

THINKING CRITICALLY WITHOUT THINKING

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There are complexities in David McCarty's paper which he did not have the required space to develop fully. As a result, many of his points have an elliptical quality that leaves them more suggestive than demonstrative. For this reason the paper is awkward to comment upon. In the end, I do not think McCarty's paper achieves what it sets out to do, namely, to show that "critical thinking is not a kind of thinking." Along the way, however, we are treated to some interesting observations and provocative claims.

McCarty's paper does succeed in showing that any adequate account of thinking, in general, and critical thinking in particular, will necessarily include things that are not normally considered thinking. For example, critical thinking logically entails something like "bare judgement," which is non-deliberate and/or non-ratiocinative, or critical thinking presupposes public authority and public standards. The reasons for these entailments are, as McCarty suggests, closely akin to the kinds of reasons Wittgenstein gives for the impossibility of a private language; that is, there are social conditions of thinking required for critical thinking. I have no objection to this line of reasoning in McCarty's paper. Indeed, I was first convinced of its plausibility and usefulness in this connection by Paul Hirst in his *Knowledge and the Curriculum*.

However, the main thesis of McCarty's paper is that "critical thinking is not a kind of thinking." With some effort, I discern what I take to be four distinguishable arguments for this conclusion, which I will treat in the order of their occurrence in McCarty's paper. McCarty first claims that:

First, to include critical thinking within thinking is to open a broad, level road by which traditional philosophy and cognitive psychology can march into educational philosophy. Second, it creates for critical thinking a fictitious philosophical history, one obscuring a crucial discontinuity. Cognitive psychology disports itself as general empirical study [sic] of all cognition. If critical thinking is thinking, then it is cognition. Hence, without further ado, a way is open by which cognitive psychology comes to seem a proper general study of critical thinking. The import of this overhasty conclusion for pedagogy will be obvious.

To begin with, I do not find these alleged "two pernicious consequences" to be, in fact, consequences. Cognitive psychology can and does study logical thinking, mathematical thinking, and chess playing, to name a few, and often this research reveals some interesting findings. None of this research, however, has usurped the autonomy of logic, mathematics, nor chess. Nor do I see any reason to fear that it might. Notice that you can rebut McCarty's argument by simply substituting for "critical thinking," to wit:

Cognitive psychology disports itself as general empirical study of all cognition. If *tiddlywinks* is thinking, then it is cognition. Hence, without further ado, a way is open by which cognitive psychology comes to seem a proper general study of *tiddlywinks*.

This "argument" is simply a non sequitur. Any activity can be examined from virtually any perspective; this, in itself, does not change or usurp the activity.

A second argument which McCarty offers in support of his thesis that critical thinking is not a kind of thinking is his claim that:

we labor under no logical or lexical obligation to analyze every double predication XY, such as “critical thinking,”⁸⁰ that every XY turns out to be a Y. Hence, we stand un-compelled by grammar to insist that every instance of critical thinking is an instance of thinking.

The specific examples McCarty provides are those of a “German shepherd” and “critical reading.” I think McCarty is slightly confused about this point in general, and these examples in particular. Notice, for example that when one properly inserts a verb form or gerund for Y in any XY combination, as we have in “critical thinking,” then one is compelled by grammar to accept the XY as an instance of Y. If one considers the parallel example of “German shepherding” (to match the phrase “critical thinking”), then it does seem that XY is an instance of Y. That is, German shepherding is, grammatically speaking, some kind of shepherding, just as critical thinking is some kind of thinking. Likewise, with respect to “critical reading,” the dictionary, my intuitions, and common usage do suggest that it *is* a kind of reading, and I cannot imagine it to be otherwise.

