to make such judgments when we have not. Siegel agrees that this is an important danger, and he argues therefore for a type of fallible absolutism, one which “provides for objectivity in the evaluation of knowledge-claims and the possibility of criticism and improvement of criteria which guide such evaluation” (Siegel 1987, 162). In other words, it is possible to appeal to putatively objective and universal criteria for assessing knowledge and truth, while acknowledging their fallibility and potential need for correction.¹⁴

Without shared principles, values, beliefs, and rational criteria for judgments, persons thinking within different perspectives and systems of thought would be unable to communicate, learn from each other, or contribute to any social construction of a larger body of knowledge as contextualists suggest we should do. Ronald Barnett argues that it is unproductive and ultimately conservative to claim that different individuals and/or groups are always stuck within separate frames of reference, “each with its own conception of what is to count as rational, as worthwhile and as intelligible” (Barnett 1997, 25). If this were so, then we would be unable to communicate across contexts, and we would be left with “just a number of tongues talking different and mutually incomprehensible languages” (25, 26).

Contextualists often argue for the value of considering multiple viewpoints and approaches to supplement our own partial ones;¹⁵ but in order to fruitfully engage alternatives we must be able to appeal to beliefs, values, and principles that are shared across contexts. Siegel insists that without acknowledging that we share beliefs and criteria for judgment, there seems to be no reason to value consideration of other perspectives for the sake of critically evaluating our own (Siegel 1988, 14-15; 1987, 43).

Thus, universalists argue that contextualists can go too far in their focus on the partiality and embeddedness of our thinking, making transcendence seem impossible. Though they may admit that thinking takes place from a partial perspective rather than a neutral one, they argue that we can and do move beyond this limited view by appeal to principles that have a wider scope.¹⁶ Indeed, even contextualists themselves engage in transcendence of this type by their appeal to logical and ethical principles that are treated as if they could be universally valid. According to Siegel, “it is a mistake to think that . . . championing ‘immanence’ precludes our striving for ‘transcendence’” (Siegel 1997, 177-178).

III

There is an interesting pattern to the disagreements between universalists and contextualists, as described here. Contextualists argue that universalists go too far in promoting transcendence by

encouraging individuals to think that they have achieved it when they have not, and universalists argue that contextualists go too far in promoting immanence by implying that individuals are stuck in their current contexts of thought when they are not. Focusing on either extreme, each argues, will not help us transcend our habitual beliefs, values, and practices.

But significantly, the views of the theorists discussed here do not actually go to these extremes. As already noted, Harvey Siegel does not insist that individuals can reach neutral and objective viewpoints, but admits that we always think from within a limited context and that we must therefore recognize our fallibility in claiming universality for our beliefs, values and principles. On the other side, it seems clear that the contextualists discussed above *do* appeal to cross-contextual values and principles rather than arguing that we are inescapably embedded in particular contexts of thought, as Siegel and others point out.¹⁷ Theorists on each side may not clearly point out (or perhaps even recognize) the degree to which their views rely on appeal to principles and methods espoused by the other; but a careful look seems to reveal more agreement between them than some of their rhetoric indicates. Both rely on the necessity of possessing some degree of shared foundations for thought, the desire that such shared beliefs, values and principles be as universally valid as possible, and the importance of keeping in mind that they may not be – that what appears universally true may instead be only partially so.

The main differences between contextualists and universalists in regard to critical thinking seem to be twofold. First, they differ as to emphasis in method: should we promote transcendence by focusing on the ways in which we are embedded in particular contexts of thought so as to understand what we need to move beyond, or on the ways in which we are able to and already do move beyond these? It seems clear that to focus exclusively on either method is problematic – we should neither emphasize how we can and do move beyond partiality, without recognizing the degree to which we perhaps have not, nor emphasize only the degree to which we remain stuck in particular contexts of thinking without also recognizing where and how we do think beyond these.

The second main difference between universalists and contextualists has to do with our ability to reach a goal of impartiality in thinking: contextualists argue that we should not say we have definitely reached this goal, that we are appealing to actually universal principles and processes in our thinking, while universalists argue that we should not say it is impossible to ever do so. According to the contextualists, if we imply that we have reached impartiality in our thinking, we will no longer seek to determine the degree to which we may still be partial; and thus we may further entrench our thinking within limited contexts by thinking we have escaped them. According to the universalists, though, to argue that appeal to cross-contextual, perhaps even universal principles is impossible, that our thinking is hopelessly stuck in separate “schemes” or “frames of reference” is not only false, but discourages attempts to transcend such schemes and move towards greater impartiality. Again, both views seem to be correct to some degree – thinking we have definitely become fully impartial means no longer seeking to ensure that we have, yet thinking we cannot ever be so means to stop trying.

I argue that a better approach to critical thinking can be found somewhere in-between the arguments and emphases of the universalists and contextualists, by focusing on how each method is necessary to, and mutually supportive of, the process of striving for the shared goal of transcending partiality in thought. Rather than arguing as if we have reached impartiality and neutrality in thinking, or as if we can never do so, perhaps it is more fitting for the process of critical thinking to conceive of it as movement of perpetual striving towards this goal while recognizing that we can never know for certain if we have reached it.

