CRITICAL THINKING AND THE AMERICAN STUDENT:A MISPLACES EMPHASIS?

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William James is a source of the dictum that can occasionally be found in logic and critical thinking texts, that rational thinking requires one to both seek truth and avoid error (18). As *The Logic Book* puts it, to gain truth is "not by itself a viable maxim," because

> *If one's only goal were to gain truth, an obvious means of attaining this goal would be to believe everything. But if one believes everything, then one believes all falsehoods, as well as all truths. (Bergmann 96)*

But neither is avoiding error, because

> *A person whose only goal was to avoid falsity could attain this goal by adopting skepticism, that is, by believing nothing. One who has no beliefs has no false beliefs. This solution is unsatisfactory in that we must have beliefs in order to deal with the world around us. (Bergmann 96)*

When stated this way, this dictum sounds vaguely reminiscent of recent views on the science of the brain, which suggest that intelligence comes not merely from inutero and early chilhood, but from a pruning out of connections which take place in older childhood as the "less active or less informative ones fail" (Kalat 124). Perhaps, then, these two kinds of activity, in combination, are essential not only to the rational formation of knowledge but to the basic functioning of the brain.

Critical Thinking—as is indicated by its name, which might instead have been Rational Thinking, Rational Bases for Belief, or How To Decide What is Worth Believing—is generally focused on the pruning process rather than the connection-building one, with students encouraged to engage in critique of their beliefs and arguments, with the suggestion that they can call justified belief what remains standing after this Cartesian assault. It is assumed that it is better to have a smaller number of true beliefs, about which one is relatively confident, than to have true beliefs mixed up with false ones. If one is not confident about a proposition, there is always the possibility of suspending one's belief and waiting for evidence to tip the scales for or against. But James stressed the other side of this duality; he wrote of "the risk of losing the truth" (11) as if it were a more disturbing possibility than that of being in error, or as he puts it, slyly pointing out the hints of vanity in this attitude, the risk of being a dupe:

> Believe Truth! Shun Error!—these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase of truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. (18)

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For James, there is no empirical obligation to favor one of these laws over the other, for "our feelings of duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life" (18). But James argues that there are real practical losses involved in refusing, out of the desire to avoid false beliefs, to believe in something which might possibly be true. That is why, for James, " a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth of those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule" (28; italics removed).

In this paper, I will evaluate the importance of the noncritical aspects of rational thinking, and the extent to which Critical Thinking as it is currently taught does not address these aspects. I am particularly interested in Critical Thinking students in the U.S., where many students arrive at the university level already *critical* in the sense of testing, critiquing, and demanding evidence before belief; where students are often already highly skeptical about authority figures, including their instructors, the media, and the U.S. government; and of ideas, including any nonrelativistic system of morality, the power of the individual citizen, and the potential for positive change; and where conspiracy theories abound. Of course, one might say that believing in conspiracy theories is a sign of gullibility, of a lack of a skeptical attitude, of the students' inclination to accept whatever they read on the Internet; but I will argue that it could also be understood as a sign of too little belief, and too much skepticism, which takes the form of their rejection of what they read in the more established newspapers and what their elected officials and educated elders have to say.

The questions that I will address are: to what extent does rationality require an open and constructive, rather than a critical, attitude? What role do relationships, such as those between instructor and student, or reader and text, play in the student's development of a rational system of beliefs, and what might the impact of criticality have on these relationships? Are current methods of education, as well as public discourse in general, focusing excessively on skill and technical know-how, such as, in the case of critical thinking, the criteria one might use in evaluating one's beliefs, the evidence that is required for acceding to a claim, and the kind of argument that might be convincing, and leaving aside deeper questions about what might be worth believing? In the first section, I will review the typical textbook approach to critical thinking, and express some preliminary concerns about this approach. I will then consider in more depth the philosophies of William James and Hans-Georg Gadamer, focusing in particular on the implications of their thought for the questions enumerated above. Finally, in my concluding section, I will examine the impact of these trends for society as a whole.

I

As may already be clear, this paper will focus on epistemological concerns rather than logical ones. Although critical thinking texts tend to focus most of their attention on the evaluation of arguments, considering the acceptance or rejection of claims rather more briefly, I assume that the ultimate point of the endeavor is

epistemological. The students, in developing the ability to evaluate arguments, are supposed to learn when "an argument really does provide a compelling reason to believe something" (Feldman xiii). Indeed, there is sometimes the assumption that people arrive at beliefs, or at least should arrive at beliefs, via argument, by figuring out "what conclusion the available evidence supports" (Feldman xiii).

