

# TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN NON-WESTERN CONTEXTS

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## 1.Introduction

Socrates was not the first philosopher in the western tradition, but he was one of the first philosophers to think critically about social and ethical matters. As a result of his thoroughgoing commitment to the idea of using critical thinking to guide one's life, Socrates has been receiving accolades for the last two millennia. Socrates was, however, a dangerous man. This fact, which is often overlooked or ignored, was not lost on Hegel, who believed that Socrates had a destructive influence on Greek culture. Peter Singer provides the following account of Hegel's view of Socrates and his influence on the early Greeks:

*Hegel believed that in ancient Greece individuals did not see themselves as having interests separate from those of their community. This communal conception of self-interest existed, according to Hegel, because the Greeks had not*

*yet become aware of the possibilities of individual freedom and individual self-consciousness. Socrates was, in Hegel's view, the pivotal figure in making Athenians think critically about what they had taken for granted. Hence, he was rightly regarded by the conservatives as a dangerous subversive: once the Socratic questions had been raised, they could not be answered within the accepted framework of ancient Greek society.* (1993, p.36, my italics)

Singer evidently endorses Hegel's interpretation of Socrates, for he goes on to claim that the critical thinking that Socrates introduced into Athenian society is necessarily destructive of a society based on custom.

In western society, we may have to go back to the ancient Athenians to find a culture in which custom and community were powerful concepts and in which critical thinking played a negligible role. However, if we extend our gaze beyond the periphery of the western world, we can see that there are cultures in existence today whose bonds of custom and community have not yet been destroyed by the Socratic tradition of critical thinking. If Singer is right in suggesting that critical thinking is necessarily destructive of such cultures, then those who teach critical thinking in non-western contexts need to think carefully and critically about what they are doing.

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This paper is an attempt to do just that. In particular, this paper addresses, and attempts to answer, the questions of whether, and to what extent, it is acceptable to teach critical thinking in non-western contexts. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In sections 2 and 3, I define critical thinking and summarize the sorts of claims that are typically used to justify the teaching of critical thinking. In section 4, I critically evaluate two objections to the teaching of critical thinking in non-western contexts. In section 5, I argue that the claims that are typically used to justify the teaching of critical thinking involve culturally specific assumptions. In section 6, I conclude with some remarks on the acceptable and unacceptable applications of critical thinking instruction in non-western contexts.

## 2. What is critical thinking?

Moore and Parker (1989) define critical thinking as "the careful and deliberate determination of whether to accept, reject, or suspend judgement about a claim" (p.3). They also assert that critical thinking involves several skills or abilities, including the ability to listen and read carefully, to evaluate arguments, to look for and find hidden assumptions, and to trace the consequences of a claim. Similarly, Cederblom and Paulsen (1991) define critical thinking as a collection of procedures that enable one to make decisions concerning what to believe, an ability that they contrast with passive reading or listening and mere disagreement (p.1). Though they do not, in their definition, explicitly state which skills are involved in critical thinking, the content of their book makes it clear that

they have the same sorts of skills in mind as do Moore and Parker, skills such as finding hidden assumptions, tracing consequences, and evaluating arguments.

Thomson (1999) describes the following three abilities as "important aspects of critical thinking": the ability to understand and evaluate arguments, the ability to make well-reasoned decisions, and the tendency to be fair-minded (p.2). She also claims that there are certain distinct skills involved in the assessment of arguments and in good decision-making, skills such as those described above: recognizing reasons, conclusions, and unstated assumptions, drawing conclusions, appraising evidence, and analyzing words, phrases, and concepts. Tamthai (2000) does not define critical thinking as such, but he does characterize what is involved in the teaching of critical thinking, and his characterization is very much in keeping with the foregoing definitions. Thus, he claims that teaching critical thinking is a matter of teaching students how to carefully consider conclusions drawn from evidence, how to derive various consequences of such conclusions, and how to explore and weigh alternatives to those conclusions (p.191).

It would be easy to go on producing further examples in this vein, but the foregoing should suffice to demonstrate that there is, if not complete consensus, at least broad agreement over what critical thinking is and what skills or abilities it involves. In particular, each of the authors just mentioned regards critical thinking as consisting of a set of skills that enable one to evaluate arguments and make rational decisions concerning



what to believe or do. The specific skills that these authors agree are involved in critical thinking include the following:

1. recognizing reasons and conclusions in written or spoken communication,
2. identifying hidden assumptions,
3. tracing consequences,
4. evaluating claims against evidence,
5. spotting fallacies,
6. weighing alternatives, and
7. clarifying terms.