In the next section, I propose a way to interpret critical thinking as a never-ending movement of transcendence, a dynamic process of transcending by which we strive towards a goal we can never fully reach, but only ever approximate more and more closely. I appeal to Immanuel Kant’s notion of “ideas of reason” in his *Critique of Pure Reason* to explain and illustrate such an endless movement towards an impossible goal, and the necessity to strive nonetheless. This provides also a way to recast the debate

between the universalists and contextualists as espousing different, yet equally crucial methods of engaging in a perpetual process of transcendence in thinking.

IV

The dispute between the universalist and contextualist theorists of critical thinking is remarkably similar to one described by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR), between two kinds of “students of nature”:

Those who are more especially speculative are, we may almost say, hostile to heterogeneity, and are always on the watch for the unity of the genus; those, on the other hand, who are more especially empirical, are constantly endeavoring to differentiate nature in such manifold fashion as almost to extinguish the hope of ever being able to determine its appearances in accordance with universal principles. (Kant 1965, 540; B 683)¹⁸

On the one side are those who are focused on homogeneity, and are always on the lookout for similarities amongst individuals that would signal their unity under a single concept; while on the other are those focused on heterogeneity, who are continually seeking to point out differences amongst individuals and are resistant to attempts to unify them. Kant argues that though these two groups often dispute with each other, between them “there is no real conflict, but merely those differences in the interest of reason that give rise to differing modes of thought” (547; B 694). Both are necessary and mutually-supportive methods within a single process of human reason. I will argue that similarly, the dispute between the universalists and contextualists can be best understood as a tension between two seemingly conflicting modes of thought that are both necessary to help move individual thinkers towards the common goal of impartiality in thinking.

For Kant, the single process and interest of reason for which the methods of seeking homogeneity and heterogeneity are both needed is to unify all of knowledge into a complete system, “to exhibit the connection of its parts in conformity with a single principle” (Kant 1965, 534, B 673). Our reason directs us to continually search for underlying unities and commonalities amongst heterogeneous data, concepts and categories in our body of knowledge, so as to continually attempt to bring it “the greatest possible unity” (307; B 365). Kant insists, however, that such a complete unity and

systematization of knowledge is an impossible goal for us – it is an “idea of reason” only: “a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense-experience” (318; B 384). Since, for Kant, what we can know is entirely limited by the boundary of possible experience, if ideas of reason can never be objects of possible experience, we can never have knowledge of them.¹⁹ Still, they serve a crucial regulating function for thought and action, directing and orienting them around the possibility of something whose existence we can never meet with nor know for certain (319-320, 450; B 384-386, B 537).²⁰ For example, seeking a fundamental unity within the heterogeneity of knowledge is necessary for reason to organize and categorize particulars under concepts – indeed, the process of understanding species as “different determinations of a few genera, and these, in turn, of still higher genera, and so on,” is for Kant “a logical principle . . . without which there could be no employment of reason” (538; B 679).²¹

According to Kant, reason has a “natural tendency” to move us to posit “ideas” as impossible goals to strive for, and to guide our thinking processes to approach them “asymptotically, *i.e.* ever more closely without ever reaching them” (Kant 1965, 532, 545; B 670, B 691). He sometimes speaks of ideas of reason as “archetypes,” standards “with which we [can] compare and judge ourselves, and so reform ourselves, although we can never attain to the perfection thereby prescribed” (486; B 597). Such ideal standards allow us to better judge the degrees to which we do and do *not* live up to the goals we seek: they provide “a concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, . . . thereby enabling it to estimate and to measure the degree and the defects of the incomplete” (486; B 598). Ideas of reason provide goals that allow us to move towards some end, to judge how far we have come, and also how far we have yet to go.

Thus, in directing us to attempt to unify knowledge into a complete system, reason moves thought “towards a certain unity of which it has itself no concept,” yet towards which we must strive nonetheless (Kant 1965, 318; B 383). In order to approach the ultimately impossible goal of systematizing all knowledge, an emphasis on both homogeneity and heterogeneity is needed, since the

process of unification involves bringing individuals together under concepts according to their similarities, but also recognizing the differences amongst individuals thus unified in order to determine as fully as possible the extension of the unifying concepts.²² We must therefore “pay due regard to homogeneity,” while also “impos[ing] a check upon this tendency towards unity” by being sure to “distinguish subspecies within it” (543; B 688).²³ Kant concludes that the dispute between those who focus on homogeneity and those on heterogeneity is due to different emphases and methods within reason’s overall attempt to systematize our knowledge: “reason has only one single interest, and the conflict of its maxims is only a difference in, and a mutual limitation of, the methods whereby this interest endeavours to obtain satisfaction” (547; B 694). Both methods are necessary, and each helps to check any tendencies to emphasize the other to an extreme.

