

Book Review

I am Right You are Wrong by Edward de Bono

MICHAEL ROWAN *University of South Australia*

de Bono, Edward (1990). *I am Right You are Wrong*. London: Viking. Pp. i-ix and 1-293. ISBN 0-670-83011-9. Cloth. Can. \$29.95.

1. Introduction

I am Right You are Wrong is an important book for philosophers to read, and to challenge, for it is no less than a best-selling attack on academic disciplines and universities in general, and on philosophy—especially the new critical thinking movement—in particular. It is however a hard book to read, for it is written in a way that makes it difficult to determine just what the author is saying.

The main problem with reading de Bono is to cope with his style. The book consists of brief chapters—one or two pages—composed of short and often unrelated paragraphs, so in sum it amounts to a collection of thoughts (many of which are annoyingly repeated) rather than an elaborated piece of reasoning. I would want to criticise de Bono for this, but it may be that to do so would be to beg an important question against him. For de Bono's aim is to change the way we think about thinking, and to complain that he gives us no good *argument* for the change is to assume that an argument *ought* to be given for it, whereas one of de Bono's claims is that argument is ineffective at changing people's ideas, which are fixed by perception. So perhaps he did not set

out to argue with us, but to directly act on how we perceive thinking. That would make sense of his style, and then it would be a question of whether de Bono ought to have argued with us. This is a question I will take up below.

I shall consider de Bono's claims about argument and perception in due course, after summarizing what he says about these and other things. My summary will attempt to make de Bono's case more coherent than it is as presented by him, but putting aside the question of whether he would have *wanted* to present his case in the way I will, there is no question that my summary will be unfair to de Bono, as it follows in broad outlines from his clearest statements on how his various positions hang together.

2. Summary of de Bono's Claims

De Bono twice puts forward an overview of his claims. On the first occasion he says

There is no mechanism more basic than the operation of the nerve networks in the brain. Once we can understand these mechanisms, ... [we] can build on this understanding to devise new thinking tools (as in the process of lateral thinking). We can recognise the faults and bad tendencies in the system and see how these are encouraged by some of our traditional thinking habits. We can begin to see a need for new thinking habits. (12)¹

On the second occasion he stresses the importance of perception in our thinking, writing

I would be very happy indeed if we did but acknowledge that perception was a very important part of thinking. Once we do this we soon find that the table-top logic habits of our traditional thinking system do not readily apply... and that we must develop a better understanding of perception and deliberate perceptual skills (as with the CoRT programme in schools). Perception becomes a new area that we must work within. (288ff.)

From these passages it is clear that we need to focus on de Bono's claims concerning how the brain works, the nature and importance of perception, the defects of logic, and how we can improve thinking skills. I shall summarise what he says under these headings, and then argue that he fails to understand the proper role of logic in enquiry, and that, should we implement his suggestions for repudiating argument, the consequences would be wholly unfortunate.

a. *How the Brain Works*

The main thesis of *I am Right You are Wrong* is summed up in an article by de Bono in *Marketing*. He writes

I am looking at the human brain as a self-organizing system. A few other people are doing the same. But everyone else and the whole of our intellectual culture is looking at the brain as an externally organised system in which symbols and information are moved around according to certain rules of logic.²

De Bono's idea of a self-organising system is perhaps best illustrated by his first analogy, that of rain falling onto a virgin landscape. With the first rain, the surface will be altered by the way in which the water has flowed over it, and the consequence of this is that subsequent rains are likely to flow in patterns created by the first rain. The rain has altered the surface in flowing

across it, and set a self-perpetuating pattern which becomes more deeply etched into the surface with each succeeding rain.

The features of this process of forming the topography by the action of the elements which interest de Bono can be brought out by contrasting the flow of water across the land with the flow of traffic through a city's streets. In the case of the water flowing across the land, the flow of the water shapes an originally virgin surface forming by the process of flow the channels in which future flow will take place. The dynamics of the individual event of fall and flow and the dynamics of forming and changing the landscape are one and the same. There is no forming without flow, and no flow without forming for the future. In the case of the traffic, this connection between forming and flow is absent (if we ignore the effect of wear and tear on the system). Before any traffic can flow we need to set up the road system, and then the traffic will flow along our pre-determined routes. The flow of traffic is organized from outside, whereas the flow of water is organised by itself—it is a self-organising system.