Critical thinking texts typically delineate both rational grounds for accepting beliefs and other appropriate responses to candidates for belief. 1 With regard to the latter, the typical view is that one should suspend belief about a conclusion, or an undefended claim, in the absence of evidence, rather than accept or reject it out of hand. The burden of proving a claim is generally placed on the positive or more unusual claim. How much evidence is required for assent to a positive claim is not always covered directly, but when mentioned it is made clear that the evidence need not be conclusive, and that one can rationally hold false beliefs. 2 But it is clearly stated that evidence must be present, and that one should not accede to beliefs as a matter of choice. (Feldman 48). I have yet to encounter any discussion of the conditions under which one might accede to a belief without evidence, or even the fact that one might commonly accede to or have to accede to beliefs without substantial, specific, or even, in some circumstances, minimal evidence. Furthermore, there is little discussion of propositions which by their very nature have to be accepted without evidence, such as the principles of reason themselves.

With regard to the former, rational grounds for accepting beliefs, critical thinking texts generally cite at a minimum personal observations and information from credible or expert sources. Leaving aside personal observations, which I will not address in this paper, the accounts for the other sources of belief are often problematic. The accounts of credible and expert sources assume that the modern system of specialization and dissertation writing produces experts that are to be preferred over generalists or independent scholars, with little discussion of whether this is equally true in all fields of knowledge. While there are nods in this direction, as critical thinking texts usually state that experts are only to be trusted on issues about which there is general consensus within the field of study, this presumes that the field as a whole is to be trusted, and that there are no subtle pressures on experts within a field to accept certain academic orthodoxies that might be questioned by those outside the field. Students are certainly aware that unanimity among experts is no guarantee of correctness. Indeed, when unanimity in the general public is taken as grounds for accepting a claim, this would constitute the fallacy appeal to belief. I am not sure that this case is sufficiently different among experts in at least certain fields that unanimity there should be taken as sign of truth.3

Additionally, critical thinking texts generally address the issue of background knowledge, sometimes as a source of belief on par with personal observations and information from experts and newspapers, although, seemingly, it should be understood as a network of interlacing

beliefs originating in a variety of forgotten sources. But even here, there seems to be a presumption that beliefs can be accepted and rejected individually without impacting other beliefs. There is no trace here of the holism of Quine, as described thus: "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but *only as a corporate body" (From* 41; italics mine). There is little concession to the idea that beliefs form a complex web, that any single belief rests on auxiliary hypotheses, theories, and other well-entrenched beliefs.

Furthermore, there is rarely discussion of the obvious fact that much of this background did not originate in observations or statements by witnesses or experts, who themselves made observations or engaged in some respectable evidence-gathering pursuit, but in principles of life accepted as basic within one's family or larger culture. One text briefly discusses worldview, or each person's "comprehensive way of looking at the world that involves attempting to answer some fundamental questions...a conceptual scheme or a lens through which everything an individual encounters is filtered" (Kelly 186). But it is barely mentioned that the basic principles of rationality themselves, as well as the basic principles of science, constitute one of these conceptual schemes.

Of course, writers might avoid discussing such matters simply because they seem too arcane to introduce to beginning students, but on reading these texts one gets the sense that they believe that good thinking, the basic precepts of logic and reason, which are presumably self-evident, necessarily lead to their worldview, and that therefore they need only teach students good thinking in order to bring them around to the general position of the educated class, that is, belief in science, at least generally; a strong belief in the power of reading and thinking; a proper amount of skepticism about government and the establishment, without paranoia; and a willingness to trust the views, at least on certain subjects, of academics, scientists, and other learned people. Since good thinking will necessarily produce this worldview, there is no need to urge the students to accept it on pragmatic, moral, or aesthetic grounds. In other words, students need only learn a *method*—a method for arriving at reasonable beliefs. Students do not need to be taught substance of these beliefs, because they will arrive at them naturally, with a little assistance on the details (which they are already primed to accept) taught in classes in other subjects.

I am, of course, referring to very subtle and sophisticated philosophical concerns. Someone might object to this whole line of thought by arguing that these fine points and even finer distinctions must be saved for the advanced student, not the beginning student who is taking critical thinking in order to learn the basics. The objectors might continue: certainly there is much that certain philosophers might find fault with in critical thinking texts; Richard Rorty would certainly object to the chapter entitled "Truth is Discovered, Not Created," in the popular text by Vincent Ruggiero; but the discussion of such matters is profitable only to students who already understand the

traditional view to which Rorty is objecting. The point is (perhaps) well taken in this particular case, as I disagree with Rorty on this point; but here too, I believe it is wrong to present a view *about which experts routinely disagree* as if it were obviously, and uncontroversially, true; but in terms of the subjects that of interest to me in this paper, this misses the point entirely. I am not arguing that students should be taught about Quine and Rorty in critical thinking. My point is that the assumptions made by thinkers who are blind to the pragmatic aspects of belief are distorting, and create a mistaken emphasis for students. This mistaken emphasis is particularly damaging for American students, at least the urban students that I teach, who sometimes use the very methods they are taught to reject the worldview they are being offered.