I propose that the dispute between universalist and contextualist theorists of critical thinking can be approached similarly. Universalist concerns can be compared to the need to pay attention to generality and homogeneity: Universalists argue for the importance of appealing to general, purportedly universal principles and procedures in thought, in order to transcend the particularities of individual perspectives. Contextualist concerns can be compared to the need for specificity and heterogeneity: contextualists argue for the importance of checking this ascension towards universality in thought by focusing on differences between individuals supposedly covered by universal principles, and noting thereby how the extension of such principles may be only partial. Both emphases are necessary in critical thinking. We do need to at least posit some principles and methods as potentially universally valid, if only to set out what will be discussed and tested as hypothetically universal. Further, it seems we must make some kind of appeal to perspectives and principles outside our own contexts, at the very least in order to even recognize that we *do* think within limited contexts. It seems necessary to move beyond our own boundaries to some degree to even recognize them as boundaries, and to understand where they lie by comparing them with other perspectives according to shared principles and criteria for judgment. Yet the contextualists are right to point out that we must be careful not to assume that a

purportedly universal principle or method is an *actually* universal one, when this has not been established. Each general or universal principle requires application to a variety of heterogeneous individuals, and we must pay attention to this variety to determine where the general principles do/do not apply; and determination of differences between individuals, in turn, depends on commonalities upon which heterogeneity can be predicated.

Just as Kant says reason has a single interest unifying the dispute between the two kinds of “students of nature,” namely an attempt to unify all knowledge into a single system, the universalists and contextualists also seem focused on a single goal: transcending the partiality of one’s own beliefs, thought processes, and practices as much as possible. Both might agree that ideally, individuals would be able to think purely impartially, from a universal standpoint valid for any rational being. But is this possible to achieve, or an ideal in thought only? The contextualists and universalists discussed all seem to agree that it is the latter. I have already noted above where the contextualist theorists Missimer, Thayer-Bacon and Giroux argue that purely impartial thought by individuals is impossible. But universalists may also agree that the ultimate goal of pure impartiality in thinking may be impossible to achieve. Recall that Siegel, too, acknowledges that we can never escape all “conceptual schemes” through which we think, that we can never “judge from a God’s-eye point of view” (Siegel 1997, 175). To assume one is thinking purely impartially and neutrally, through only certain, universal and absolute principles and methods, *would* seem to be to assume that one is thinking as a supremely perfect, rational being might rather than as a human being does. As Paul puts it, “our knowledge is always limited by the perspectives that are inherent in our various ways of forming concepts and making inferences. We are limited, not infinite, creatures; humans, not gods” (Paul 1993d, 107).²⁴

It seems legitimate to suggest, then, that universalists and contextualists may be disputing about complementary methods necessary to move us towards a goal of pure impartiality in thinking that is like a Kantian “idea of reason” – ultimately impossible to reach, but necessary to strive towards nonetheless.²⁵ The goal of transcending contexts and reaching completely impartial neutrality in our

thought may be best conceived as impossible -- at least in the sense of an individual being able to know if s/he has achieved it or not. Can one ever know that one is thinking in a way that is purely impartial and universal, cleansed of any particularity? The contextualist concern is that if we do find ourselves confident we have reached such a point when we have not, this discourages further efforts at transcendence and wrongly parades the particular as the universal. This point mirrors Kant's claim that a major source of error in knowledge is to take "merely *subjective* grounds in judging for *objective* grounds, and consequently to mistake the *mere semblance of truth for truth itself*" (Kant 1988, 59; italics in original).²⁶ One way to avoid such error is to constantly recognize that one may *not* be thinking and judging in a universal, impartial fashion, and to remain open to the possibility that further transcendence of one's particular contexts of thought is necessary. Considering pure transcendence as an ultimately impossible ideal that we can yet approximate if we continue to strive for it, could support such an important humility in thought.

I am proposing that we consider critical thinking as a perpetual process, a movement of *transcending* wherein we strive towards a goal of impartial neutrality in our thinking, while recognizing that we will never know for certain if we have reached it. We should continually strive to know things "as they are" rather than as we see them, and we should recognize when and how we are able to move closer to this goal. We should posit some methods and principles as potentially universally valid, yet ensure that we continue to test and question these. Kant warns that we fall into error if we think we have achieved impossible knowledge of "ideas of reason": when these are "taken for concepts of real things" they become "delusive," and "they give rise, by a dazzling and deceptive illusion, to persuasion and a merely fictitious knowledge, and therewith to contradictions and eternal disputes" (Kant 1965, 532, 569; B 671, B730).²⁷ We can use the goal of complete transcendence as a regulative principle for thought, through which we seek to be as impartial as possible, so long as we also recognize that this road is never-ending.

