

277. Why a Critical Thinking course?

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Toddlers might as a rule be independently minded. But many people as they grow older come more and more to take their beliefs and values from others. An adult who regularly and happily thinks for herself is surprisingly rare.

Thinking for oneself, or being intellectually and morally autonomous, is an accomplishment. It takes hard work. And the rewards of thinking for oneself might not outweigh the costs and penalties.

Thinking for oneself is having one’s own evidence and arguments for one’s beliefs and values, evidence and arguments that meet one’s own high standards. To be able to think for oneself requires one to be able to hold one’s beliefs and values at arm’s length, to examine them as though they weren’t one’s own beliefs and values, despite their importance to one’s identity, to one’s sense of who one is or should be. A person who thinks for herself takes a critical attitude to what she hears, even when she’s listening to herself.

We fail to be independent thinkers for one or both of two causes. The first is that we humans are prone to cognitive biases and certain varieties of fallacious reasoning. Psychologists who study thinking have been shocked at what they’ve found. We frequently generalize from very few cases, we expect the odds to turn in our favour after a string of bad luck, we value confirming evidence much more highly than we do disconfirming evidence, we’ll judge an awful argument great just because we like its conclusion, and we’re terrible at interpreting statistics.

The second cause of our failure to think independently is our desire to fit in and be liked and our fear of being cast out. Humans are very sensitive to psychological and social pressures. Throughout history, group leaders and other authorities have been good at exploiting our desire to fit in and, even more, at exploiting our fear of exclusion.

If the people we like or admire, or who have power over us, believe X and value Y, we are likely to believe X and to value Y, too. Failing to believe X can put us on the outs with them; valuing something other than Y can make us pariahs in their eyes. Refusal to conform our beliefs and values to the preferred ones can bring mockery and insults on us. We are especially unlikely to ask hard questions or seek to make up our own mind if there is an official sanction for failing to conform.

Those who look after the group might have very good reasons for wanting the group to think one way rather than another. Racist or sexist beliefs or values can cause pain and hardship to people. Best to keep such beliefs and values down. Why not do so, then, by openly and freely discussing them? Because discussion is both difficult and unsure. By instead wielding their

power to include and exclude, our leaders can much more reliably promote good feelings and good habits within the group and prevent harmful ideas from taking hold.

Thinking for oneself requires, on the one hand, being aware of the ways in which reasoning can go off track and, on the other, having the fortitude to endure the shaming, shunning, or worse (getting fired) that can easily come one's way if one's researches bring one to conclusions not endorsed by the group or its leaders.

Not surprisingly, if one aspires to become independent of mind and an autonomous thinker, one is well advised to find others who share that aspiration. Social creatures that we are, primed as we are to respond to social pressures, we can take advantage of the support we will find among other people keen to think for themselves. Universities are human institutions among all the other human institutions, and the manufacture of consent through psychological and social pressure goes on at universities as it does everywhere else. But universities do have as their mission being environments for the exercise of independence of mind. The chances that one will find autonomous thinkers and people who value autonomous thinking are, despite recent trends, still higher at a university than at most other institutions.

Indeed, in line with its mission to be hospitable to independent thought, almost all universities offer a course called "Critical Thinking."

One point of a critical thinking course is to make students aware of the cognitive biases that people are prone to. Another point is to make them aware of fallacies in reasoning. Being aware of the cognitive biases they might have and of the ways reasoning sometimes goes wrong, students will be able to avoid the mistakes that biases and fallacious reasoning cause people to make.

Another point of Critical Thinking, and of all philosophy courses (one would hope), is to encourage students to focus on the arguments themselves, and not be concerned about the impression they would give to their peers or superiors were they to endorse the line of reasoning found in the arguments. It's this aspect of work in critical thinking that addresses our tendency to conform our thinking not to what we take to be true or well evidenced but to what we suspect will help us maintain our social status and good standing. Looking at claims and arguments in the context of analyzing them for their meaning and then evaluating them according to canons of logic and reasoning removes the worry that others will be offended by what you say or ridicule you for saying it. Analyzing and evaluating arguments in class is simply to participate in an exercise. As such, the social and emotional stakes are fairly low.

Gaining proficiency in analysis and evaluation can, though, have a profound effect on one's values and self-image. Being comfortable around arguments and having the skills to understand them and think about their relation to the truths of the matter can bring one to care about the truths—to care maybe even more about being in touch with what is true than about one's social standing or the approval of one's friends and one's leaders. When you care more about believing for reasons of evidence and argument than you care about how having the ideas you settle on will make you look in the eyes of others, you have become an independent thinker.

An important point: there is no compulsion in education. Were there compulsion, it would not be education. It would be indoctrination or training, getting you to believe or value something independently of whether it's true or whether it fits well with the rest of your values. So the task of a Critical Thinking course, or of university as a whole, cannot properly be to make you an independent thinker. The goal cannot be to produce an intellectually and morally autonomous person. The task, rather, is to help students to experience what independent

thinking is like. Whether a student chooses to commit herself to thinking independently must remain entirely up to her.