Book Review

Critical Thinking: An Introduction to the Basic Skills by William Hughes

HANS V. HANSEN   *Brock University*

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This introductory text is divided into four parts: Introduction, Meaning, Assessing Arguments, and Applications. The introduction informs us that the "primary focus of critical thinking skills is on determining whether arguments ... have true premises and logical strength" (p. 10). The skills are divided into those of interpretation, of verification and of reasoning. They all involve the application of the principles of logic, but this application introduces a "host of special problems that take us beyond the domain of formal logic" (p. 13). Thus, in Hughes' view, critical thinking is the skill, or skills, of evaluating arguments, outside the rarefied context of formal logic, by the standard(s) of soundness.

The second chapter, called "Meaning and Definition," gives a brief review of the referential, ideational and 'meaning as use' theories of meaning. It is quickly argued that the last of the three is the best and we are thus led to consider the different uses of language. Hughes identifies nine of them: descriptive, evaluative, expressive, evocative, persuasive, etc. Next, three kinds of definitions (reportive, stipulative, essentialist) are introduced and methods and criteria of definitions are discussed.

"Clarifying Meaning" is the name of the third chapter. It is mainly concerned with some traditional problems of language (ambiguity and vagueness) but also reviews the analytic, contradictory, synthetic classification of statements. The three opening chapters are quite traditional and well done, although inquisitive students will find some of the explanations to be too brief. But brevity is to be expected in an introductory text which tries to do many things. Anticipating discussions of argument analysis and evaluation with discussions of terms and propositions is a practice as old as the *Organon* and the *Port-Royal Logic*. The logician's approach to critical thinking still finds it the natural pattern of exposition.

Chapter 3, however, has something else of interest, namely, the Principle of Charity (PC) which is defined as follows:

> When our opponents are not present we have a moral obligation to follow the principle of charity, that is, to adopt the most charitable interpretation of their words. The most charitable interpretation is the one that makes our opponent's view as reasonable, plausible, or defensible as possible. According to the principle of charity, whenever two interpretations are possible we should always adopt the more reasonable (p. 49).

This statement of PC is too strong for two reasons. First, it makes all argument interpretation (in the absence of the speaker) a moral matter, and secondly it demands so much charity that we run the

risk of minimizing the real differences between our opponents and ourselves. Agreed, some intentional misinterpretations do deserve moral reprimand, but many, or most, show no more than a temporary blindness or a failure to appreciate the background. Such shortcomings are also wrong but it is a wrongness that is to be understood against the background of argumentative rationality, not morality. The second point, how PC should guide argument interpretation and reconstruction, is that it should assume a minimum of rationality on the part of the speaker and interpret his problematic utterances with a view to coherence of his overall viewpoint. If it is not possible to reach an adequate interpretation of an argument by these lights, it is better to declare the argument unclear and leave it alone. Making every argument that needs interpretation as "defensible as possible" – as Hughes directs us to do – runs the risk of imbuing our opponents with our own good sense more often than fairness requires.

Chapter 4 introduces argument interpretation. Arguments are first distinguished from explanations and then a nice distinction, corresponding to that of use-mention of a term, between arguments and reports of arguments is introduced (p. 74). The heart of the chapter, however, consists in the introduction of a method (owed to Stephen Thomas) that directs the analyst to diagram an argument in one of three ways. The simplest case is from one premiss to a single conclusion; the other two involve multiple premises and Hughes calls them, respectively, T and V argument structures (because of the capital letters their diagrams resemble). An argument whose premises form a T are such that "if either premiss is false then the other by itself would provide no support for the conclusion" (p. 83) (but note a weaker version of the criterion on p. 81). The bar of the letter T indicates that the premises work together, that is, are linked or dependent on each other. When the premises and

conclusion of an argument form a V (a convergent argument) then the falsity of one of the premises does not undermine the support the other premiss(es) give. (The theoretical plausibility of a neat distinction between T and V arguments has been questioned, but it is still thought to be a useful tool of argument analysis by many informal logicians.)

Chapter 5 begins the part of the book which is specifically devoted to argument assessment. Here we are (briefly) presented with two alternative approaches, the fallacies approach and the criterial approach. The fallacies approach is said to be inferior for at least two reasons: (i) "there is no limit to the number of ways in which an argument can fail to be sound ...[hence] ... We can never be sure that our list of types of fallacies is complete" (p. 94), and (ii) the fallacies approach is negative in nature (p. 95). I cannot resist two short comments on this. The first complaint against fallacy approaches arises because of Hughes' adopted concept of fallacy as "any error or weakness that detracts from the soundness of an argument" (p. 94). The traditional concept of fallacy, from Aristotle to Copi, includes at least one or both of the requirements that the argument seems better than it really is, and that the kind of mistake occurs with noteworthy frequency. Either requirement limits the extension of types of fallacies significantly, and so, traditionally, the list of fallacies is not thought to be co-extensive with a list of all the kinds of faults that can trouble an argument. The second problem is that Hughes leaves the impression that there actually are advocates of the fallacies approach that do not think that it should be supplemented with, or be subservient to, positive criteria. Hardly anyone, with the exception of Henry Sidgwick's less well known cousin Alfred, has ever entertained the thought. In the end, like others before him, Hughes takes the criterial approach as basic and uses the familiar fallacies to illustrate noteworthy kinds of violations of the criteria of a good argument.