It seems clear that in order to strive towards the common (yet impossible) goal of transcendence of our current beliefs, values, and practices, we must consider the concerns of both the universalists and contextualists. As the universalists insist, we should be able to recognize commonalities that show how we can and are actually moving closer to this goal – how our thinking can be and is unified to some extent. But as the contextualists insist, it seems clear that in order to move towards this goal, we must also continually check to see if the purportedly universal principles to which we are appealing hold up to an investigation into the heterogeneous varieties of thought to which they are supposed to apply. Striving for universality and impartiality in thinking requires that we focus on both the ways in which our thinking remains immanent and contextualized, and on the ways in which we can and do engage in transcendence of these boundaries. We must have an idea of where we are heading, how far we've come, and how far we have yet to go.

Does this interpretation *resolve* the dispute between universalists and contextualists? Yes and no – it puts them in a productive tension, noting how the concerns and methods of each, though moving in seemingly opposite directions, are mutually supportive and necessary for striving towards a common goal. There is something quite useful in their tension, as each can thereby provide an important check on any movements to either extreme. But this usefulness is negated if each side fails to recognize its contributions to a cooperative enterprise, and insists that its way is the only legitimate way to operate. Such conflicts, rather than being productive, are a “positive hindrance, and cause long delays in the discovery of truth” (Kant 1965, 548; B 696). Emphasizing different directions and methods in striving for transcendence in critical thinking is important; and even some degree of conflict and tension between these may be helpful to keep each side in balance and in check. But while keeping the other side from going to the extreme, each should recognize the productive help provided by that other side in keeping it from its own extremes as well. Neither side should give up their opposing emphases; but it would be more productive for each to recognize their contributing role in a cooperative movement towards transcendence.

To take critical thinking seriously as a perpetual process of transcendence could have significant effects on what we think we are doing when we engage in, recommend, and/or teach critical thinking. Paul's concerns that students may too often be learning how to engage in "weak sense" critical thinking would be lessened if students are encouraged to recognize that appealing to principles of logic and argumentation does not automatically get one beyond thinking within partial contexts. Students might be more likely to treat their own processes of offering reasons for their claims as inviting others to a dialogue rather than as a proof that they have offered the last word on a subject. They might then be less likely to be frustrated with fields of thought where no such "last words" have been established, and more likely to question those words where they are claimed to be had. In addition, this view makes more clear the need for both self-confidence and humility in critical thinking – the confidence to put one's ideas forward and communicate them and their supporting reasons with others, and the humility to recognize and be willing to admit to one's own fallibility. Harvey Siegel argues that the critical thinker must be "emotionally secure, self-confident," with a "positive self-image"; but s/he must also possess "the feeling of humility which is necessary to the whole-hearted acceptance of the possibility that one may be in error" (Siegel 1988, 41, 40).²⁸ One must have the confidence to strive towards the goal of transcendence and express to others how far one thinks one may have reached, and yet also possess the humility to know that one may never fully leave one's limits behind.

Finally, this view of critical thinking does justice to our capacity to continually think beyond whatever we might have previously thought. As noted above, thinking allows us to pull away from, to transcend what might previously have guided our thought and action without our recognition and evaluation. But it seems to be of the nature of human thinking that we can continually do this, over and over – fix a part of our thought before us in thought long enough to transcend it, to make it conscious and evaluate it; and we can then do the same with the results of this process, and again, and again, perpetually. It makes sense, then, to conceive of critical thinking, as Arendt conceives of thinking in general, as a never-ending activity for which only "the sensation of being alive" could be an adequate

metaphor (Arendt 1981, 123). For Arendt, “[t]o think and to be fully alive are the same, and this implies that thinking must always begin afresh; it is an activity that accompanies living” (177). We recognize that we are limited beings, and since to do so means to at least glimpse the possibility of there being a realm beyond these limits, we strive to transcend who, where, and what we are. But our inability to ever reach a completely transcendent, “god’s eye view” means we must think, and think again, in a movement that never allows itself to rest certain that it has found the last word. To be human and alive is to experience constant change and movement; and to be human, alive, and thinking is to do the same.

Notes

¹ Arendt notes that though mental activities allow us to travel quickly across and around spatial and temporal boundaries and thus transcend the conditions in which we find ourselves, they cannot, of course, “directly change reality” (Arendt 1981, 71). However, they do not thereby simply create fantasies in our minds, because the mental transcendence thus achieved can indirectly change reality by structuring our actions: “the principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind” (71).

² In this text Barnett carefully distinguishes between critical thinking, critical thought, and critique – a distinction I am not following directly here by connecting his view of critical thought to a discussion of critical thinking in general. For Barnett, whereas critical thinking describes cognitive actions performed by individuals, critical thought describes ways in which thought operates collectively, through discussions and debates within fields and disciplines (Barnett 1997, 16-17). Critical thought operates through groups of people discussing issues together according to accepted criteria within a discipline. Critique, according to Barnett, is a form of criticism of a discipline according to standards from outside the discipline itself – it involves taking a perspective beyond a field of study, a body of knowledge, and analyzing/evaluating it from there (18). For Barnett, the move from critical thinking to critical thought to critique involves taking progressively wider perspectives, from one’s individual activities to those of a group within a field, to a perspective beyond that. With each enlargement of perspective, thought becomes more and more critical, Barnett argues (19); and, he implies, along the way individuals and collectivities (e.g., practitioners of disciplines, societies) can better free themselves from beliefs and practices that were previously accepted as given.

