# Critical Thinking

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Many educators and educational scholars have championed the educational aim of critical thinking. It is not obvious what critical thinking is, and philosophers of education accordingly have developed accounts of critical thinking that attempt to state what it is and why it is valuable—i.e., why educational systems should aim to cultivate it in students. These accounts generally (though not universally) agree that critical thinkers share at least the following two characteristics: (1) they are able to reason well—i.e., to construct and evaluate various reasons that have been or can be offered for or against candidate beliefs, judgments, and actions; and (2) they are disposed or inclined to be guided by reasons so evaluated—i.e., actually to believe, judge, and act in accordance with the results of such reasoned evaluations. Beyond this level of agreement lie a range of contentious issues.

One cluster of issues is epistemological in nature. What is it to reason well? What makes a reason, in this sense, good or bad? More generally, what epistemological assumptions underlie (or should underlie) the notion of critical thinking? Does critical thinking presuppose conceptions of truth, knowledge, or justification that are objective and "absolute," or is it compatible with more "relativistic" accounts emphasizing culture, race, class, gender, or conceptual scheme?

These questions have given rise to other, more specific and hotly contested issues. Is critical thinking relevantly "neutral" with respect to the groups who use it, or is it in fact politically biased, unduly favouring a type of thinking once valued by white European males—the philosophers of the Enlightenment and later eras—while undervaluing or demeaning types of thinking sometimes associated with other groups, such as women, nonwhites, and non-Westerners—i.e., thinking that is collaborative rather than individual, cooperative rather than confrontational, intuitive or emotional rather than linear and impersonal? Do standard accounts of critical thinking in these ways favour and help to perpetuate the beliefs, values, and practices of dominant groups in society and devalue those of marginalized or oppressed groups? Is reason itself, as some feminist and postmodern philosophers have claimed, a form of hegemony?

Other issues concern whether the skills, abilities, and dispositions that are constitutive of critical thinking are general or subject-specific. In addition, the dispositions of the critical thinker noted above suggest that the ideal of critical thinking can be extended beyond

the bounds of the epistemic to the area of <u>moral</u> character, leading to questions regarding the nature of such character and the best means of instilling it.

## Indoctrination

A much-debated question is whether and how education differs from indoctrination. Many theorists have assumed that the two are distinct and that indoctrination is undesirable, but others have argued that there is no difference in principle and that indoctrination is not intrinsically bad. Theories of indoctrination generally define it in terms of aim, method, or doctrine. Thus, indoctrination is either: (1) any form of teaching aimed at getting students to adopt beliefs independent of the evidential support those beliefs may have (or lack); (2) any form of teaching based on methods that instill beliefs in students in such a way that they are unwilling or unable to question or evaluate those beliefs independently; or (3) any form of teaching that causes students to embrace a specific set of beliefs—e.g., a certain <u>political ideology</u> or a religious doctrine—without regard for its evidential status. These ways of characterizing indoctrination emphasize its <u>alleged</u> contrast with critical thinking: the critical thinker (according to standard accounts) strives to base his beliefs, judgments, and actions on the competent <u>assessment</u> of relevant reasons and evidence, which is something the victim of indoctrination tends not to do. But this apparent contrast depends upon the alleged avoidability of indoctrination, which itself is a philosophically contested issue.

## The <u>individual</u> and society

A number of interrelated problems and issues fall under this heading. What is the place of schools in a just or democratic society? Should they serve the needs of society by preparing students to fill specific social needs or roles, or should they rather strive to maximize the potential—or serve the interests—of each student? When these goals conflict, as they appear inevitably to do, which set of interests—those of society or those of individuals—should take <u>precedence</u>? Should educational institutions strive to treat all students equally? If so, should they seek <u>equality of opportunity</u> or equality of outcome? Should individual <u>autonomy</u> be valued more highly than the character of society? More generally, should educational practice favour a more-liberal view of the relation between the individual and society, according to which the independence of the individual is of fundamental importance, or a more-communitarian view that emphasizes the individual's far-reaching dependence on the society in which she lives? These questions are basically moral and political in nature, though they have epistemological <u>analogues</u>, as noted above with respect to critical thinking.