Now de Bono claims that our 'whole intellectual culture' has mistakenly thought that the working of our brains was organized from outside inasmuch as the means of our thought, our concepts, are thought to be defined by a logical system which is prior to any particular thought process which employs these concepts, while in fact our brains work as self-organising systems. In particular, he says that the brain works not by simply recording information as it flows in from our senses, which later would have to be sorted into pre-existing categories and evaluated according to logical rules to determine what perceptual statements can be justified by the input from our senses; rather, as information flows in from our senses it is immediately processed and judged and is recorded in the brain already as a perception/judgement. Our brains work to

make sense of what we see as we see it, and to do this information is recorded in our brains as patterns which impose upon the incoming information a structure which is not derivable from the information alone but is an addition to it. These patterns derive from previous experience and are triggered by perhaps partial matching of the incoming sensations and those which we received in the past when we formed that pattern. Thus perception itself always already involves pre-conceptions, or judgements.

If I understand de Bono correctly, his claim might be put in philosophical terminology as that there are no hard sense data, but only Kuhnian gestalts.

However de Bono's interest is not to contribute to any debate about the nature of perception but to insist that our brains arrive at judgments not by logical operations on neutral data, but in the very process of storing sense information. For de Bono thinks that it follows immediately from this that logic is not a basic part of brain functioning—that it is not psychologically basic—and also that logic has no important role to play in the fixation of belief, as it is perception that is the basis of belief formation.

b. Perception and Belief

Probably the best way to summarise de Bono's claims about perception is to report him as saying that perceptions are already beliefs: 'The borderline between perception, description and belief is clearly non-existent'. (185) For the brain works by providing an environment in which sequences of activity become established as patterns. Then these patterns, these ways of seeing the world, influence how we record immediately following sense-data, as after a particular pattern is triggered by some initial sense-data the arousal of this pattern and any others linked to it then make it likely that further incoming sense-data will be fitted into the triggered pat-

terns. In this way, what we believe influences what we see. (85)

I note in passing that de Bono draws a radically sceptical conclusion from this, that 'there cannot be any truth in perception'—but he does not see that he has done so. For de Bono himself has his eyes firmly fixed at this point on what he believes follows from his analysis of perception and belief for the role and importance of argument.

c. De Bono's Claims on the Perniciousness of Logic

De Bono's main point about logic is, essentially, that it is useless. There is never any point in arguing with someone because it is always already too late. Everyone has already made up their mind in the very act of making sense of the world in perception. So all that argument can do is reinforce perceptions. Argument is powerless to change beliefs. I quote:

We use extremely little explicit logic in ordinary life. Most thinking at ordinary level, government level, and commentary level, is based on perception, language, and information. At most there is one logic step: if this, then that. Apart from technical matters ... most thinking takes place in the perceptual stage. How much do we take in? How do we look at things? This perception is based on habits of perception.... (223)

Logic can be used to reinforce perceptions (and prejudices) but logic and argument will not change perceptions. (225)

Why is argument so impotent? Because it is based upon logic and logic does not invent new categories which might provide new ways of seeing and thus new ideas. Rather, it uses those categories we already have and reinforces and rigidifies them. In this way, de Bono claims, argument builds upon defects of perception—the tendency to immediately fit new information into a pre-established scheme—and this makes argument always conservative and dogmatic. He says:

Logic freezes things into stereotypes and categories. Perceptions are variable, depend on circumstances and can be changed. (189)

De Bono's criticism of logic takes up much of *I am Right You are Wrong*. It is very repetitive, and always conflates logic with argument and argument with adversarial disputation, as in a court of law. Logic as proof, or disproof, and the whole idea of entailment, de Bono does not consider—a point I shall expand upon shortly. For the moment, I quote just a few lines from the article in *Marketing* which I think puts de Bono's view of logic—and the implications for the informal logic movement of his spreading such views in journals like *Marketing*—as well as anywhere in *I am Right You are Wrong*:

So from Socrates we got the argument habit. From Plato we got the truth habit. From Aristotle we got the logic of categories and contradiction. That became the basis of Western thinking.

