

The Conflicting Ideals of Democracy and Critical Thinking in Citizenship Education

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INTRODUCTION

The unconditional values of democracy and universal human rights are generally referenced as the bedrock of all forms of education in the policy documents produced by various intergovernmental education organizations and also in national curricula around the world (at least in so-called Western democracies).¹ These core values can therefore be considered to provide the fundamental moral orientation for both the design and implementation of our educational practices. Furthermore, a general agreement exists in the field of philosophy of education regarding the societal possibilities of education—this maintains that especially in democratic societies, education and its institutions serve as a central means to regenerate society by preparing the members of future generations to act as actively participating citizens in their respective societies.² More specifically, in the current philosophical theorizing regarding the contents and aims of citizenship education, a strong focus on critical thinking is often made: it is arguably these intellectual skills and tendencies that enable prospective citizens to deliberate independently and rationally on the reasons and arguments given to competing views presented for their appraisal in public forums.³³ In this manner, the educational practice of fostering critical thinking abilities and dispositions is often thought to directly support and further the education for democracy, as cultivating critical thinking can also work as an antidote for various extremist views that challenge and undermine democracy and human rights.

The values of democracy and human rights, together with the educational goal of fostering critical thinking, therefore seem to provide the overarching aims of citizenship education. However, these two ideals involve potential tensions in the instances when they pull in opposite directions. In short, teaching that aims to further the growth of critical thinking skills and tendencies can conceivably come to incorporate also non- and anti-democratic topics and themes, thereby challenging the status of our deeply held values of democracy and equality. On this basis, it is reasonable to ask whether these controversial topics should really be given a place in education, which seeks to nurture democratic behavior and appreciation of human rights. This conflict is not merely of academic interest, as there have been several actual cases in which these two ideals have come at odds, resulting in heated public discussions on the correct prioritization of our educational aims. In this article, I use certain contents of philosophy teaching, which have generated debates both in the global and national contexts (notably in Finland, for instance), as my illustrative example. The impetus for these debates has come from certain acts of violence in which the perpetrators have attempted to give ideological rationalizations for their actions, and these rationalizations have namechecked certain mainstays of philosophy education, such as Plato and Nietzsche.

My conclusions are twofold. First, in the conflicts between democracy and critical thinking, we should prioritize the latter as our primary educational goal, and in its name, we can and should therefore discuss also those controversial themes and topics that challenge democracy, human rights, and tolerance (to violate this would amount to an even greater violation against the ethos of democracy). At the same time, the second part of my conclusion indicates that we must re-think certain commonly held assumptions in critical thinking theory about the connection between critical thinking and democracy.

TEACHING FOR DEMOCRACY AND CRITICAL THINKING AS AN EDUCATIONAL IDEAL

Of the various intergovernmental agencies with an interest in educational matters, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in particular, has throughout its entire lifespan from 1945 onwards, promoted the importance of democracy, human rights, and tolerance as the fundamental moral bedrock of all education around the world. It is good to bear in mind here that the vast majority of UNESCO's 195 member states still have relatively young and developing relationships with the democratic political system. These core values are accordingly echoed in various national curricula, especially those in so-called Western democracies.⁴ For example, the *Finnish National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools* establishes the underlying values of education in the following words:

The education is based on respect for life and human rights as well as inviolability of human dignity. During his or her years in upper secondary school, the student forms a structured conception of the values underlying the universal human rights and national basic rights, some key norms derived from these, and how he or she, by taking action, may promote these rights. ... Upper secondary school education promotes equality and equity as well as well-being and democracy.⁵

I highlight the case of the Finnish school system as an illustrative example, but it should be noted that the value statements quoted here are in no way distinctive to only Finland (similar declarations can be found in other national curricula as well). The significance of democracy and human rights is often signaled in these policy documents and declarations of principles by describing them as universal and inviolable. Consequent-

ly, the impression is that these values should be regarded as our prime directives in all education, and they cannot be discounted in the name of some conflicting educational value or aim, whatever this might be.

