



2.1 A definition of 'critical thinking'

Introduction

Usually, we use the terms 'critical' and 'critical thinking' as if their meanings are self-evident and can be clearly understood by anyone coming to the topic for the first time. However, among scholars, there is no single, precise definition of critical thinking which is broadly agreed upon. This is because historically, 'critical thinking' has become a field of study in its own right, so it is not surprising that many claims about critical thinking are hotly contested. Such claims are clearly influenced by the philosophical, cultural and institutional contexts in which they are developed.

This lack of agreement should be seen, however, in a positive light – for it indicates that all of those involved in debates about critical thinking are vigorously engaged in effective critical thinking! As will be discussed later, one of the hallmarks of good critical thinking is the ability to question your own assumptions, and to never be completely satisfied with the answers to your questions.


Before we discuss how thinking may be critical or otherwise, we begin with the simple question: what is thinking? The important 20th Century philosopher, Martin Heidegger, posed such a question in a book in which he also made the quite startling claim that 'most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time, is that we are still not thinking.'

(Heidegger 1968, 6). This assertion seems strange, yet it was consistent with his view that human beings did not so much lack a capacity for what he called thinking, but in the current epoch, we had forgotten certain kinds of questions which would, in turn, lead to the capacity for *genuine* thinking.

Thinking is thinking when it answers to what is most thought-provoking.

Martin Heidegger (1968, 28)

(image source: <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Martin-Heidegger-German-philosopher>)



Heidegger offered several broad descriptions of thinking, and these have been augmented by Peters (2008, 15) who distinguishes between 'kinds of thinking' and 'styles of reasoning' based on an idea introduced by Hacking in 2002 (cited in Peters 2008, 18). This kind of distinction is important because it highlights links between thinking, reasoning and writing, and therefore prompts us to consider how effective 'critical thinking' can be demonstrated in academic practice.

In his discussion, Peters also refers to the more 'technological' definitions of thinking such as 'cognitive modelling', 'computer-simulation' and 'information processing'. However, even though these considerations are crucial in this age of digitally produced and organized information, we will treat here only what humans do with their brains directly - and not through these machine-mediated processes.



Activity: Have a go at Activity One on the right-hand side of the screen.



Having offered a broad overview of what we call ‘thinking’, we now turn our attention, briefly, to the term ‘critical’. In the context of critical thinking, use of the term ‘critical’ implies much more than just



“Critical” does not mean destructive, but only willing to examine what we sometimes presuppose in our way of thinking, and that gets in the way of making a more livable world.

Judith Butler

(image source: <http://news.berkeley.edu/2012/09/12/butler-wins-adorno-prize/>)

fault-finding, error-correction and negative evaluation. Renowned American philosopher, Judith Butler, has this to say:

To help us better understand its meaning, the adjective ‘critical’ should be placed within the broader context of the noun ‘critique’. Although the idea of critique is built on thinking methods which emerged in early Greek philosophy, it was developed and refined in an era of significant political and philosophical upheaval in Europe in the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries. This period saw a radical questioning of concepts at the heart of traditional views on science, God and reality, which undermined the very foundations of social power in European societies.

A simple definition of critique has been offered in the next section, where it is described as “the systematic practice of doubt”. The concept of critique is (or should be) at the centre of all research and teaching in the modern university. In the 18th Century, Immanuel Kant developed his critical philosophy in an attempt to clarify the nature and limits of human knowledge, and his project placed the idea of critique at the centre of philosophy in the modern era. In more recent times, philosophers Butler and Spivak have characterized critique in the following way:

“...critique is the exploration of how it may be possible to think otherwise – persistently, denaturalizing and historicizing the order of things”. Ideally, in terms of its practice, critique is not afraid of risk-taking, and is “ruthless in the sense that it does not fear its own consequences.” (Butler and Spivak, 2011).

This idea of a radical and enduring attitude of questioning is taken up, in different ways, in some of the following definitions of critical thinking. Moore (2014, 16) has collected some of these definitions from scholars within the so-called ‘Critical Thinking Movement’:

For these writers, critical thinking is

“...reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do.”
Ennis (1962, 10; 2015, 32)

or

“...appropriate use of reflective scepticism within the problem area under consideration.”
McPeck (1981, 7)

or

“...skilful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgement.”
Lipman (1988, 39)



or

“...disciplined, self-directed thinking which exemplifies the perfection of thinking appropriate to a particular domain of thinking.” Paul (1989, 214)

or

“...the educational cognate of rationality.” Siegel (1988, 127)

Given the diversity of these definitions, it is useful to combine aspects of each to construct a description which is best suited to our main purpose of producing effective academic reading and writing. This can be called a ‘syncretic’ definition, since it takes elements from a range of sources without necessarily privileging any one of them.

Some key words which appear in these definitions are:

‘reasonable’, ‘appropriate’, ‘reflective’, ‘skilful’, ‘disciplined’, ‘responsible’, ‘reflective’

Many of these descriptors imply that critical thinking must have a kind of order to it, and must, therefore, be systematic.

Furthermore, the words ‘judgment’, ‘deciding’, ‘believe’, and ‘do’ imply that it must achieve some kind of specific outcome.

Based on the above, we can offer the following syncretic definition of critical thinking:

“Systematic, self-reflective thinking aimed at producing an appropriate conclusion, judgement, decision or action.”

NOW WATCH THIS VIDEO (5 minutes, 12 seconds) which gives a very concise account of the foundations and value of effective critical thinking:



[Critical Thinking \(by QualiaSoup\)](#)