

CRITICAL THINKING, ACTIVISM AND APPLIED ETHICS

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Abstract: Critical thinking as attitude and current activity is a practice of everyday argumentation. At the same time, critical thinking is a tool for training young people in a democratic society. It is a modality of education in the spirit of individual freedom. We are in favor of choosing some critical themes for which the researcher has a strong implication. The analysis and evaluation of arguments often leads to positive effects insofar as the neutral researcher turns into an informed activist. We argue that the subjects of applied ethics can be an excellent framework of analysis in which critical thinking skills can be developed both for the benefit of the individual and for the benefit of contemporary society.

Keywords: Critical thinking, argumentation, education, activism, applied ethics, teaching methods

1. Valences of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a topic of debate nowadays. Many consider it to be one of the few “weapons” that a rational citizen can use against propaganda, manipulation, misinformation, and fake news in the media and social networks. Critical thinking has also become an introductory discipline, which emphasizes the logical and philosophical aspects of the discourse. Our paper is intended to be an investigation exercise that aims to tell and argue in favor of choosing some critical analysis topics for which the teacher or instructor has a strong involvement in the contemporary society. Our desire was to connect critical thinking with the applied ethics in order to bring to light some everyday choices and offer to practical philosophy a possibility of existence.

It is the teacher’s duty to leave his/her personal or conceptual mark on a certain discipline that he/she teaches. In case of critical thinking, we consider that the whole argumentative component should be valued by an everyday choice.

According to different authors or theoretical approaches critical thinking has been identified with a number of various expressions such as: critical argumentation, art of reasoning, everyday reasoning, introduction to logic, practical reasoning, critical reasoning, informal logic, philosophy for children or applied philosophy:

“The field of critical thinking has also changed dramatically since the ‘80s. Then commonly called «informal logic,» at least by philosophers, it was relatively new, still half-wishing to be formal logic and accustomed mainly to treating the wider realm of reasoning as a matter mostly of avoiding «fallacies,» a grab-bag of seemingly random types of mistakes. Now, by contrast, critical thinking is a field in its own right, much better tuned to the variety and texture of actual argumentation and focused not merely or mainly on pitfalls to be avoided but on the underlying principles of *good* argumentation.” (Morrow and Weston, 2016, xiv)

Certainly, the problems we face in the 21st century – global warming, overpopulation, nuclear weapons, digital isolation and consumerism excesses – require a careful attention in approaching any form of knowledge based on the grounds that support it and the conclusion to which it is heading.

The current themes of critical thinking are: recognizing the elements of an argumentation, explaining the tacit assumptions, drawing conclusions, evaluating grounds, evaluating statements, or using clear, unambiguous language. In other words, the evaluation of arguments is the central issue of critical thinking. This is a basic practice of logicians and philosophers for thousands of years. On the one hand, we consider the building of a valid and powerful argument in any form of communication as a positive aspect. On the other hand, we consider that the identifying, avoiding and correcting sophisticated sophisms, paralogisms or misleading arguments that appear in public or daily discourse, as a negative aspect.

2. Critical Thinking as a Practical Discipline

It should be recalled that courses in critical thinking have been adopted recently and the first-year students of the Faculty of Communication Sciences are those who attend them during the first semester. Unfortunately, they are not familiar with disciplines such as logics or philosophy. These students have only little knowledge of an argumentative essay. The baccalaureate curriculum (Lascăr et al., 2017), proposes a minimalist framework of argumentation that would allow the teachers to correct the argumentative essay after a questionable scale. Obviously, there is a series of works in Romanian which could potentially stimulate the interest of those who want to go along this path of thought and rational meditation.

Generally speaking, good critical thinking skills demand adequate critical reading skills, which were largely theorized by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren (2014). Moreover, any critical work should have a good organization, thought, and honesty, and for this goal to be reached, we propose the use of the rhetorical templates proposed in the work *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Graff and Birkenstein (2015). One alternative would be a critical thinking approach of philosophy for children and some interesting topics of reflection on the basis of current themes, some eternal questions and answers given by the most important philosophers. David White's book *Philosophy for Kids: 40 Fun Questions That Help You Wonder ... About Everything!* is a suggestive example (2016). Another alternative could be, as a starting point, one of the most discussed issues of ethics: the trolley problem and based on Thomas Cathcart's book: *Trolley Problem, or Would You Throw the Fat Guy Off the Bridge?* (2014) or Greta Thunberg's speeches about the dangers of global warming to find out the reason of each student's choice based on an ethical theory. Each of these perspectives or others can be used by teachers or instructors to achieve the teaching – learning goals.

