
THE SOCIAL CORE OF CRITICAL THINKING: EDUCATING TOWARD AN EMPOWERED DEMOCRACY

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The ability to think critically is a defining characteristic of humanity,¹ setting humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. To perceive future consequences of an action, idea, or decision and then adjust these actions, ideas, and decisions accordingly is an integral part of existing as conscious beings in the world. Moreover, critical thinking is an essential part of living together with others and sustaining liberal democratic practices which gradually move towards a more equitable and just world. While consensus abounds around the existence of critical thinking as a human capability, an exact definition is rather elusive and veritable. Nonetheless, some considerable agreement can be found in the understanding that critical thinking entails, among other things, respect for evidence, reflective skepticism, and open-mindedness among other attitudes and dispositions cultivated during education.² In this paper, I will discuss the role of critical thinking in education. As a point of departure, I will examine Harvey Siegel's robust conception and belief that critical thinking is central to the educational project and flourishing human individuals. Siegel's framework provides a foundational and nuanced understanding of critical thinking upon which I will discuss Anthony Laden's belief that reasoning is a social project. Ultimately, I will argue that a complete, robust understanding of critical thinking involves the recognition of these theories as compatible with one another other.

Concerning critical thinking in education, Siegel states, "what is advocated is that education should have as a fundamental aim the fostering in students of (1) the ability to reason well, that is, to construct and properly evaluate the various reasons which have been or can be offered in support or criticism of candidate beliefs, judgments, and actions; and (2) the disposition or inclination to be guided by reasons so evaluated, that is, actually to believe,

¹ Throughout this paper, I will use the terms 'critical thinking,' 'rationality,' and 'reasoning' interchangeably. While these terms are certainly not perfectly synonymous, the definitions discussed share considerable similarities that we can reasonably see them as interrelated and pointing towards the same skill and disposition.

² John Dewey, "The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. Volume 6: 1910-1911, Essays, How We Think," in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, eds. Jo Ann Boydston and Larry Hickman (Charlottesville, VA: IntelLex Corp., 2003), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843000>; John E. McPeck, *Critical Thinking and Education* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

judge, and act in accordance with the results of such reasoned evaluations.”³ Siegel’s overall definition of critical thinking and his claim to its centrality to education provide a clear picture for the importance of this particular educational good and its necessity. Tony Laden offers an additional frame of reference, noting that “reasoning is fundamentally something we do together.”⁴ While not strictly at odds with each other, these perspectives could see mutual benefit by being brought into conversation with one another. In doing so, I will first review Siegel’s conception of critical thinking and the social epistemologist critique that Siegel’s conception is too dismissive of the social aspects of living and thinking. With this critique in mind, I will argue that when we understand Siegel’s definition of critical thinking with the integrated backdrop of Laden’s social picture of reasoning, the already spurious social epistemological critique is further counteracted. I will conclude by noting some important ways that critical thinking as a social endeavor, and not one done in isolation, is important for education in democratic societies.

EDUCATION’S FOUNDATION IN CRITICAL THINKING

Harvey Siegel’s conception of critical thinking parallels the concept of rationality wherein the capability to ‘reason well’ encompasses the dispositions and inclinations to be guided by ‘good’ reasons.⁵ Siegel contends that the primary goal of education ought to be the cultivation of this skill of good, reasoned critical thinking. Viewed in this light, education is the initiation into the space of reasons which rational, critical thinking individuals inhabit with other similarly reasonable critical thinkers. Siegel states that “to regard the cultivation of reason as a fundamental educational aim or ideal is to hold that the fostering in students of the ability to reason well and the disposition to be guided by reasons is of central educational importance.”⁶

Siegel’s support for critical thinking as a foundational goal of education is predicated on four tenets. (1) Education that fosters critical thinking is consistent with the recognition of humans as rational and autonomous beings. That is, as autonomous, self-contained beings, humans have the natural ability to think for themselves and to utilize their own mental capacities to make judgements. The only way education respects this autonomy of rational individuals is by cultivating the capacity to think independently from influence, in turn creating an autonomous, rather than heteronomous, thinker. We might also take this to mean that when critical thinking is not cultivated, the inherent worth of students is negated. (2) To the extent that education is preparation for

³ Harvey Siegel, “Cultivating Reason,” in *Education’s Epistemology: Rationality, Diversity, and Critical Thinking* (2017), 4, accessed through *Oxford Scholarship Online*: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190682675.001.0001>.