³ Siegel bases many of these points on Israel Scheffler’s characterization of rationality (Siegel 1988, 30, 32-33). According to Scheffler, a rational person “is one who is consistent in thought and in action, abiding by impartial and generalizable principles freely chosen as binding upon himself” (Scheffler 1973, 76). Scheffler explicitly links this conception of rationality to Kant: “Rationality, for Kant, means impartiality and fairness of judgment; the conforming of one’s actions to general rules which one has freely accepted for oneself” (Scheffler 1973, 63). Critical thinking, Siegel argues, is “the *educational cognate*” of rationality – it describes the skills, abilities, and dispositions that education for rationality should attempt to develop in students” (32).

⁴ These terms, which are nowhere used in the literature in quite this mode (so far as I know), name rough categories only. The theorists I discuss here differ widely in the details of their views and arguments, but there are enough similarities between them to place them roughly into two sides on the issue of critical thinking and transcendence – those who emphasize the need to think as impartially as possible, and those who emphasize the need to focus on the ways in which we think within contexts. Other theorists who could be put into these categories include Robert H. Ennis (1962, 1987) as offering a universalist view, and Nicholas C. Burbules (1994), Kerry S. Walters (1994) and Karl Hostetler (1994) as offering contextualist views and criticisms of universalist theorists. As I argue below, the criticisms of each side by the other may not be entirely accurate – each side accuses the other of extremes that are not always reflected in the writings of their targets.

⁵ Missimer labels this an “Individual View” of CT, since within it the “onus of rightness or justification falls on each act of critical thinking and on the individual doing the critical thinking” (121). She refers to Harvey Siegel as one of the most prominent proponents of the Individual View, since he focuses largely on the individual and the character traits s/he should have to be a critical thinker (Missimer 1994, 121). Siegel argues explicitly in *Educating Reason* that his view of critical thinking is centered in a significant way on the individual as a critical thinker, on the type of person one should be in order to be a critical thinker: “The conception of critical thinking being offered here is as much a conception of a certain sort of person as it is a conception of a certain set of activities and skills. When we take it upon ourselves to educate students so as to foster critical thinking, we are committing ourselves to nothing less than the development of a certain sort of person” (Siegel 1988, 41). The reason for this is that for Siegel, borrowing from Kant, rationality and critical thought are directly linked to autonomy: “The critical thinker must be *autonomous* – that is, free to act and judge independently of external constraint, on the basis of her own reasoned appraisal of the matter at hand” (Siegel 1988, 54). Israel Scheffler argues similarly, saying that rationality involves “a primary concern for the free and critical judgment of the free mind in all realms, and a pervasive attempt to strengthen its autonomy and responsibility,” and that “the student [should] confront reality for himself so that his mind may be illuminated by the truth” (Scheffler 1973, 62, 63).

⁶ The assessment of reasons, Missimer argues, must be undertaken in “in relationship to alternative reasons,” since “[a]ny argument will look reasonable or seem the appropriate view if it is the only argument that one is aware of” (Missimer 1994, 121).

⁷ Thayer-Bacon also agrees with the pragmatist view that it is not possible to achieve a radical separation between ourselves as knowers and the objects of our knowledge, that we cannot fully escape from our social, historical and personal context to reach a neutral viewpoint (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 31-34). Since “there is no point of view absolutely public and universal,” no one person can have a “God’s Eye view of truth” (44, 45).

⁸ Though I have put them in a rough category together, Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon actually criticizes Richard W. Paul's view of strong sense critical thinking. She interprets him as saying that we ought to try to get away from our particular perspectives, since our contextuality "ultimately makes us selfish and gets in our way" (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 62). According to Thayer-Bacon, Paul stresses "removing the self from the critical thinking process," because we too often think within the context of our own biases, interests, and goals (62). Paul does argue that critical thinking should aim to get students to recognize their own egocentrism, how their thought processes are often rooted in "their own desires, pains, thoughts, and feelings" (Paul and Elder 1997, 1-2; see also Paul 1993c, 1993b). Because "egocentric thinkers have no real insight into the nature of their own thinking and emotions," Paul argues, it is important that students "discover that there is such a thing as non-egocentric thought" (1-3). For Paul, an important goal of teaching critical thinking is to "foster a process whereby students progressively and over a long period of time rid themselves of their egocentric and sociocentric beliefs and attachments" (Paul 1993c, 346). This does sound as if Paul may be suggesting that critical thinkers take the self and the ego out of their thought processes. Yet non-egocentric thinking need not mean the complete erasure of the self. Paul also at times emphasizes the need to recognize the systems in which we do think (rather than arguing that we could get out of them entirely), to become aware of our own limitations due to our own embeddedness in contexts (Paul 1994, 182-183, 187-188; Paul 1993d, 107-108; 1993b, 206; 1993c, 344). He argues that what makes for critical thinking is not the kind of worldviews we hold, but the *way* in which we hold them – critical thinkers are those who recognize not only that they think within particular systems, but that those systems may be in part (or whole) mistaken, and thus that they may need to take into account alternatives (Paul 1994, 183, 196-197). He at times argues for expanding worldviews, thinking from more than one frame of reference – not attempting to think without any particular frames at all (Paul 1994, 194).