In other words, the methods these students are being taught are counterproductive. Critical thinking, encouraged and refined, can be used to critique and reject a rational worldview. It can be used to reject what educators have to say, as not being sufficiently supported. It can do all this while leaving intact the worldview that students prefer. As I will argue, American students need to be offered skills that they lack and that are equally important for productive thinking: curiosity about and openness to other points of view; a willingness to try on different theories and systems of thought; a trust in the Other. Critical thinking never addresses any of these. Two philosophers who do are James and Gadamer, and it is to their thought I will turn in the following two sections.

II

In *The Will to Believe*, James eloquently points out the passional nature of much of our beliefs. While thinkers of his time extol the value of sufficient evidence running before belief, writing, in one case, that belief "is desecrated when given to unproven and unquestioned statements" with a stain "which can never be wiped away" and "if a belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence," then, *even if that belief be true*, "the pleasure is a stolen one" because it "is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence"(8) 4, James argues that there "are passional tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief"(11). For James, this is as true of the hardest empiricist as it is of the most committed rationalist: the "greatest empiricists among us are only empiricists on reflection...when left to their instincts, they dogmatize like infallible popes." (13-14). So when the Cliffords of the world argue that evidence must come before belief, according to James, "insufficiency is really the last thing they have in mind. For them the evidence is absolutely sufficient, only it makes the other way" (14).

Of course, belief in God is what the empiricists reject as being insufficiently proved, and it is this belief that James sets out to defend. But James clearly thought his ideas had a wider application, and it is the wider application that we will consider here. When a hypothesis of any sort, religious or otherwise, is dead—when, because of a passional commitment to an opposing view, it "refuses to scintillate with any credibility at

all" (2) for a particular individual—then evidence for it, or against it, is irrelevant. One is simply certain that it is false, and certainty is the mark of the dogmatist rather than the empiricist. For James, many of our most profound beliefs are of this sort, as his arguably outdated list suggests: our commitment to truth itself, which is a "passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up"(9); our belief in molecules and the conservation of energy; our belief in democracy and necessary progress.

Thus, students do not arrive in their critical thinking classes *tabulae rasa*, but rather holding many passional beliefs. This points the way to several problems with the expectation that critical thinking, as a method, will lead to a more rational system of beliefs. First of all, there is the obvious concern (not discussed by James) that what one believes affects what looks for and what one sees—in other words, that belief comes before and necessarily contaminates evidence.

Second, students will invariably be inclined, as indeed we all are, according to James, to use the skills that they acquire to attack beliefs they disagree with under the assumption that this means their own beliefs rest on more substantial grounds, even thought they are not critiqued under the same standard. As James writes, our reason "is invariably satisfied, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of every thousand of us, if it can find a few arguments that will do to recite in case our credulity is challenged by some one else" (9). Students learn to defend their positions with arguments. They learn to make their arguments more logical by stating what were previously unstated premises; by defending their premises in turn with further arguments; by acknowledging the sources from which they draw their evidence. They labor to eliminate any inconsistencies in their positions, by rejecting a few beliefs or showing how what appears to be an inconsistency is really not one. But they do not reject their deeply held passional beliefs.

The position of critical thinking texts is that students should be urged to test these beliefs, and assess the evidence for them; but James shows us the psychological difficulties in doing this. In order to test these beliefs, one would presumably have to put them aside for the moment, and examine them as if they were external to oneself. But this Cartesian position is a psychological impossibility for James (and a logical impossibility for Quine, as we shall see in a moment). Even if a student were capable of doing this with many of their beliefs, certain ones are required by the critical thinking method itself and would have to remain unquestioned during this process. The belief in the importance of evidence for belief would be one of these. So the critical thinking texts themselves do not evince any capability of beginning from a purely nondogmatic viewpoint.

