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Regarding a Definition of Critical Thinking

Many people who feel that they don't know what critical thinking is or means request a definition. When they realize there is no *one* definition of critical thinking given by all theorists, many people feel frustrated and confused. "Even the experts can't agree about what they're talking about. How can I teach it if *I* don't know what it is, and no one else can tell me?" What such a reaction misses, however, is that although theorists provide a variety of definitions, they do not necessarily reject each others' definitions. They feel that their particular definition most usefully conveys the basic concept, highlighting what they take to be its most crucial aspects, but do not necessarily hold that other definitions are "wrong" or lacking in usefulness. Novices, on the other hand, typically get caught up in the wording of definitions and do not probe into them to see to what extent their meanings are in fact compatible. The various proposed definitions, when examined, are in fact much more similar than they are different.

Furthermore, because of the complexity of critical thinking, its relationship to an unlimited number of behaviors in an unlimited number of situations, its conceptual interdependence with other concepts such as the critical person, the reasonable person, the critical society, a critical theory of knowledge, learning, literacy, and rationality, not to speak of the opposites of these concepts — it is important not to put too much weight on any one particular definition of critical thinking. A variety of useful definitions have indeed been formulated by distinguished theoreticians, and we should value these diverse formulations as helping to make important features of critical thought more apparent.

Harvey Siegel, for example, has defined critical thinking as "thinking appropriately moved by reasons." This definition highlights the contrast between the mind's tendency to be shaped in its thoughts and beliefs by phenomena other than reasons: desires, fears, social rewards and punishments, etc. It points up the connection between critical thinking and the classic philosophical ideal of rationality. Yet, clearly, the ideal of rationality is itself open to multiple explications. Similar points can be made about Robert Ennis' and Matthew Lipman's definitions.

Robert Ennis defines critical thinking as "rational reflective thinking concerned with what to do or believe." This definition usefully calls attention to the wide role that critical thinking plays in everyday life, for since all behavior is based on what we believe, all human action is based

upon what we in some sense *decide* to do. However, like Siegel's definition, it assumes that the reader has a clear concept of rationality and of the conditions under which a decision can be said to be a "reflective" one. There is also a possible ambiguity in Ennis' use of 'reflective.' As a person internalizes critical standards — sensitivity to reasons, evidence, relevance, consistency, and so forth — the application of these standards to action becomes more automatic, less a matter of conscious effort and, hence, less a matter of overt "reflection," assuming that Ennis means to imply by 'reflection' a special consciousness or deliberateness.

Matthew Lipman defines critical thinking as "skillful, responsible thinking that is conducive to judgment because it relies on criteria, is self-correcting, and is sensitive to context." This definition is useful insofar as one has a clear sense of the difference between responsible and irresponsible thinking, as well as what to encompass in the appropriate self-correction of thought, the appropriate use of criteria, and appropriate sensitivity to context. Of course, it would not be difficult to find instances of thinking that were self-correcting, used criteria, and responded to context *in one sense* and nevertheless were *uncritical* in some other sense. Clearly, one's particular criteria might be uncritically chosen, for example, or the manner of responding to context might be critically deficient in a variety of ways.

I make these points not to underestimate the usefulness of these definitions but to point out limitations in the process of definition itself when dealing with a complex concept such as critical thinking. Rather than to work solely with one definition of critical thinking, it is more desirable to retain a host of definitions, and this for two reasons: 1) in order to maintain insight into the various dimensions of critical thinking that alternative definitions highlight, and 2) to help oneself escape the limitations of any given definition. In this spirit, I will present a number of definitions which I have formulated of the cluster of concepts whose relationship to each other is fundamental to critical thinking. Before reading these definitions, you might review the array of teachers' formulations in the section "What Critical Thinking Means to Me." You will find that virtually all the teachers' definitions are compatible with each other, even though they are all formulated individually.

Critical thinking is disciplined, self-directed thinking which exemplifies the perfections of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thinking. It comes in two forms. If the thinking is disciplined to serve the interests of a particular individual or group, to the exclusion of other relevant persons and groups, I call it *sophistic* or *weak sense* critical thinking. If the thinking is disciplined to take into account the interests of diverse persons or groups, I call it *fairminded* or *strong sense* critical thinking.