**Moral education**

Another set of problems and issues has to do with the proper educational approach to morality. Should education strive to instill particular moral beliefs and values in students? Or should it aim rather to enhance students' ability to think through moral issues for themselves? If the latter, how should educators distinguish between good and bad ways to think about moral issues? Should moral education focus on students' character—rather than on either the inculcation of particular beliefs and values or the development of the ability to think well about moral matters—and endeavour to produce particular traits, such as honesty and sensitivity? Or are all these approaches problematic in that they inevitably involve indoctrination (of an undesirable kind)? A related objection to the approaches mentioned is that moral beliefs and values are in some sense relative to culture or community; therefore, attempts to teach morality at least presuppose an indefensible moral absolutism and may even constitute a kind of moral "imperialism." These large and complex questions are intimately connected with metaethics and moral epistemology—i.e., the part of moral philosophy concerned with the epistemic status of moral claims and judgments. Moral psychology and developmental psychology are also highly relevant to the resolution of these questions.

## Teaching, learning, and curriculum

Many problems of educational practice that raise philosophical issues fall under this heading. Which subjects are most worth teaching or learning? What constitutes knowledge of them, and is such knowledge discovered or constructed? Should there be a single, common curriculum for all students, or should different students study different subjects, depending on their needs or interests, as Dewey thought? If the latter, should students be tracked according to ability? Should less-able students be directed to vocational studies? Is there even a legitimate distinction to be drawn between academic and vocational education? More broadly, should students be grouped together—according to age, ability, gender, race, culture, socioeconomic status, or some other characteristic—or should educators seek diversity in the classroom along any or all of these dimensions?

Whatever the curriculum, how should students be taught? Should they be regarded as "blank slates" and expected to absorb information passively, as Locke's conception of the mind as a tabula rasa suggests, or should they rather be understood as active learners, encouraged to engage in self-directed discovery and learning, as Dewey and many psychologists and educators have held? How, more generally, should teaching be

conceived and conducted? Should all students be expected to learn the same things from their studies? If not, as many argue, does it make sense to utilize standardized testing to measure educational outcome, attainment, or success? What are the effects of grading and evaluation in general and of high-stakes standardized testing in particular? Some have argued that any sort of grading or evaluation is educationally counterproductive because it inhibits cooperation and undermines any natural motivation to learn. More recently, critics of high-stakes testing have argued that the effects of such testing are largely negative—dilution ("dumbing down") of the curriculum, teaching to the test, undue pressure on both students and teachers, and distraction from the real purposes of schooling. If these claims are correct, how should the seemingly legitimate demands of parents, administrators, and politicians for accountability from teachers and schools be met? These are complex matters, involving philosophical questions concerning the aims and legitimate means of education and the nature of the human mind, the psychology of learning (and of teaching), the organizational (and political) demands of schooling, and a host of other matters to which social-scientific research is relevant.

Finally, here fall questions concerning the aims of particular curriculum areas. For example, should science education aim at conveying to students merely the content of current theories or rather an understanding of scientific method, a grasp of the tentativeness and fallibility of scientific hypotheses, and an understanding of the criteria by which theories are evaluated? Should science classes focus solely on current theories, or should they include attention to the history, philosophy, and sociology of the subject? Should they seek to impart only beliefs or also skills? Similar questions can be asked of nearly every curriculum area; they are at least partly philosophical and so are routinely addressed by philosophers of education as well as by curriculum theorists and subject-matter specialists.

**Educational research**

A large amount of research in education is published every year; such research drives much educational policy and practice. But educational research raises many philosophical issues. How is it best conducted, and how are its results best interpreted and translated into policy? Should it be modeled on research in the natural sciences? In what ways (if any) does competent research in the social sciences differ from that in the natural sciences? Can educational research aim at objectivity and the production of objective results, or is it inevitably subjective? Should researchers utilize quantitative methods or qualitative ones? How is this distinction best understood? Are both legitimate modes of

research, or is the first problematically scientistic or positivistic, or the second problematically subjective, impressionistic, or unreliable? These and related issues are largely philosophical, involving philosophy of science (both natural and social) and epistemology, but they clearly involve the social sciences as well.

**Feminist, multiculturalist, and postmodern criticisms**

Feminist, multiculturalist, and postmodern criticisms of education extend far beyond the issue of critical thinking, addressing much more general features of philosophy and educational theory and practice. These three critical movements are neither internally univocal nor unproblematically combinable; what follows is therefore oversimplified.