Although the basic tenets of critical thinking are sometimes traced back to the antiquity (epitomized by the character of Socrates, as his dialectical approach to philosophizing is portrayed in Plato's dialogues), this topic has become an explicit educational ideal in the modern sense from the 20th century onwards, starting with the work of John Dewey.⁶ Then, during the fourth quarter of the previous century, a broader critical thinking movement surfaced, and it consisted of educational theorists and philosophers who all shared the conviction that critical thinking should be placed high in our list of educational aims. On a philosophical level, the specifics of critical thinking have been elaborated and defended especially by Israel Scheffler and Harvey Siegel.⁷ In Siegel's view, critical thinking should be regarded as the regulative ideal behind all teaching, which provides the direction for all policy making pertaining to education and its practices: if we are presented with a choice between two competing models of education, we should favor the one that better furthers the realization of critical thinking. Siegel sums his position as follows: "To regard critical thinking as a fundamental educational aim is to hold that educational activities ought to be designed and conducted in such a way that the construction and evaluation of reasons (in accordance with relevant criteria) are paramount throughout the curriculum."⁸

What, then, is critical thinking exactly? In basic terms, critical thinking coincides with rationality, and in epistemic situations it is what we normatively appraise as good and desirable thinking.⁹ However, it should be regarded as an epistemic ideal that we, as actual human beings with fallible cognitive capacities, can attain more or less. In other words, at some point, there is a vaguely defined threshold, above which our

thinking becomes good enough to qualify as truly critical thinking—there exists no straightforward checklist of requirements against which the rationality of our performance can be measured.¹⁰ And just like no person acts morally in all situations, no person thinks rationally all the time and everywhere—the greatest philosophers, too, have had their own blind spots and momentary lapses of rationality. All this is not to say that the critical thinking prowess could not be tested, as assessing students' critical thinking abilities can be carried out in several ways.¹¹

Although philosophers have put forward several competing interpretations of critical thinking, during the past few decades, the mainstream view in the field has shifted to support an analysis that regards critical thinking as constituted by two closely interlinked and mutually supportive components.¹² The first of these is *the reason assessment component*, which refers to a subject's ability to be moved by the rational force of reasons as the relevant justification for his/her beliefs, judgments, and actions. The second part is *the critical spirit component*, consisting of one's dispositions, character traits, and intellectual temperament, which move a critical thinker to actively use his/her reason assessing skills. Therefore, the former component describes the content of critical thinking, whereas the latter describes the kind of person a critical *thinker* actually is. What is important to recognize here (*pave* certain narrow conceptions of critical thinking sometimes promoted in self-help literature and websites) is that critical thinking does not mean simply applying certain core principles of formal (and informal) logic, which students could be taught to follow mechanically from case to case. It is certainly true that a critical thinker ideally does this, but the proponents of critical thinking also regard the ideal as involving, through the critical spirit component, various epistemic virtues, such as open-mindedness and respect towards our interlocutors. Consequently, from a pedagogical point of view it is often thought that critical thinking skills and tendencies are best cultivated in students

through open discussions and reflective writing assignments. Through these activities, students learn to realize that holding a view requires reasons and that they are free to voice their reasoned critiques of views presented to them. An important part in the classroom is played by the teacher, who moderates the discussions and exemplifies through her own reasons-based belief-formation the practice of active critical thinking.

The ideal of critical thinking is supported by the fact that it is regarded as a central instrument in teaching students the spirit of a democratic discussion culture, in which we are supposed to choose from alternative views on the basis of which one of them is best supported by rational reasons. Ackerman and Perkins describe thinking skills as a meta-curriculum that affects all subjects in the school system.¹³ Accordingly, critical thinking should not be taught as a separate subject in itself but rather as a repeating theme that is interwoven more or less with all school subjects. Nevertheless, certain school subjects, such as philosophy and social studies, might be expected to put more focus on critical thinking skills on the account of their nature and topical emphases. To use the case of Finland again as an example, the *Finnish National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools* mentions critical thinking as one of its principal educational aims:

The mission of general upper secondary education is to strengthen transversal general knowledge and ability. In upper secondary school education, general knowledge and ability consists of values, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and will, which allow individuals capable of *critical and independent thinking* to act in a responsible, compassionate, communal, and successful way.¹⁴

Besides these policy documents and national curricula, the ideal of critical thinking has also been embraced by certain prominent politicians,

such as Barack Obama and Michael D. Higgins (the current president of Ireland), as an antidote for the rise of extremist views and increasing political apathy among the youth.¹⁵

THE CLASH BETWEEN THE EDUCATIONAL IDEALS OF DEMOCRACY AND CRITICAL THINKING

The problematic issue now is that in our pursuit of fostering critical thinking, we might also end up entertaining topics and themes that question and even blatantly undermine the values of democracy and equal human rights. This clash comes to fore perhaps more naturally in the context of certain school subjects (such as the aforementioned cases of social studies and philosophy) that deal directly with normative and political issues related to democracy and human rights. Should these incendiary topics thus be left outside of the classroom on the account that they collide with our most deep-seated moral ideals?

