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# Teaching Critical Thinking Virtues and Vices

## The Case for *Twelve Angry Men*

### Abstract

In the film and play *Twelve Angry Men* Juror 8 confronts the prejudices and poor reasoning of his fellow jurors, exhibiting an unwavering capacity not just to formulate and challenge arguments, but to be open-minded, stay calm, tolerate uncertainty, and negotiate in the face of considerable group pressures. In a perceptive and detailed portrayal of a group deliberation a ‘wheel of virtue’ is presented by the characters of *Twelve Angry Men* that allows for critical thinking virtues and vices to be analysed in context. This article makes the case for 1) the film being an exceptional teaching resource, and 2), drawing primarily on the ideas of Martha Nussbaum concerning contextualised detail, emotional engagement, and aesthetic distance, its educational value being intimately related to its being a work of fiction.

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### Introduction

<sup>1</sup>From a philosophy teacher’s perspective, the film and play *Twelve Angry Men* is unusual. While it is of course common to use scenes, storylines or characters from works of fiction to exemplify philosophical ideas (especially ideas from ethics, see Nussbaum 1990; Carroll 2002), rarely does a complete work of fiction provide the basis for an analysis of a sub-discipline of philosophy. In the field of critical thinking *Twelve Angry Men* has this potential. The aim of this article is to explain and justify this claim, and then to make a broader argument for the importance of fictional narratives for the teaching of critical thinking.

*Twelve Angry Men* was originally written as a TV play by Reginald Rose in 1954, and Sydney Lumet’s film version was released in 1957. It was critically acclaimed at the time, continues to be so, and there have been numerous stage adaptations (including variations with female cast members: *Twelve Angry Women*, *Twelve Angry Men & Women*). Almost the entire ninety minutes of the film is set in a jury room in a New York court. The twelve male jurors have sat through the trial of a teenage boy (from an unspecified ethnic minority) accused of murdering his father. Most of the jurors are convinced of the boy’s guilt and unprepared to discuss the case any further, but one member – Juror 8, played by Henry Fonda – is less sure. In his own words, ‘it’s not easy for me to raise my hand and send a boy off to die without talking about it first’ (1996, 8), but he might also suspect there is reasonable doubt about the boy’s guilt. Initially he manages to persuade the other jurors to talk about the case, and subsequent discussions gradually reveal holes in the prosecution’s arguments. One-by-one minds are changed, providing the basic plot structure: a swing from 11-1 in favour of guilty to 12-0 voting not guilty.

From the point of view of critical thinking the ways in which the jurors interact, respond to the accused and the accusers, and the extent to which they are willing to question their assumptions and the quality of their arguments, is what makes the film such a valuable resource. These features will be investigated and unpacked in terms of the conception of critical thinking I have elsewhere advocated (Hanscomb 2017); one that has critical thinking virtues and vices (and personal development more broadly) at its centre. Overall it will be argued that *Twelve Angry Men* is an exceptional tool for teaching critical thinking virtues and vices, and that this is in part because it is a fictional story. The sections of this article outline the elements of critical thinking, the nature of critical thinking virtues and vices, and how this set of virtues and vices manifests itself in *Twelve Angry Men*. Following this, the reasons why fictional stories can be so effective for teaching this subject will be discussed in terms of 1) the necessity of context and detail for facilitating appropriate depth in argument analysis; 2) the degree of engagement fictions engender as a counterpoint to what can be quite a dry subject area; 3) indirect communication’s potential for prompting independent thinking; and 4) benefits afforded by emotional distance, the balance literary form can strike between open-endedness and magnifying salient features (Nussbaum 1990), and how a self-contained narrative can provide a more equal starting point for students with differing degrees of life experience and general knowledge.

## Critical thinking

The discipline of critical thinking aims to teach the difference between good and bad reasoning, and to make us better deliberators and decision makers. Applied to the kinds of arguments put forward in academic, professional, civic, and personal spheres are forms of scrutiny that enable the critical thinking student to become a better reasoner. Information and skills regarding the identification, formulation and assessment of arguments improves our capacity for ‘reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do.’ (Ennis 1996, 166)

Critical thinking as a discipline can be synonymous with informal logic (the analysis of everyday arguments), but it can also be more broadly conceived as encompassing elements of the psychology of decision making, judgement and persuasion (which overlaps with rhetoric), argumentation theory (with its focus on dialogue), and virtue theory (Hanscomb 2010; 2017). Since this conception – what I am calling the ‘expansive version of critical thinking’ - is important for understanding the value of *Twelve Angry Men* as a resource, it is worth explaining a little more about each of these elements.

### 1. Arguments

The nature of arguments is core to the subject: defining them; explaining their importance for the formulation and justification of beliefs; and identifying, reconstructing, and assessing them. Basic to such knowledge and skills is an investigation of argument types; not just deductive, inductive and plausible arguments, but also what have been referred to as argument ‘schemes’ such as causal arguments, arguments from consequences, arguments from analogy, and ad hominem arguments (Walton, Reed, and Macagno 2008). In the assessment of these we come across fallacies – common and seductive errors in reasoning – such as confusing correlation and cause, equivocation, straw man arguments, false dilemmas, and weak analogies.