Let us assume, then, that the primary aim of critical thinking instruction is to instill or foster the foregoing skills in students. And let us now ask what further purposes these skills might serve or why it is thought that these skills are worth teaching.

### 3. Why should we teach critical thinking?

The full title of Moore and Parker's 1989 text is *Critical Thinking: Evaluating Claims and Arguments in Everyday Life*. As the subtitle suggests, the book is intended to promote an ability that will help its readers in their everyday lives. "The ability to think critically," they write, "is vitally important. In fact, our lives depend on it, since the way we conduct our lives depends on what claims we believe—on what claims we accept" (1989, p.3). The implication here is that critical thinking is essential to rational decision-making and the ability to make rational decisions is necessary for one's very survival. In a similar, but slightly more modest tone, Cederblom and

Paulsen (1991) claim that critical thinking promotes substantial social values, such as defense against our vulnerability as citizens in a society increasingly ruled by experts. Thus, they write that, "Even though we might not be experts, we can mitigate our status as amateurs by honing our reasoning skills" (p.6).

Lipman (1991) also sees a connection between critical thinking and self-defense. Thus, he writes that, "whenever we make a claim or utter an opinion, we are vulnerable unless we can back it up" (p.117). When our opinions come under fire, to what do we appeal? In answering this question, says Lipman, we are led to see that claims and opinions must be supported by reasons. Closely connected with the idea of one's defense against vulnerability is the idea of personal freedom or autonomy, and this is a connection that Lipman (1991) makes explicit when he writes that students must be encouraged to become critical thinkers "as a step towards their own autonomy" (p.118).

The focus of Thomson's 1999 text, *Critical Reasoning in Ethics*, is on the role that critical thinking can play in resolving personal and social ethical dilemmas. According to Thomson, critical thinking is important because it enables one to make ethical decisions for oneself, which serves the additional goal of enabling one to take further control of one's life (1999, p.1). Brown and Keeley (1994) echo this last claim when they write that critical thinking improves one's self-confidence by increasing one's sense of "intellectual independence" (p.2).



Further support for this connection between critical thinking and autonomy or independence is provided by Ruggiero (1995), who writes that, "We are not individuals automatically; rather we *become* individuals by our willingness to realize our potential and our effort to be "self-aware, self-critical, self-enhancing" (p.39). In particular, Ruggiero believes that critical thinking promotes independence by helping one to avoid blind conformity and self-deception. Ruggiero also believes that critical thinking serves the following two positive functions: a) it helps to clarify or refine ideas and thereby leads to better ideas, and b) it improves one's ability to persuade others of one's ideas. "The best idea in the world," Ruggiero writes, "is of little value until others are persuaded of its worth" (p.142). This last point is one that is also emphasized by those, such as Chaffee (1985) and Hammond (1989), who promote critical thinking within the context of improving linguistic skills. Indeed, the primary aim of Chaffee (1985) is to develop students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities along with their ability to think, but these are not regarded as entirely distinct aims; rather, it is assumed that by improving the latter skill one automatically improves the former skills. Thus, Chaffee writes that "since language and thinking are so closely related, how well we do with one is directly related to how well we do with the other" (p. 244).

Finally, critical thinking has also been justified on the basis of explicitly political considerations. Lipman (1991) claims that the following sort of argument has been endorsed by a great many thinkers, not least of whom is John Locke:

democracy functions best with reasonable citizens, and critical thinking improves reasonableness, so critical thinking promotes well-functioning democracies (p.244). Lipman himself seems to support this line of reasoning, as does John Dewey, who was one of the leading proponents of the idea of revolutionizing education for the purpose of fostering effective democracies.

Let us sum up the foregoing with a list of the benefits that have been cited in support of critical thinking. According to the authors recently considered, critical thinking:

1. provides one with a means of self-defense against manipulation,
2. promotes one's individual autonomy,
3. protects one against self-deception,
4. helps one to resolve ethical dilemmas for oneself,
5. enables one to take greater control of one's life,
6. enhances one's self-confidence,
7. increases one's intellectual independence,
8. improves one's linguistic skills,
9. increases one's persuasive power, and
10. promotes well-functioning democracies.