We would seek the truth by logical argument. In practice this very quickly became critical thinking. We would seek the truth by attacking the logic and argument of others in order to discover the truth

The trouble is that critical argument completely lacks the constructive and creative energies that are needed in order to generate ideas or design solutions to problems.³

d. How to Improve Thinking Skills

It comes as no surprise that de Bono's criticisms of logic should lead him to say that teaching logic, or critical thinking, is the wrong way to go. What we need to teach is creative thinking. For logic reinforces the bad lack of flexibility and sticking to established patterns of perception of ordinary thinking. We need new 'mental software' to overcome these deficiencies, if we are not to reinforce them. And this new mental software is lateral thinking and the CoRT program, which is intended to stimulate new ways of perceiving. In this

way de Bono defends his view of the curriculum from the recent gains of philosophy.

Now although I agree with de Bono that we need to encourage creativity—indeed, we need that for logic—he did not bring me to see the relative merits of argument and lateral thinking his way. Indeed, I found his whole analysis superficial and erroneous, which faults become apparent once we consider more carefully his repudiation of logic.

3. The Shallowness and Errors of de Bono's Theory

a. De Bono's Three Claims about Logic

As we have just seen de Bono makes three main claims about logic and argument.

First, that logic is not psychologically basic, that is, that the brain does not function as a logical machine in the way that a digital computer functions. Now I do not wish to take issue with this claim, first because it seems to me to be right, and second, because nothing important about the role of logic in enquiry follows from this. I would simply refer you to Howard Margolis' *Patterns, Thinking and Cognition* for a discussion of the relationship between logic and brain function which takes patterning as the basic way in which the brain functions but retains for logic its traditional role as the basis of rational argument.

Second, that argument in our tradition, influenced by Aristotelian logic, is always sterile and conservative because it is based on pre-given categories which cannot be altered in the course of the argument. Again, I want to agree with this claim—at least when expressed in language which is not pejorative—but argue that nothing follows from it which impugns the importance of logic once we understand the proper function of argument in the generation of new ideas.

To argue this case I need to bring into the discussion the distinction between discovery and justification. We can then admit that logic and argument *by themselves* will lead us to new ideas only within a given framework, as when we deduce a new theorem from already given axioms. The axioms themselves, however, cannot be deduced. They must be invented. And, while any reasonable methodology for producing new mathematics or science will employ tested strategies for producing new ideas, no one that I know of has ever said there is any algorithm for invention. Thus de Bono is simply committing the straw man fallacy when he asserts

We have grown up with the tradition that if you want to know what is happening and if you want new ideas you should analyse the data available, or collect more data through experiments or surveys. ... We believe, or many believe, that the analysis of data is enough and is the basis of rational behaviour. (178)

But this is false: some second rate positivist may have said this somewhere, but you couldn't pin it on an important thinker—not even Francis Bacon. (Characteristically de Bono gives no source for the claim.)

What is correct is that our intellectual tradition has thought of the creation of new ideas as a mystical process, which cannot be taught. And perhaps de Bono has something to say here which is interesting and important. But it does not reduce the importance of logic which, to bring in the distinction between discovery and justification, arises from its use in checking new ideas and justifying their adoption or rejection.

My claim here is that logic and argument form, as it were, the quality control department in the factory of ideas, and as such they have an important function even though they have no direct role in production. I take it that this claim is not controversial. Certainly de Bono himself admits it in saying, for example, 'Every valuable creative idea ... must always be logical in

hindsight. If it was not, we could never recognise the value of that idea.' (14)

So much for de Bono's first two claims about the impotence of logic. Any fundamental re-evaluation of the importance of logic and argument must then be based on de Bono's third thesis, that argument is always ineffectual because beliefs are changed not by arguments but by perceptions. Now I will argue that de Bono has failed to prove his case here, and then take up the question of whether it is begging the question against de Bono to *argue* against him at all when he is rejecting the idea that argument is a useful way to analyse thinking.

b. Perception, Argument and Belief.

