READER'S RESPONSE

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(this article is offered in response to Ludwik Kowalski's article in our last issue)

We all owe Ludwik Kowalski a debt of gratitude for having shared with us so lucidly the uneasiness he feels with regard to critical thinking. He has articulated a concern that many people apparently feel with regard to the emergence of critical thinking as an educational development of some significance.

Prof. Kowalski sees a possible conflict between the fact that, "within the framework of the scientific method, experimental findings constitute the only valid criteria for making pronouncements about the nature of things," and the sometimes employed definition of critical thinking as thinking that is "guided by criteria." Scientific method is rigorous because it will accept only the evidence produced by experimentation as the criterion of warranted assertibility; critical thinking, in contrast, appears to be utterly lacking in rigor because it countenances the appeal to all sorts of criteria, of which experimental evidence is just one.

Now, if scientific method and critical thinking were being cast as rivals or competitors with regard to explaining what there is, we would have to declare it "no contest." For this purpose, as far as I am concerned, scientific method has no rivals, and I know of no one in the movement who would be likely to take a different position. What purpose, then, does critical thinking serve?

In every human life, countless judgments must be made that, for one reason or another, cannot be made by scientific method. Science is not in a position to prescribe to us whom we should vote for, whom we should marry, what books we are to read, who should be our friends, or countless similar issues that require that we think for ourselves and arrive at our own judgments. If we are on a jury, we can listen to the arguments of the lawyers and to the explanations of the judge with regard to the law, but ultimately it is we who have to deliberate and come up with a verdict which we ourselves have arrived at.

When it comes to deciding how we are to treat our children or our parents, we must make our own ethical judgments; science cannot make them for us, although it can advise us, and it can do much to improve the quality of the alternatives we face. When it comes to deciding how much we can trust the pronouncements of politicians or the importunings of advertisers, we must make our own epistemological judgments as to their veracity; no one can do it for us. When we choose a place to live (if we are so fortunate as to be able to), it is we who must decide among the competing aesthetic considerations. And when we finally make up our minds with regard to the rights of animals and the rights of nature — whether these are to be treated as persons or things — it will be because we have finally agreed to take into account the profoundly metaphysical implications of these problems.

I have underscored the ethical, the epistemological, the aesthetic and the metaphysical because these are areas of utmost concern over which science can claim no jurisdiction. That is one side of the matter. The other side is that we cannot abdicate our responsibility to think for ourselves and make our own judgments with regard to the sorts of persons we want to be and the sort of world we want to live in. This responsibility has not diminished with the rise of scientific method; on the contrary, it has increased. We are now beginning to realize that the opportunity is beginning to dawn for us to move beyond the absolutism of nationhood and to become citizens of the world, but this must be accompanied by a corresponding increase in opportunities for rational and creative participation.

This is where critical thinking comes in. In no way whatsoever is critical thinking a rival of scientific method. Its enemy, rather, is uncritical, dogmatic, undisciplined, unquestioning thinking. Its aim is to help those who are unreflective to think more reflectively, by getting them to see the importance of appealing to reasons and supporting their judgments with relevant criteria.

If human beings are to be moved to reflect, it will be necessary, as part of that process, to get them to understand and appreciate the role of reasons in reflection. They have to be moved beyond the mere utterance of an opinion to providing a reason for that opinion, and beyond merely providing any reason whatsoever to providing a good reason. The class of criteria is that subset of reasons which has repeatedly demonstrated its reliability (although certainly not its infallibility). A criterion is therefore a solid fulcrum on which our judgment can turn, and experimental findings is a model instance of such a criterion, but it is far from being the only one open to us. Indeed, every time we choose to utter a word, that utterance is a judgment that has been guided by a criterion, by the context, or, more likely, by both. This is why critical thinking has been defined as self-correcting, criterion-governed thinking that is sensitive to context. Critical thinkers weigh their words because they know that, sooner or later, they will have to justify them. The possibility of eventual justification seems never to occur to those who just blurt their opinions out and move on to other matters.

Responsible students, teachers and administrators cannot delegate to others the thinking they must do themselves. However sagacious may be the circle of scientists, philosophers, jurists, clergy and others who surround them, the judgments they have to make are theirs alone. The critical thinker has much to learn from these experts, of course, but they are, after all, only experts, mere experts, and time may show that they have something to learn from the judicious non-expert, the mere critical thinker.

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