This actually resembles very much Thayer-Bacon's own conclusions, that we should acknowledge the partiality and contextuality of our views, and work with others and their partial views to come up with more reliable and objective knowledge: "The more we are able to communicate and relate to others, the more we become aware of our own selective process, and the more we are able to therefore critique our own and others' influences on our constructing of knowledge" (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 170). For Thayer-Bacon, we can interact and communicate with others to "gain perspectives on our own contextuality" and to "begin to develop an enlarged view" (169, 167). Paul, too, argues that we can achieve "a greater measure of objectivity" by recognizing the systems within which we think, and acknowledging the possibility of thinking in alternative ways (Paul 1994, 197). Thus I find Paul and Thayer-Bacon to be alike enough in their views to make it reasonable to them together under the heading of "contextualists." Both theorists are arguing for a recognition of our own perspectives and a consideration of alternatives in order to begin to shift and enlarge these perspectives.

⁹ Missimer argues similarly when she points out that the Individual View tends to downplay creativity due to its emphasis on "reasonableness and appropriateness" (Missimer 1994, 126). If critical thinking means individually attempting impartiality so as to assess reasons and arguments appropriately, it is going to tend to lean towards the already-accepted, "since what is new is often thought odd or unreasonable" (126). If one could achieve impartiality on one's own, perhaps one's reason-assessment would be appropriate; but since for Missimer partiality can only be overcome over time, through the contributions of many individuals, thinking one has achieved impartiality in solitude is likely to lead to rejecting innovations in the name of putatively universal criteria that are instead biased.

¹⁰ Paul argues that thinkers who learn to use logical skills to evaluate arguments without paying enough attention to the "background logic," the worldviews that contextualize their thought processes, may perform argument assessment within unquestioned worldviews and systems of thought as if these were neutral and universal. He describes the notion of "background logic" working within our reasoning processes as follows: "Surrounding any line of thought is a large substructure of *background thought, logical connections* not lying on the surface of reasoning, but prior to it, underling it, or implied by it. In the background of all thinking are foundational concepts, assumptions, values, purposes, experiences, implications, and consequences – all embedded in lines of thought radiating outward in every direction" (Paul 1993a, 283).

Paul argues that critical thinking crucially involves becoming aware of the background logic of one's own thought as well as that working within larger public discussions and debates (Paul 1993a, 298-299). For Paul, "strong" critical thinking requires consideration of one's contextual embeddedness: "Critical thinking . . . is defined in the strong sense as inescapably connected with discovering both that one thinks within 'systems,' and that one continually needs to strive to transcend any given 'system' in which one is presently thinking" (Paul 1994, 182). But such transcendence requires recognizing and focusing on the contexts within which our thinking takes place, not attempting to ignore them.

¹¹ For example, Paul argues that "[s]ince vested interest and other forms of bias typically influence perceptions, assumptions, reasoning in general, and specific conclusions, we must become aware of the nature of our own and others' engagements" in the world, our "prior belief-commitments and particular ways of seeing things" (Paul 1994, 188).

¹² Thayer-Bacon argues that critical thinking is better conceived of as "constructive thinking," insofar as it is a process by which individuals work with others on a continual project of constructing knowledge rather than being able to discover truths on their own (Thayer-Bacon 2000, 2-5, 47). Since it is impossible for any individual to achieve complete neutrality in their thinking on their own, she argues, "what we need to do is work with others, as a community of rational inquirers, to help

further our knowledge and understanding” (42). Missimer argues similarly, in that her “Social View” of CT defines a critical thinker according to his/her contributions to a “socially wrought conceptual fabric of theories,” as someone who “takes account of one or more alternatives and compares their evidence,” attaching new views to “at least some of the existing theoretical fabric” (Missimer 1994, 122, 120). CT is here conceived as part of a larger social process, wherein many individuals, offering alternative views, contribute to the goal of progressing further towards knowledge: “It is widespread use of critical thinking by many people over the long haul that produces greater reasonableness” (125). For Missimer, it is “too large a burden” to place “the onus of being right or correct” on the individual -- the evaluation of arguments comes through a collective, rather than an individual process (121).

¹³ This does not rule out the possibility that though we think this judgment applies to all persons we may still be wrong, and thus that our judgment is not, indeed, universally applicable. As I discuss further below, Siegel argues that we can and should appeal to purportedly universal principles while still acknowledging our fallibility and the need to continually question and revise such principles.