In thinking critically, we use our command of *the elements of thinking* to adjust our thinking successfully to the logical demands of a type or *mode of thinking*. As we come to habitually think critically in the strong sense, we develop special *traits of mind*: intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity, and intellectual faith in reason. A sophisticated or weak sense critical thinker develops these traits only in a restricted way, in accordance with egocentric and sociocentric commitments.

It is important not only to emphasize the dimension of skills in critical thinking, but also to explicitly mark out the very real possibility of a one-sided use of the skills associated with critical thought. Indeed, the historical tendency for skills of thought to be systematically used in defense of the vested interests of dominant social groups and the parallel tendency of all social groups to develop one-sided thinking in support of their own interests, mandates marking this tendency with explicit concepts. It should be clearly recognized that one-sided critical thinking is much more common in the world of affairs than fairminded critical thought.

Critical Thinking is:

- a) skilled thinking which meets epistemological demands irrespective of the vested interests or ideological commitments of the thinker;
- b) skilled thinking characterized by empathy into diverse opposing points of view and devotion to truth as against self-interest;
- c) skilled thinking that is consistent in the application of intellectual standards, holding oneself to the same rigorous standards of evidence and proof to which one holds one's antagonists;
- d) skilled thinking that demonstrates the commitment to entertain all viewpoints sympathetically and to assess them with the same intellectual standards, without reference to one's own feelings or vested interests, or the feelings or vested interests of one's friends, community or nation;
- e) the art of thinking about your thinking while you're thinking so as to make your thinking more clear, precise, accurate, relevant, consistent, and fair;
- f) the art of constructive skepticism;
- g) the art of identifying and removing bias, prejudice, and one-sidedness of thought;
- h) the art of self-directed, in-depth, rational learning;
- i) thinking that rationally certifies what we know and makes clear wherein we are ignorant;
- j) the art of thinking for one's self with clarity, accuracy, insight, commitment, and fairness.

And this is by no means all, for sometimes it is important to know whether a question is being raised against the background of a given social system, a given socio-logic. Sometimes, in other words, we are thinking as Americans or as Iranians, or Russians. When we think like the other members of our social group, it is often to our advantage to believe what they believe even when it is *false*. I have alluded to this variable before in terms of the use within social systems of "functional falsehoods." What is justified as an answer to a question, given one social system as the defining context, may very well be different within the logic of another social system. We need to know, therefore, whether we seek to reason within the logic of a given social system or, on the other hand, are asking the question in a broader way. A question may be answerable within one system and not within another, or not in the same sense, or in the same sense but with a different answer. We sometimes forget this complexity when talking about critical thinking.

Going still further, it may be important for a critical thinker to recognize, in asking a question, whether we are framing it within the logic of a technical or natural language. The question, 'What is fear?' asked with the technical language of physiology and biology in mind, may well be a different question than that same interrogative sentence asked in ordinary English, a *natural* language. This is yet another dimension to critical thinking.

Finally, we often need to know, when reasoning about a question, whether that question is most appropriately treated by an established procedure (monological issues), or whether it is plausible for people to approach it from the perspective of diverse points of view (multilogical issues). If there is one dominant theory in a field or an established procedure or algorithm for settling a question, the rational thing to do would be to use that theory, procedure, or algorithm. Many of the routine problems of everyday life as well as many of the standard problems in highly technical or scientific disciplines are of this sort. However, it is crucial for students to learn how to identify those higher order problems for which there are multiple theories, frames of reference, or competing ideologies as the instrumentality for settling the issue, and hence

cannot legitimately be approached monologically. Instruction rarely addresses these multilogical issues, even though most of the pressing problems of everyday social, political, and personal life are of this order. Moreover, there is good reason to foster a multilogical approach even to monological issues when students initially approach them. Students learn better when they struggle to understand things on their own terms, so even when we can immediately show them the "best" way to proceed, it is often better to let them argue about alternative ways first.