Unlike the introductory courses of logic or philosophy, at the student's demand, critical thinking courses are meant to combine theory with practice in the teaching and learning process. Thus, during these courses, there is no formal argumentation or intersection with the ideas of great thinkers, but rather the approaching of everyday reasoning. More specifically, the themes of the discussion are current issues such as: environment protection, racism, discrimination, demographic explosion, etc. However, the subjects are not only general or global themes, but they can refer to those issues of daily life that we hope to solve by appealing to reason: abortion, contraception, capitalism, consumerism, corruption, bureaucracy, drugs, diet and so on.

As an educational discipline, critical thinking aims to develop critical skills and aptitudes in the practice of everyday reasoning to emphasize the significant role of

argumentation. We can have at least three general perspectives of conceiving critical thinking as an activity, either attitude or instrument:

- “1) emphasizing the active character of critical thinking: this form of thought would be the most important type of intellectual activity in human life;
- 2) emphasizing the attitudinal character of critical thinking: the attitudes towards the beliefs or opinions would be the core of critical thinking (evaluation);
- 3) emphasizing the instrumental character of critical thinking: critical thinking would be the *ability* to perform an argumentative (rational) intervention in solving problems.” (Clitan, 2003, 70-71)

Firstly, critical thinking as an activity involves the presence and development of reasoning skills. In other words, critical thinking is interlinked with: critical speaking, reading and writing skills that lead to a good reasoning. This reflexive activity is the center of an examined life, the only one that deserves to be lived, according to Socrates.

Secondly, critical attitude is a modality of a positive or negative evaluation of various arguments. To be more specific, critical thinking is a practical activity that helps us to accept, reject or suspend our judgment on an aspect of reality. Through critical thinking, namely rational and methodical thinking, the individual can determine what to believe or how to act when he has to choose among several possibilities.

Thirdly, critical thinking can be considered a tool by which the reason leads us to solve problems. Thus, through thinking as a critical tool, we can provide grounds or reasons for our beliefs and actions, but also the argument analysis and evaluation of others. Without losing sight of the first two valences – critical thinking as activity and attitude – we believe that its instrumental aspect can help us most in solving practical problems.

Critical thinking as “informal logic” or “critical argumentation” is a work that, as Douglas Walton (1989, ix) asserts, can be associated with a series of traditional skills emphasized by socio-human disciplines:

“[...] empathy, a critical perspective, careful attention to language, the ability to deal with vagueness and ambiguity, balanced recognition of the stronger and weaker points of an argument that is less than perfectly good or perfectly bad, a careful look at the evidence behind a claim, the skill of identifying conclusions, sorting out the main line of argument from a mass of verbiage, and the critical acumen needed to question claims based on expert knowledge in specialized claims or arguments.”

The argumentative component can be covered in the curriculum through a series of general works (Levitin, 2017; Morrow and Weston, 2016; Baillargeon, 2011; Clitan, 2003; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2003; Sălăvăstru, 2003; Toulmin, 2003). However, during the courses, I chose to focus mainly on Nigel Warburton’s book *Thinking from A to Z* (2007), translated into Romanian under the title *Cum să gândim corect și eficient* (1999), a glossary of concepts, definitions, explanations and examples for the main elements of everyday argumentation. The book itself manages to combine the rigor with everyday argumentation and the students can easily understand the arguments and errors of the argumentation, which are often presented in a technical and abstract language. This book presents critical thinking as a tool to get a clear thinking that can be applied and where the critical aspects “have direct applications in most academic disciplines and in any facet of life in which people present reasons and evidence in support of conclusions” (Warburton, 2007, ix).