Clearly, the foregoing claims are not independent of each other. Indeed, the first seven claims are, to a large extent, variations on the same theme—that of individual autonomy. Furthermore, given



that democracy is a social arrangement that is based upon, and intended to promote, individual autonomy, there is a definite connection between the first seven claims and the tenth. The principal difference between claims 1 – 7 and claim 10 is that while the former speak of autonomy from the point of view of the individual, the latter characterizes autonomy as a social value.

Claims 8 and 9, which belong in a different group from the rest, are obviously related to each other. For the sort of persuasion mentioned in claim 9 is persuasion by means of language, as opposed to emotional manipulation or physical coercion. The idea is that by becoming a critical thinker one can improve one's mastery of the language and thereby use language more persuasively. It is worth noting that this idea makes sense only within a context in which critical thinking is widely practiced. For critical thinking skills are helpful in persuading only those who are already critical thinkers; those who, for one reason or another, eschew critical thinking are unlikely to be moved by carefully constructed, thoughtful argumentation.

We may summarize this section of the paper by noting that while proponents of critical thinking have offered a variety of claims on its behalf, these claims can be organized around three basic concepts: autonomy, democracy, and language. In response to the question "Why should we teach critical thinking?" proponents of critical thinking have given the following three answers: a) it enhances individual autonomy, b) it fosters well-functioning democracies, and c) it improves one's linguistic skills (and,

hence, one's ability to persuade). Let us now go on to consider some objections that have been raised against the teaching of critical thinking.

#### **4. Atkinson's arguments against the teaching of critical thinking**

Atkinson (1997) challenges the use of critical thinking pedagogies upon students raised outside of western culture. The thrust of his argument, which he expresses with the aphorism "critical thinking is cultural thinking," is that critical thinking is a culturally based social practice that is incompatible with the attitudes and practices supported by certain non-western cultures. Atkinson directs his argument specifically to TESOL instructors, whose cross-cultural teaching assignment forces them to reflect upon the cultural assumptions that they bring to their classrooms. However, if his argument is sound, it is cause for concern for anyone involved in the practice of teaching critical thinking in non-western contexts.

Atkinson (1997) presents four more-or-less independent reasons why instructors ought to be cautious in adopting critical thinking pedagogies with non-western students. Only the first three of these reasons are in any way related to the cultural issues involved in the teaching of critical thinking, so we will examine only these. Atkinson states these reasons as follows:

1. Rather than being a well-explained and educationally usable concept, critical thinking may be more in the nature of a so-

cial practice. That is, what we commonly refer to as critical thinking may be an organic part of the very culture that holds it up as an admirable achievement—more at the level of common sense than a rational, transparent, and—especially—teachable set of behaviors.

2. Dominant current conceptualizations of critical thinking can be and have been critiqued for their exclusive and reductive nature. Feminist critiques in particular have charged that much critical thinking theory and pedagogy marginalizes alternative approaches to thought, approaches that may in fact lead to more socially desirable outcomes in the long run.

3. Not only is critical thinking a culturally based concept, but many cultures endorse modes of thought and education that almost diametrically oppose it. This fact suggests that the teaching of critical thinking to international and language minority students may be much less straightforward than has been commonly assumed. (1997, p.72)

Let us now consider these reasons to see if they really do present legitimate objections to the teaching of critical think-

ing. Since the first and third reasons are directly relevant to the issue of the cultural relativity of critical thinking, we will consider them together (in section 4.1) as a single argument. The second reason is indirectly related to the issue of cultural relativity and will be considered separately (in section 4.2).

### **Is critical thinking a western social practice?**

In evaluating Atkinson's first and third objections to the teaching of critical thinking, we need to consider the following two questions: "Is critical thinking a social practice?" and "Is it the case that other cultures endorse modes of thought that are opposed to critical thinking?" We will consider these questions in turn.

By "social practice," Atkinson means the kind of behavior in which an individual is automatically immersed by virtue of being raised in a particular culture. Such behavior, Atkinson asserts, is by definition tacit—it is learned and practiced largely unconsciously (1997, p.73).

Atkinson gives two reasons for regarding critical thinking as a social practice. The first reason relates to the fact that "whereas everyone seems to know what critical thinking is, very few people ever attempt to define it" (1997, p.74). People do not define critical thinking, Atkinson suggests, because they cannot define it, and they cannot define it because it exists largely at the level of "tacit, commonsense social practice." The second reason relates to research that claims to have found specific modes of socialization that differentiate middle-class American children from children belong-



ing to non-mainstream groups. "Many of the modes of socialization identified in this body of research," Atkinson writes, "appear closely related to the concept of critical thinking as a social practice" (1997, p.76).