### 2. Psychological biases

An investigation into the increasingly well-understood psychology behind errors of reasoning (such as the confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance, anchoring, base rate neglect, social proof, and the effects of emotion on reasoning and decision making) accompanies a modern take on processes of decision making and persuasion. We are prone to errors in reasoning in part because we spend so much of our lives thinking quickly (Kahneman 2012). Quick thinking – which relies on heuristics - can be effective amidst the flow of familiar tasks and challenges, but will often let us down when new problems, or new aspects to old problems, arise. Awareness of our biases, and practice in identifying and analysing them, reveals the psychology underpinning many fallacies, provides personal insight, and helps protect us against those who seek to manipulate them.

### 3. Argumentation (dialogue)

In broad terms there are three situations in which critical thinking takes place: individual reflection and decision making; one-to-one dialogues (such as a typical Socratic dialogue), and group deliberations (such as *Twelve Angry Men*). Some knowledge and skills will apply to all three, but there will also be learning that is distinctive to each. For example, the field of argumentation (including Pragma Dialectics; and also see Gilbert 1997; Walton 1998; Mook & Marty 2001) is primarily interested in processes and rules that enable constructive dialogues, particularly the one-to-one variety; and there is a vast body of literature in psychology and communication on group decision making (including group polarization and groupthink). Also, within virtue theory, some important ideas around ‘group-deliberative virtues’ have been a topic of recent discussion (see below).

#### 4. *Virtue*

Critical thinking dispositions or virtues are character traits that enable good reasoning and decision making. They correspond to a sub-set of Aristotle's 'intellectual virtues', including: 'good deliberation' (*euboulia*), understanding (*sunesis*), and judgement (*gnōmē*); all contributing to practical wisdom (*phrōnēsis*). A critical thinking course that takes an interest in these can gain a distinctive depth (Paul 1984) and critical thinking virtues are proposed as a means of enhancing the transferability of critical thinking skills beyond the classroom. A good critical thinker is not just someone who understands informal logic and possesses skills of argumentation, but someone who appreciates their value for living well and aspiring to be a good person. Critical thinking knowledge and skills and critical thinking virtues should be seen to be mutually educative. The presence of certain virtues motivates and enables the development of critical thinking knowledge and skills, while learning about arguments, cognitive biases and dialogical considerations helps develop these virtues. For the person disposed to be a good critical thinker, a world in which critical thinking plays an important part is preferable to its opposite; and a person who encompasses this set of abilities in their personality and employs them at the right time and to the right degree, is a more admirable person than their opposite.

There are quite a few taxonomies of critical thinking virtues available (such as Ennis 1996; Facione 1995; Aikin & Clanton 2010; Aberdein 2010, 2016; Hanscomb 2017). Virtues commonly featured include commitment to truth seeking, inquisitiveness (or intellectual curiosity), open mindedness and a willingness to listen to others, tolerance of uncertainty, meta-cognition, humility, perseverance, and 'group-deliberative virtues' (Aikin & Clanton, 2010) such as temperance, wit, friendliness and courage. Unsurprisingly these virtues and their corresponding vices are particularly relevant to what can be observed in *Twelve Angry Men*.

Incorporating psychological biases, dialogue, and virtues into an analysis of arguments is, then, the basis of the expansive version of critical thinking. In contrast to critical thinking understood largely as a form of academic literacy, or confined to tools derived from informal logic, it provides both a more holistic insight into how reasoning works in everyday personal, professional and civic contexts, and a clear steer towards its relevance for self-reflection and personal development. We learn about features of our own psychology - aspects we share with others, and errors we are personally especially vulnerable to - and we are better equipped to understand and develop a subset of virtues and make decisions about the kind of person we want to be.

A complete picture of the nature of critical thinking and why it is important typically arises from a recognition of each of the elements of the expansive version of critical thinking, and from the learner's perspective, understanding how they interconnect is more satisfying than dealing with them independently, or only paying attention to some. The focus of this article is virtues and vices, but it is significant that *Twelve Angry Men* can equally well be used to teach argument structure and analysis, the psychology of judgement and persuasion, or features of constructive dialogues. As the examples below demonstrate, these aspects of critical thinking are strongly interrelated, and for this reason we should expect a detailed portrayal of critical thinking dispositions and their shadows to also reveal a great deal about arguments, fallacies, psychological biases, and group decision making.

#### **Critical thinking virtues and vices in *Twelve Angry Men***

*Twelve Angry Men* is a good example of Noël Carroll's 'wheel [or tableau] of virtue': 'a studied array of characters who both correspond and contrast with each other along the dimension of a certain virtue or package of virtues' (2002, 12). Carroll's view is that it is quite common in narrative art for characters to range from the highly virtuous through to the highly vicious. Those in between might display some virtues and not others, or particular virtues to differing degrees. In literary terms these strengths and weaknesses are often intrinsic to themes and plot lines, and contribute to a work's depth,

engagingness and relatability. Understood as thought experiments, they provide the moral theorist with a contextualised study of the nature, value, causes and consequences of certain virtues and vices.

As far as I am aware the only academic attempt to analyse *Twelve Angry Men* as a tableau is Roger Brown's in his excellent textbook *Social Psychology* (1986). It is found under the section on group polarization, and ostensibly serves as an example of the 'persuasive arguments' and 'social comparison' dimensions that explain this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> The resulting discussion is quite detailed and becomes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the functioning of epistemic virtues and vices. Two significant differences between Brown's analysis and mine are, however: 1) a specialist focus on existing categorizations of critical thinking virtues (and the ties between these and aspects of argumentation competency); and 2) an ultimate aim of judging the jury members as critical thinkers, rather than this being secondary to supporting a theory of social influence.