This points the way to another problem, in this case pedagogical, for this method. Presuming the possibility of critiquing one's beliefs in this sense, we might ask if the texts and the teachers who use them are actually engaging in this process in the same way they urge their students to do. This is a case in which indirect learning—the kind of learning

that takes place when students pick up on how their instructors act, and learn to model behaviors that their instructors manifest—might have a significant impact. If teachers do not take the critical thinking method seriously enough to critique their own deepest views, then why should students? If they cannot give evidence for their beliefs, including the belief in critical thinking itself, if they have passional beliefs that seem above reproach, then why should students understand their passional beliefs to be within the fray? One suspects that James would argue that they cannot do it for the same reason that the students cannot; but that they want to argue that in their case it is different, because they are right. One senses that this is circular reasoning somehow.

The third problem with the expectation that critical thinking will lead to a more rational system of beliefs arises out of Quine's philosophy. As is well known, Quine argues that our beliefs form a web, with the beliefs that were formerly called analytic truths resting, along with extremely well verified empirical facts, in the middle, while other synthetic truths, not as well verified, and theories are at the perimeter *(Web)*. Beliefs are not testable individually, for individual beliefs are too short to "have a separate bundle of observable or testable consequences" *(Theories* 70); only larger-scale structures of belief, such as theories, have such consequences. Whenever an empirical fact turns up that does not accord with our web of belief, we can reject the theory that the fact appears to contradict, but we have a variety of other choices open to us in response. As Quine writes:

> A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Reevaluation of some statements entails reevaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections—the logical laws being in turn simply further statements of the system, certain further elements of the field...But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in light of any singular contrary experience. (*From* 42-43)

He elucidates further:

> Any statement can be held true *come what may*, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. (*From* 43; italics mine) 5

It is worth noting that Quine, at least in his earlier thinking, appears to agree with James that our more central beliefs, such as the laws of logic or the principle of Occam's Razor, are accepted for pragmatic reasons. Along with Carnap, who made a distinction between the framework, which is pragmatic or conventional, and the internal knowledge, or beliefs which are judged to be true within the framework, Quine seems to believe that central beliefs (which for Quine are not, in contrast with Carnap, separable in principle from peripheral ones) are not accepted for purely evidential reasons. For both Quine and Carnap, however, there are interrelationships be-

tween these different kinds, or levels, of belief; one might abandon a framework or theory because another framework or theory more profitably makes sense of the evidence. But for Quine, it is not logically possible to abandon all theories at once and begin from a Cartesian position. As he famously argues, following Neurath, we can only repair our ship while we are at sea in the world, so we cannot suspend belief about everything all at once. While we doubt certain theories or beliefs, we must retain others to keep us afloat.

All this has obvious implications for critical thinking students, albeit ones with which Quine might not agree: students, when faced with facts that contradict their theories, do not have to jettison their theories. They can reject the purported facts; they can reject auxiliary hypotheses that connect the problematic facts to their theories; they can make adjustments in their theories to allow for the facts; or they can even reject the laws of logic. If we accept the metaphor of the boat, then students cannot reject all their beliefs as a whole; and furthermore, as the framework or deepest principles are not held for evidential reasons but for pragmatic ones, it is hard to see how evidence would be sufficient to challenge them. When students cling to beliefs passionally, in James' words, they may see the critiques of these views, and the "wit and intellectual superiority" on which the critiques depend, as "no better than the cunning of a fox" (143).

At this juncture, I think that a few examples would be helpful. Here are some examples of beliefs that students in my critical thinking classes have held that are, in James' terms, dead to me:

The U.S. presidential election was fixed.

Creationism is true.

JFK was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald.

The first one requires explanation even to be understood. Of course, reasonable people believe that the 2000 presidential election in the U.S. was fixed in the sense that the Supreme Court decided the matter in favor of the party that nominated most of them to the bench and that most of them preferred politically. But many students have told me that they believe this in a broader sense: the election was fixed, they tell me, long before anyone voted; and this was not true simply because of the personalities of the candidates, or other political events, which inevitably led towards a certain result, but because votes are in actual fact never counted by anyone. Voting is a pretense from start to finish. Note the difficulties of responding to the student in this particular case: one of the problems with the 2000 election is that certain votes were rejected by the machine, and thus were, in fact, never counted.