In section 2 we considered some of the definitions of critical thinking that can be found in the existing literature and saw that there is, if not complete consensus, at least broad agreement on what critical thinking is. Indeed, there is very large agreement over what specific skills are associated with critical thinking. This literature effectively undermines the idea that critical thinking cannot be defined, and Atkinson's failure to consider this literature must be regarded as a glaring oversight. This oversight also vitiates Atkinson's attempt to characterize critical thinking as a culturally specific "mode of socialization." The modes of socialization described in the study that Atkinson cites are the following: a) the asking and answering of why and how questions, b) the classification and labeling of objects according to abstract attributes, c) the breakdown and step-by-step learning of complex behaviors, and d) the overall use of language as a heuristic device (1997, p.76). Clearly, these modes of socialization have little or nothing to do with the skills commonly associated with critical thinking, skills 1 to 7 mentioned in section 2. Thus, it appears that Atkinson's belief that critical thinking is a social practice is ultimately based upon a misunderstanding of what critical thinking is.

Nevertheless, it still could be the case that there are other cultures that promote attitudes or behavior that are op-

posed to critical thinking, as we understand that term. So let us consider the second of the above two questions. Atkinson mentions three areas in which cross-cultural research has uncovered important differences between western and non-western modes of learning, modes of learning that are presumably related to critical thinking. These are the following: a) opposing notions of the relations between the individual and the social system; b) contrasting norms of self-expression across cultures, and c) divergent perspectives on the use of language as a means of learning. In comparison with the first two points, Atkinson admits that the research in this last area is incomplete. Let us therefore consider only the first two points, which are very much related.

Atkinson claims that, "notions of the primacy of the individual and their consequences underlie the social practice of critical thinking at a fundamental level" and that, "various cultural groups assume notions of the individual that are almost diametrically opposed to western or at least mainstream U.S. assumptions" (p.80). Most of the research that Atkinson mentions concerns the Japanese. In Japanese culture, Atkinson observes, the basic social unit is not the individual but the group, and this fact is made manifest in both the verbal and the non-verbal behavior of the Japanese. One of the studies Atkinson cites concludes that for Japanese children, language is viewed less as a means of self-expression and more as a medium for expressing group solidarity and shared social purpose (1997, p.83).

As we will see in more detail below,



Atkinson is surely right in regarding the Japanese as having a very different understanding of the relationship between the individual and the group than most westerners have. And what is true of the Japanese is also largely true of the Koreans and perhaps other Asian cultures as well. Furthermore, Atkinson is also right in thinking that these differences raise important questions about the propriety of teaching critical thinking in Asian contexts. However, before we address these issues, as we will in section 5, let us consider the specific conclusion that Atkinson draws from his observations.

Atkinson's argument is directed specifically to TESOL instructors. His basic idea is that because certain non-western cultures endorse modes of thought that are opposed to critical thinking, TESOL instructors should be cautious about teaching critical thinking in their classrooms. Now if it is true that certain non-western cultures endorse modes of thought that are opposed to critical thinking, then there are two different reasons why one might think that TESOL instructors should not use critical thinking pedagogies in their classrooms. On the one hand, it might be thought that critical thinking pedagogies will simply be ineffective in the ESL/EFL classroom; on the other hand, it might be thought that teaching critical thinking in the ESL/EFL classroom amounts to a form of cultural imperialism. Although it is not entirely clear which of these two reasons Atkinson has in mind, it does not make much sense to interpret his paper as a defense of the first idea. For the question of whether or not critical thinking pedagogies are effective in the ESL/EFL

classroom is a purely empirical question, which ought to be settled by appropriate empirical means.

