Living with Conflicting Ideals

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Henri Pettersson argues that the values of promoting democracy and of teaching critical thinking can conflict—and that when they do conflict, we should prioritize teaching critical thinking over promoting democracy. For Pettersson, part of teaching critical thinking may include studying philosophers like Plato and Nietzsche who espouse anti-democratic ideas.

I appreciate Pettersson's argument and willingness to submit conventional beliefs to critical scrutiny; the willingness to submit all positions to questioning is certainly a key dimension of critical thinking. However, I think that the picture is a little more complicated than this, and that the relation between critical thinking and democracy needs to be examined further.

Pettersson is correct that for the sake of critical thinking we need to be willing to submit all ideas—even, I would say, the nature and value of critical thinking itself—to skeptical questioning. It is a problem that positions like democracy, human rights, and tolerance are regarded as "universal and inviolable," when we cannot even come to agreement about what these mean. And I think that a relentlessly critical spirit must always be suspicious of principles that come to be unquestioned in this manner. If we have learned anything from human history, it is that the tyranny of good intentions often leads to tragic consequences, and that when one group decides that its beliefs and values are "universal" it often leads to policies and practices that countervene those very values. As a general principle, I want to suggest, we should regard all general values of these sorts as containing inconsistencies and imperfections that make them always provisional and subject to question—and, indeed, that part of what recommends these values is *not* that they are universal and inviolable, but that they are more willing and able to submit themselves to such questioning, compared with alternative values. Humility in such matters is a necessary value, I would say.

I have already suggested that critical thinking itself needs to be self-questioning in this manner. Is critical thinking always the right approach to every human situation? As I have discussed with Harvey Siegel in the past, is there ever a time to "turn off" our critical thinking inclinations?[1] Are the standards of "reason assessment" that critical thinking is based upon subject to question? Might they have cultural biases built in? Might they be overly constraining as knowledge conditions? All of these and other questions need to be kept in play: in my conception, critical thinking needs to be willing to pull up its own roots for examination, for the sake of staying true to critical thinking in a broader sense. This may sound paradoxical and self-undermining, but it is the nature of critique to always also be self-critical.[2]

Once we think this way, the relation of critical thinking and democracy becomes more complicated. Pettersson rightly summarizes Siegel's view that critical thinking is fundamental to democracy (indeed this is part of the justification for teaching critical thinking, according to Siegel). If citizens do not (on the whole) have the ability to reliably judge sources of information, if they are overly susceptible to ideology and cant, if they are unwilling to question authority, then the mere mechanisms of democracy are dangerous—we don't *want* the will of the majority if the majority is ill-informed and stupid (a point both Plato and Nietzsche made). A critically thinking citizenry, by and large, is the only citizenry worthy of the rights of democracy.

Fair enough. But it is also true that *democracy is necessary for critical thinking*. John Dewey famously gives us one argument for this: democracy, he says, is not defined primarily by a set of formal political procedures, like voting; it is defined by a set of social and communicative relations among citizens, to discuss issues, to share information, to debate, to deliberate about the best policies—and there are a variety of political forms that might grow out of that democratic polity, or public (majority voting, ranked priorities, consensus, etc.). Education plays a central role in creating such a democratic polity.[3]

Extending Dewey's argument: if it supports critical thinking to say that it facilitates democracy, it equally supports democracy to say that it is the social and political form best able to foster critical thinking.

Here is why. For Siegel (and other major critical thinking theorists such as Israel Scheffler and Robert Ennis), there are two components to critical thinking: what he calls the "reasons assessment" component (let's call that the skills of critical thinking) and a "critical spirit" (the disposition or willingness to enact those skills). It is pretty obvious that the first is of limited value without the latter. But I have long believed that the latter quality is undertheorized. The doing of critical thinking can be challenging: it means replacing simple, absolute answers with more provisional truths; it means struggling with complexity; it means being willing to engage disagreement, sometimes vigorously so; it means going against the tide of popular opinion and conventional wisdom; it can make you, as Socrates found out, very unpopular. Doing critical thinking is not only hard work, it is sometimes very lonely work—and even, sometimes, dangerous work.

So, why do people do it? How do we cultivate in people a "critical spirit" that not only values "reasons assessment" in the abstract, but that comprises the multiple virtues of patience, persistence, integrity, and courage that are necessary for people to actually *act* as critical thinkers? To my way of thinking, we need to think of critical thinking as a socially situated practice: a practice (1) that, like any practice, is consciously taught and modeled for young people; (2) that is supported by social interactions that encourage the doing of critical thinking and help us do it better (sometimes through others questioning and challenging our conclusions); and (3) that is sustained in us by a community that values critical thinking and helps transmit it to the next generation. This practice-based model provides a better accounting, I believe, of the "critical spirit" and where it comes from. Our disposition and willingness to engage in critical thinking are fostered in contexts where this is a shared value, developed and exercised by individuals, but supported and strengthened through interaction with others. Let's call that context, following Dewey, "democratic."

One can also approach this from the negative side. Authoritarian, fascist, and heavily ideological forms of government cannot tolerate critical thinking, nor the network of open, deliberative communicative relations that give rise to it. Free speech, a questioning press, counterhegemonic educational processes,

are all anathema to those kinds of societies, which ruthlessly suppress them. It is impossible to create a critically thinking public under those circumstances—which is, apart from all the other harms that they do, one of the main reasons for opposing them.

So, I think it is a little too easy to say that if forced to choose between critical thinking and democracy, we should choose critical thinking. To me they are much more interdependent and—perhaps—at a theoretical level even mutually defining in a fundamental way.

But I have also argued here that there are tensions within and between critical thinking and democracy. What I have called here a relentlessly critical spirit needs to be willing to subject even these to question. A critically self-questioning democracy is the only kind of democracy worth having; and a democratically self-questioning approach to critical thinking is the only way in which critical thinking is prevented from becoming just another "universal and inviolable" principle.

Finally, in closing, this practice-based account of critical thinking is at the heart of what I once tried to develop as an account of "criticality" (an awkward word that was less awkward than "criticalness").[4] My point, then and now, was to emphasize the *doing* of critical thinking as the point and purpose of education, and to argue that some ways of conceiving and teaching critical thinking might actually interfere with what we want, namely, the creation of *critical thinkers*. Hence, in that process even critical thinking itself needs to be relentlessly self-examined. Its internal tensions, its limitations, its existence within broader philosophical assumptions all need to be open to question. This is not in opposition to critical thinking, but in favor of critical thinking understood critically.

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1 Nicholas C. Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness: A Discussion of Harvey Siegel's *Relativism Refuted* and *Educating Reason*," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (1991): 235-252.
2 Nicholas C. Burbules, "Being Critical About Being Critical," *Democracy & Education* 24, no. 2 (2016): 1-5.

3 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

4 Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," in *Critical Theories in Education*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45-65.