Given these bits of evidence that support a narrow construal of the first sentence above, it is hardly surprising that students might feel that a broader construal is supported. Most of my students are minorities and distrust in the system is deeply rooted in their web of belief, and there are good reasons for this, reasons that a reasonable thinker cannot deny. 6 And this is only compounded by my attempts to distinguish the narrower from the broader claims,

because I am an authority figure, a white authority figure at that, and it is precisely the authority figures who are here in question. Justices on the Supreme Court and members of the media are not to be trusted, and it is easy to move from that to not trusting college instructors. Indeed, assuming that "trust your instructors" is even a student's auxiliary hypothesis, it would presumably be rejected before the following: although much was unfair about this election, it was still not fixed before election day; elections are generally fair; reporting is generally accurate; there are rarely conspiracies. One of the interesting things about this particular case, moreover, is that the seemingly incorrect point of view is the simpler one: in order to make the case for the election being flawed but real I must qualify my point of view, arguing that certain authorities are not to be trusted but that others are; that certain parts of the election were fixed but not others; that certain votes were counted but not others. It is a fact that paranoia is often reasonably coherent and simple, and that is what makes paranoid beliefs powerful. The other two sentences raise similar questions. 7

What is implicit here is the extent to which students are inclined towards the beliefs enumerated above specifically because they are critical. Indeed, the astonishing thing about all of these beliefs is how *critical* they are of accepted theories, oft-stated beliefs, or implied assumptions, as well as of the positions taken by authority figures. We might say that what students are not critical of is the extent to which they are too critical, but even though this appears to be true, urging them to be meta-critical does not seem like a solution either.

James points the way to a better solution, but the ideas are implicit in Carnap as well. According to Carnap, "we must be ready to respond to surprising observations by adjusting framework principles for the sake of a similar and more coherent position," writes Christopher Hookway (35). Thus adjustments would not be empirical in tone; they would be more like leaps of faith, more like trying on a new viewpoint to see how it works as a whole. 8 For James, we must be willing to do the same, and not simply in the case of unusual observations. Whenever there is a "genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds" then "our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions," (11)

For to say, under such circumstances, "do not decide, but leave the question open" is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (11; italics removed)

Many of our beliefs, including moral beliefs and belief in God, are of this nature. For James, suspension of belief should not be one's automatic response to insufficient evidence, because of the goods that might be lost, moral, spiritual, and social, when one chooses to remain neutral. He believes that this should especially be true for empiricists, who believe "no bell tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp," and that for them is should seem "a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell" (30).

At this stage I would like to address several potential concerns about the rationality of this general approach. 9 First, might there not be cases in which suspension of belief is required in order to obtain and properly recognize evidence, and where refusal to suspend belief may produce bad outcomes, say, for instance, questions about the efficacy of a medical treatment, where we must test the treatment in a neutral fashion in order to ascertain its benefits before prescribing it to all patients; and second, might people not be inclined to choose false beliefs because they are comforting, or reject true ones because they are disturbing? These concerns are both serious ones, but I do not believe that they directly address James', or my, point. It is worth emphasizing that James is not arguing that people should believe whatever they want, or whatever might be pleasing to them, despite contrary evidence; as someone who considers himself an empiricist, he certainly cannot argue that. He is specifically discussing cases in which evidence is lacking or insufficient. In these cases, James stresses, we all choose our beliefs (to the extent that we form beliefs at all) on pragmatic grounds. More importantly for our discussion, he also addresses theoretical and second-order beliefs, such as the belief that one should rely on scientific and other evidence in forming one's first-order beliefs. It is this belief that must be offered to students on pragmatic grounds, as there are no other (noncircular) grounds for offering it.

Therefore, I am not arguing that we should encourage students to "will to believe" with regard to first-order scientific or evidentiary questions. I am arguing that students need to first accept the world view that makes beliefs matters of evidence, before they can arrive at the first-order questions of when to accept evidence; and that teaching them to be more critical will not, as things currently stand, lead them to this world view. In other words, we may, by encouraging them to consider and ultimately choose, on pragmatic grounds, the scientific world view, expect that they will then subordinate pragmatic concerns to evidential ones on questions susceptible to scientific proof. Consider, as a case in point, the current lack of faith in medical research, and indeed the medical establishment in general, in the U.S. Before we can ask patients who believe in or wish to use unproven treatments, jurors in medical malpractice cases, and individuals who are suspicious of vaccinations and other time-tested medical interventions, to look at the evidence, avoid the post hoc fallacies that they might naturally commit as individual observers of theirs and others' specific medical conditions, and form their beliefs free from hope, anger, fear, and other inclinations, we have to convince them that the scientists who conduct the studies are trustworthy, that large-scale double blind studies are necessary and more meaningful than individual experience, and that scientific evidence matters. To convince them of this, I would argue, we need them to learn openness and trust as much as criticality. We cannot ignore the fact that their suspicions about science form a world view, with historical and political origins, that will not wither away when confronted with first-order evidence. Students who subscribe to this world view need to be offered, and must be open enough to accept, a new world

view, in order to change their minds.