Let us assume, then, that it is the second idea that Atkinson seeks to defend—the idea that teaching critical thinking in the ESL/EFL classroom is a form of cultural imperialism. However, this idea seems clearly wrong. If critical thinking is related to culturally specific modes of self-expression, as Atkinson insists it is, then of all places in which critical thinking might be taught, the ESL/EFL classroom would seem to be one of the most appropriate places. For learning a language is not merely a matter of learning a vocabulary plus a set of grammatical rules. Learning a language is very much a matter of learning a culture, in the sense of learning the ways in which members of the culture think, reason, and act. Indeed, the most common mistake that learners of a second language make is in translating into the target language, word-for-word, the things that they tend to say in their native language. This sort of process leads to error and communication failure far more often than it leads to communication success. In order to communicate with speakers of a foreign language, the L2 learner must absorb the linguistic habits of the target culture and speak the way members of that culture speak. In order to do so, the learner must also internalize the way members of the target culture think. Thus, if it is indeed true that critical thinking is closely associated with the modes of self-expression that prevail in English-speaking cultures, then, contrary to what Atkinson argues, non-western students learning English ought to be taught critical thinking skills while they are learn-



ing English. And when critical thinking is taught in this context, it is no more a matter of cultural imperialism than the very act of teaching the English language is.

The question of this section of the paper is whether or not critical thinking is a western social practice. The foregoing discussion shows that the answer to this question is both yes and no. Critical thinking is not a western social practice in the sense that it is not, strictly speaking, a social practice at all. Critical thinking is rather a set of specific reasoning skills. This point is important because Atkinson uses the idea that critical thinking is a social practice to conclude that it cannot be taught. In order to avoid this mistaken conclusion, it is important to see that critical thinking is not a social practice, but rather a set of specific and teachable reasoning skills.

However, it is very likely that at least some non-western cultures support modes of thinking that are, to one extent or another, opposed to critical thinking. This, of course, is not to say that *all* non-western cultures are opposed to critical thinking, an idea that is surely false. Hongladarom (1999), for example, argues that the logical traditions in India and China are highly compatible with, and supportive of, critical thinking. Nevertheless, if it is true that at least *some* non-western cultures endorse modes of thinking that are opposed to critical thinking then, while it is not correct to say that critical thinking is a western social practice, we can say that critical thinking is a culturally specific set of thinking skills. I will defend this point in more detail in section 5. Before doing so, how-

ever, let us consider Atkinson's second argument against the teaching of critical thinking.

### **Does critical thinking marginalize other forms of knowing?**

Atkinson asserts that the most powerful critique of the exclusive and reductive nature of critical thinking comes from feminist scholars, and he cites Martin (1992) and Clinchy (1994) in connection with this point. Martin and Clinchy characterize critical thinking as a form of "separate knowing," in which the knower adopts a detached, objective stance from the object of knowledge. In contrast, they assert that there is another form of "connected knowing," in which the knower adopts a sympathetic stance towards the object of knowledge. Both of these authors emphasize that these approaches to thinking are not gender-exclusive. However, Martin implicates the distancing nature of critical thinking in ethically questionable judgements and cites Robert Oppenheimer as a paradigmatic critical thinker. The suggestion here, both by Martin and by Atkinson, who endorses Martin's argument, is that critical thinking is ethically neutral and, hence, compatible with the most heinous decisions. Critical thinking—the argument goes—can help us to build an atomic bomb, but it will not help us to see why we should not use it.

Is this so? Most philosophers working in the area of applied ethics would almost certainly disagree. Peter Singer, for example, regards the detached form of knowing that Martin criticizes on ethical grounds as the very foundation of ethics. Singer writes that, "My ability to



reason shows me the possibility of detaching myself from my own perspective, and shows me what the universe might look like if I had no personal perspective" (1993, p.272). Singer goes on to mention that the idea of adopting the "point of view of the universe" is consistent with, and supportive of, the Golden Rule, which encourages equal consideration of interests, a rule endorsed in one form or another by most cultural traditions as a fundamental ethical principle.

So while Martin criticizes critical thinking for embodying a detached form of knowing, Singer points out that it is the very ability to detach—both from others and from oneself—that enables one to transcend selfishness and give equal consideration to the interests of others. Of course, sympathy and other forms of attachment must also play a role in guiding ethical conduct. For while the ability to detach may lead us to consider all perspectives equally, total detachment means treating all perspectives as equally irrelevant. Thus, we may agree with Martin to this extent—that critical thinking, insofar as it embodies a detached form of knowing, is incomplete. However, this does not amount to an objection to critical thinking; rather, it merely underscores the need for sympathy in addition to critical thinking. What is objectionable about the ethically objectionable judgements Martin has in mind, such as certain judgements of Robert Oppenheimer, is not the presence of critical thinking, but the absence of other important traits like sympathy.