If it were true that all beliefs were derived immediately from perceptions, it would follow that argument had no role in the formation of belief, and then it would certainly be true that argument had no useful role in our life at all. Our practices of argument would be mere epiphenomena, conducted after the fact of belief formation and changing nothing. But it is not obviously true—indeed, quite the opposite—that argument has no role in the formation of belief, and de Bono fails to prove that it does not have any such role.

De Bono makes his claim that argument cannot affect belief on the basis of an argument which commits a glaring non-sequitur. He first argues that all perceptions have the status of beliefs, inasmuch as they all go beyond the immediate sense-data. This is by now a philosophical truism. He then conflates this truism with its converse, that all beliefs are perceptions, saying, for example:

A belief is a perceptual framework which leads us to see the world in a way that reinforces that framework. (212)

But this second thesis is patently false if literally interpreted as applying to *all* beliefs.

Many beliefs, for example, the belief that all beliefs are perceptions, are simply and obviously not perceptions. Nor are many beliefs, for example, that the CoRT program should be taught in schools in preference to critical thinking, closely connected to perceptions. Now such beliefs, which are distant from perceptions, cannot plausibly be reduced to perceptions, and this creates a problem for de Bono. For his whole theory of brain functioning, perception and creativity, is massively reductionist. He does away with all mental functions apart from perception by allowing perceptions as the only epistemic entities. Once we insist that there are others, including values, theories, philosophical theses, and the like, de Bono has no way to show how these are derived from perception and thus no way to eliminate the traditional explanation of how we come to have such epistemic items, which explanation involves substantial notions of belief and reasoning, notions which de Bono himself is forced to rely upon even while denying their existence. The strains show in passages such as this:

Experience has shown that reason and logic can never change perceptions, emotions, prejudices and beliefs. Yet we continue in the pious hope that if everyone would 'see reason' the world would be so much better. As we shall see later, *there are very good reasons* why logic will never affect emotions and beliefs. The only way to do this is through perception. (40, emphases added)

Thus, despite his making a show of repudiating logic and reasoning, when we look for an explanation of how we might come to believe, and whether we should believe, for example, that the CoRT program should replace the Philosophy for Children program in schools, de Bono has nothing to replace the traditional account which says that if we are to believe such a thesis we will have to convince ourselves by reasons, as there are no perceptions that will influence this belief directly. Also, and importantly, he has nothing to replace the traditional account of what we must do if we

want to bring someone else to this view, namely, that we must use arguments to prove it to them.

So we must maintain a distinction between perception and belief, and thereby we find a role for argument in connecting those beliefs which are relatively far removed from perceptions with perceptions which might act as distant reasons for those beliefs. De Bono's denying this is a consequence of his being too sloppy with the notions of perception and belief.

4. Has My Arguing with de Bono Begged the Question?

Now let me take up the question of whether arguing with de Bono is begging the question against him. Am I wrong in even dealing with de Bono's book as an argument? Might he not have been directly trying to influence my perceptions of logic and creativity, and have been content with that? Perhaps, but I have no *perceptions* of logic and creativity! That is just sloppy talk which leads us to the confusion between perceptions and ideas that I have already identified. To avoid it, we must say rather that de Bono may have been just trying to modify my *ideas* about logic, or perhaps my *attitudes* to logic. But this is no unusual thing for an author to try to do, and it does not place any obligation on the reader to refrain from arguing the point with the author. As a reader I always have a right to place myself as the author's equal and argue with him/her about his/her claims.

Now de Bono asserts that you can most effectively influence people's ideas and actions by operating on their perceptions and emotions. That is hardly new or original to de Bono, though he makes it seem so by avoiding the common name for it: traditionally, trying to change people's ideas by operating on their emotions and perceptions rather than by arguing with them has been called 'manipulation'.

Perhaps de Bono was trying in *I am Right You are Wrong* to manipulate his readers. Then we must admit that in refusing to be manipulated and insisting on arguing instead we refuse to play his game. But that is not begging the question in any way: it is just insisting on our rights as readers.

