

Difference is important tool 'for arriving at truth': professor

By H. Kaji and J. Heirannia

TEHRAN — Professor Eric Thomas Weber believes that "difference is one of the most important tools for arriving at truth that we have."

"The more controlled inquiry is by centralized power, the less we can benefit from the different voices and insights that people have," Weber, assistant professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, told the Mehr News Agency.

Following is the text of the interview:

Q: How do you criticize different views?

A: The first thing that I should say is that the language of criticism and of argument is often associated with fighting or negativity. It is very important to distinguish these everyday senses of criticism and argument from those that are simply the components of intelligent inquiry. Plato emphasized that discussions with others reveal great differences in how each of us experiences or thinks about things. Thus, when one person explains that he or she sees a matter differently than how you have expressed or implied the matter to be, that is only natural. Plus, that difference is one of the most important tools for arriving at truth that we have. The more controlled inquiry is by centralized power, the less we can benefit from the different voices and insights that people have. This is why even in criticism, we want different views to be voiced freely.

It is in this context that I would say that I approach criticism as a central tool for inquiry into truth and ethics. So, if I were to approach criticism in a negative, disrespectful, or combative way, I would

be acting against the interests for which criticism is socially virtuous. Whenever I hear a view that runs counter to my own, I try to understand why one might see the world in the way that the speaker or writer does.

I approach criticism constructively. I seek either to find for myself what I can learn in a different point of view or to correct mistakes where I see them for the benefit of the author or speaker. Often these two goals are intertwined. Most teachers I know will agree that they know their subjects better because they have had to teach them, to learn from students about many perspectives from which one could understand a subject matter differently.

Q: In criticism do you focus on propositions or reasoning?

A: When I critique different points of view, I certainly consider both the author's propositions and his or her reasoning. It is important, however, not to leave the matter there. For, it is often the case that the reason for which a view or claim was made can only truly be understood given the context in which it arose. In other words, a lesson that was helpful at one time might be damaging to follow in another.

A common example of the need to understand a set of views in context is Thomas Hobbes, who held an uncommon view regarding the idea of the social contract. He believed that life is brutal and short in the state of nature. We fight human beings' natural tendencies and leave the state of nature in a hurry, under the rule of a powerful leader whose value is especially to bring stability to a country. When we recall that Hobbes lived in a time of unrest and instability, we can better understand his motivations. When we have stable societies, however, it is reasonable to ask whether alternatives to a sovereign's claims are reasonable or could be improved.

So long as we consider the contexts in which arguments arise and the purposes they aim to address, yes, it is invaluable to ask ourselves whether the particular propositions that an author has offered are true, reasonable, or valuable to consider and apply today. When we lay out the propositions that an author proclaims, furthermore, it becomes easier to judge whether or not the ideas together are consistent, whether contradictions or conflicts arise between competing claims. Thus, the idea that it is reasoning rather than claims that should be evaluated might imply that these are separate ideas, when in fact they work together.

Q: Do you have some ethical codes for criticizing views?

A: There are two fundamental forms of ethical codes for criticizing views. The most substantive in terms of specific content are the norms of civility. The

norms of civility include at least three basic tenets. The first calls for the respectful engagement of people who have different points of view with clear and intelligent communication. The second asks us to treat other people with respect, as persons deserving consideration of their views and of dignity. Finally, the third demands that we respect important social institutions, so long as those institutions allow the first two tenets of civility to be followed. In sum for this first set of ethical codes, there is an implicit need in society for people to endeavor together to have a stable, just, and prosperous community, one which allows freedom for others and the ability for people to seek their own flourishing and happiness. At the same time, it would run counter to the norms of civility simply to force people to be civil through uncivil means. Thus, given the tenets of civility, we must permit people who are uncivil some freedom, so long as they do not significantly harm others.

In this context we see the reason for the second moral code for criticizing beliefs. The second approach is far less specifically prescriptive. In fact, we call it a proscriptive theory insofar as it describes those kinds of criticism that it would disallow, rather than which criticism it would recommend. As I have said, some people will wish to do without even the very tenets of civility. When this is true, we must decide how far we will let people go in their disavowal of the virtuous cooperation of citizens. Can we allow one person's anger and interests to override the aims of the vast majority of citizens? The proscriptive theory we call libertarianism would argue that even when people are uncivil, it is not unreasonable to let them be so, as long as they do not harm others. For instance, if a person criticizes another simply because he or she disagrees with a belief you hold, that is one thing. It is quite different, however, when a person slanders your character falsely and causes you great harm to your livelihood. The libertarian approach to criticism would say that we should maximally allow freedom in criticism to go on, so long as that criticism is not causing undue harm to people.

How we understand harm is the difficult question, of course. The conservative religious leader might say that his followers are harmed when a person criticizes their practices. At the same time, however, to be closed to receiving criticism appears to imply that one's practices are perfect or that it is important to continue practices that may be unjust because of some other benefit. The first response is hubris, for no practices are perfect. The latter response is one which engages in reasoning that could only be evaluated upon hearing the various sides of the issue in question — thus calling for free and open discussion

of the practices that were criticized. When we say that what we do is just and good, it should be able to withstand scrutiny. If it does not, then criticism was crucial for rendering an unjust situation more just.

The two ethical codes do not contradict one another. Instead, we can see that a person who believes in the tenets of civility might think that those who are uncivil at least can justifiably be stopped when their actions harm others. So long as uncivil citizens do not hinder the functioning of public action, those who practice civility can lead by example and benefit maximally from the free exchange of ideas for the benefit of all.

Q: Do you agree with this point that paper (and not book) is the main format of writing in humanities? Why?

A: In the humanities, the trends in formats for writing depend on the discipline in question. Sometimes they differ also depending on the area within a specific discipline. For example, it is more typical in the study of history to see books as the main format for writings. There are excellent articles in journals of history, but books are more often the format of choice, at least among the historians I know. The reasons why one format is more often chosen over another will depend on the purposes and requirements of the work. To complete a historical analysis may require the recounting of many details, which all together are necessary for creating the framework within which a thesis is defended.

In philosophy, there are many who see journal articles as the most important form of writing. The practice of writing for journals is certainly important and can also serve as a powerful tool for getting feedback on works that will become chapters in books after they are first published as articles. The main idea behind this practice is that scholars' work improves due to the feedback they receive. As in the dialogues of Plato, today there are conversations that occur in journals, with one article responding to another. The same could be said about books, but books' lengths make the conversations between them somewhat slower and more complicated to join. In philosophy, my field, there are scholars who find that books are the only format in which one can truly complete a sustained argument. At the same time, their books are written in steps, chapters, which sometimes can be read with benefit on their own. So even such claims leave open the benefit of publishing articles. The push for preferring articles in philosophy, by those who prefer them, is that the reader can focus on a narrow point and keep his or her efforts straightforward in analyzing the text.

(Read the complete interview on the *Tehran Times* website.)



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