⁴ Anthony S. Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 16.

⁵ I find this claim to be convincing evidence that ‘critical thinking’ is at least somewhat synonymous with ‘reasoning,’ and it serves as support for the continued use of the terms interchangeably. Siegel, “Cultivating Reason,” 4.

⁶ Siegel, 4.

adulthood and adulthood is the realization of ‘self-sufficiency and self-direction,’ critical thinking is crucial in preparing students for this transition. (3) Critical thinking is central to the disciplines which comprise the educational tradition. Education is composed of sub-disciplines such as math, science, art, etc., all of which require critical thinking and rationality as a prerequisite for taking part in such activities.⁷ And lastly, (4) critical thinking is a crucial component of democracy. To the extent that we desire a democratically functioning society, we must cultivate habits of critical thinking in citizens. In Siegel’s words, “for democracy can flourish just to the extent that its citizenry is sufficiently critical.”⁸

While numerous strong and valid critiques of Siegel’s position have been levied against him, this paper accepts the premises which Siegel lays forth. Nonetheless, I argue that Siegel’s definition can be improved by a modest addition and posit a fifth tenet: critical thinking is a continual, social process.

CRITICAL THINKING AND EPISTEMIC INDEPENDENCE

The justification for the proposal of this additional tenet can be found in the social epistemological critique of Siegel’s conception of critical thinking. Siegel characterizes this critique as follows:

Critiques of individualism are many and varied; most relevant here are those which challenge the idea that students—and believers generally—are rightly thought to be able to “drive their own epistemic engines” and determine by themselves, from among candidate beliefs, which are worthy of embrace. Such epistemic individualism is challenged by advocates of what has come to be called social epistemology: the systematic study of the ways in which knowledge is irredeemably social, in large part because knowers are dependent on others for their knowledge. Because epistemic agents are epistemically dependent on others, epistemic individualism, it is argued, is a *chimera*.⁹

The social epistemologist argues that critical thinking, insofar as it is said to be an individual project, is not possible because reasons emerge not from within ourselves but from the world around us. Further, attempting to discern our own reasons for belief in every instance is a futile endeavor; the world is simply too complex to do this. Relying on the testimonies of others and their

⁷ One might posit that just because these are traditionally the educational disciplines does not mean that they ought to be. However, we might press this assertion for other disciplines which compose education and then one must justify why these disciplines do not entail critical thinking, a task not easily undertaken and outside the scope of this paper.

⁸ Siegel, “Cultivating Reason,” 7.

⁹ Siegel, 11, emphasis added.

epistemological expertise is fundamental for flourishing in this increasingly complex world.

Siegel addresses this critique by noting that (a) the fact that we are at times epistemically dependent (i.e., we must rely on testimony of experts) does not abnegate the ability for us to be epistemically independent, and this is because (b) we must always determine what good reasons for belief are for ourselves. In responding to John Hardwig's claim that "rationality sometimes consists in refusing to think for oneself,"¹⁰ Siegel concedes that there are times where it is reasonable for individuals to rely on the testimony of others for belief. However, he does not concede that this is sufficient proof that we are always, if ever, epistemically dependent. Siegel claims that regardless of where reasons originate, we are left to our own devices to conclude what is a good reason independently of others, stating,

Rationality requires rather that, on occasion we *value* expert opinion more highly than our own lay opinion. Even on such occasions, moreover, we must do plenty of thinking to be rationally justified in holding that the occasion in question is one in which we are epistemically dependent, and that the expert upon whom we propose to be dependent is a legitimate authority, and the opinion offered appropriately expert and authoritative. There is no abdication of individual cognitive responsibility here.¹¹

Siegel further argues that "[to determine] when we are in fact epistemically dependent and when not — when we should uncritically accept expert testimony and when we should endeavor to think for ourselves — itself requires critical thinking and the exercise of independent judgment."¹²

Siegel has a point, but so do the social epistemologists: we must determine for ourselves what reasons bear objective weight for shaping our beliefs, but these reasons are rarely ever generated solipsistically. This tension is what brings about the proposed fifth tenet of critical thinking. In addressing this tension between epistemic dependence and independence, I will suggest adopting Anthony Laden's social picture of reasoning as a way to more fully incorporate epistemic dependence into Siegel's conception of critical thinking and one that better encompasses what we truly mean when we evoke the practice of reasoning.