Is manipulation of the reader what de Bono is up to? Certainly he shows remarkable lack of opposition to manipulation as a form of changing the public's mind, writing, for example,

For the first time in history we are within reach of powerful perceptual tools. There is no need to attempt to appeal to people through logic. Emotional appeals are not necessary either. The battle of politics will become the battle of perception. (268)

Thus it seems that de Bono accepts manipulation as a way to influence the ideas of others, and perhaps that was what he was trying to do to his readers in *I am Right You are Wrong*. But even if this is the case, I am not begging any question against de Bono by refusing to be manipulated by him. Indeed, I am not even denying the effectiveness of manipulation. One would be a very naive student of human affairs not to acknowledge that operating on people's perceptions, or their emotions, is likely to have a more immediate and dramatic effect than arguing with them. One picture of a starving child will raise more money than a thousand reasons why we should give aid to the third world.

For there to be any begging of the question against de Bono in my refusing to be manipulated by him it would have to be the case that he claims that *all* attempts to affect another's beliefs is manipulation, which I have so far merely rejected without giving reasons for my rejection. Perhaps de Bono does want to say that all attempts to affect other's beliefs is manipulation. Certainly this would explain why he thinks that manipulation is unobjectionable, which from the quote above he does

seem to think, because if manipulation is *all* you can do if you want to change another's ideas, then it is unavoidable.

Now in reply to this it would seem enough to say that if all attempts to alter another's beliefs are manipulation, then I must be playing de Bono's game after all—as it is the only game there is—so there can be no question of question begging. But it is more interesting to give reasons why some attempts to alter another's beliefs should not be considered to be manipulation. That is easily done, because the thesis that all attempts to affect others' beliefs are manipulation does not make sense. You can manipulate some of the people all of the time, or all of the people at some time, but the idea that all of the people manipulate all of the others all of the time is a nonsense: manipulation requires a manipulator who is outside the manipulation, (and also above the manipulated) who has his or her reasons for manipulating those below them in preference to arguing with the lower types.

The concept of manipulation implies the existence of two epistemically unequal groups. First, there are the powerful, who adopt positions on the basis of an analysis of what is right, or perhaps of what serves their interests. In this group are those who send the film crew off to the famine zone, and the makers of political advertisements. Second, there are the powerless, who are manipulated by the production of material which operates not on their logical faculties but on their perceptions. But that there is a section of the population whose views on a whole range of matters have been cleverly engineered by media producers does not make argument irrelevant to the formation of belief as de Bono perhaps supposes. It merely means that argument need not be equally available to all to have the community reach a common view of some matter. Conflating this with the idea that every attempt to alter another's ideas is manipulation constitutes a legitimization of manipulation which is, I think, wholly undesirable.

I conclude from this that even if de Bono is not trying to argue with us, but rather manipulate us, it is not begging any question against him to refuse to play the game and want to argue instead, for while in arguing we repudiate the thesis that all attempts to change others' beliefs is manipulation, this thesis is self-inconsistent in any case.

5. Where de Bono Might Be Right

Before concluding this review I must say clearly that I do not dispute de Bono's claim that creativity is important. Indeed, my experience of teaching reasoning is that many students' problems with logic are caused by their lack of imagination—their inability, for example, to be able to imagine circumstances in which the conclusion of an argument would be false even though all its premises are true. There can be, therefore, no opposition between logic and creative thinking, and we should not be forced to choose between them.

There is, however, limited space in the curriculum to teach thinking skills, and it is this I think which explains much of de Bono's book, for there is competition between the logic based critical thinking approach to teaching thinking skills and de Bono's CoRT program. Now if de Bono is right and we can teach students to think creatively, I think he has a decent argument for his CoRT program to be given space in the curriculum. Not, however, at the expense of teaching students to use basic logical skills to evaluate evidence for and against a point of view they are considering.

6. Conclusion

As I have just noted, de Bono's *I am Right You are Wrong* is not without interest. But if you want to know more about the relationship between logic and mental processes, which is ostensibly de Bono's main topic, then I would suggest that Marvin Minsky's *The Society of Mind* and Howard Margolis' *Patterns, Thinking and Cognition* would be better places to start.

Notes

¹ Page numbers in brackets refer to de Bono, *I am Right You are Wrong*, London: Viking, 1990.

² de Bono, *Marketing*, May 1990 p.5.

³ de Bono, *Marketing*, May 1990 p.6.

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MICHAEL ROWAN
SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
MAGILL, SOUTH AUSTRALIA 5072
AUSTRALIA □