The film's tableau of virtue involves all twelve of the jurors, but inevitably there is greater focus on some than others. There are perhaps five who stand out, in part because of the number of lines they have, and in part because of their influence on proceedings. In each case this influence stems from strong personalities:

Juror 3 is aggressive, quick to anger, and prone to bullying. He is the last to accept the not guilty decision and seems to have held out so long because of displaced anger and grief felt towards his estranged son. As this suggests, despite the tough exterior he is also capable of loving and being hurt, and the portrayal of him by Lee J. Cobb in the film is ultimately very moving.

Juror 10 is the penultimate character to change his vote and does so under the pressure of extreme ostracism from the other members. He's an explicit racist, dogmatic and foolish, but quick to take offence and generally highly unpleasant.

Juror 7 switches vote somewhere in the middle of proceedings, but with the goal of speeding things up rather than any real view on the matter. He is disengaged throughout, keen to get to his baseball game, and like jurors 3 and 10 also irascible and defensive. He desires to retain some superiority over the other jurors and the situation despite his lack of engagement with the details of the case.

Juror 4 (along with Juror 8) is the other outspoken intellectual on the jury and remains the most logical, clear-headed supporter of the original guilty vote. As the arguments for a guilty verdict are defeated one by one his credibility makes him a keystone, and once his mind changes the day is effectively won. From the perspective of critical thinking virtues, the ways in which he differs from Juror 8 are, though, interesting, and will be explored below.

Juror 8 is the film's thoughtful, intelligent, calm and assertive central character. He persuades the others to spend time discussing what they have taken to be a forgone conclusion, persisting in his efforts to formulate arguments and, where necessary, enlist other forms of persuasion. In a sense he cajoles them through Deanna Kuhn's (1991) epistemic stages: from their initial faith in the single authority of the legal system (prosecution and witnesses); through their frustration in the face of the relativism his scepticism might appear to imply, and then, for many of them, an acceptance that they can reach sincere and credible beliefs through argumentation. Juror 8 is motivated only, it seems, by a desire for truth and justice, and is involved in most of the interchanges in the film.

To gain a deeper sense of the ways in which these characters reveal critical thinking virtues and vices through their arguments and dialogues I will present a set of examples. There are, by the way, many, many more lines, monologues, and sections of dialogue that could be used – the film really is packed with them. Anyone reading this who intends to use *Twelve Angry Men* as a resource can be assured that they and their students will be left with a vast pool of further examples for informing discussions.

(Note that the reference for each of these does not come from the film but from the Methuen version of the stage play (1996). The script is more or less identical to that of the film.)

### 1. *Juror 7's weak analogy*

Directly after the initial show of hands Juror 7 takes offence at the (mistaken) inference that it was 'easy' to vote guilty. He says 'I think the guy's guilty. You couldn't change my mind if you talked for a hundred years', which leads to this exchange:

Juror 8: I'm not trying to change your mind. It's just that we're talking about somebody's life here. ... we can't decide in five minutes. Suppose we're wrong?

Juror 7: Suppose we're wrong! Suppose this building fell on my head. You can suppose anything.

(1996, 8-9)

This analogy implies that just as in the normal run of life it is impractical or ridiculous to consider the possibility of buildings falling on our head, so it is impractical or ridiculous to spend time debating the boy's guilt or innocence. It would amount to a folly, or an intellectual game of no real-world relevance. The argument is poor though, and its potential impact on the form and direction of discussion is worrying. It contains a dangerously weak analogy, is highly reactive, exhibits irritation, selfish concern, short-termism, and a plain disregard for the nature and purpose of a jury.

This exchange is found early in the play and in many ways sets the scene for what Juror 8 must contend with. It is perhaps significant that Juror 7 is not someone of obviously low intelligence. On occasions he formulates much stronger arguments, and so we might suppose that the weakness of this effort is down to his emotional (exasperated) state of mind. This is in turn conditioned by some critical thinking vices, notably glibness, impatience, 'unwillingness to engage in argumentation' (Aberdein, 2016, 4), and possibly by a high 'need for cognitive closure' (Webster and Kruglanski 1997) - 'a need to reach a quick conclusion in decision making and an aversion to ambiguity and confusion' (Djikic, Oatley and Moldoveanu, 2013)).

### 2. *Juror 8's appeal to pity*

After reluctantly agreeing to spend an hour talking about the case, the jury still lack motivation or ideas. On a couple of occasions in the dialogue Juror 8 resorts to means other than transparent argumentation to provoke engagement, and at this juncture he effectively employs an appeal to pity:

this boy's been kicked around all his life ... living in a slum, his mother dead ... He spent a year and a half in an orphanage while his father served a jail term ... That's not a very good head start. I think we owe him a few words, that's all (1996, 9)

Due process of course dictates they would owe any defendant a 'few words',<sup>3</sup> so objectively, as Juror 4 later points out, this is a weak argument. Juror 8 most probably knows this, but he also knows there is room for pity towards the boy and that evoking this could motivate some support for his cause, at least to the extent of generating a sensible discussion.