¹⁰ Quoted in Harvey Siegel, "Rationality and Epistemic Dependence," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 20, no. 1 (1988): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.1988.tb00487.x>.

¹¹ Siegel, "Rationality and Epistemic Dependence," 4.

¹² Siegel, "Cultivating Reason," 13.

LADEN AND THE SOCIAL PROCESS OF REASONING

Before proceeding to Laden's project, we should be clear on Siegel's position. To be sure, Siegel does not so much dismiss the social epistemologist claim that reasons are derived from the outside world, only the claim that epistemic independence is "a chimera." His reasons for dismissing this claim on epistemic independence are, to my mind, hard to oppose. Certainly, we all make our own decisions to some extent. For instance, I have made the decision to write this paper on this topic. Regardless of where this idea originated, I still made the ultimate decision to write on critical thinking and not some other subject. This decision was and is fully mine. However, it is pertinent and enlightening to recognize the way in which the decision was influenced by social factors.¹³ Although our *final* decision is epistemically independent, critical thinking cannot be adequately defined by sole reference to our momentary decision point.

We might further consider the implications and repercussions of the claim that critical thinking is always epistemically dependent upon the democratic project.¹⁴ As Siegel claims, critical thinking is part and parcel to the success of democracy. What also ought to be understood is that democracy is *necessarily* a social endeavor and one that does not begin when we enter the voting booth and end when we leave it; democracy is an ongoing social process. If critical thinking is rightly conceived as an activity which parallels and is necessary for democracy, it then *must* be perpetual and social. Democracy, viewed as an independent endeavor, changes the fabric upon which our institutions are founded and the notion of cooperation which is essential to its flourishing. In viewing the practice of critical thinking as integral to the success of democracy, we can reasonably see that Siegel acknowledges some components of epistemic dependence within his view of critical thinking, albeit a recognition that does not take the forefront.

Anthony Laden's picture of social reasoning creates a framework for properly conceiving of critical thinking and its ongoing social nature and brings epistemic dependence into a more commensurable position with Siegel's work. In his book *Reasoning: A Social Picture*,¹⁵ Laden paints an alternative social picture of reasoning. He juxtaposes his social view against the classical picture of reasoning which holds that "reasoning is an activity of rational or logical calculation and determination, a norm-governed engagement with forms or

¹³ Here it is important to clarify that the claim that critical thinking is not epistemically independent is not a claim that autonomy is unachievable; this topic sits outside of this paper's scope. Indeed, it can be said that we act as autonomous individuals by nature of the way in which decisions are made at the final moment within ourselves. The act of decision making is part of what makes us autonomous.

¹⁴ Here I do not mean to suggest that Siegel makes this claim but find exploring this line of reasoning to be fruitful for thinking through the complexity of critical thinking and reasoning.

¹⁵ Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*.

structures or according to principles of reason.”¹⁶ So conceived, Laden claims, this picture of reasoning is constricting and does not adequately capture what it is to inhabit the space of reasons. Laden urges us to consider reasoning as “(1) an *activity or practice* that is (2) *social*, and (3) *ongoing* and largely consists of (4) the *issuing of invitations* (5) to take what we say as *speaking for our interlocutors as well*.”¹⁷

According to the standard picture of reasoning, critical thinking and reasoning cannot be wholly understood as a singular moment in time away from social inputs. Understanding them as such would cast aside the influences we have surely received leading up to a decision and ultimately the inherently social nature of living together. Instead, critical thinking should be seen as a *process*, in accordance with Laden’s social picture of reasoning, which involves discerning reasons from the world to reach a conclusion which ultimately culminates in a decision. Here, I will focus on Laden’s claims that reasoning is (2) a social process and that reasoning is (3) ongoing.

In the following sections, I will detail why critical thinking is rightly thought to be a continual social process due to the case that (A) sufficient reasons cannot be generated independent from social influence and (B) reasons cannot be sufficiently and properly adjudicated without communicative practice.

A. *The emergence of reasons*

To contend that critical thinking as a process is epistemically independent is to contend that it can be wholly performed without social influence. This must extend throughout the *entire* process, from the emergence of our reasons to our decision point. However, it is ludicrous to claim that one can reason well enough to classify the act as critical thinking if they have not interacted with the world. The reasons which generate justifiable arguments for belief only exist to the extent that they reference meaning constructed through the act of living with others. The meaning which our reasons reference is a social phenomenon built out of structured interaction.¹⁸ However, we need not go so far as to interrogate the emergence of meaning to demonstrate our point that sufficient reasons come from interaction.¹⁹ Importantly, Siegel does not dismiss the fact that reasons come from the world outside ourselves; instead, he suggests that critical thinking can be captured in a singular moment which only involves the weighing of these reasons against each other within ourselves. Said differently, critical thinking might be understood as a skill we possess alone rather than an activity in which we necessarily have to participate with others.

