Critical Thinking and Transcendence
Christina Hendricks, UW-Rock County
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I. Preliminaries

A. Transcendence in thinking (as I am using the term here) involves:

1. Thinking about thinking: a reflective process whereby we take something that we had previously utilized in thinking (e.g., beliefs, principles, values, methods, motivations, feelings) and make of it an object of thought; we hold it steady in thought long enough to examine it as if from a distance.

2. Moving beyond: the distancing involved in reflection is already a means of moving beyond whatever we are thinking about – we put it at a distance from ourselves, pull it out of its usual unconscious use in our processes of thinking and consider it in a new way.

3. Questioning and evaluating: the distancing movement of reflection does not get us very far beyond that which is made into an object of thought; transcendence also involves questioning and evaluating this object in terms of criteria and methods that are already accepted on other grounds – in order to decide whether to continue to use it in thought, to alter it, or to abandon it.

B. Conceptions of critical thinking (CT) as a process of transcendence, for the sake of freedom and autonomy in thinking: John Dewey, Harvey Siegel, Richard W. Paul, Ronald Barnett among others.

II. Question/disagreement in the literature on CT: How best to engage in transcendence through thinking?

We can locate (roughly) two sides in the current literature, each charging that the other does not promote enough transcendence in their conception of CT.

My purpose in this essay: I argue that these two sides are best considered as necessary, mutually-supporting aspects of CT as a perpetual process, a never-ending movement of striving towards the (impossible) goal of thinking in a purely impartial way.

III. The dispute between the two sides -- contextualists and universalists (my terms)

A. Contextualists – charge universalists with attempting too much transcendence, and thereby not achieving enough.¹

• by encouraging individuals to think from a purely neutral and impartial perspective, which is impossible – thinking is always embedded in particular contexts

• individuals may thus come to believe that they are thinking impartially when they are not, and end up strengthening, rather than questioning, their already-accepted beliefs and values

• contextualists thereby criticize universalists for acting as if we have achieved transcendence into a purely neutral, impartial realm of thinking when we have not (and cannot)

B. Universalists – charge contextualists with focusing too much on the contextual embeddedness of thought, thereby making transcendence of such contexts appear impossible when it is not.²

• contextualists may be right that we cannot have a purely neutral, “God’s-eye” perspective in our thinking; but this does not mean our judgments cannot ever have universal legitimacy or applicability (e.g., mathematical judgments and scientific laws)

¹ The arguments I am characterizing with the term “contextualist” can be found in various forms in works by Connie Missimer, Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, Henry Giroux, Richard W. Paul, Nicholas Burbules, among others.

² The arguments I am characterizing as “universalist” are represented in works by Harvey Siegel and Ronald Barnett; theorists who would likely be sympathetic to these views include Israel Scheffler and Robert H. Ennis.
• contextualists themselves appeal to moral principles (e.g., against oppression) and epistemological methods (logic, appeal to reasons) that are treated as if they are applicable across contexts, or perhaps even universally valid
• without at least some shared principles and methods we could not even communicate across contexts, much less consider alternative perspectives and approaches to our own (as the contextualists suggest we should do)

III. Finding a way in-between the sides of this dispute

A. My conception of CT and transcendence: It may be best to consider CT as a perpetual process of transcending, a never-ending movement of striving towards an (impossible) goal of pure impartiality and universality in thinking.
   • the contextualists and the universalists represent two seemingly conflicting, but mutually supporting and necessary, emphases and methods that drive CT as a perpetual movement

B. This view is inspired by Immanuel Kant’s notion of “ideas of reason” in The Critique of Pure Reason

1. “idea of reason,” according to Kant: “a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense-experience” (CPR, B 384). Ideas are concepts posited by reason as necessary for guiding thinking, but which we can never meet with in experience, and therefore of which we can never have knowledge
   • for example, unification of all knowledge into a system under a single principle is an “idea of reason” we can only ever approach “asymptotically” (CPR, B 691); yet perpetually striving towards this goal is useful for organizing knowledge under more and more general concepts

2. To strive towards the idea of unifying knowledge into a complete system under a single principle, we must pay attention to both homogeneity and similarity (in order to unify individuals under concepts as genera), and to heterogeneity and difference (in order to determine the limits of each genus and to distinguish within them various subspecies).

C. Connecting Kant to the dispute between universalists and contextualists

1. I consider the goal of thinking purely impartially and universally along the lines of an “idea of reason”; a goal we can only ever approach asymptotically, which can guide our thinking in useful ways (it helps us recognize and move beyond partiality).
2. Critical thinking is thus a perpetual process of striving towards this goal, where we both appeal to principles and methods we presume to be universal in order to think as impartially as possible, while also recognizing that they may not be so – both universalist and contextualist approaches are necessary.
   • need universalist emphasis on general, purportedly universally valid principles and methods, to point towards the goal, to show that we can and do make progress towards it
   • need contextualist emphasis on recognizing differences in order to point out the need to test the purported universality of principles and methods

IV. Conclusion

Universalist and contextualist approaches to CT are put into a productive tension under this view – both methods and emphases are necessary to strive towards the goal of impartiality, and their pull in opposing directions may help keep each from going to extremes (if, that is, they pay attention to each other). This tension is less productive if each side fails to recognize their contributions to a cooperative enterprise, and insists that their approach is the only useful one.

3 References to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason are by paragraph reference numbers for the “B” edition of this text. Translations used are from the 1965 translation by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press).