This, then, is not an example of good critical thinking in any narrow sense, but it does demonstrate an important 'group deliberative virtue' – that of 'wit'. Wit is typically associated with humour,<sup>4</sup> but it also refers to 'mental acumen' in the sense of 'shrewdness' and an ability to work out and negotiate situations as they present themselves. Understood in this way it is a kind of practical wisdom that implies alacrity, cunning, and flexibility of thought – as in 'living by your wits' or 'out-witting' someone. 'Deliberative wit', as described by Aikin and Clanton (2010, 414-15), smooths off some of the self-serving edges this definition suggests, calling it 'the ability to think creatively, critically, and

constructively'. They flesh this out as being able to contribute to a group discussion in a way that is dialogical and inquiring rather than lecturing; that involves being supportive of others' ideas through building on their arguments, but also imaginatively pre-empting objections and being quick to respond should they arise. Crucially, though, this person is also 'engaging' - interesting rather than dull - and this further indicates the ability to be persuasive where necessary. In Juror 8's case he wants nothing more than an honest and thorough discussion, but to make this happen he is willing to use other means of winning people over (*pathos* in this case). This he achieves with the kind of delivery, content and timing that typify deliberative wit.

### 3. Juror 10's unwarranted generalisation and *ad hominem* argument

The following line of argument (if we can call it that) epitomises Juror 10's vicious personality:

you're not going to tell us that we're supposed to believe that kid, knowing what he is. Listen, I've lived among 'em all my life. You can't believe a word they say ... they're born liars.  
(1996, 9-10)

His hot-headed racism is linked to the vices of closed-mindedness, intemperance and poor self-knowledge, and generates endless examples of poor argumentation. In this case he commits an obvious unwarranted generalisation which forms the basis of an abusive *ad hominem* argument that has no place in jury deliberations. If we are to believe Juror 10 then the boy must be guilty, *a priori*, as soon as he says he's not.

A few lines above I qualified the use of the term 'argument' because a lot of what 10 says are maybe better understood as outbursts. Rather than being formulated to convince others of certain propositions through reasoning, they seem to be spontaneous utterances linked to deeper moral vices. In other words, he is unconcerned about evidence and arguments – his own or anyone else's – but wants to express his hatred for this ethnic group and a desire for harm to come to them no matter what the circumstances. When the depths of his feelings are finally displayed – 'I'm warning you. This boy, this boy on trial here. We've got him. That's one at least. I say get him before his kind get us. I don't give a goddamn about the law' (1996, 66) – he is ostracised by the other jurors.

### 4. *Elenchus* (1)

Because of his racist assumptions and repellent personality most of the other jurors soon stop listening to Juror 10. Helping this along is Juror 8's quick rebuttal when, a short while after the initial outburst discussed above, 10 cites the evidence of a witness of the same ethnicity as the boy:

Juror 8: You don't believe the boy. How come you believe the woman? She's one of 'them', too, isn't she?

Juror 10: You're a pretty smart fellow, aren't you?

(1996, 12)

In Socratic fashion, and serving as a further example of deliberative wit, Juror 8 discredits him by identifying and highlighting this contradiction. This is perhaps not a true *elenchus* because he is not actively manoeuvring his opponent into making contradictory claims, but it shares elements with it, including its resounding impact on the discussants.

### 5. *Elenchus* (2)

Jurors being forced into or otherwise finding themselves in positions where they contradict themselves is something of a theme in the film (see also 1996, 57, 59, 68, 73). One piece of evidence against the boy is the claim that before the murder he was overheard shouting at his father ‘I’m going to kill you’. Davis suggests that people say that sort of thing all the time without meaning it, but Juror 3 responds:

the kid screamed it out at the top of his lungs. Don’t tell me he didn’t mean it. Anybody says a thing like that the way he said it, they mean it. (35)

A little later however, after Juror 8 accuses him of having personal reasons for wanting the boy convicted and of being a ‘sadist’, Juror 3 explodes:

I’ll kill him! I’ll kill him!’

As he is being restrained Davis coolly retorts.

You don’t really mean to kill me, do you?

(1996, 47)

Confrontations stop short of physical violence, but as the film’s name suggests, verbal and non-verbal intimidation between jurors is a regular occurrence. Jurors 3, 7 and 10 are particularly quick to resort to forms of bullying, including sarcasm and threats. But non-verbal behaviours – aggressive tone, raised voice, sneers and finger pointing – are more frequently exhibited (especially by Juror 3), and can be just as damaging to constructive dialogues as verbal assaults. The implication is that if you disagree you are worthy of contempt. This is highly unpleasant to be on the receiving end of, and has the intent, or effect, of making people unwilling to express future disagreements. Analysed in terms of argument forms we might view such moves as implicit *ad baculum* arguments.

### 6. *Elenchus* (3)

The boy’s alibi was being at the movies at the time of the murder, but this is regarded as weak because he is unable to remember the name of the film. This is an important piece of evidence maintaining Juror 4’s support for the guilty verdict, and he is only made to reconsider when Juror 8 asks him to remember the name of a recent film he saw. He gets this wrong, even when under no emotional strain (57).

Juror 4 comes across as proud of his cool intellect, declaring early on how he ‘never sweats’. He is intimidating in a way that Juror 8 isn’t, and scores low on ‘deliberative friendliness’, and indeed on a range of critical thinking virtues, despite his objectivity. He shows little sign of the thinking ‘outside the box’ that Aikin and Clanton see as part of deliberative wit (2010, 414), and possibly lacks courage too. While Juror 8 constantly exposes himself to attack, 4 is quieter and perhaps more concerned with protecting his status. Robert Ennis’ first critical thinking disposition is commitment to truth, but excessive pride – the need to be right and maintain one’s status – can often impede this.

### 7. *Juror 8’s reciprocal concession*

A short while after using the appeal to pity to encourage at least some discussion of the case Juror 8 is again making little headway. His arguments are failing to gain traction and so he employs another rhetorical device. His bargaining position is not strong, but he has some power because a unanimous decision is needed. He uses this as leverage:

I have a proposition to make ... I want to call for a vote. ... If there are still 11 votes for guilty, I won't stand alone. ... But if anyone votes not guilty, we'll stay and talk this thing out.