Where do the criteria come from? They stem from the logician's concept of a sound argument (= a logically strong argument with true premises), now analyzed as three conditions of premises, individually necessary and jointly sufficient: premises must be (i) acceptable, (ii) relevant, and (iii) adequate (p. 97). (Those familiar with the texts of the last decade will find these three conditions familiar from Johnson and Blair's *Logical Self-Defense* and Govier's *A Practical Study of Argument*.) Presumably Hughes' claim that the three criteria are independent (p. 97) means that any one of them could be satisfied whilst the other two were not. This does not seem to be true. How could the premises offer adequate support for the conclusion without being relevant to it? Hughes does acknowledge (p. 222) that it is sometimes hard to distinguish failures of relevance from failures of adequacy; regrettably, this difficulty, as we shall see, infects some of his illustrations. Chapter 5 concludes with seven general rules for assessing arguments (identify the main conclusion, the premisses, the structure, etc.).

Chapters 6 to 8 undertake the development of the three criteria of a sound argument. The sixth chapter, which is to develop the criterion of premiss acceptability, begins with a review of three theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic) and their respective shortcomings. Truth, however, is required only for proof and in many contexts it is sufficient that our premisses are acceptable (p. 113). A premiss is acceptable in a context if it is justifiable in that context, but there are "varying standards of acceptability, depending upon the nature of the statement and the context in which it is made" (p. 113). This seems reasonable enough but unfortunately only four pages are given over to a discussion of what the different kinds of context might be. Professors must meet a higher standard of premiss acceptability than their students; some premisses acceptable in a seminary will not be acceptable in the philosophy seminar. "Deciding what kind of support

is required by the context is largely a matter of common sense" (p. 115), says Hughes. That may be true too, but it is not very satisfying in a book that is supposed to give us some of the practical conceptual distinctions useful in argument evaluation. What is needed here is the articulation and refinement of the principles that guide our common sense judgments about the varying standards of premiss acceptability. The chapter ends with a discussion of the four fallacies thought to violate the criterion of premiss acceptability: begging the question, inconsistency, equivocation and false dichotomy.

Relevance is the topic of Chapter 7. Premisses are relevant to the truth (or acceptability) of a conclusion "if they make it more likely that the conclusion will be true" (p. 130). Hughes goes on to illustrate the criterion of relevance by appeal to examples.

> Tom Thompson is a better artist than Jack Shadbolt, because Thompson's paintings usually sell for a higher price than Shadbolt's (p. 132).

Says Hughes: "there is no reason to believe that the price of an artist's painting always or even usually reflects the quality of the artist." (p. 132) This is Hughes' reason in support of the claim that the argument has an irrelevant premiss. Surely, however, even if Hughes' reason is true it leaves room for the very plausible proposition that price *sometimes* reflects the quality of the artistic product. And if it does, then price is a relevant, although not a decisive indicator, as Hughes seems to admit when he remarks that the quality of the artist is only one factor in determining the price of a painting (p. 132). The notion of adequacy, it seems, has crept into the discussion of relevance at an early stage.

Three pages later Hughes wants to demonstrate the irrelevance of appeals to popularity.

> Well, obviously capitalism is the most efficient economic system ever devised by humankind. Everybody knows that.

Taken literally, this seems to be a non-trivial, deductively valid argument and hence not an example of a failure of relevance; however, charity requires that we interpret the premiss as, "Everybody *believes* that ...", thus bringing the argument down a notch from a deductive connection to an inductive one. Even so, the problem the argument suffers from is not irrelevance but rather that of having an unacceptable premiss which, were it true, would provide less than strong support for the conclusion. In sum, the reader does not get a very clear idea, from either the exposition or the examples, of what the criterion of relevance demands.

The chapter devoted to premiss adequacy, Chapter 8, begins with the observation that, unlike acceptability and relevance, adequacy admits of degrees (p. 148). Since what passes for adequate support in deductive, inductive and analogical arguments differs, it may be wise to jump ahead to the next two chapters (deduction and induction, respectively) before asking students to make judgments about adequacy in the examples presented. The fallacies Hughes associates with failures of adequacy are the causal fallacies, and they receive a brief discussion. The chapter contains an interesting suggestion about appeals to ignorance. Premisses to the effect, "it is not known that *p*", do not by themselves adequately support the conclusion that not-*p*, but they can be used together with other premisses for "not-*p*" to give additional strength to an argument. Since ignorance premisses provide no support on their own, when they are used to give additional support it must be in a T (linked-premiss) argument.

