

1 Getting Started on Critical Thinking

WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

As you would imagine, definitions of critical thinking vary from author to author, but there are certain key features that we can draw out. While there are debates about what constitutes *good* critical thinking, there are a few facts we can start with.

Usually critical thinking involves the production of an **argument about an argument**. The first speaker or writer says something, and the critic examines the argument of the first speaker, providing counterarguments that undermine the original proposition. It can be quite a controversial area – arguments can become quite personal and aggressive – but remember when you are trying to think critically yourself to stay calm, no matter how ridiculous what you've been presented with is. Construct your counterargument logically, methodically, slowly, and maintain a good pace. Rarely does anyone assume that someone who is shouting, ranting or excited is making a good point: we tend to listen to calm people much more. Shouting gets you noticed, but it doesn't get you agreed with. It's always useful to think about the argument someone is making in the context of the tone of their speech, and any particular reasons they might have for making the comments they are making. What are the motives of the person making claims? What is their agenda? A politician, a parent, a feminist, a patient or a film critic all have things they want to achieve, and what they say might be influenced by those wider aims; they don't exist in a vacuum. Similarly, what is the quality of the information that you are being provided with in an argument? Can you trust its source? Just because someone has found a 'fact' on the internet or even in a book does not

mean that it is indisputable. Always check so-called facts that are presented to you. We'll discuss these issues again later in the book.

Critical thinking is, most of the time, closely related to critical reading. After all, when we ask students to think critically, and mark down their work because it doesn't show critical thinking, what we really mean is that they have not demonstrated that they read original sources critically.

Critical thinking is largely associated with an argument. This involves putting forward *positions*, which further the argument as we read or speak on it. In common parlance, we refer to two people disagreeing as 'having an argument', as if these were synonymous. However, unless new positions are being generated, they are not actually arguing, but disagreeing. An example of a disagreement is to be found in traditional pantomime:

'He's behind you!'

'Oh, no he isn't!'

'Oh, yes he is!'

'Oh, no he isn't!'

'Oh, yes he is!'

All that is happening is that both parties are repeating a single position: nothing develops. It's a disagreement, not an argument. When we think critically, we have to do so by first assessing what someone's position is, then providing a critique of their argument to support that position.

Defining critical thinking

It might be useful to examine some common or 'classic' definitions of critical thinking.

John Dewey is regarded as the modern reviver of critical thinking philosophy, although he called it, interestingly enough, 'reflective thinking'. He said it was the:

Active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.

(Dewey, 1909, p.9)

This seems very much like a common-sense statement rather than something deeper, but if we apply some critical thinking to this

definition of critical thinking (perhaps we could call that *metacritical thinking*), we see something more profound emerging. It is clear from this that critical thinking has a method, and that method must be active and persistent. We keep on asking questions until we have no more to ask. We base our enquiries on evidence ('the grounds which support it'), and we have an eye on the implications and conclusions of any belief (i.e. we think about the uses to which an argument could be put, because sometimes we can predict what others will make of our ideas, and what awful consequences might arise).

Here is one more definition for you, this time from Richard Paul, who is also famous for his use of **Socratic questioning** (see below):

Critical thinking is that mode of thinking – about any subject, content or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them.

(Paul, Fisher, & Nosich, 1993, p.4)

Here we have clear reference to 'metacritical' thinking and an allusion to the use of method; again we could call that scientific method, if appropriate, as in the case of much of psychology.

It seems, therefore, that critical thinking needs to have some implicit or explicit structure, and by implication, some method. It is for the purpose of improving the quality of thinking, and therefore the production of one's own arguments.

PSYCHOLOGY AND CRITICAL THINKING

One thing missing from these definitions is the notion of *creative* thinking. For some writers on the subject, it seems as if critical thinking has become divorced from the act of creation. That is probably an unnecessary and dangerous step. Good critical thinking can be creative: it's all about putting ideas together in new ways and making us think of things we didn't think of before. Perhaps these days we make a false distinction between creative people and scientific people, and perhaps we think that critical thinking belongs in the scientific camp. This is faulty thinking. Science is just as creative as the arts, albeit in slightly

different ways, and the arts are just as critical as science. Psychology is in a fascinating position, in that it forms the bridge between the two. We can look in either direction for ideas to shape our theories, and psychologists are often trained in the arts, the sciences or both.

When you read this book, think about psychology, what it means to you and where it fits in, and try to keep the bigger picture of what psychology is in your mind. Psychology is a massive subject, and encroaches on sociology, medicine, philosophy and so on. It has a wide range of methods, from the anti-scientific approaches of the critical qualitative researchers through to the biological psychologists, whose methods are indistinguishable from those used by formal scientists. Perhaps, therefore, you will find contradictions within psychology – unless you only view one area of psychology at a time and think about that in relation to issues concerning critical thinking. When people dismiss psychology as ‘mumbo jumbo’, do they mean all of psychology, or just bits of it? When people champion psychology for its progress and findings, do they mean all of it, or just bits of it?

Tied in with all of this is the argument about whether psychology is a science or an art. It is the bridge between the two, and bridges have foundations on both sides of the river. From now on, as you read, keep asking yourself a slightly different question: is psychology an artful science, or a scientific art? Ask yourself also, at every turn, whether you feel that psychologists are involved in finding things out, or asking more and more questions? Concern yourself with not only the immediate picture – that is, working out whether or not a particular piece of research is valid – but also with the bigger picture, that of where all our evidence is heading. Are we getting somewhere, and if so, in what direction?

CHAPTER 1 – CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. What is critical thinking? Can you define it easily, and if not, why not?
2. ‘If you want to think critically, knowing what critical thinking is is half the battle’: discuss.