Of course, we have not been examining cases where students are open to different beliefs, and unsure about which of several options to choose; but rather cases where they are certain of their viewpoint and closed to any other possibility. When James refers to the will to believe, he is writing specifically about situations in which beliefs are living hypotheses. We may be agnostic about God, but that simply means that belief in God and nonbelief in God are both live options to us. In that situation, we can, and should because of the potential gains, will to believe that there is a God. But we cannot will to believe something that we feel to be a dead option. In these sorts of cases, we may be ruled by our passions, but our passions are not of our own choosing, but are rather determined by, say, childhood experiences and basic human needs. This is of course how Freud (most disapprovingly) explains belief in God, and it may also explain the overly critical and somewhat suspicious worldview of many of my students.

Interestingly, James does not discuss what we might do to make something a live option, but surely something along such lines must be required to escape unproductive passional beliefs. Following Freud, we might argue that one must first become aware of the habits of thought that are preventing openness to other points of view. Critical thinking texts and students alike (i) deny the passional nature of their own thought; and (ii) remain closed to other passional beliefs. In acknowledging this, students (and their professors) take the first step to openness towards other frameworks, theories, and beliefs.

Such a reflection would be meta-critical. Ultimately, however, a creative act of will—an effort to see the world in a different way, in terms of a new positive theory, heuristic, or worldview—is required. Students can realize that they are rather suspicious of government and authority, but it requires a further move to take on a more positive view, which can then prove itself to be fruitful. In order to encourage this step, the outcome of which students cannot know before they take it, instructors must offer positive reasons. Instructors must offer these views as wholes, and give pragmatic and aesthetic reasons for accepting them rather than evidential ones. They must discuss the merits and benefits of looking at the world in this way; they must persuade and enchant.

III

In order to be persuaded by their instructors, of course, students must trust them, and this leads us back again to concerns about students' lack of faith in authority figures. In this section we will discuss the importance of students' being open to the Other, whether that takes the form of instructors or, as in the case of Gadamer's philosophy, texts. James had something to say about this issue is well, for one kind of belief that cannot wait for sensible proof, and thus must be willed, are what James calls beliefs "concerning personal relations, states of mind between one man and another" (23). As he writes:

Do you like me or not?—for example. Whether you do or not depends, in count-

less instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, as the absolutists say, ad extorquendum assensum meum, 10 ten to one your liking never comes...The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. (23-24)

All changes in worldview are at least somewhat of this nature. One cannot know what benefits a new lens will bring, as mentioned in the previous section, without putting it on and looking at the world through it, and one cannot put it on casually or easily. An effort of will without proof of certain reward is required. But relationships, including relationships between instructors and students are particularly this way, with trust having to come before proof that trust is worth giving, which naturally compounds the problem, for students who are reluctant to trust their instructors are thus doubly reluctant to try on a wordlview that their instructors recommend to them. 11

Critical thinking texts, in encouraging students to be generally critical, give them the grounds upon which to justify being more particularly critical of their instructors. This is a real problem in instructing students who do not have much independent knowledge of the world's scientific and intellectual heritage, because without trust of their instructors they have little reason to make serious attempts to wrestle with this heritage. Calling these same instructors experts in their field, and stating that experts are to be trusted in noncontroversial matters, does not solve the problem for several reasons. First, virtually no interesting issue of worldview is noncontroversial in a broad understanding of field of expertise, and it is folly as well as circular reasoning to attempt to limit the field of expertise to those with particular educations or interests that would implicate their agreement. Should we only consider the views of sociobiologists on the genetic inheritability of social traits? They are the experts in the field, but their agreement is ensured by their entrance into the field. Second, students are aware of the shallowness of the expert culture, and the scrambling for prestige that takes place in its name. They know that being a qualified expert does not mean being a learned, knowledgeable, or trustworthy person; and that not being an expert does not mean being the contrary of these things. What is required here is precisely what is required, for Gadamer, for a reader in confronting a text. Critical thinking texts speak as if, when an expert makes an assertion that is generally accepted in a field, students should accept her word for it. But Gadamer was very suspicious of assertions. Assertions hide their origins; one cannot tell from an assertion that it is an answer to a past question, or that it might be further questioned in the future. Gadamer preferred conversation, or as Joel Weinsheimer writes, "the primacy of process over state and of question over answer" (200). Following this, we might say that instructors will gain

more trust from their students by admitting the provisional and arguable nature of their assertions, by admitting their own passional commitments to certain worldviews and theories, and by thus truly entering into equal conversation with their students.