Although the central issue here can therefore be phrased already in purely theoretical terms as a collision between these two central educational ideals (democracy, human rights, and tolerance vs. critical thinking), these questions are not mere idle hypothetical speculation, as this conflict has come about in actual situations, too. In this article, I use the case of philosophy teaching as my illustration, as it is implemented in certain upper secondary school systems (e.g., in Finland).

In the literature on teaching critical thinking, philosophy is sometimes advertised as an effective subject through which one becomes familiar with the relevant skills of reasoning and argumentation, which are central to critical thinking.¹⁶ This is done by engaging with philosophical questions and ideas, often taken from thinkers belonging to the canon of Western philosophical tradition. Alas, even the most celebrated thinkers

in this tradition were not above unequal and prejudiced sentiments, which led them to advocate anti-democratic and illiberal views in their writings. The discussion regarding these matters has particularly focused on two philosophers: Plato and Nietzsche. The character of Plato's political utopia is decidedly non-democratic, as it casts its denizens in unequal positions in this social order, backed by philosophical reasoning and argumentation. Later commentators have even deemed Plato's societal vision as tantamount to fascism. Similarly, Nietzsche's notion of *Übermensch* allows racial misinterpretations, as the case of the Nazis demonstrated. Despite these aspects, both of these names are integral parts of the Western cultural tradition, and for this reason, they are usually reserved a place in introductory philosophy classes.

The topic of potential dangers of philosophy education gains more weight from the fact that the connection between such philosophical views and extremist actions has resulted in actual public discussions in several contexts. There exists a cultural script in which persons behind acts of violence have justified their killings in ideological terms, which have alluded to philosophical views, such the Platonist and Nietzschean ideas just mentioned. In the US, between 1978 and 1995, a domestic ecoterrorist sent mail bombs to unsuspecting victims; he extorted *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to publish his lengthy essay, in which the author attempted to give a rational defense for his radical and anti-humanistic worldview.¹⁷ In the Finnish context, the public debate about the status of philosophy teaching was sparked by the Jokela 2007 school shooting, which resulted in the loss of nine lives. On the eve of his actions, the perpetrator uploaded his manifesto onto the Internet. In this document, he gave the ideological basis for his acts and expressed admiration for Plato's and Nietzsche's views. Similarly, the culprit of the 2011 Norway attacks followed the same general blueprint and wrote his own 1,500-page-long manifesto, in which he gave reasons for his

actions and encouraged others to follow his example. Plato's *Republic* and Nietzsche's names are referenced numerous times in this schizophrenic document (which in closer look seems to be compiled by cutting and pasting text from several existing sources, among them the essay written by the aforementioned American ecoterrorist).

As these tragic cases illustrate, philosophical views can sometimes have an inspiring effect on extremist views that have led to violent acts (although whether these perpetrators understood the original philosophical ideas correctly is, of course, debatable). In the Finnish case, the Jokela school shooting led to public debates on the content of philosophy teaching, and in these discussions, certain pundits wanted to ban Plato and Nietzsche entirely from the Finnish curriculum.¹⁸

So, it seems that we have here a vivid illustration of a situation in which the educational ideals of democracy and critical thinking come at odds and in which a certain real-life incentive to take these matters seriously exists. However, I hasten to stress that although my previous illustrations came from a philosophical perspective, I contend that the relevant issues here generalize more broadly to other analogous cases in which the topics used in teaching critical thinking do not harmonize with the all-encompassing democratic and normative aims of education. In the following, I raise some critical observations about the suppositions behind the connection between critical thinking and education for democracy.