(1996, 23)

This is an example of a reciprocal concession and is a common negotiating tactic. Negotiators, unless in an extremely weak position, will be reluctant to make a concession unless one is promised in return. In this instance Juror 8 offers the concession first – a reasonable one under the circumstances – and that way also gains some persuasive power through the norm of reciprocity. This norm is simply that, when given something, we will feel obliged in quite a deep-seated and immediate way, to give something back. Here Juror 8 has shown his hand and demonstrated a degree of respect and empathy towards the others. Under these circumstances it is hard for them not to grant him what is, on the face of it, quite a generous exchange.<sup>5</sup>

#### 8. *Juror 8's ethotic authority*

The person who changes his vote (Juror 9) at this stage does so not because he can understand how the boy might be innocent, but because

it's not easy to stand alone against the ridicule of others. He gambled for support and I gave it to him. I respect his motives. The boy ... is probably guilty, but I want to hear more.

(1996, 25-6)

This juror is siding with Juror 8 at this time because he is impressed by *him* rather than his arguments. Along with deliberative wit, Juror 8 has already demonstrated critical thinking virtues such as being truth-seeking, open minded, tolerant of uncertainty (he says "I don't know" a lot), temperate and courageous. It is possible that Juror 9 is explicitly aware of these virtues, but perhaps more likely that they have coalesced into a holistic impression of someone whose views should not be easily dismissed. This I elsewhere refer to as 'ethotic power' (or 'ethotic authority') (Hanscomb 2017, 147-53), and have proposed it as an addition to French and Raven's (1959; see also Raven 1965) well known taxonomy of social power (legitimate, expert, information, coercive, reward, and referent power). Juror 8 has no more legitimacy than any of the other jurors, has no specific expertise or (at this stage) relevant information, is not threatening or the possessor of rewards for agreeing with him, and is certainly not relatable to the others as referent power requires. But he has something, and in simple terms it amounts to being perceived as a good, or virtuous person, or at least as someone disposed to be a good critical thinker in the wider understanding of the term.

Though not in the language of virtue ethics, Roger Brown (1986) makes the point that with complex, multifaceted decisions with unknown variables, and where expertise in the usual sense is not applicable, part of our decision making is based on the qualities of other discussants. These qualities are transmitted by 'the great residue of action that goes beyond statement of relevant arguments.' (235). A consequence of Juror 8's ethotic power is that, under the right circumstances, and at the right time, he will be rightly imitated.

### **The value of narrative fiction and why *Twelve Angry Men* is such an exceptional resource**

So far an argument has been made that *Twelve Angry Men* serves as an excellent case study for examining the four elements of the expansive conception of critical thinking. I will now go on to claim that this owes a substantial amount to its being a work of narrative fiction; an argument that can be summarized as follows:

- Understanding critical thinking's relevance to everyday deliberations requires a lot of contextual detail.
- Education in critical thinking is assisted by (the right kind of) emotional engagement.
- Narrative fiction (e.g. novels, plays and films) can provide the right kind of detail and engagement.
- *Twelve Angry Men* presents an accurate portrayal of many elements of critical thinking in a way that has suitable contextual detail and is emotionally engaging.

The conclusion is then that *Twelve Angry Men* is an exceptional educational resource in this area.

Applied to critical thinking, and with reference to various theorists (but particularly Martha Nussbaum), these premises will be developed under several subheadings explaining the role of fiction in providing context, detail and emotional engagement, and in changing minds. Also examined are some advantages fictional stories have over non-fictional ones.

### 1. Context and detail

Often when using examples and thought experiments in philosophy – especially ethics – analysis is hindered by the need for more detail. Even quite a lengthy example such as Sartre's student (in *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948)) becomes unsatisfying when its initial richness provokes more questions than it is able to answer. On reaching this point we can switch to more sketchy hypotheticals, but then something else is lost. We want to be able to make an assessment of characters and situations that exist outside of our imagination and are less *ad hoc*; something that can sustain a life of its own, and either is, or could be, real.<sup>6</sup> 'By showing the mystery and indeterminacy of "our actual adventure"', Martha Nussbaum argues,

[novels] characterize life more richly and truly – indeed, more precisely – than an example lacking those features ever could; and they engender in the reader a type of ethical work more appropriate for life. (1990, 47)<sup>7</sup>

The short argument examples typically found in critical thinking textbooks present a similar problem. They are certainly useful for practicing argument identification and reconstruction, but not for evaluation. The same demand for more detail and context arises (see also Abrami et al, 2015). If we then consider the extended version of critical thinking that I have outlined, the problem is exacerbated. To investigate the interdependence of critical thinking skills, dialogue, psychology and virtues we need insight into who is arguing, not just the subject matter.

Several theorists have made the case for the value of literature in the philosophical study of virtues and vices. Richard Hoggart (1970) and Noël Carroll (2002) emphasise how literary 'thought experiments' (as Carroll calls them) help us articulate intuitive knowledge. Detailed and extended narratives allow our ethical intuitions to be 'brought explicitly into the foreground' (Carroll 2002, 8) or 'bring experience up fresh before us' (Hoggart 1970, 12), and that way '[render] our concepts newly meaningful' (Carroll 2002, 7).