Such a conversation would be an open one, one in which "the partners do not talk at cross purposes" (367). Gadamer decribes such a conversation:

To conduct a conversation ...requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion. Hence it is an art of testing. But the art of testing is the art of questioning. For we have seen that to question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the "art" of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion. (367)

It will involve not closed questions, in which the answers are predetermined by the participants' preconceptions, but open ones, in which the participants are capable of truly—that is to say, not casually—weighing and considering different possible answers. This does not mean that they are aloof, or neutral, about the opinions in question, and are willing to leave the matter undecided or accept any understanding of it. The participants have thoughts about it, but are willing to engage in a process in which those thoughts will be challenged. Thus, the conversational process is dual in nature, involving both the critical asking of questions and the open consideration of questions. Each participant not only asks questions of the other, but also allows the other to ask questions—including questions that test basic assumptions—of her or him. In order to have this kind of conversation, participants must have good will. They must be willing to allow the Other, whether text or speaker, to call into question their own prejudices.

Thus, in such a conversation, the instructor's students will be able to question him as he will be able to question them; in so doing, he will be acting out the role that he wishes his students to take on. Yes, such a instructor will be encouraging his students to be critical of him, in a fashion; but in return he will be opening up to his students, in listening to and taking seriously when students call into question his views. This is entirely different from the current state of affairs, as presented in critical thinking texts and, presumably, college classrooms throughout America, where instructors encourage students to be critical of everything, but refuse to take seriously—instead, heatedly defending against—those criticisms when turned against themselves. The crux to the difference is this: *instructors who are open to such questions are modelling openness for their students as much as they are modelling criticality; indeed, they are modelling openness more than criticality*. Instructors who argue against criticisms, heatedly defending their own point of view without taking any other point of view seriously at all, are only modeling criticality, and it is hardly surprising that their students would do the same, learning from their critical thinking class how to defend

against, but not be open to, points of view that differ from their own.

IV

Students need to develop this sense of openness and trust outside the classroom, as well, and for eminently practical reasons. Among the social entities whose existence depends upon our will to believe, according to James, are governments, armies, colleges, and sports teams, all of which exist because of our faith in them. He writes:

A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. (24)

James gives another powerful example: a train of passengers will only fight a robber if each one of him believes that the others will back him up. This certainly seems an unremarkable statement of fact; what we believe affects what we do, what we create, what we are. But unremarkable as it is, it, or at least its significance, seems in danger of being forgotten. If American students are so suspicious of the government and other societal institutions, then those institutions are in serious trouble, for we need their faith for those institutions to continue to exist. And this faith must come before it can be proved, because it is a part of what is required for the proof.

It is noteworthy, given this crisis of faith, that our institutions are retreating into purely technical concerns. The American media, for instance, approach political elections from an almost entirely technical point of view. Instead of discussing the issues, the media reports on what constituents think about the issues. More cynically, they report on what the candidates are doing to make sure that the constituents believe that they are the ones best responding to what the constituents think about the issues. When the media reports on the most egregious examples of politicians painting their views in the light most favorable to the electorate, it is almost with admiration at their proficiency. The media discusses how Democrats are making themselves look more like Republicans to curry moderate voters, and vice versa; but never about whether the Democrats or the Republicans have the better views, or, in short, are right.

Critical thinking texts are also guilty of this general abdication of responsibility. Indeed, there are remarkable similarities. Critical thinking texts that use examples from politics—the best example is Moore and Parker's popular text—retreat into purely technical discussions of reasoning and argument. Politicians who express themselves rhetorically rather than logically, like Ross Perot, are subject to heavy criticism for their bad arguments, with no discussion of the substance of their views. While Moore and Parker's text also discusses ad hominem attacks, there is little discussion of the fact that their (seemingly ad hominem) attacks on Perot's reasoning should not be taken as a refutation of his views or

of his value as a politician. There is little discussion that good ideas, even right ideas, can be badly expressed and defended, or that it might be incumbent upon good thinkers—rational, productive thinkers—to consider the substance of a politician's views even if they are not, in virtue of strong logic, of proven value beforehand. As with the media, the standard of value appears to be one of skill, of method, rather than truth, and avoiding obvious error seems to be more important than achieving the "blessings of real knowledge" (James 18). We might concur with Gadamer that we need *both* truth and method.