Chapters 9 and 10, in turn, take up deductive and inductive reasoning. Hughes stresses the importance of form to deductive validity and then lists four basic truth-functional valid forms (p. 175). There is one example (p. 178) of how one might use the forms to show that an argument is valid, but nothing that could be called a method.

Potential users of this text should know that it has no truth tables, no semantic tableaux and no syllogisms. The chapter ends with the illustration of two formal fallacies, denying the antecedent and affirming the consequent. Like George Washington, who couldn't tell a lie, philosopher Hughes finds it hard to even mention an invalid argument. His example (p. 180), meant to illustrate affirming the consequent, turns out to be a nice instance of *denying* the consequent.

The short chapter on inductive reasoning (Ch. 10) is a quick introduction to the familiar forms of inductive arguments and some of the associated rules for their evaluation. Again, my intuitions about premiss adequacy and acceptability – especially with regard to the examples presented – differ sharply from Hughes'.

Chapter 11 counts moral reasoning as a third type of reasoning beside deductive and inductive reasoning, but why it is different is never made clear. One hypothesis is that a kind of reasoning is a distinct type if the three general criteria – acceptability, adequacy and relevance – must be especially tailored for the kind. For example, deductive and inductive reasoning are different types of reasoning because inductive adequacy is not the same as deductive adequacy. On our hypothesis moral reasoning will count as distinct from both deduction and induction for the reason that the standard of acceptability is different for the premisses of moral arguments than it is for non-moral arguments. This may well be Hughes' view for he points out that the conclusions of moral arguments depend on moral principles, and that one may accept either (some even accept both [p. 200]) formalist or consequentialist principles in moral reasoning. The upshot of this is that a moral principle serving as a premiss cannot be deemed unacceptable simply on the ground that it is, say, a teleological principle – something that an argument analyst should know. But there is more to Hughes' concept of moral reasoning: He views good moral thinking as good thinking done by a

moral person, and then gives eight characteristics of 'moral maturity' (pp. 213-16). But since some of these characteristics such as consistency, getting the facts straight, awareness of our own fallibility, etc., are as important in non-moral reasoning as they are in moral reasoning one does not really feel that here the character of moral reasoning rises into sharp relief.

The last part of the book, called "Applications", has three chapters. Chapter 12 is a brief account of three ways of arguing back. Two of these are negative: finding exceptions to generalizations, and showing invalidity by formal counter-examples. The third way is to invent a better argument for the opposite point of view. Hughes tells us that the three criteria of argument soundness provide the basics for how one should 'argue back' (p. 221) but he does not integrate the methods with the criteria, thereby missing a chance to give greater unity to the book. One of the negative methods falls under premiss acceptability, another one under adequacy. The last one does not seem to fit any of the three criteria which, in itself, is worth a remark to the student: the criteria of argument soundness does not fully equip you for the practice of argumentation.

Chapter 13 usefully reviews irrational techniques of persuasion: loaded and vague terms, misleading statistics, red herrings, persuasive redefinition, and some others. The final chapter on writing and evaluating essays brings the general theory of the book to focus in an instructive way that will doubtlessly benefit students who have worked through the first 250 pages.

Appendix 1 is a collection of seven paradoxes, including the liar paradox and the surprise examination paradox. This is followed by seven puzzles (with answers). All great fun, but what are they doing in *this* book? How does mastery of the preceding fourteen chapters help anyone in figuring out the solutions? Critical thinking skills *are* essential to solving problems like these, but the fact that this book provides little or no guidance for problem solving underscores the fact that its inventory of critical thinking skills is incomplete.

All the chapters in *Critical Thinking* have at least one set of exercises and, in addition, a set of harder questions for class discussion. Appendix 2 has the answers to the exercises only. The book is nicely printed on good paper and it has an attractive cover. Regrettably, the book has no index. Nor does it have or need a bibliography since the student is never referred to any of the historically important or new literature on argument evaluation and critical thinking.

There already are a great number of critical thinking texts on the market. Given that Hughes' *Critical Thinking* neither breaks new ground nor makes significant improvements to the many received wisdoms, it is difficult to imagine what special need it was meant to meet. Hence, apart from the fact that it covers much of the traditional material in a simple and pleasant way, there is no special reason to recommend this text.

HANS V. HANSEN
LIBERAL STUDIES
BROCK UNIVERSITY
ST. CATHARINES, ONTARIO L2S 3A1   ❏