The supporting materials can offer a good introduction and familiarization with various argumentative aspects which are the core of critical, independent and rational thinking. The following classification offers the fundamental concepts of the field and the complementary notions: 1. logical basics (premise, conclusion, argument, antecedent, consequent, conditional statements, validity, rejection, conclusive argument, deduction, enthymeme, assumption, supposition, induction, empiric, hypothesis, *ad hoc* clauses, consistency, contradiction, contraries); 2. common strategies of argumentation (affirming the antecedent, denial of the consequent, argumentation by analogy, disanalogy, *reductio ad absurdum*, absurd consequences move, biting the bullet, appeal to authority, kowtowing, truth by consensus, argument knock-out, companion in guilt mood, “everyone does it”, slippery slope argument, line of demarcation, mental experiment); 3. errors in reasoning: 3.1. formal (formal fallacy, denial of antecedent, affirmation of the consequent, bad reasons fallacy, *non sequitur*), 3.2. informal (informal fallacy, genetic fallacy, democratic fallacy, etymological fallacy, gambler’s fallacy, bad company fallacy, *argumentum ad hominem*, getting personal, “you would say that wouldn’t you”, Socratic fallacy, proof by ignorance, complex questions), 3.3. seductive (Van Gogh’s fallacy, sunk cost fallacy, correlation, alternative explanations, begging the question, circular arguments, universal competence, rash generalizations, “nothing bad has happened to me out of this”, anecdotal evidence, provincialism, prejudice, hypocrisy); 4.1. persuasion techniques (“research shows that...”, spurious “therefore” and spurious “so”, “that’s a value judgment”, the devil’s advocate, straw man, principle of charity, Ockham’s razor, least worst option, counterexample, exception that proves the rule), 4.2. avoidance techniques (irrelevancy, red herrings, politician’s answer, shifting the goalposts, zigzagging, no hypotheticals move, poisoning the well, catch-22); 5.1. obstacles to critical thinking (wishful thinking, rationalization, truth by adage, lying, economy with the truth, lawyer’s answer, ambiguity, equivocation, imply/ infer, confusion all/ some, pedantry, dictionary definitions, stipulative definitions, humptydumptying, circular definition, persuasive definition, family resemblance term, necessary and sufficient conditions), 5.2. obstacles to clear thinking (vagueness, inappropriate precision, rhetoric, assertion, persuasive words, weasel words, “that’s a fallacy”, emotional language, sentimentality, domino effect, smokescreen, jargon, newspeak, pseudo-profundity, paradox, vested interest, sophistry, false dichotomy, rhetorical questions, black-and-white thinking).

To use critical thinking as a real tool to solve a practical problem, I have challenged my students to answer rationally the question, “Should we eat ethically?”. As I suspected – and as it was confirmed by over 60 students in the first year – none of them were vegan. Consequently, they would be challenged to think and build credible and honest arguments for their daily practical choices. Perhaps some skeptics might question my approach on the grounds that critical thinking is an activity that should not be used in the academic world to investigate personal preferences. It is certainly a pertinent objection. Critical thinking can be used to clarify or solve important global issues. However, I believe that by bringing together the theoretical elements and aspects of the argumentation in case of ethical eating, the spirit of critical thinking is better emphasized. The emphasis falls on practice against theory, because we are interested in solving a particular problem; students are encouraged to come out of the crystal globe of conformism and passivity to speak first person voice about the real reasons of their choices; being a collective activity, they have the opportunity to know different points of view and perspectives as a result of that to get a perceptual overview of a particular subject.

Who does not eat? But what do we eat? What does it mean to eat healthy? Can we talk about eating ethically? What are the arguments that justify a certain choice? Reading Gary Francione and Anna Charlton's book *Eat What You Care: An Examination of the Morality of Eating Animals* I have realized its educational potential. On the basis of some popular insights and of two generally accepted principles, both authors succeed in building an edifice in favor of vegan movement. In the first part of the book, the authors explain the theoretical components and analyze some eloquent case studies. In the second part of the book there are dozens of objections to the consumption of animal products, followed by consistent and persuasive arguments that reject the objections. At the end of the semester, the students were invited to write an argumentative essay on the basis of that model. In the first part ("they say") they followed Francione and Charlton's book, while in the second part ("I say"), the most extensive one, they had to develop their own argumentation and provide a broad, sustained and well-grounded answer to the initial question.

