Critical Thinking, Thin Ideals, and Irreducibly Normative Deliberation

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Critical thinking is usually considered essential to education, especially liberal democratic education.[1] I am interested in the normative question: what motivations for thinking critically should be cultivated? This paper will provide a partial and conditional answer to this general question by identifying the relevant importance of thin normative ideals such as "doing what's right." In the concluding section I will also suggest a related conjecture about how such thin ideals should be cultivated (a hint: "IND"). But first, a couple of preliminary remarks.

The activity of critical thinking has been explained as "careful thinking directed to a goal,"[2] or "reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do."[3] As they stand, these explanations might seem partial or vague; but to avoid controversy, I will not try to offer a more detailed conception here. As far as I can tell, my argument will apply to any plausible detailed conception. In particular, it will apply to any conception of the activity of critical thinking that may be derived from Harvey Siegel's conception of critical thinking as an educational ideal.[4] According to Siegel, to meet this ideal, educators must cultivate the ability to assess reasons properly, as well as a "critical spirit" which features dispositional elements. For those who agree with Siegel, what my argument will add is that the critical spirit would not be complete without a commitment to a thin ideal. The thin normative ideal of "doing what I have most reason to do" would be especially suitable for Siegel's theory.

I will focus on thinking critically in practical deliberation about which basic moral or prudential values (or goals, or principles) to adopt, or which to prioritize in cases of conflicting values (which will be illustrated in section 2).[5] Such deliberation involves questions that are irreducibly normative (including moral and prudential questions); therefore, I will call it "Irreducibly Normative Deliberation," or "IND" in short. IND differs from instrumental reasoning

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION | Amy Shuffelton, editor

that seeks an effective means to a concrete end.

Some may feel that critical thinking—despite its undisputed importance for instrumental reasoning and for the formation of non-normative beliefs—has no place in IND; or that IND should not be encouraged. However, first, it seems that the value of instrumental reasoning and accurate non-normative beliefs partly depends on the value of the goals that they serve. To illustrate, it seems morally problematic to promote sound instrumental reasoning and accurate non-normative beliefs if we somehow know for sure that they would mostly serve highly immoral goals. Second, it seems that moral and prudential deliberation could be flawed, leading to the wrong conclusion; and that thinking critically can minimize such deliberative shortcomings. For these reasons, it seems all the more important to think critically about irreducibly normative questions. Relatedly, many liberal educators share the conviction that cultivating critical thinking in democratic societies can help to prevent majority support for immoral policies. But this conviction seems to rely, at least partly, on the hope that citizens will think critically about which basic values to adopt, and which to prioritize, and this amounts to critical IND.

I acknowledge that the short arguments presented in the previous paragraph are insufficient to silence objections. However, in this paper my starting point shall be that critical thinking can and should be applied (at least sometimes) in IND. Conveniently, I will not try to articulate or defend the metanormative assumptions upon which this starting point is based, except some brief remarks in endnote 15.

1. NONMORAL AND NONPRUDENTIAL MOTIVATIONS FOR THINKING CRITICALLY

The type of motivation upon which my argument will focus is "rational" motivation that comes from personal deliberative commitments of the highest order, such as end goals, values, and ideals. Such commitments influence our behavior by generating motivating reasons that affect our practical deliberations.[6] But before we "take off" toward these heights of rational motivation, it is important to acknowledge that critical thinking is often driven by habit

(as paradoxical as this may seem to some). Quite often, critical thinkers think critically without a deliberative decision to do so.

Perhaps some habits of thinking critically should be cultivated. Such habits can be acquired, at least partly, by imitation. The relevant role model could be an educator, a term I will use to denote anyone in a position to educate, such as a parent, a counselor, a teacher, or a school principal. It has been claimed that habits could also be acquired in pursuit of particular goals, and even outlast these goals.[7] Some might think that this phenomenon could be utilized for the cultivation of critical thinking. For example, let us imagine a fifth grader named "Dana" being motivated to exhibit critical thinking mostly in order to win an educator's appreciation. Perhaps in the process of pursuing this goal Dana could acquire a habit of thinking critically that remains after winning this educator's appreciation is no longer one of Dana's goals. But empirical research generally suggests that educators cannot count on such processes: a long-lasting habit might not be formed, and the motivation might simply dissipate when the external reward is not present.[8]

In any regard, even when critical thinking is driven by habit, it might be additionally motivated by personal commitments. In such cases, one's current commitments could reinforce and regulate one's motivation to think critically, influencing the occasions and manner in which one thinks critically. Furthermore: a change in one's commitments may lead to a change in one's habits. Hence the practical significance of the question: Which personal commitments should educators cultivate as motivations for thinking critically?

Certain commitments would clearly be insufficient. For example, imagine that Dana has come to view critical thinking merely as subservient to her goal of getting good grades. Such a goal would not motivate critical thinking beyond the academic realm. As another example, consider the broader goal of "being appreciated intellectually." Despite the fact that this goal transcends the academic realm, "being appreciated intellectually" is still too narrow for our purposes. It is sometimes important to think critically regardless of whether anybody appreciates it. Furthermore: if we are hoping that critical thinking will serve to counter wrongheaded intellectual and social trends (and weaken the

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force of populism), we need a goal that would motivate critical thinking in the face of opposing social pressures.