Nussbaum argues that novels have special value for elaborating circumstances of incommensurability and conflict, exposing ways in which desire and emotion, and concrete particulars and chance happenings, are relevant to ethics. The kind of depth, detail, complexity and context found in certain literature helps develop our moral 'perception': 'the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's particular situation' (1990, 37). Where Carroll and Hoggart emphasize bringing clarity to intuitions or freshness to what is rusty or half-forgotten, Nussbaum advocates its

value for practicing the skill and habit of fine-grained observation and analysis. Fundamental to *phronesis* is that it ‘apprehends the ultimate particular, which cannot be apprehended by scientific knowledge, but only by perception’ (Aristotle 1976, 215). To these I would add that the right sorts of stories also help us raise questions that can be productively addressed by academic inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

In many respects *Twelve Angry Men* – a 90-minute film from a script of less than eighty pages – contrasts with the worlds of Dickens, Henry James, Melville, George Elliot, or E.M. Forster, that populate Nussbaum’s and Carroll’s analyses. But its brevity and linearity can be advantageous from an educational point of view. We are not afforded a fully rounded insight into any of these characters, but their critical thinking skills and dispositions are laid-out before us with ample breadth and depth. We hear and see their arguments, other comments and non-verbal signals, the reactions these give rise to, and the impact this has on deliberations. In varying degrees these reveal and lead us to ask questions about aspects of the psychology of persuasion and judgement, and about underpinning critical thinking virtues and vices. It is a rich seam for this area of inquiry, and if it is limited in other respects this does not speak against its being a high quality and educationally rewarding work of fiction. In my experience all of these things can go on when a student, new to the subject of critical thinking, encounters *Twelve Angry Men*.

## 2. Engagement, entertainment and persuasion

Another aspect of effective communication concerns how we facilitate people reaching their own conclusion on an issue. This does not necessarily mean there are multiple alternative conclusions that could be reached, but it does mean that the quality of those conclusions differs from those resulting from a less immersed or emotionally engaged form of knowing. If immersion improves the quality of knowledge, it also suggests we are engaged, or entertained. Nussbaum points out how

Schematic philosophers’ examples almost always lack the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness ... of good fiction; they lack, too, good fiction’s way of making the reader a participant and a friend ...’ (Nussbaum 1990, 46)

This absorption is an incentive to keep watching; stories appeal to our ‘experiential’ mind (Epstein 1998) in a way that theory does not, and this is particularly important for teaching an often dry subject like critical thinking.

While acknowledging quite significant methodological challenges in this area there is gathering empirical evidence for the transformative effect of fiction in comparison with non-fiction. For example, Djikic et al (2009) found greater changes to perceived personality traits and emotional states in participants who had read Chekhov’s *The Lady with the Toy Dog* (a story about an adulterous affair between two married people) than a control group who had read a non-fictional account (in the form of a court document) with the same content. The Chekhov and control groups found the story equally interesting, so the authors conclude that these differences are the result of the ‘artistic form’ (2009, 27). Moreover, their analysis indicates that it is changes in emotional states (across a wide spectrum of emotions) that mediate between the artistic form and personality changes; something that will be discussed further in the next subsection.

It has also been argued that stories are more persuasive precisely because of the absence of (explicit) arguments. We are not provided with an answer, so we are incentivized to look for our own. We may look at the subject matter more deeply as a result, and our engagement with events becomes more personal because interpretations are seen as legitimate. This was one reason behind Kierkegaard’s strategy of indirect communication. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he says:

It has never been a mystery to me why the pseudonymous authors have again and again asked to be excused from being reviewed. Since the ... form of the presentation makes it impossible

to report the content in an abstract, because the abstract takes away the features of greatest importance and falsely transforms the book into a doctrinizing treatise. (1992, 252)

Former Greenpeace campaigns director Chris Rose agrees:

Stories don't need to argue and you can't argue with them. Because *you* work out the meaning of a story yourself without having it thrust upon you, they can easily lead to that rare event, a change of mind. (2010, 44)

Narratives may also assist with self-reflection and identification as we are more likely to ask: *What would I do?*

examples, setting things up schematically, signal to the readers what they should notice and find relevant. They hand them the ethically salient description. This means that much of the ethical work is already done, the result "cooked." The novels are more open-ended, showing the reader what it is to search for the appropriate description and why that search matters (and yet they are not so open-ended as to give no shape to the reader's thought). (Nussbaum 1990, 47)

In short, in the absence of didactic guidance from someone who seems to know better – or 'not wooing, nor apologizing, nor bullying' as Hoggart (1970, 11) puts it – stories have a distinctive potential to enhance reflective, independent thinking.

Juror 8 is an outstanding exemplar of critical thinking virtues, and so the searching and self-searching potential of extended narratives is perhaps less pronounced in *Twelve Angry Men*. However, virtues are also spread around other members of the jury, and this is important since, while their limitations highlight Juror 8's overall excellence, their strengths serve to challenge audiences to rank them, and allow more realistic options for self-identification. The wheel of virtue allows us to better identify with and learn from characters, and not simply admire Juror 8 or despise Jurors 7 and 10.

### 3. *Fictional vs. non-fictional dialogues*

Much of the discussion so far has argued that extended narratives provide the sort of context and detail, and potential for immersion and independent thinking, that abstract analyses with short examples lack. However, there is more to be said about the benefits of these narratives being fictional. In this final section I want to offer a case for this, and how *Twelve Angry Men* being a fiction contributes to its educative potential.