Of course, if it were not possible for one and the same person to be a critical

thinker and a sympathetic human being, then the observations of Clinchy and Martin would provide a valid objection to the idea of fostering critical thinking skills in students. But are critical thinking and sympathy really mutually exclusive? There is little reason to think they are. Critical thinking is but one mode of thinking or one set of skills that a person can use in a given context. But like any skills, there are times for their employment, and times when they should be set aside. Teaching critical thinking skills does not mean teaching students to everywhere and at all times think critically. Critical thinking is also often contrasted with creative thinking, and the two modes of thinking clearly are very different processes. But it is a mistake to think that one and the same person cannot manifest both skills. Certainly those who attempt to teach both sorts of skills, such as De Bono (1980) and Ruggiero (1995), do not regard them as mutually exclusive. We must, therefore, conclude against Atkinson and the so-called feminist critique of critical thinking: critical thinking does not preclude one from also adopting more sympathetic or connected stances towards others.

## **5. The cultural relativity of critical thinking**

In section 3 we surveyed the justifications for critical thinking that can be found in the existing literature and saw that these justifications appeal to one or more of the following three notions: individual autonomy, democracy, and language. The question to consider at this point is whether or not those justifications involve culturally specific assumptions. I have already suggested that they



do; in this section of the paper I will explain and defend this belief in more detail. In order to do so, I will, following Atkinson, compare western and Japanese attitudes towards critical thinking and the values or goals associated with critical thinking. Japan is a useful object of study in this regard, not only because its culture differs in very obvious ways from western culture, but also because it has been widely researched and written about. Ideally, we would consider not one, but all, non-western cultures. This, however, is neither possible, given space limitations, nor necessary. For if we can show that the alleged goals of critical thinking run contrary to the dominant values of even one non-western culture, then that will suffice to show that the typical justifications of critical thinking involve culturally specific assumptions.

### **Critical thinking and individual autonomy**

In *The Japanese Today*, Reischauer and Jansen (1996) begin and end their discussion of Japanese society with a discussion of the pervasive influence of the concept of "the group" in Japanese culture. This is no accident. Reischauer and Jansen clearly regard this concept as playing an important role in shaping the attitudes and behavior of the Japanese. They do admit that the balance between the group and the individual is in flux in Japan, and that the importance of the concept of group is often over-emphasized, even by the Japanese themselves. Nevertheless, they insist that there are substantial differences between Japanese and westerners regarding attitudes towards individualism and belonging to groups, differences that

manifest themselves in very different sorts of behavior. Similarly, in *How are we to Live?* a book about the contemporary ethical crisis in western society, Singer (1993) devotes a full chapter to examining Japanese society. Singer does this because the Japanese, he believes, possess a very different concept of self-interest and of the relationship between the interests of self and others, one that he thinks might help western society to overcome the ethical crisis that it is currently experiencing.

What are these differences? Singer observes that the Japanese have a much less clearly defined notion of the self than do westerners, and that this less individualistic notion of the self manifests itself in all sorts of ways in Japanese culture. The traditional Japanese home, for example, did not have individual rooms that were designated to individual family members (1993, p.142). Nor did they have private baths. As a result, many Japanese did, and still do, use public baths, where it is not uncommon to see strangers scrubbing each other's backs. The lack of a clearly defined notion of self is also reflected in the Japanese language, in which the terms for self-reference, for example, can be also be used for second- or third-person reference (p.143). Differing notions of the relation of the self to the group also help to explain Japanese attitudes towards work. According to Reischauer and Jansen (1996), a job in Japan is not merely a contractual arrangement for pay, but means identification with a larger entity, which usually lasts for life. Whereas an American, they note, is likely to see himself as an individual possessing a certain skill, which he will sell



to the highest bidder, a Japanese is much more likely to see himself as a permanent member of an established company.

These are but a few of the many examples that could be used to demonstrate that there are indeed important differences between Japanese and western attitudes towards the self and the group. But do these difference have any bearing on the notion of critical thinking? The answer is almost certainly yes. For critical thinking, as we have noted, is often justified on the grounds that it promotes intellectual independence and individual autonomy, but these are not important values for the Japanese; indeed, independence and autonomy are very much at odds with the group-oriented values that the Japanese do cherish. The following passage from Reischauer and Jansen (1996) nicely illustrates the conflict between critical thinking and the group-oriented values of the Japanese:

*To operate their group system successfully, the Japanese have found it advisable to avoid open confrontations. Varying positions are not sharply outlined and their differences analyzed and clarified. Instead, each participant in a discussion feels his way cautiously, unfolding his own views only as he sees how others react to them. Thus, any sharp conflict of views is avoided before it comes out into the open. The Japanese even have a word, haragei, "the art*

