Richard William Paul

Obituary

September 1, 2015

Tomales, CA. The Foundation for Critical Thinking is saddened to announce the death of our Founder, Dr. Richard William Paul, who died quietly in his sleep on August 30, 2015. Paul suffered from Parkinson’s Disease.

Richard W. Paul was a philosopher and an international authority on critical thinking. Since the early 1980’s Paul has worked to advance the concept of fairminded critical thinking through his work at the Center and Foundation for Critical Thinking, both of which he founded. Paul established the first Center for Critical Thinking worldwide in 1980 at Sonoma State University in Northern CA and established the Foundation for Critical Thinking for Critical Thinking in 1991, to support the work of the Center. The work of the Foundation for Critical Thinking is widely used in education, at all levels of instruction, where critical thinking is to be found. It is also advanced in the current Army Field Manual for all military leadership education in critical thinking. Due largely to Paul’s work and the theoretical foundations of critical thinking he developed over a lifetime, Paul revolutionized the way in which critical thinking is conceptualized in academia and in intellectual communities across the world.

Paul wrote eight books and more than 200 articles on critical thinking, including his early seminal work on critical thinking published in 1992 entitled: *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World*. Throughout his life, Paul wrote books for every grade level and developed extensive teaching tactics and strategies that advance critical thinking in instruction.

In his critique of traditional philosophical approaches to reasoning, Paul illuminated the conflicting nature of these approaches, as well as the limitations and often glaring inconsistencies within and among them. He asserted the need for replacing the fragmented, inconsistent, and conflicting philosophical approaches to reasoning with an integrated, systematic, and – if possible – universal approach to critical thinking.

Paul argued that the primary task of the logician is to develop tools for the analysis and assessment of reasoning in every discipline and domain of human thought – tools to be used in reasoning through life’s many complex problems and issues. He emphasized the importance of the “logic of language” to human reasoning. He set forth the idea that every subject and discipline has a fundamental logic that could and should be explicitly formulated (and that an adequate theory of reasoning would provide the foundation for that logic).

Paul’s focus on the importance of explicating intellectual tools for analyzing and assessing reasoning in his 1968 dissertation laid the groundwork for what would become his life’s work. It planted the seeds for the critical thinking theory Paul would develop throughout many years of thinking about the problematics in thinking, and about the concepts that can be used to intervene in these problematics, thereby improving thinking. In his work as a doctoral student, Paul attempted to state the minimal conditions for an adequate theory of critical thinking and then build upon those conditions. In the process, Paul combined and synthesized a network of virtually self-evident truths about critical thinking and the various obstacles to it. This network included such premises as:

1. It is human nature to think (that thinking pervades every aspect of human life and every dimension of the human mind).
2. Though it is human nature to think, it is not natural for humans to think well (human nature is heavily influenced by prejudice, illusion, mythology, ignorance, and self-deception).
3. Therefore we need to be able to intervene in thinking, to analyze, assess it, and where necessary, improve it.

Paul believed that critical thinking, properly conceptualized, entails understanding the ethical dimension of human life. Paul, from his earliest days as theoretician, placed the realization of fairminded critical societies at the center of his work and of his idea of critical thinking. In the 1980’s, he articulated the crucial distinction between strong-sense critical thinking and weak-sense critical thinking. While critical thinking in the weak sense is used in ways that are manipulative, selfish, and in other ways unethical, critical thinking in the strong sense adheres to the standard of fairness. On Paul’s view, then, critical thinking is not thinking that is merely skilled; if our thinking is not attuned to fairness, to taking account of other points of view and of the consequences our thinking and our resulting actions have for others, then it is flawed. It is not truly critical thinking because it fails to take into account the rights and needs of relevant others.

Paul argued that our thinking does not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a rich interplay with our feelings, our desires, and the experiences that shape us. Paul developed our understanding of how intrinsic egocentric and sociocentric forces within us impede our ability to think critically. He argued that we ignore these realities only at our peril as humans living on a fragile planet with limited resources and many complex problems to be solved. Paul understood the complex nature of human thought, and the background logics we develop and maintain as humans, many of which are based in narrow-minded ideologies that lead to prejudice, bigotry, and injustices of every type and variety.

To highlight different dimensions and applications of critical thinking, Paul developed a number of (now often-cited) definitions of critical thinking, including this basic definition, written with Linda Elder: “critical thinking is a mode of thinking about any subject, content or problem in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them.”

Taking charge of the structures of thought, for Paul, requires both the analysis and the assessment of thinking. Paul conceptualized reasoning as entailing eight distinctive elements of thought: purpose, question, information, inferences, assumptions, point of view, implications and concepts. In other words, he developed this fundamental idea: that whenever people reason, they reason for a purpose, in answering a question or given set of questions; they use information, in making inferences and coming to conclusions; they take certain beliefs for granted (or in the words, make assumptions).
in conceptualizing situations and experiences; they reason from some point of view; and there are implications of their thinking.

In developing his understanding of the elements of reasoning, Paul was influenced by his background as a philosopher. But in formulating the elements of reasoning, he was influenced by other domains of thought, as well as by educated usages of words. Again, he came to see that reasoning was far more complex than had been hitherto understood by traditionally philosophical approaches to reasoning, which focused primarily on only a few of the parts of reasoning – namely premises (assumptions and information) and conclusions (inferences and/or implications). Paul’s theory entails the idea that all reasoning contains the eight elements, and therefore can be analyzed into eight specific parts – in determining the full logic of the reasoning. All products of reasoning (conversations, articles, books, speeches, editorials, video programs, etc) can be analyzed according to the eight elements. Further, to ignore any one part is to misunderstand the interrelationships between the parts.