The Perfections and Imperfections of Thought

clarity	_____	vs	_____	unclear
precision	_____	vs	_____	imprecision
specificity	_____	vs	_____	vagueness
accuracy	_____	vs	_____	inaccuracy
relevance	_____	vs	_____	irrelevance
consistency	_____	vs	_____	inconsistency
logical	_____	vs	_____	illogical
depth	_____	vs	_____	superficiality
completeness	_____	vs	_____	incompleteness
significance	_____	vs	_____	triviality
fairness	_____	vs	_____	bias or one-sidedness
adequacy (for purpose)	_____	vs	_____	inadequacy

Each of the above are general canons for thought. To develop one's mind and to discipline one's thinking to come up to these standards requires extensive practice and long-term cultivation. Of course, coming up to these standards is typically a relative matter and often has to be adjusted to a particular domain of thought. Being *precise* while doing mathematics is not the same thing as being precise while writing a poem or describing an experience. Furthermore, there is one perfection of thought that may come to be periodically incompatible with the others, and that is adequacy to the purpose. Because the social world is often irrational and unjust, because people are often manipulated to act against their interests, because skilled thought is often used in the service of vested interest, thought adequate to these purposes may require skilled violation of the common standards for good thinking. Skilled propaganda, skilled political debate, skilled defense of a group's interests, skilled deception of one's enemy may require the violation or selective application of any of the above standards. The perfecting of one's thought as an instrument for success in a world based on power and advantage is a different matter from the perfecting of one's thought for the apprehension and defense of fairminded truth. To develop one's critical thinking skills merely to the level of adequacy for success is to develop those skills in a lower or *weaker* sense. It is important to underscore the commonality of this weaker sense of critical thinking for it is dominant in the everyday world. Virtually all social groups disapprove of members who make the case for their competitors or enemies however justified that case may be. Skillful thinking is commonly a tool in the struggle for power and advantage, not an angelic force that transcends this struggle. It is only as the struggle becomes mutually destructive and it comes to be the advantage of all to go beyond the one-sidedness of each that a social ground is laid for fairmindedness of thought. There is no society yet in existence that, in a general way, cultivates fairness of thought in its citizens.

It is certainly of the nature of the human mind to think — spontaneously, continuously, and pervasively — but it is not of the nature of the human mind to think critically about the standards and principles which guide its spontaneous thought. It has no built-in drive to question, for example, its innate tendency to believe what it wants to believe, what makes it comfortable, what is simple rather than complex, what is commonly believed, what is socially rewarded, etc. The human mind is ordinarily at peace with itself as it internalizes and creates biases, prejudices, falsehoods, half-truths, and distortions. Compartmentalized contradictions do not, by their very nature, disturb the mind of those who take them in and selectively use them. The human mind spontaneously experiences itself as in tune with reality, as directly observing and faithfully recording it. It takes a special intervening process to produce the kind of self-criticalness that enables the mind to effectively question its own constructions. The mind spontaneously but uncritically invests itself with epistemological authority with an even greater ease than the ease with which it accepts authority figures in the world into which it is socialized. The process of learning to think critically is therefore an extraordinary process that cultivates capacities merely potential in human thought and develops them at the expense of capacities spontaneously activated from within and reinforced by normal socialization. It is not normal and inevitable nor even common for a mind to discipline itself within a rational perspective and direct itself toward rational rather than egocentric beliefs, practices, and values. Yet it is increasingly possible to describe the precise conditions under which critical minds can be cultivated. The nature of critical thought in contrast to uncritical thought is becoming increasingly apparent.

We should recognize therefore that the process of encouraging critical thinking is a slow, evolutionary one — one that proceeds on many fronts simultaneously. We should recognize that built into our students' minds will be many egocentric and sociocentric tendencies. They will need time and encouragement to come to terms with these. A definition of critical thinking will never be our fundamental need, but rather a sensitivity to the many ways we can help students to make their thinking more clear, accurate, consistent, relevant and fair.

All the various strategies explained in the handbook are couched in terms of behaviors. The principles express and describe a variety of behaviors of the 'ideal' critical thinker; they become applications to lessons when teachers canvass their lesson plans to find appropriate places where those behaviors can be fostered. The practice we recommend helps guard against teachers using these strategies as recipes or formulas, since in each case good judgment is required in the application process.