



Book Reviews

RICHARD L. EPSTEIN with CAROLYN KERBRGER, **Critical Thinking**, 3rd Edition, Advanced Reasoning Forum, 2012, 464 pp., ISBN-10: 1938421000, ISBN-13: 978-1938421006.

RICHARD L. EPSTEIN, **The Pocket Guide to Critical Thinking**, 4th Edition, Advanced Reasoning Forum, 2011, 162 pp., paperback ISBN-13: 9780981550770, ISBN-10: 0981550770, ebook ISBN-13: 9780981550787.

Richard L. Epstein with Carolyn Kerbrger, *Critical Thinking*.

As the need for foundation level courses increases across universities around the world, and there is, on the whole, more recognition that early year students ought to be provided with a thorough, broad academic skill set before they embark on further study, this book and books like it will find an increasing audience. A general text aimed at filling gaps in any thinker's basic skills as well as providing a solid ground for beginners new to academic writing and thinking, the book manages to be both accessible for early university learners and also work as a sturdy backbone for a substantial full term course in reasoning well.

The tone is approachable and conversational, almost chatty, throughout; with liberal sprinklings of gentle humour, which will likely appeal to younger students in particular. The introduction is especially engaging, providing plenty of incentive to read on via appeals to everyday situations which provide immediate interest and evidence supporting the strong rationale for the subject offered: e.g. “[to] sharpen your judgement, and show you that the methods of evaluating reasoning apply to much in your life” (p. 2).

Indeed, the writing style is so direct and personal that it, at times, leads the content more toward moralising rather than direct teaching. This though, may not necessarily be judged a drawback, depending on

taste and teaching style. The following paragraph, discussing criteria for accepting or rejecting claims, in the form of an imagined dialogue between reader and author gives a quick example of both the former and latter mentioned features: “[reader:] Oh, we get the idea. Don’t trust politicians. [author:] No. It’s a lot closer to home than that. Every rumour, all the gossip you hear, compare it to what *you* know about the person or situation. Don’t repeat it. Be rational, not part of the humming crowd” (p. 84). Students will, I predict, enjoy this sort of straightforward, even bold advice giving, if only for the refreshing change it makes from the careful hedging and neutrality characterising a great deal of similarly placed general academic texts.

Another example can be found on page 185: “If you reason well you will earn the respect of the other, and may well learn that the other merits your respect too”. There is something quite compelling about such ethical undertones (or, perhaps more accurately, overtones) that helps set the book apart as a particularly lively and thought provoking journey through the basics of practical reason.

On the whole, the ground covered will be familiar to anyone with a working knowledge of critical thinking and academic argumentative writing skills, but this basic ground is set within some notable context. This includes the moral angle just mentioned, but also a rather vast number of exercises and examples. These are paired with comprehensive sample lessons and assessments complete with full sample answers and also including the sort of teacher feedback such answers could expect to have received. These lessons display an unusual depth of analysis and so, especially when taken together with the practical, rational and moral advice throughout the main text, they go a long way toward setting this particular book apart as an exceptionally comprehensive teaching tool.

Another quite novel innovation of particular note in this regard are the cartoon examples and exercises, requiring the student to respond to visual cues and analyse possible real-life situations as depicted in a cartoon or cartoon series. These visual and interpretive exercises serve a number of teaching goals and go a long way toward illuminating the host of assumptions and simplifications we tend to make in our ordinary, everyday existence. The cartoon examples and exercises also serve to develop writing skills by supplementing direct lessons on how to write good arguments with picture scenarios to analyse and represent in text.

Indeed, the conversational and approachable tone along with the added dimensions offered by the modern, thought provoking examples;

the thoroughly worked exercises; and the visual, interpretive dimension added by the cartoons, combine to create what could be considered, in these important respects, a quite revolutionary volume. This is especially apparent in the way in which the cartoons and the practical moral advice in particular almost qualify the work as not only a critical thinking handbook, but also as a sort of general social-skills manual. On top of this the writing exercises, with their focus on the translation of thoughts to a well structured argument on the page, ensure that the text can indeed be offered as a broader general academic skilling text. On the whole, great value for money!