Here, consider what we are doing when we are *supposedly* reasoning alone. We are engaging in a conversation with a generalized other concerning

¹⁶ Laden, 12.

¹⁷ Laden, 10. Emphasis added

¹⁸ Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, ed. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981).

¹⁹ This is the core of the social epistemologist critique.

reasons that are not entirely our own. Habermas explicates this point in the development of the critical “self,” while building the foundation for his theory of communicative action. Referencing Mead, Habermas shows that we must internalize the reasonable responses of others to develop meaning out of otherwise meaningless symbols.²⁰ Habermas elaborates saying:

Reasons are no more a private possession than is language itself; in cases of controversy, whether reasons are good or bad can be determined only in the forum of a rule-governed exchange of arguments. Therefore, the practice of argumentation, which requires the participants to adopt a reflexive attitude towards validity claims that have become problematic, is the key to a complex form of rationality in which those different forms of rationality mentioned come together and merge.²¹

Again, we need not go so far as to show that meaning can only be created socially, simply that to have good reasons to reason well, we must take the perspective of the other. That is, all our thoughts must be mediated through a prism of another’s point of view in order to be considered critical because criticality emerges from a ‘practice of argumentation,’ which is a public endeavor. Even if we are not directly engaged with someone in conversation, the act of weighing reasons that a reasonable other might consider requires that we have some previous exposure to that other. When we understand critical thinking as an ongoing process of gathering, consolidating, and weighing reasons, we start to create a fuller picture, which relies on and requires other people.

B. Social Reasoning and Communication

Claiming that reasoning is social is synonymous with claiming it cannot be done alone. Laden supports this claim in various ways. Namely, in keeping with Kant’s requirement that reasons must remain open to criticism, he notes that to remain open to criticism a reason must be offered up for acceptance into a space of reasons and validation by others. Thus, for an act to qualify as reason, it must perpetually remain open to criticism. Once reason closes itself off from criticism, it is no longer reasonable.²²

Again, it is certainly the case that at the final moment of decision, criticisms are considered internally by oneself. But much like in the case of reasons, this does not mean that the origin of criticism was in the self, nor that the reasoned arguments being weighed against each other are generated absent of social influence. Take, again, the aforementioned deliberative process done alone. As stated, if we do this well, we do so in reference to a generalized other.

²⁰ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 11–15.

²¹ Jurgen Habermas, *Philosophical Introductions: Five Approaches to Communicative Reason* (Medford, Ore: Polity Press, 2018), 88.

²² Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, 15.

We consider how we might be viewed or what might be said of us, how X will improve society, how it will affect our own standing in the world, etc. When we make a choice between an array of possible actions, critical thinking requires that one must think through the consequences of their actions based upon all reasonable alternatives. We ought then to be thinking of sufficiently broad and diverse actions and consequences. The only adequate way to do so is by engaging in a conversation with a generalized other.

However, it is often the case that we are *not* acting alone when reasoning. Laden expands upon this notion in his conception of social reasoning saying, “[w]hen ... I try to speak for you in the sense that I do when reasoning, I call for your response, not only to what I have said, but to my invitation to take it as something you would say as well.”²³ For ideas, values, virtues, norms, social mores, etc. to be legitimated in the world, they must survive criticism levied through social deliberation. If a thought does not go through this legitimation process, it is simply that: a thought, not a reason that has withstood criticism. Because sufficient criticism cannot be a solipsistic endeavor and must be perpetual, critical thinking must also be considered social and ongoing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

When we rightly conceive of critical thinking as an ongoing social process, we create ripples in the way we conceive of education. Education prepares us to participate in a complex and diverse world, and this preparation must account for the fact that participating in the world means interacting with others whose experiences vary greatly from our own. Communication and critical thinking engaged across diverse lifeworlds becomes paramount for flourishing as a human. Being initiated into the space of reasons is being initiated into a communicative and participatory space with others.²⁴ In this way, critical thinking, done together as a society, facilitates moral progress and legitimates democratic processes.