The first point to make is that good real-life examples can be hard to find. With critical thinking it is possible to use examples from media debates (such as round-table discussions on news programmes, interrogative interviews, or clips from BBC's *Question Time*), but they tend to have limitations. A couple of these limitations will be discussed below, but two initial ones are that, 1) they are often relatively short, and 2) even if longer they will rarely contain the rich variety of critical thinking related dialogue and incident that we find in *Twelve Angry Men*. Psychologist Keith Oatley's flight simulator analogy is pertinent here:

[I]f you learn to pilot an airplane, you may find it worthwhile to spend time in a flight simulator. Learning in an actual plane is essential, but a good deal of the time nothing much happens. In simulators you confront a wider range of experiences and try out in safety how to respond to critical situations. (2011, 158)

To cite Nussbaum again, fictional stories 'are not so open-ended as to give no shape to the reader's thought' (1990, 47). This shape is very helpful from a teacher's point of view, but it must be stressed

that this does not rule out finding similar value in some non-fictional dialogues, and indeed it can be important that students are exposed to these to pre-empt any concerns that *Twelve Angry Men* is unrealistic. Just as Nussbaum (1990, 46; 1995, 5) concedes that biographies and histories that pay sufficient attention to particularities and emotions can share the ethical relevance of literature (a point more thoroughly developed by Skilleås, 2006), so it should be conceded that this particular educative benefit of fictional dialogues can be matched by well-chosen real-life encounters. A recent example is the (two-person rather than group) discussion between Kathy Newman and Jordan Peterson about the gender pay gap on the UK's *Channel 4 News* (in January 2018). It must also be conceded that I know of nothing nearly as good as *Twelve Angry Men* in the world of fiction,<sup>9</sup> in which case a broader point is simply that it is hard to find the right kind of examples, whether fictional or real. Nevertheless, there are further arguments that can be advanced in favour of fiction.

One concerns aesthetic distance. When Nussbaum discusses the advantage of 'freedom from certain sources of distortion that frequently impede our real-life deliberations' she is talking specifically about local issues where protagonists are known personally to discussants. We can 'find ourselves caught up in the "vulgar heat" of our personal jealousies or angers or in the sometimes blinding violence of our loves.' (Nussbaum, 1990, 48) This same limitation, though, extends to public figures and to current and past events, and too often the result is distraction from the essential learning. I find that if current, politically oriented or otherwise emotive events are used as examples (the Newman-Peterson exchange is a case in point) the ways in which students can respond can serve as 'here and now' (Yalom, 1980) examples of how preconceptions and strong emotions can impede listening and clear thinking. This is useful for several reasons, including prompting self-reflection, but subject matter generating engaged, but cooler, analysis is also important. This is particularly the case with written summative assessments where there is less opportunity for teachers to head-off emotion-driven wrong turns or detours.

There is empirical evidence that reading fictional stories, in comparison with essays, lessens people's 'need for cognitive closure' (see above). Research indicates it is the 'urgency' and 'permanence' of real-life decision making that underpins the need for closure. Nussbaum's aesthetic distance, on the other hand, seems to be able to reduce this need to the point of at least a short-term alteration of this tendency.

A related point arises from the typically self-contained nature of fictional narratives. When using *Twelve Angry Men* I make it explicit how students should not be analysing the film in terms of any background debate around capital punishment, or applying filmic or literary analysis. All they need concentrate on is the story and what it can tell us about critical thinking.

This is again a way of avoiding distractions and distortions, but it is also, crucially, a leveller. A debate about, say, historical death sentences will elicit a discrepancy in how well-informed students are. This can lead to the less knowledgeable (or less opinionated) being more passive in the discussion, but also tempt the better informed to be side-tracked by factual disputes. A self-contained narrative, on the other hand, is better able to maintain focus on the critical thinking skills, psychology, and dispositions in question. There is also a far greater chance that students will be starting from the same place. The only likely differential becomes how well they have so far been learning in the critical thinking class, or, if the film is used at the beginning of the course, prior critical thinking instruction or prior life experience. In many subject areas, however, it is hard to avoid these contingencies.

A further upshot of this levelling feature is that the experiencing of the case study (i.e. the film), including its analysis, should become more communal, less competitive, and even more so if the students are together for the initial viewing (rather than viewing it privately before class). There is the occasional student who has seen the film in their past, but usually it is a while ago and dimly recalled. What I have never encountered is a student who has looked at it analytically before, so that even in the case of a recent viewing, the critical thinking frame creates a significantly novel experience for them.

## Limitations

Some of the beneficial effects of fictional stories are related to what has been termed ‘transportation’ or ‘immersion’: a coalescence of ‘concentration, affective engagement, and [in the case of written narratives] mental imagery, all focussed on the events of the narrative.’ (Green and Dill, 2012, 451) Our ‘experiential’ mind is heavily involved and is precisely not the locus of critical thinking. Our beliefs can be shown to be influenced by fiction, but often we are not aware of this influence. A suggestion is that fictions are processed as separate from reality, in which case non-consciously assumed not to be appropriate media for truth and truth-testing. Moreover, we are disinclined to break the highly pleasurable spell of immersion by entering an analytical frame of mind.