¹⁴ According to Siegel, “[k]nowledge-claims can be objectively assessed in accordance with presently accepted criteria (e.g. of evidential warrant, explanatory power, perceptual reliability, etc.), which can in turn be critically assessed” (Siegel 1987, 161). Siegel emphasizes that these criteria, though they “admit of criticism and improvement,” are still “taken as absolute” when they are being used to assess knowledge-claims (162). In other words, putatively universal principles are taken as if they are absolutely universal when they are being used and applied. Siegel argues that principles for assessing reasons may differ over time, yet “the principles which determine the compellingness of reasons at a time apply to all putative reasons impartially and universally” (Siegel 1988, 135). He seems to be saying that whatever principles are being used at any given time to assess reasons are universal and impartial in that they are to be consistently and impartially applied in the assessment of any reasons given for a claim (including, presumably, both the truth of those reasons and their logical connection to the conclusion). This would not be the same as saying that the principles of reason-assessment accepted at any given time are necessary and absolute in the sense that they are never subject to correction. The view of critical thinking I argue for below is compatible with Siegel’s view, if my characterization of it here is accurate.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Missimer (1994, 131), Thayer-Bacon (2000, 167-170), Giroux (1988, 63), Paul (1994, 194).

¹⁶ See also Barnett (1997, 27-28, 33).

¹⁷ For example, it seems clear that the emphasis on attempting to achieve greater objectivity through the contributions of individuals to a collaborative construction of knowledge, as shown in the views of Thayer-Bacon and Missimer, requires shared foundations for: (a) the possibility of communication, (b) for deciding what is to count as a contribution to our collaborative body of knowledge, and (c) for determining if and how this knowledge is more “objective” than that which might result without such a collaboration.

¹⁸ References to Kant’s CPR in all footnotes and parenthetical citations include page numbers for the 1965 edition given in the list of citations, as well as paragraph reference numbers for the “B” edition of the CPR.

¹⁹ For Kant’s arguments that we can only know that which could be an object of possible experience, see Kant (1965, 24, 173-174, 257-260; B XIX-XX, B 166, B 295-299).

²⁰ Kant lists numerous ideas of reason in the first *Critique*, as things of which we cannot have knowledge but which are necessary for ordering and regulating our thought processes. These include the existence of God, human immortality, human freedom, and the unity of the thinking subject (Kant 1965, 422-423; B 490-492). He argues that ideas are necessary and natural to reason, not brought in from outside of it: “They are not arbitrarily invented; they are imposed by the very nature of reason itself, and therefore stand in necessary relation to the whole employment of understanding” (Kant 1965, 319; B384). “The law of reason which requires us to seek for this unity, is a necessary law, since without it we should have no reason at all” (538). These ideas are beneficial principles, Kant says, in that we must use them as guides to thought; but we must not think we can know them as objects of possible experience.

²¹ According to Kant, reason demands that “*if the conditioned is given, the entire sum of conditions, and consequently the absolutely unconditioned* (through which alone the conditioned has been possible) *is also given*” (Kant, 1965, 386; B 436; italics in original). The unconditioned, which is an idea of reason, must logically be posited, according to reason, along with the notion of the conditioned.

In addition to such an organizing function for knowledge, ideas of reason are also crucial in reason’s practical, ethical employment. They point to ethical ideals such as the “kingdom of ends” in which every rational being is the source and subject of universal, practical laws, and the “highest good” as moral virtue combined with happiness, the condition of which is a “perfect fit of the will to moral law” – an impossibility for human beings (Kant 1993, 128). For Kant, such a perfect conformity of the will to moral law is “holiness, which is a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable” (128-129). Still, the ideal is something towards which it is rational to try to continually progress: our duty to produce the highest good involves “an endless progress to that perfect fitness” (129). Kant also posits his political vision of an ideal state as an “idea of reason”: the establishment of a civil society operated in accordance with universal laws that ensure the freedom, equality and independence of each citizen as both sovereigns and subjects (Kant 1983, 72, 77). Kant

argues in the first *Critique* that though “[t]his perfect state may never, indeed, come into being; none the less this does not affect the rightfulness of the idea, which, in order to bring the legal organization of mankind ever nearer to its greatest possible perfection, advances this maximum as an archetype” (Kant 1965, 312; B 374). For Kant, then, reason has legitimate interests, both epistemological and ethical, to guide our thought in pursuing ends that are ultimately impossible to reach.

²² Kant argues that reason prescribes that we move in two directions to “aim at the systematic completeness of all knowledge”: “in beginning with the genus, we descend to the manifold which may be contained thereunder, in such fashion as to secure extension for the system, just as in the alternative procedure, that of ascending to the genus, we endeavour to secure the unity of the system” (Kant 1965, 540; B683). For Kant, “every genus requires diversity of subspecies,” since “if there were no *lower* concepts, there could not be *higher* concepts” (541; B 683, B 684); and though we must therefore pay attention to variety of species, we must also assume that “behind this variety there is a unity of fundamental principles – properties from which the diversity can be derived” (538-539; B 680).