Part of living involves learning of and contributing to the development of social and moral norms. We do not enter the world with *a priori* knowledge and acceptance of the current moral state. Moreover, moral consensus is not a static achievement but changes as we better understand the consequences of our actions and what is considered reasonable by society. Anderson shows that “[m]oral norms, like social norms and conventions, are largely sustained through shared expectations of conditional conformity, backed up by expectations of sanction.”²⁵ Conformity and sanctions do not just arise on their own, they are developed through interaction with others and reference to communal life. Moral norms can change as conflict arises when assumed moral principles become obsolete, when consequences from an existing moral principle become

²³ Laden, 19–20.

²⁴ Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture*.

²⁵ Elizabeth Anderson, “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery,” *The Lindley Lecture. The University of Kansas, February 11, 2014* (2014), 3.

unsatisfactory, or if the legitimacy of the moral norm or principle is brought into question.²⁶ In these such cases we must engage with one another as a community in the process of social reasoning and critical thinking to adjudicate and legitimate the moral principles of society.

This legitimation project is an integral component of living together. Through legitimation, moral and social norms are created, tested, and ossified. To the extent that we live in a public with competing notions of the good, the legitimation of social norms becomes a political project. In this political project, society constructs the basic structure of itself through reference to what can be universally agreed upon as sound principles for living a good life amenable to all. This process parallels the legitimation of scientific knowledge upon which norms and mores are founded. Knowledge is not solely founded upon rigorous method but must be socially substantiated through collective validation. Knowledge only emerges through interaction and consensus within the community.²⁷ Just as the legitimation of scientific knowledge requires the communication and collaboration of the scientific community, legitimation of social norms requires citizens to work together to build an agreed upon set of rules which can exist without reference to standing dogmatic belief.²⁸ This process is *per se* participatory. We cannot agree on a social norm without cooperation and communication among each other.

Ultimately, the construction and legitimation of moral and social norms is part and parcel to the democratic project. It is based upon the ability to communicate and think together towards a more perfect world. By its very nature, democracy is a collective endeavor in which citizens under a common national demonym *encounter* one another and work together to build the structure of their world. Democracy cannot be an individual endeavor, nor can it be a momentary act. And to the extent that a stable democracy relies on a reasoning and critical thinking public — recall Siegel’s claim above that critical thinking is a crucial component of democracy— these tasks cannot be individual endeavors or momentary acts either. It involves building meaning, reasoning, and learning with others in a shared space to function and sustain. Only once those in a society can reason together within the space of reasons will democracy function properly.

CONCLUSION

Critical thinking properly construed involves the recognition that we can think critically only insofar as we sufficiently engage with others in the space of reasons. The implications of this fact on education are broad. It means we must orient children to be collaborative and communicative thinkers if we are to

²⁶ Anderson, “Social Movements.”

²⁷ Helen Longino, “Introduction: Good Science, Bad Science,” in *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton University Press, 1990), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvx5wbfz.4%0AJSTOR>.

²⁸ Matthew Clayton, “Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing,” in *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing* (2006): 1–224, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199268940.001.0001>.

adequately prepare them to take part in the democratic project. As we continually refine and improve our educational initiatives to support critical thinking and social reasoning in students, it is incumbent upon all educators to create environments and processes which support these skills and dispositions. One way the education community has worked to support socially oriented critical thinking is through Philosophy for Children (P4C) initiatives and practices. P4C engages children with one another philosophically to reach their own conclusions about the world rather than pre-ordained answers. This aim rests upon the notion that philosophy, reason, and critical thinking are participatory spaces in which we encounter another purposefully and thoughtfully. P4C practices prepare students to participate in the construction and legitimation of society. However, this cannot be the only space where students are taught to take part in social reasoning. Many STEM subjects focus upon an individual's capability to problem solve alone, but it is just as important for students to understand these fields as participatory spaces in recognition of the social construction of knowledge, rather than as solipsistic endeavors. The social aspect of critical thinking must permeate throughout the educational experience.

My point in this paper is not to argue against Siegel's claim of the centrality of critical thinking in education. In fact, I am largely sympathetic to this project and claim as detailed by Siegel. Instead, I hope to have emphasized the importance of the social aspect of critical thinking which is underplayed within Siegel's work and is brought to clearer light with the proposed fifth tenet that critical thinking is a continual, social process. That one might disagree with this claim and this paper solidifies the notion that we cannot properly engage in critical thinking on our own. We must do so together.