One result of transportation is ostensibly obstructive to critical thinking: ‘reduced scrutiny and conterarguing’ (Green and Dill, 2012, 452) resulting in the exacerbation of bias towards the position(s) the story is supportive of or sympathetic towards. However, for the way in which I am advocating the use of *Twelve Angry Men*, this should not pose too great a concern. While it could be problematic at the level of the film as a whole - for example, the shaping of views for and against various jury practices - bias should not apply at the level of comparing and contrasting jurors’ virtues and skills. However, what watching the film with this task in mind might do is prevent transportation from happening in the first place. Since it would be a shame to impede such a positive process, and because the immersion will contribute to students’ long-term ability to appreciate the film’s relevance for understanding critical thinking, then a solution is to watch it twice. The first time students are asked just to enjoy it, as if on an outing to the cinema. The second time they are asked to be analytical in the ways described.

The film has the potential to exemplify and provoke an analysis of every aspect of critical thinking as a discipline, but to base an entire course on it is perhaps unwise. As excellent as it is, students can still become saturated by its continual use, so moderation in this respect is advised. Setting it an essay option (or a group presentation) I have found to work very well though, and in the appendix is an example of a question that has inspired some very impressive work indeed.

## Conclusion

Critical thinking is not the easiest subject to engage students with, especially where philosophy is not their primary discipline. Critical thinking taught with the aid of *Twelve Angry Men*, however, I have consistently found to both engage a wide range of students, and to generate a considerable number of high-quality essays and presentations. One broad reason for this concerns the film’s subject matter and style. There is an explicit focus on processes of deliberation; the plot is linear and feature-length; it is dialogue heavy, and yet compelling viewing. It exhibits in abundance all four aspects of what I have referred to as the expansive version of critical thinking: arguments, dialogue, psychological biases affecting judgement and decision making, and virtues and vices. This latter component has framed this article, but the interconnectedness of these elements means that the film can facilitate a rich analysis of all or any of them. The other broad reason for its effectiveness is that it is a work of fiction. This permits appropriate magnification of relevant features of real-life deliberations; motivates sustained attention and deeper levels of engagement; provides aesthetic distance to enable more objective scrutiny, and allows students to encounter it on an equal footing. For all these reasons *Twelve Angry Men* is an exceptional resource for teaching critical thinking.

## Appendix: Example of *Twelve Angry Men* assessment and instructions

### Group Presentation: Critical Thinking in *Twelve Angry Men*

The presentations will involve working in small groups to put together an approximately 25-minute presentation (5-6 minutes per person) on a set topic. This assessment is compulsory; you must complete it to gain credit for the course.

You will be asked questions at the end of your presentation by the examiners and other students.

**Your presentation task is to answer these questions:**

#### 1. Who are the best and worst critical thinkers in the play/film *Twelve Angry Men*?

You must discuss at least 4 characters - the 2 best and the 2 worst critical thinkers - and it is not recommended that you discuss more than 6 (see 'Guidance' point 2, below).

For each one you should analyse their application of critical thinking in terms of all or some of these criteria:

- The quality of their arguments
- The quality of their dialogues (their interactions with others)
- The presence of critical thinking virtues and vices
- Their ability to identify and/or not be unduly influenced by the fallacious arguments and persuasive tactics of the other people (other jurors, lawyers)

#### 2. What do you think are the two or three most important lessons we can learn from *Twelve Angry Men*?

Answers to this second question are not intended to take up much time in the presentation but can serve as a way of summarizing the factors that have influenced your decisions about the film's best and worst critical thinkers.

#### **Guidance:**

1. To do this well you will need to view the film more than once, and you will need to be in a position to stop and start it so that you can note down arguments and other relevant features.

The play is also available in book form and can be purchased quite cheaply or accessed via the library. (Be aware though that this isn't quite identical to the film's screenplay.)

2. You don't have to give equal weighting to each of the characters you discuss, but you must make sure that for some of them there is substantial analysis (4-5 mins) of their critical thinking in terms of the criteria listed.

3. Your analysis **must** include the identification, reconstruction and evaluation of some of the **arguments** used by the characters in the film.

4. You can use **short** excerpts from the film to illustrate points you make. However, since these will be included in your time limit, make sure they don't interfere with the time needed for your analyses. Often it'll be quicker to read (or act??) the example out.

5. Don't be tempted to treat this as a critique of the film. We are using it as an example of an extended dialogue, so we are in effect treating it as a real-life event.

6. You must include **references to relevant academic sources** to support your analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> Group polarization refers to the tendency for people to reach more extreme positions on an issue when deliberating collectively with like-minded people than they would if considering the issue by themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Applied to juries by Brown (1986, 300) in terms of entailing 'fair and thorough discussion.'

<sup>4</sup> This is largely what Aristotle (1976, 167) means when he discusses it as a virtue relating to the sphere of conversations.

<sup>5</sup> For an exploration of *12 Angry Men* as a negotiation case study see Flouri and Fitsakis (2007).

<sup>6</sup> A similar point is made by Marilyn Friedman (1987), and by Robert Colter and Joseph Ulatowski (2013).

<sup>7</sup> To allow the full significance of her point we need to recognize that examples constructed or adapted by philosophers pretty much always 'lack those features'.

<sup>8</sup> The main concern of this article is the communication of philosophically relevant particulars. With this in mind, what are otherwise significant epistemic differences between Nussbaum on the one hand and Hoggart and Carroll on the other become relatively unimportant. What matters is that fiction can be shown to play a valuable educational role, and that this can be achieved both through making experiences 'fresh', and through honing perceptions.

<sup>9</sup> Quite a good one is in Danny Boyle's film *Sunshine* (2007) in which the crew deliberate at some length about whether to continue with their (vital) mission to re-ignite Earth's dying Sun or to investigate a distress call from the spaceship that failed in the same mission several years earlier and thought to be lost.