3. Applied Ethics and Vegan Activism

Applied ethics refers, as the name suggests, to the application of theoretical ethics in various practical cases. Thus, the applied ethics is "the application of an ethical perspective to specific problems and practical situations" and this is the "practical reply to the abstract theories of normative ethics" (Singer, 2006, 9). Applied ethics is a subdomain of ethics that focuses on solving some problems in society, and on rational individual choices according to philosophical principles and theories, as well. For example, in the treaty edited by the initiator of the animal liberation movement, the Australian utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, we can find some guiding themes that are present in the contemporary disputes: poverty, ecological ethics, euthanasia, abortion, gender, personal relations, equality, discrimination and preferential treatment, animals, ethics of business relations, crime and punishment, etc. Besides, we can also mention other aspects such as: bioethics or ethical and deontological codes, ethics committees, and various topics of academic ethics (integrity, fairness, honesty, plagiarism, falsification and counterfeit). The above-mentioned subjects are part of compulsory courses on Ethics and academic integrity for Romanian students in masters and doctoral courses.

The theme of ethical eating was a personal choice that has cultural implications as well.

An alternative solution with a higher degree of difficulty, generality, and abstraction could be the recent book *Etica mediului. Argumente rezonabile și întâmpinări critice* (2016) by Professor Constantin Stoenescu from the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Philosophy. The first part of the book "Environmental Ethics as a Theoretical Project" offers ample conceptual clarifications and presents various argumentative structures from a field of knowledge that is less known but which concerns each of us, citizens of the global village.

Without being a true activist, the issue of veganism, the ethical eating and our current relationship with the environment are subjects for which I have a deep respect. I think it is my responsibility to present the less familiar sides of these issues to the young students that can change their perspective on the world. However, I do not consider that critical thinking and applied ethics should be done from the perspective of a social activist. Obviously, the data of the problem should be presented objectively and without trying to distort the opposing position. Moreover, the personal example can inspire

people either in the form of a direct activism or in a moderate one. For example, during the discussions of various objections to a vegan lifestyle, I had to use and tell my students different experiences, facts and findings, personal knowledge, or knowledge gained from a large number of books read in the last 13 years since I renounced to eat meat and animal based products.

In the field of socio-human disciplines the researcher is not obliged to remain in a passive position. That's why I plead for direct involvement in themes and topics for which he/she feels a special affinity and he/she has his/her "skin in the game", as Nicholas Taleb (2018) says. University thinkers and philosophers have the duty and responsibility to show to the collectivity that they are not only concerned with abstract themes, but they make concrete choices and assume a lifestyle in public. Thus, through this course and paper, I have tried to propose an exit from the philosophical closet, to plead for discussing the current applied ethics issues and present arguments for a vegan lifestyle in the academic world. Perhaps we will achieve a moral progression based on reason. Perhaps in the future the liberating way of the human mind will shift from civic rights, women's rights, children's rights, LGBT+ rights to animal rights: "Are there practices that we engage in where the arguments against them are there for all to see but nonetheless we persist in them? When our great grandchildren look back at us, will they be as appalled by some of our practices as we are by our slave-owning, heretic-burning, wife-beating, gay-bashing ancestors?" (Pinker and Goldstein, 2012).

4. Final considerations

Certainly, the logical and philosophical themes and discussions in the sphere of critical thinking should also be open to other fields and disciplines. I refer to: the findings in the field of social psychology (Dobelli, 2014, Kahneman, 2012), poetic or artistic thinking (Avădanei, 2013) and especially creative thinking where a number of authors have developed models based on brainstorming (Rawlinson, 1998), mental maps (Buzan, 2019) lateral thinking (Bono de, 2019) or other aspects of critical thinking (Weston, 2008, Warburton, 2007).

Our paper has only been aimed at familiarizing with various aspects of critical thinking in the academic practice. The central core of such a discipline is the formation of a good everyday argumentation skills through this course and paper. The main elements in the sphere of argumentation, but also the argument errors, the persuasion techniques and the avoidance techniques, which ensures the accuracy of scientific discourse and it should be known by any person who lives in a democratic country. Critical thinking should be a discipline that helps students formulate significant questions and find rational answers in an independent and active way. Its mission is to try to rationally solve individual problems or ethical choices and to question the great challenges of our society such as global warming.

Finally, we have argued that the role of this critical approach is in fact a conceptual clarification through the recognition of the premises and conclusions, a presentation of tacit assumptions, an evaluation of the grounds and personal conclusions. Throughout this process, the instructor or teacher has an important role as he/she provides the themes or texts on the basis of which critical analysis is achieved. Critical analysis offers students real possibilities for clarification and self-knowledge, but also practical skills to support a public dialogue in which ideas and arguments are the central elements of social change.

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