The third argument offered by McCarty to support his thesis derives from Descartes’ view that thinking, or *cogitare*, includes such things as doubting, willing, refusing, affirming, imagining, sensing, and the like. I have no difficulty with this view. Further, I have no difficulty with McCarty’s example of an excited football fan “thoughtlessly” jumping up and spilling drink down the back of the man in front, as being an example of thought, Cartesian or otherwise, even though we do not commonly associate such instances with thinking. However, this observation simply shows that not all things which we regard as *thinking* are candidates for critical thinking. That is, there will always be types of thinking which are not subsumed under critical thinking. I know of no one who denies this claim. It is similar to claiming: “There are many bodily movements that we do, such as scratching our chin, which will never become competitive Olympic events.” McCarty’s observation here is thus true but irrelevant to his general thesis that “critical thinking is not a kind of thinking.”

McCarty’s fourth and final argument consists of three “thought experiments,” which are designed to show that critical thinking presupposes certain features, or properties, which are not in themselves “thinking,” as such. The first case is the “logical overachiever,” which is intended to show that “bare judgement,” that is intuitive, nondeliberative judgement, is necessary for actually doing critical thinking. This is so because the application of a rule, such as *modus ponens*, cannot depend upon the application of yet another rule to decide when to use the rule. McCarty is, in fact, less clear about the reason for this than he might be. Wittgenstein, by contrast, argues that the reason is because a regress is involved. Psychological factors come into play when one tries to apply a rule or principle. This is why logic courses, for example, train for cognitive transfer through repetitive drills and exercises — precisely because there are no rules for how to apply the rules. One must simply grasp it.

However, all that McCarty’s “overachiever” shows is that there are limits and preconditions to using critical thinking and that these limits are not themselves a constitutive part of critical thinking. I’m sure there are still other conditions, such as being conscious, breathing or having a heart-beat, that are also necessary for critical thinking. But simply to show that there are other necessary preconditions for critical thinking does not show that critical thinking is not a kind of thinking. Every X has certain limits and pre-conditions which are not themselves X.

The second case, the “critical libertarian” is intended to show that external public standards of reasoning exert *prima facie* authority over the quality of one’s thought. That is, one’s personal standards of reasoning must conform to public standards that are not of one’s own making. Contra-McCarty, however, there is a version of postmodernist thought which takes issue with this point of view. To this extent, the position of the “critical libertarian” is not quite so absurd as McCarty might wish. At the very least more argument is required. But how ever one decides this question, I cannot see how the issue bears upon the question of whether critical thinking is a kind of thinking. The point seems simply irrelevant.

The third case, the “critical prodigy,” depends upon an analogy with the autistic mathematical genius or idiot savant in order to suggest that it is logically possible to come up with correct critical judgements which involve no deliberation or mental effort what ever. This last “thought experiment” assumes, however, that critical thinking entails *always* getting the right answer or, as McCarty puts it, “all decisions are perfectly correct.” But I know of no one who overburdens critical thinking with this demand. Critical thinkers can be and often are wrong. Every theorist that I know of defines critical thinking in terms of the *processes* of thinking, *not* on correct outcomes. Indeed, if the idiot savant or “critical prodigy” could not provide reasons for his/her decisions, I doubt if such could be considered *bona fide* instances of critical thinking. Certainly computers that produce “correct answers” are not considered critical thinkers.

Finally, let me comment on McCarty’s two critical thinking metaphors: “theme-and-variation,” and “chronometry.” The metaphor of theme-and-variation from music is an imaginative way of characterizing how various logical rules and principles of reasoning can be viewed as *more* or *less* obvious, depending upon one’s point of view. For writers like Ennis, Norris, and Siegel, the obviousness of logic in critical thinking is as clear as the Brahms variations on a theme of Haydn. For me, logic is far less obvious, and, therefore, far less useful. But how ever one views these relationship, it seems clear to me that variations upon a theme in music remain *musical* variations; they are no less music. Similarly, all cases of critical thinking remain instances of thinking.

I have a similar view of McCarty’s use of the chronometry metaphor. Given chronometry’s prominent place in the title of McCarty’s paper, one would have expected this metaphor to have played a larger role in the development of his thesis. As it stands, the metaphor fails to carry any of the argumentative burden of the paper.

In sum, I agree with McCarty, that not *all* thinking requires deliberation, ratiocination, pondering or effort. But it seems to me that critical thinking is the one kind of thinking that does!

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