*of the belly," for this meeting of minds, or at least the viscera, without clear verbal interaction. They have a positive mistrust of verbal skills, thinking that these tend to show superficiality in contrast to inner, less articulate feelings that are communicated by inference or nonverbal means. (p.136)*

There are two important points worth noting in the above passage. First, Reischauer and Jansen clearly emphasize that "the sharp analysis of conflicting views" and "the clarification of positions" are not encouraged—and are even actively discouraged—in the Japanese style of negotiation. But these behaviors are clearly associated with critical thinking. Indeed, the sharp analysis and clarification of varying positions is exactly what we expect of a critical thinker. Secondly, critical thinking is also clearly associated with verbal skills. Indeed, as we have seen, one of the main justifications for the teaching of critical thinking is that it improves one's verbal skills and, hence, one's persuasive power. However, according to Reischauer and Jansen, the Japanese have a positive mistrust for verbal skills and rhetoric. Indeed, the Japanese have a negative attitude towards anything that threatens group harmony, which is, as Reischauer and Jansen point out, the key Japanese value.

Let us now compare the above description of Japanese values and modes of communication with what one western



writer says in support of critical thinking. Ruggiero claims that an important function of critical thinking is that it prevents one from being a conformist. Of course, not all conformity is bad, but there is, Ruggiero insists, such a thing as harmful conformity. This is what he says about it:

*Harmful conformity is what we do instead of thinking in order to belong to a group or to avoid the risk of being different. Such conformity is an act of cowardice, a sacrifice of independence for a lesser good. In time it makes us more concerned about what others think than about what is right and true and sensible. Once we begin to conform, we quickly find ourselves saying and doing not what we believe is best but what others want or expect us to say and do. That focus dulls our ability to think creatively and critically. (1995, p.45)*

This is shocking stuff! Imagine a Japanese student picking up Ruggiero's book and reading that her cultural traditions are based on cowardice. Evidently, it does not occur to Ruggiero that sacrificing one's individual perspective for the sake of the group could ever serve a higher social goal. Nor does Ruggiero seem to be aware that in other cultures, such as in Japan, sacrificing one's individual perspective for the sake of group

is customary. Ruggiero is, therefore, a good example of one who is unaware of the cultural relativity of the values implicit in critical thinking.

### Critical thinking and democracy

Attempts to explain any significant aspect of western culture typically appeal to one or more of the following events or periods in western history: the Roman empire, Christianity in the middle ages, the rise of modern science, the Enlightenment, or the democratic revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Attempts to explain East Asian culture, on the other hand, typically appeal to the influence of feudalism and Confucianism. Let us briefly consider how these last two forces have influenced the social and political views of the Japanese.

Feudalism was of course a prominent feature, not only of Japan, but also of medieval Europe, at least from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the West, however, the influence of feudalism has been largely erased by 600 years of political, economic and religious change. For the Japanese, on the other hand, the feudal system that began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, continued unabated until about 1853, when the Americans forced their way into Japan. For this reason, Singer (1993) asserts that "the most striking difference between Japanese and western society is that for us, the feudal era lies buried in the remote past, whereas in Japan it is relatively recent" (p.128). Singer regards this difference as highly significant because the values that we find in Japan, values such as loyalty to the group, harmony within the group, and self-sacrifice, are basically the values that were



demanded of the feudal serf.

Furthermore, the fact that Japan only recently emerged from its feudal past suggests that its democratic traditions are still relatively young and fragile. The Japanese never experienced the dramatic political revolutions that western countries carried out for the sake of democracy. Rather, democracy entered Japan through the gradual process of westernization, which is still ongoing, and proceeding with at least partial reluctance amongst the Japanese. The history of democracy in Japan is thus roughly contemporaneous with the history of westernization. As a result, democracy does not have as firm an institutional framework as it does in the west and lacks the widespread emotional and intellectual support that it enjoys in the west.

The historical influence of Confucianism on Japanese culture also serves to weaken Japanese attitudes towards democracy. The ideals and values upon which western democracies are founded—individual rights, freedoms, and equality—are not nearly as important in Confucian culture, which is founded on the basis of individual duties, rather than rights. These duties are prescribed by the five basic relationships around which a Confucian society is organized: father/son, husband/wife, older brother/ younger brother, older friend/ younger friend, and ruler/subject. This network of relationships, which is really a system of subordinations, not only tolerates, but indeed promotes, inequalities of a sort that are unacceptable to most westerners.