As a thinking and teaching tool, the cartoons deserve further discussion. They open, I think, the range of usual applications offered in critical thinking texts to cover a far wider set of circumstances, arguably more reflective of the situations encountered in real life than those usually presented in written examples. The sorts of skills tested in the analysis and interpretation of the cartoons can include: the rigorous reading of all the available information at one's disposal; the careful navigation of one's underlying assumptions; the analysis of when and why other's actions and facial expressions may have occurred; and the (often corresponding) analysis of the various visual components involved in the building and negotiating of relationships in general. In sum: the careful consideration of a range of possible everyday judgements and the evidence supporting those judgements (or the lack of such evidence). I am very much inclined to believe that the cartoons, along with the ample exercises and examples, will in fact work just as they are claimed to in the preface: "[to] help the students grasp the ideas much faster [and to relate] theory to the needs of students to reason in their own lives".

Regarding the academic content, on the whole, the text is conservative and takes the default position of toeing the classical line. For example, in the section on repairing arguments, we encounter the claim (without caveat): "when premises contradict each other and can't be deleted, there's no way to repair the argument" (p. 67). Paraconsistent logicians would disagree. On the other hand, there are quite a few detours into grey areas and the actual subtlety of the otherwise seemingly black and white prescriptive claims typically made in the name of reasoning well. Indeed, the overall impression one gets having read this particular text is one of being offered a primarily realistic and practical, hence (in this context) flexible tool set for navigating a host of actual situations, both social and academic.

That is, one can interpret the advice being offered as contingent rules of thumb to aid (often quick) rational decisions, rather than as unbreakable laws of a static structure of Reason. And, so long as the reader works within this sort of interpretation, the conservative content can quite readily be regarded less as classical stricture and more as an expression of the apparent stability of socially constructed, inter-subjective norms. Epstein admirably allows, for example, that “not every good attempt to persuade is an argument” (p. 66), and suggests to the reader the possibility that reason and rationality may be a “western value”, even offering suggested further readings on that subject (p. 77).

Richard L. Epstein: *The Pocket Guide to Critical Thinking*.

The pocket guide is by and large a distillation of the larger work, with some added bonuses (such as the chapter on evaluating risk — an expansion on the comments on risk in the larger work — which is a useful and concise analysis of the myriad of skills involved in evaluating risk well). It is, though, also a fully stand-alone volume covering all the basic skills for practical reason. There are less fully worked assessment examples than in the larger work, although the host of mini-examples given throughout each section will serve well as similarly useful teaching tools.

The *Pocket Guide* similarly represents (although, again, in distilled form) the overarching conservative stance of the larger text, while (also in common with the larger text) retaining a strong accessibility and relevance. While there are a number of examples one could use to illustrate these dual characteristics, one such example, which is found from pages 24–26, does a particularly good job. This struck me as a particularly clear case of the two aspects coming together in one passage. The content of the relevant section gives us a pertinent modern example: evaluating the truth of claims of a conspiracy theory about Muslim terrorists. Just preceding this example, though, we encounter the conservative claim: “The standard fare of conspiracy theorists is to think that because it’s possible, it’s true” — bracketed by another such just after the example — “with conspiracies, we can be pretty sure evidence will eventually come out”. Thus, the one section incorporates a lovely engagement with modern issues with a rather censorious conservatism. I imagine experts on conspiracy theories lining up with the aforementioned paraconsistent logicians to voice their protest in turn.

Where the larger text draws the reader deeper into extensions and side alleys with expanded discussions, lists of further readings and comprehensive appendices (the last giving the reader an incentive to venture into formal logic), the *Pocket Guide* sticks to concise summaries and short catch phrases.

Both books are supported by a web site:

<http://www.AdvancedReasoningForum.org>.

In conclusion, as critical thinking manuals, these two texts stand out for their approachability, thoughtful examples and engagement with the moral and ethical dimensions of reasoning well. Both end (ignoring for a minute the useful dot-point ‘writing well’ summary in the *Pocket Guide*) with a chapter entitled ‘making decisions’. The content and tone of this short chapter capture a great deal of what I found to be most appealing about the books. There is an exhortation to readers to carefully consider pros and cons in real-life decision making (including the careful consideration of the option of doing nothing at all: “which may have serious consequences”), to heed ‘gut reactions’ and to systematically construct and test the arguments we regularly, albeit implicitly, offer ourselves in a wide variety of our own specific life-decision making processes. All this is capped off with a solemn reminder to reason well “with those you love and work with” and that to do so depends, not just on critical thinking, but on the practice of virtue.

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