Once we have analyzed our thinking into parts, Paul recognized the need to articulate explicit standards for assessing the quality of our reasoning. Paul developed the term universal intellectual standards to capture the standards used in natural languages (everyday languages) that emphasize the quality of thought. Paul articulates these essential intellectual standards: clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, breadth, depth, logicalness, significance and fairness, though he recognized that hundreds of intellectual standards exist in natural or everyday languages.

Another hallmark of Paul’s philosophy is his emphasis on, not only skills in critical thinking, but on the cultivation of intellectual, and hence ethical, character. For Paul, intellectual virtues are the centerpiece of the fairminded critical person and of a reasonable conception of critical thinking. Those who develop intellectual character, according to Paul, do so through deep commitment to the ideals and principles of critical thinking, passionately pursued over a lifetime.

In other words, Paul recognized the need to understand and cultivate in one’s thinking the intellectual virtues of intellectual empathy, intellectual integrity, intellectual perseverance, intellectual courage, intellectual autonomy, faith in reason, fairmindedness and intellectual sense of justice.

The idea of intellectual virtues or traits, when Paul first began to conceptualize them, were not completely new—these traits can be seen, at least implicitly, in the works of a number of important thinkers throughout history, including Socrates, John Locke, William Graham Sumner, John Henry Newman, and Bertrand Russell. Paul’s contribution was in bringing them together in a system of ideas, clearly delineating them as intellectual in nature, defining and elaborating each one, including the most important dispositions extant in the mind of the cultivated thinker, and stressing the importance of these virtues in the development of a critical person and a critical society.

Paul’s approach to critical thinking is inclusive in that he recognized the important role that many fields of study can play in our understanding of the human mind and which can offer intellectual tools for intervening in human thought to improve the quality of human life. Paul was ever concerned to find the best, the most foundational tools, the most easily accessible concepts for understanding and intervening in thought.

Richard Paul was a life-long critic of schooling because he believed that schooling generally lacks an emphasis on critical thinking or intellectual development. Paul says: “It is now generally recognized that the art of thinking critically is a major missing link in education today, and that effective communication and problem-solving skills, as well as mastery of content require critical thinking…It is also generally understood that some major changes in instruction will have to take place to shift the overarching emphasis of student learning from rote memorization to effective critical thinking (as a primary tool of learning).” Paul argued that teaching should not entail transmitting information to students, but rather a “reworking of education where students construct knowledge through application of their own reasoning.” Paul asserted that an educational setting that facilitates the exchange of open and free dialogue between opposing views is essential to any authentic exercise of critical thinking.

Richard Paul was born in Chicago on January 2, 1937. He earned a BA from Northern Illinois University and a master’s in English from UC Santa Barbara; he was a Research Student at St. John’s College, Cambridge University, and earned his Ph.D in philosophy from UC Santa Barbara in 1968. He was a professor at Sonoma State University (SSU) for almost thirty years and is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at SSU. Paul convened the first conference on critical thinking in 1981 through the Center for Critical Thinking. The International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform is now in its 35th consecutive year, the longest-standing and most widely attended conference on critical thinking in the world. Paul presented annually at the conference until prevented by illness in 2014.

Paul studied as a research student with John Wisdom at St. John’s College, University of Cambridge (1965-66). Paul’s work reveals influence by a number of intellectuals including Socrates, Wittgenstein, Freud, Jean Piaget, William Graham Sumner, John Henry Newman, and Karl Marx. Paul’s philosophy was influenced by a Wittgensteinian approach to language, which relies on conceptual distinctions available only in ordinary languages, such distinctions enabling thinkers to take command of the logic of things in everyday life. Like Freud and Piaget, Paul emphasizes the unconscious intrinsic forces in the mind that naturally impede critical thinking development, including egocentricity and sociocentricity. Paul’s emphasis on the logic of questions was influenced by John Wisdom’s approach to questions. His contention that philosophy should not confine itself to traditional argumentation (since language is used to do more than merely express arguments) is in keeping with the views of J.L. Austin, GE Moore and other ordinary language philosophers. Paul’s view that humans are largely sociocentric and ethnocentric was influenced by the work of William Graham Sumner. Paul agrees with Marx and other social theorists, that people are largely trapped in settings structured by economic realities over which they had no choice and in which survival is often difficult. For Paul, the answer is given in the development of one’s own critical capacities, and the development of fairminded critical societies. Paul’s critique of education is similar to John Henry Newman’s view of education as detailed in The Idea of a University.

Paul died at his home late in the evening on August 30, 2015. He is survived by Linda Elder, his wife of 20 years and constant collaborator, by his children, and by his legacy of advancing critical thinking in the service of fostering fairminded critical societies across the world.

Instead of flowers, please contribute to the Richard Paul memorial fund at the Foundation for Critical Thinking (501c3): www.criticalthinking.org. Contributions are tax deductible and help increase awareness of the essential need for critical thinking in advanced fairminded critical societies.

{written by Linda Elder and Gerald Nosich}