In my judgment, the media and college instructors avoid questions about what is worth believing, and instead focus on the nuts and bolts of belief and persuasion, because they are bedeviled by the same criticality that is affecting their students. Critical of every thought they might express, unconvinced that any amount of evidence that is realistically possible will be sufficient for conviction, especially in the face of increasing relativistic criticisms of what once were accepted truths, they find it simpler to focus on what is beyond question. Thus, instead of questions about ends and values, they focus on purely instrumental questions; or, where they cannot avoid discussion of ends and values, as in other types of philosophy classes, they simply give students the inclusive list of what philosophers have believed. But I believe that this has real, if unintended, consequences. Because it is not genuinely conversational, because it does not model for students the kind of conversation in which questions about real value take place, it leads to a lack of interest in such questions, or an inability to know how to be interested in such questions. In making politics seem cynical and technical, neither of which is likely to induce one to be interested in politics, it leads students away from the polling place. The same is true of the philosophy classroom, and the classics.

Of course, this analysis focuses specifically on American students. Students in other cultures may well be too trusting of instructors and the classics, and lack the critical skills necessary for asking questions in a Gadamerian conversation. The participants in such a conversation must not be too willing to take each other's statements as unquestionable assertions. Indeed, this may have been true of American students not too long ago. But the current state of affairs in America is worse, for while Gadamer is correct that good conversation and good thinking require both criticality and openness, James was even more right, I believe, when he privileged one side of this duality above the other. "I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world" (19), he writes,

> It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound. Not so are victories either over enemies or nature gained. Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf. At any rate, it seems the fittest thing for the empiricist philosopher. (19)

Notes

1 It is worth noting that the critical thinking texts that I discuss in this paper are quite good, if one assumes the framework in which they are written. It is this framework, and not the quality of the texts, which I am questioning here. I mean no insult to the fine work the writers have done to explain this framework to students. The description of the typical text relies on all the texts listed in the references, many of which I have used in my courses, but the most typical of them all is Moore and Parker.

2 Feldman has an interesting discussion of fallibilism, in which he defends the view that one can rationally hold false beliefs. But he later holds that it is the height of irrationality to choose to believe something by an act of will, comparing such a choice to the supposedly irrational reaction to a placebo. He is arguing directly against James here, though he never mentions that philosophers have disputed his position. Interestingly, placebos work.

3 Ruggiero has a full-fledged account of this issue in a section entitled "Even Experts Can Be Wrong" (48-50). One hardly thinks students need reminding of this fact.

4 Here James is quoting William Kingdon Clifford, the prominent 19th century mathematician and philosopher.

5 In this description of Quine's views, I am relying in part on the excellent discussion in Christopher Hookway.

6 I once asked a speaker at my university—a philosopher whose name I have since forgotten—about the penchant for conspiracy theories among the predominantly minority student body. He pointed out to me that there are notable conspiracies about which minority students are quite well aware, including the famous cases where minorities were used as medical subjects without their permission in the U.S.. Given these cases, it is hard to argue outright that is wrong to subscribe to such theories. It becomes a much more complex matter than that of responding, say, to irrational beliefs in extraterrestrial visits to earth, astrology, or ESP.

7 In the case of creationism, why should a student question their deeply held religious beliefs, on the word of college professors who themselves rarely discuss religious questions or even mention their own religious or anti-religious beliefs? It is true that religious belief need not entail creationism, but it would require taking a more complex path to accept the metaphorical, but not literal, truth of the bible, and all on the basis of authoritative scientific evidence rather than personal observations, by students who trust neither authorities nor science. Furthermore, many creationist authorities—with degrees, and unchallenged by others in the field of creationism—have already provided logically well thought out arguments that save the creationist hypothesis by tweaking auxiliary hypotheses and rejected certain choice bits of evidence. Radner and Radner give an excellent account of this. In the case of JFK, what professor can even begin to make headway into what has become a received truth? Quibbling with the evidence at the periphery of this

deeply held belief will leave the central core of it, which students are inclined to accept anyway on the basis of their suspicious worldview, intact.

8 Although it is outside the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to discuss Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty in relation to this point. In Kuhn, paradigm shifts require one to make an extra-evidential leap. In Rorty, there is much discussion of vocabularies, which might constitute worldviews. These two thinkers, however, are relativistic, and my point is not a relativistic one.

9 I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for his or her helpful comments about the dangers of taking an overly passional approach to epistemological questions. Of course we must be careful not to encourage irrational thinking and the reliance on inclination over evidence, where evidence is obtainable.

10Rough translation: almost wrestling approval from me.

11 Another example would be the relationship between doctor and patient. One has to trust doctors sufficiently to be willing to take the prescriptions and follow the directions they give; but it is only after taking these prescriptions and following these directions that one will feel better. This is particularly of note, given that there is greater distrust of doctors now than in the recent past, with many Americans rejecting, among other things, immunizations for their children.

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