²³ According to Kant, reason actually gives *three* logical principles to guide thought towards the goal of a systematic unity of knowledge: “a principle of the *homogeneity* of the manifold under higher genera; . . . a principle of the *variety* of the homogeneous under lower species; and, in order to complete the systematic unity, a further law, that of the *affinity* of all concepts – a law which prescribes that we proceed from each species to every other by gradual increase of the diversity” (Kant 1965, 542; B 685; italics in original). I am focusing here only on the first two principles, as they seem to correspond well to the differing concerns of universalist and contextualist theorists of critical thinking.

²⁴ Kant describes the process of understanding higher and higher concepts unifying knowledge under higher genera in a way that seems pertinent here: “Every concept may be regarded as a point which, as the station for an observer, has its own horizon, that is, a variety of things which can be represented, and, as it were, surveyed from that point. . . . But for different horizons, that is, genera, . . . there can be a common horizon, in reference to which, as from a common centre, they can all be surveyed; and from this higher genus we can proceed until we arrive at the highest of all genera, and so at the universal and true horizon, which is determined from the standpoint of the highest concept” (Kant 1965, 542-543; B 686-687). Ascending to more and more general concepts is here compared to taking on more and more general perspectives or standpoints from which to think. Thinking purely and perfectly impartially could be compared to standing at the “universal and true horizon,” where all universals and particulars can be understood in their true relations to each other, within a single system under a highest concept. Kant insists, however, that such an absolute standpoint is “a mere idea, to which no congruent object can be discovered in experience” (544; B 689). We can recognize it as a goal to work towards, but it is something we can never reach.

²⁵ The process of becoming more and more impartial in thought is similar to the process of finding more and more general concepts, rules and principles unifying particulars, which, for Kant, involves a “hypothetical” use of reason: the “hypothetical employment of reason” occurs when “the universal is admitted as *problematic* only, and is a mere idea, the particular is certain, but the universality of the rule of which it is a consequence is still a problem” (Kant 1965, 534-535; B 674; italics in original). For Kant, the hypothetical use of reason can never completely determine the truth of the universality thus postulated as a hypothesis: “For how are we to know all the possible consequences which, as actually following from the adopted principle, *prove* its universality? The hypothetical employment of reason is regulative only; its sole aim is, so far as may be possible, to bring unity into the body of our detailed knowledge, and thereby to *approximate* the rule to universality” (535; B 675; italics in original). We cannot ever prove universality for certain from the inductive process of seeking similarities in particulars, and then checking to ensure that the rule *does* cover all the particulars to which it is applied, since we cannot ever know all the possible particulars that would fall under the rule (**note material from Kant’s Logic about this** – p. 58). All we can do is offer potentially universal concepts and rules, test them so far as we can, and hold them as approximations until proven otherwise.

Kant contrasts the “hypothetical” use of reason with the “apodeictic,” which occurs when “the universal is already *certain in itself* and given, only *judgment* is required to execute the process of subsumption, and the particular is thereby determined in a necessary manner” (Kant 1965, 534-535; B 674). **Include here how can use reason this way in math and logic, can have some certain universals, but only when have form of thought and not matter at issue.** In any of our thinking involving disputes about substance rather than simply form, the universal principles are not given as certain, and are problematic only.

²⁶ See also Kant (1965, 297-298; B 350-351)

²⁷ Parties taking up sides regarding such impossible knowledge can never establish their positions with certainty, and finally refute the views of the others. Kant focuses on conflicts of long-standing in metaphysics, such as those regarding the possibility of free will in a world of causality, the existence of an eternal, necessary being as the cause of the universe, and whether or not the universe had a beginning in time (Kant 1965, 422-423; B 491-492). These disputes are impossible to answer with certainty, as they hinge on ideas of reason – such as the existence of God and human freedom – and since such ideas can never be objects of knowledge, disputes about their truth can never be finally resolved, only given up for impossible. Kant argues that in such disputes, “it is impossible to decide between [the sides]”: “There can be no way of

settling [the dispute] once and for all and to the satisfaction of both sides, save by their becoming convinced that . . . they are really quarrelling about nothing, and that a certain transcendental illusion has mocked them with a reality where none is to be found” (446; B 530).

The dispute Kant explains between the “students of nature” focused on homogeneity and those on heterogeneity can degenerate into such an irresolvable dispute, if each side thinks they have found all there is to know about a subject in nature by finding some principle of unity or by noting differences where they had been ignored before. According to Kant, any such conclusion is never the last word, as reason obliges us to continually seek further for unity and heterogeneity, in an endless progress towards a goal of complete systematicity that we can never fully achieve. Kant argues that we always run into error if we “regard our investigation into nature, on any subject, as absolutely complete, disposing reason to cease from further enquiry, as if it had entirely succeeded in the task which it had set for itself” (562; B 718). Similarly, it seems legitimate to say that we err if we stop on either side of the process of critical thinking, believing we have done all we need to do if we find some apparently universal principles with which to think (while failing to pay attention to their potential partiality), or if we have found some differences in beliefs, values and methods thinking which seem to frustrate attempts to unify them under general or universal principles (while failing to seek further to see if and how they *can* be unified).

²⁸ Siegel takes the quote about humility here from R.S. Peters (1973, 75).

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