Furthermore, in a true Confucian state, as Hur has observed, “All ruling ideology must be drawn up and implemented by intellectual bureaucrats, depriving all other classes of people any rights to participate in the policy-making process (2000, p.77). This system of government runs the risk of turning despotic, but there is, in Confucianism, a strong belief in the ethical basis of government; central to Confucian ideology is the idea that leaders are of high moral character and act in the interests of the people. This, of course, is theory, and does not necessarily reflect the actual practice. But whether it is good or bad, ethical or unjust, Confucian style government tends to be authoritarian, hierarchical, and paternalistic. And this contrasts sharply with the notions of legitimate government embraced by most westerners, who harbor resentment and disdain for the ideas of hierarchy and paternalism.

So the idea of justifying critical thinking by appeal to democracy betrays deep commitments to western ideology, commitments which run contrary to important Japanese values and traditions. One may respond to this fact by suggesting that the Japanese ought to strengthen their framework for democracy by promoting the sorts of things that are associated with western-style democracies, such as individual rights, individual freedoms, and equality. However, not only does this response smack of ethnocentrism, it is by no means clear that western-style democracy is either necessary or suitable for Japan.

One crucial difference between Japan and most western countries, as Reischauer and Jansen stress, is that



Japan lacks the social fissures of race, language, religion, region, and class, which are such complicating factors in many western countries" (1996, p.290). Western-style democracy, which seeks to promote individualism and equality, may be not so much an objectively desirable social arrangement, but rather an inevitable response to the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, socially fractured societies of the west. Japan, by contrast, is remarkable homogeneous, and, for this reason, may not be in need of western-style democracy. It is a striking fact that while equality is held up as such an important value in western democracies, the history of western culture betrays massive racial and social inequality of a sort that is unparalleled by anything in Japanese history. This may be due entirely to the fact that Japan has never had a significant multi-cultural issue to contend with, in comparison to most western countries. However, even if this is true, it only underscores the fact that the values that a society seeks to promote are inevitably determined by its history and present circumstances, and the history and present circumstances of Japan are different in crucial respects from those of most western countries.

## 6. Conclusion

We saw in section 3 that proponents of critical thinking typically attempt to justify the teaching of critical thinking by asserting that: a) it fosters individual autonomy, b) it leads to well-functioning democracies, or c) it improves one's linguistic skills (and hence one's persuasive powers). In section 5, we examined these claims from a cross-cultural perspective and found them to be cul-

turally specific. In particular, we saw that the values to which these justifications implicitly or explicitly appeal, values such as intellectual independence, individual rights, and rhetorical prowess, run contrary to important values in Japanese culture. And what is true of Japan is very largely true of Korea (another country that has been heavily influenced by Confucianism) and perhaps other Asian countries as well. We must conclude, then, that the idea that critical thinking is an absolute good is laden with culturally specific assumptions; those who believe that critical thinking ought to be taught in all contexts are in danger of ethnocentrism and all that that entails.

Does it follow from this that critical thinking should not be taught in non-western contexts? That answer to this is certainly no. We have already seen, in section 4.1, that when it comes to teaching western languages, critical thinking pedagogies certainly should be used. For the purpose of teaching critical thinking in that context is not to inculcate certain values in students, but rather to improve the ability of students to communicate in a foreign language. For the same sorts of reasons, critical thinking pedagogies ought to be used within the context of teaching of western literature, including, especially, western philosophy. For the ability to understand, to evaluate, or to participate in any significant sense in the western literary tradition requires mastery of the basic critical thinking skills.

If this is right, then the important issue is not just a matter of *where* critical thinking is taught, but also the *purposes* for which it is taught. When it is taught for the purpose of enhancing students' un-



derstanding of the language and literature of those cultures that highly value critical thinking, then the teaching of critical thinking is, I think, uncontroversial. However, when it is taught for the purpose of getting students to use critical thinking in guiding their lives, then there are certain dangers involved. For in that case, critical thinking is being used to promote behavior, attitudes, and values in students that may conflict with the dominant values of their own culture. In the west, educators and administrators from elementary school to university proudly proclaim critical thinking as a principal objective of their programs and methodologies. We must recognize, however, that this sort of educational philosophy may be dangerously subversive in other cultures, especially those cultures with strong bonds of custom and community.

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