Feminist philosophers of education often argue for the importance of educational aims typically excluded from the traditional male-oriented set. One feminist aim is that of caring—i.e., the fostering of students' abilities and propensities to care for themselves and others. A more general aim is that of focusing less on the cognitive and more on the emotional, intuitive, and conative development of all students. Relatedly, many feminist philosophers of education call into question the traditional distinction between the public and the private realms, and they argue that education should focus not only on the development of abilities and characteristics typically exercised in the public sphere— e.g., reason, objectivity, and impartiality—but also on abilities and characteristics traditionally consigned to the private sphere of home and family—e.g., emotional connection, compassion, intuition, and sensitivity to the physical and psychological needs of others.

It must be noted that this characterization of feminist philosophy of education papers over some important internal disagreements and debates. For example, while some feminist philosophers of education suggest that girls and boys should master both traditional male and traditional female roles and abilities, others reject these familiar categories, while still others distrust or explicitly reject reason and objectivity themselves as problematically "male." Debate on these matters is complex and resists brief summary.

Multiculturalist philosophers of education, as the label suggests, emphasize the significance of cultural diversity as it manifests itself in education and its philosophy. Paying particular attention to such diversity, multiculturalists point out the ways in which actual educational aims and practices favour the interests of particular cultural groups at the expense of others. They emphasize differences not only of language, custom, and lifestyle but, more fundamentally, of basic beliefs, values, and worldviews. They argue

that education must not privilege the cultures of certain groups but treat all groups with equal seriousness and respect.

What this means in practice, however, is far from clear. Some multiculturalists argue that justice and respect require that each group's traditions, beliefs, and values be regarded as equally legitimate; others hold that it is possible to respect a group while still regarding its beliefs as false or its values as deficient. This debate has important consequences in the particular curricular domain of science education, but the general issue arises in virtually every curriculum domain. There is also the problem that the conceptions of justice and respect that multiculturalists tend to appeal to are themselves not universally shared but rather taken from particular cultural locations, thus apparently privileging those culturally specific beliefs and values, contrary to the movement's motivating impulse. How best to resolve this problem remains a subject of debate within the multiculturalist camp, with some opting for some form of cultural relativism and others for a mix of multiculturalism and universalism.

Postmodern philosophers and philosophers of education challenge basic aspects of traditional philosophical theorizing by calling into question the possibility of objectivity, the neutrality of reason, the stability of meaning, and the distinction between truth and power. They raise doubts about all general theories—of philosophy, education, or anything else—by suggesting that all such "grand narratives" arise in particular historical circumstances and thus inevitably reflect the worldviews, beliefs, values, and interests of the groups that happen to be dominant in those circumstances.

Like feminists and multiculturalists, postmodernists do not speak with a single voice. Some, emphasizing power and justice, strive to expose illegitimate exercises of dominating power in order to bring about a more-just social arrangement in which the dominated are no longer so. Others, emphasizing the instability of meaning and the defects of grand narratives, call into question the narratives of domination and justice, thereby undermining the justification of political efforts aimed at eliminating the former and enhancing the latter.

These distinct but partially overlapping movements have in common the insistence that education and its philosophy are inevitably political and the impulse to reveal relations of power in educational theory and practice and to develop philosophical accounts of education that take full account of the values and interests of groups that have traditionally been excluded from educational thinking. These movements also often question the very possibility of universal educational ideals and values. As such they in

some ways challenge the very possibility of the philosophy of education and philosophy more generally, at least as these disciplines have traditionally been practiced. Critical responses to these challenges have been many and varied; one of the most notable consists of pointing out the apparent inconsistency involved in claiming that, as a general matter, general accounts of education, justice, and the like are impossible. As elsewhere, the issues here are complex and far from resolved.

**Conclusion**

The list of problems, issues, and tasks presented above is necessarily partial, and for most of them the proposed solutions have been few or not widely agreed upon. This is in part a function of the inherent openness of philosophical inquiry. Nevertheless, some proposed resolutions are better than others, and philosophical argumentation and analysis have helped to reveal that difference. This is true of philosophy in general and of philosophy of education in particular.

All educational activities, from classroom practice to curriculum decisions to the setting of policies at the school, district, state, and federal levels, inevitably rest upon philosophical assumptions, claims, and positions. Consequently, thoughtful and defensible educational practice depends upon philosophical awareness and understanding. To that extent, the philosophy of education is essential to the proper guidance of educational practice. Knowledge of philosophy of education would benefit not only teachers, administrators, and policy makers at all levels but also students, parents, and citizens generally. Societies that value education and desire that it be conducted in a thoughtful and informed way ignore the philosophy of education at their peril. Its relevance, reach, and potential impact make it perhaps the most fundamental and wide-ranging area of applied philosophy. - *Harvey Siegel*

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