PUTTING CRITICAL THINKING FIRST

In much of the literature on critical thinking, there seems to be an underlying assumption that an open and rationally conducted debate would always end up in a democratically admirable conclusion. Indeed, critical thinking is often mentioned in its defenses as an important edu-

cational goal precisely for the reason that it is considered an antidote for unwelcome extremist views, such as fascism. For example, according to Siegel, the connection between critical thinking and democracy is a close one.¹⁹ If we are committed to a democratic form of life and its perpetuation, we are therefore committed also to teaching critical thinking. Bailin and Siegel express this view in the following way:

To the extent that we value democracy, we must be committed to the fostering of the abilities and dispositions of critical thinking. Democracy can flourish just to the extent that its citizenry is able to reason well regarding political issues and matters of public policy, scrutinize the media, and generally meet the demands of democratic citizenship, many of which require the abilities and dispositions constitutive to critical thinking.²⁰

Fascist leaders and fascist regimes understandably do not think fondly of critical thinking nor do they see it as an important educational goal.²¹ However, we can still ask the following question: cannot an individual critical thinker living in a democratic society end up advocating a fascist worldview in a manner that is consistent and open for reasons-based criticism? Does Plato's political philosophy in some way violate the fundamental principles of critical thinking? For the record, my scholarly intention here is not to legitimate fascism, or any other kind of illiberal worldview, for that matter. Rather, I wish to critically examine the supposed connection between critical thinking and democratic behavior, which is often highlighted as one of the main advantages of pursuing critical thinking as an educational ideal. The question thus becomes as follows: Is there an inherent and implicit democratic component within the theory of critical thinking which supposes that the democratic model of society is the only fully rational one? If critical thinking does

not automatically promote democracy, does this defense then disappear from critical thinking? Why should we encourage critical thinking as an educational ideal if it can just as well undermine our social order? Maybe we should indeed put democracy and human rights first, and therefore limit the permissible topics of critical thinking education, which would thus require, for example, also certain removals from the standard philosophy courses.

I will now argue that in situations in which the educational ideals of democracy and critical thinking pull in opposite directions, we should prioritize the latter. The primacy of critical thinking can be established by following Siegel's general argument for critical thinking. We can draw attention to the fact that as educators, we have Kantian responsibilities toward furthering students' autonomy as persons, which would be violated if we simply sermonized the values of democracy and human rights as unquestionable and settled truths.²²²² In open and liberal democracies, it is crucial that citizens are free to choose as they wish from the alternative ways of good life available to them. In educational contexts, this means that students should not be steered to a pre-determined slot in society. Rather, we should encourage them to independently choose the direction of their future. If we force-feed our students a certain finalized worldview, the threat is that this practice would amount to uncritical indoctrination, which is certainly antithetical to the spirit of liberal democracy. Therefore, Plato and Nietzsche, as anti-democratic and illiberal as they might be, still have a place in our philosophy courses.

With this being said, it should be noted that teaching critical thinking in the context of these issues will not always be easy. In classroom debates, the role of the teacher is to facilitate the discussion and, if needed, provide reasons for the views in question. In the case of the philosophers mentioned above, teachers should also contextualize them

in their proper cultural and historical settings, which could enable a better understanding of the backgrounds of their views. To my mind, the problem is not necessarily just what Plato and Nietzsche wrote but also the fact that these thinkers are often examined in classroom situations in admirable light—as parts of the revered pantheon of Western philosophy. Therefore, we also need a didactic viewpoint of what is taught and how. We should not teach readymade chunks of information but rather more vigorously encourage active critical thinking about these issues in the classroom, in which the teacher can moderate the debate. From a pedagogical perspective, this task obviously demands much from the teacher. In conclusion, we need proficient teachers of critical thinking, rather than surrendering the educational ideal of critical thinking in the face of the conflicts between democracy and critical thinking.

1 E.g., UNESCO, *The Declaration of Principles on Tolerance* (UNESCO publishing, 1995), <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001518/151830eo.pdf>. Besides UNESCO, critical thinking has during the past few decades been promoted by other intergovernmental organizations as well, such as by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); e.g., Finnish National Board of Education, *Finnish National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools* (Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education, 2015).

2 See Penny Enslin and Patricia White, "Democratic Citizenship," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*, eds. Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003). As an anonymous referee pointed out, the notion of democracy should be defined more closely in the main text, as there exist numerous conceptions of democracy. While I agree with this assessment, I also believe that my line of argument in this short text is compatible with the general understanding of the core meaning of democracy, and I thus leave these complications about the finer details of democracy aside.

3 See Laura Elizabeth Pinto & John P. Portelli, "The Role and Impact of Critical Thinking in Democratic Education: Challenges and Possibilities," in *Critical Thinking Education and Assessment: Can Higher Order Thinking be Tested?*, eds. Jan Sobocan, Leo Groarke, Ralph H. Johnson & Frederick Ellett (London: Althouse Press, 2009).

4 Of course, the assumption that the ideals of democracy and human rights can or should be regarded as universal and objective have been challenged in the literature, for example, on the account that they propagate Euro- or Western-centric norms

and ways of thinking. See James Nickel, “Human Rights,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (November 2014), ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rights-human/>

5 Finnish National Board of Education, *Finnish National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools*, 13.

6 John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1910).

7 Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1989); Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (London: Routledge, 1988);

Harvey Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed: Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (London: Routledge, 1997); Harvey Siegel, *Education's Epistemology: Rationality, Diversity, and Critical Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Sharon Bailin and Harvey Siegel, “Critical Thinking,” in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*, eds.

Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003). In addition to Scheffler and Siegel, other noteworthy contemporary critical thinking theorists are Nicholas Burbules, Robert Ennis, Matthew Lipman, John McPeck, Richard Paul, and Emily Robertson. For overviews, please see Bailin and Siegel, “Critical Thinking,” and David Hitchcock, “Critical Thinking,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (July 2018), ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-thinking/>

8 Siegel, *Education's Epistemology: Rationality, Diversity, and Critical Thinking*, 5.

9 There exists some disagreement among the critical thinking theorists regarding the exact relationship between rationality and critical thinking. For Siegel, critical thinking is simply the educational cognate of rationality; Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed: Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal*, 1.

10 See Siegel, *Education's Epistemology: Rationality, Diversity, and Critical Thinking*, 104–5n1.

11 See Hitchcock, “Critical Thinking.”

12 This is not to say that the theorizing about critical thinking would be without internal disagreements between philosophers. The most glaring divergence between critical thinking theorists concerns the generalizability of these skills, as certain theorists view critical thinking as being domain-specific (so that the principles, which govern the rational assessment of reasons, are sensitive to their specific context of application, such as the different cases of mathematical and historiographical research), whereas for other theorists the principles of critical thinking skills and dispositions follow similar patterns from case to case. One notable contrarian among the critical thinking theorists is Connie Missimer, as she does not think that critical thinking involves any character dispositions, but rather means mere critical thinking skills. See Connie Missimer, “Perhaps by Skill Alone,” *Informal Logic* 12, no. 3 (1990): 145–53; Bailin and Siegel, “Critical Thinking,” 183.

13 David Ackerman and D.N. Perkins, “Integrating Thinking and Learning Skills Across the Curriculum,” in *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation*, ed. Heidi Hayes Jacobs (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989).

14 Finnish National Board of Education, *Finnish National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools*, 12 (emphasis added).

15 The Irish Times, “Teach philosophy to heal our ‘post-truth’ society, says Pres-

ident Higgins,” *The Irish Times*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/teach-philosophy-to-heal-our-post-truth-society-says-president-higgins-1.2875247>.

16 UNESCO, *Philosophy: A School of Freedom. Teaching Philosophy and Learning to Philosophize: Status and Prospects* (France: UNESCO Publishing, 2007), <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001541/154173e.pdf>.

17 I follow here a scholarly practice of not referencing the perpetrators of these violent acts by their names. The reason for this is not to protect anyone’s anonymity, as the perpetrators identities have already been publicized extensively in the media coverage of such events. Instead, the purpose is to avoid needlessly glorifying these killers’ names any further, as gaining publicity and creating a hero cult has often been one central intention behind the perpetrators’ actions.

18 Helsingin Sanomat, “Platon voi panna pään sekaisin” [”Plato can make you crazy”], *Helsingin Sanomat*, November 18, 2007.

19 Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education*, 60–1.

20 Bailin and Siegel, “Critical Thinking,” 189.

21 Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education*, 69–70.

22 Ibid. Chapter 3, “The Justification of Critical Thinking as an Educational Ideal,” 48–61.