Some may be tempted to broaden the range of situations in which the person would be motivated to think critically by raising critical thinking to the status of a non-derivative, self-standing, unrestricted, purely intellectual personal ideal, which recommends critical deliberation about every choice and every belief (or something of this sort). But whereas it may be fitting for academic institutions to adopt critical thinking as an unrestricted intellectual ideal of this sort, I will argue against this adoption in the personal domain, appealing to two considerations.

The first consideration is extensional. It concerns the range of the types of situations in which the ideal would motivate critical thinking. Ideally, we would be psychologically constituted to think critically on the right occasions, focusing on the right questions, and prioritizing questions in accordance with their importance. But an unrestricted self-standing ideal of critical thinking would motivate thinking critically even at the wrong times. As Harry Frankfurt responds to Bernard Williams about the case of a husband that jumps to rescue his drowning wife rather than a drowning stranger: "the strictly correct number of thoughts for this man is zero. […] In the circumstances that the example describes, any thought whatever is one thought too many."[9] Moreover, even in situations wherein we *should* deliberate (say, about whether a particular diet would be healthy for us), it might not be the right time to critically reconsider all of our beliefs (such as the belief that health is good for us) or commitments. Normally, instances of critical reconsideration should be restricted. Unconstrained reconsideration might conflict with reaching practical conclusions and implementing them.

Furthermore, there are situations wherein we must choose which of several questions to prioritize, on the basis of the expected practical implications. For example, questions about just acquisition of property on the moon would normally be less urgent than questions that matter for deciding for whom to vote if the upcoming elections take place tomorrow. As a self-standing, purely intellectual ideal, critical thinking would be insensitive to this urgency. More

generally, no conception of critical thinking as a purely intellectual, self-standing ideal could provide sufficient proper guidance concerning "when to think critically about what," because the answer partly depends on practical considerations. Only *practical* goals (or other types of practical commitments) are constituted to systematically recommend taking into account practical considerations.

The second consideration against cultivating critical thinking as a self-standing ideal is the justifiability of the importance of critical thinking. When we critically reflect on the importance of thinking critically, a need for justification comes up. It is far from obvious that the activity of thinking critically is of final or intrinsic value by itself. Treating such views as self-evident seems dogmatic to me (contrary to the ideal of critical thinking). If we want people to be able to justify for themselves the importance of thinking critically in a rational manner that withstands critical examination, they should consider their commitment to think critically as (at least partly) derived from a commitment to some valuable things that thinking critically promotes, or from a commitment to some higher ideal that critical thinking serves.

2. THE IRREPLACABILITY OF THIN NORMATIVE IDEALS

If my argument in section 1 is sound, it follows that part of the motivation for thinking critically should (ideally) come from some practical ideal that is constituted to properly (1) regulate the activity of thinking critically in life and (2) justify its importance. The natural candidates are moral and prudential goals, values, or ideals to which it is virtuous to be committed.

One subset of these candidates has a unique advantage. But in order to characterize this subset we need some terminology. First, the category of "normative concepts" (as commonly used) includes verdictive concepts such as "right," as well as evaluative concepts such as "good," "better" and "honest." Some normative concepts are clearly moral (such as "honest"), some clearly prudential (such as "prudent"), and some—such as "more important" or "strikes the right balance of reasons"—are not necessarily restricted to one of these realms. By contrast, goals such as "minimizing suffering universally" contain no normative concept.

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Second, I adopt the well-known distinction between thick and thin normative concepts, following the reductive view of thickness defended by Daniel Elstein and Thomas Hurka.[10] (I use the expanded version of these notions, which applies not only to the moral domain but to the whole normative domain.) The quantity to which the "thickness" and "thinness" here refer is the amount of descriptive, non-normative information that the concept carries as part of its meaning, independently from the context. The more non-normative information it carries, the thicker the concept. To illustrate, notice that "honest" is a concept which carries substantive non-normative information: "George is honest" implies that George does not tend to express falsehoods knowingly and intentionally. This inclusion of non-normative information renders "honest" a thick moral concept. By contrast, the non-normative information in the concept "good" is maximally thin, if it exists at all. To illustrate this thinness, consider the assertion "Dan made a good choice in these elections." The description "good" is insufficient for inferring from this assertion the content of Dan's choice (i.e., the candidate for whom Dan voted) without contextual information (about the speaker's relevant normative political views). Accordingly, "good" is considered as a thin normative concept.

Finally, let me define "a thin (normative) ideal" as any self-standing practical ideal that the person pursues under a description that is anchored in a positive, thin normative concept such as "good" and "right" (without reducing this concept in her mind to a known non-normative concept). To illustrate, this definition renders "promoting the good" and "doing what's right" (pursued under these descriptions) as thin ideals. By contrast, "minimizing suffering universally" and "promoting science" are not thin ideals because they contain no normative concept. Similarly, "being honest" and "being courageous" are not thin ideals because the normative concepts in which these descriptions are anchored are too thick.

Aided by this terminology, we can get back to my argument. A thin ideal (such as "doing what's right" or "promoting the good") is the only type of commitment that could be constituted to motivate critical thinking in proportion to the importance of doing so under any given circumstances. Whereas many

moral and prudential goals could recommend critical thinking in particular types of situations, only thin ideals have a chance of reliably recommending and properly regulating critical thinking whenever it is called for, including situations that call for IND (*Irreducibly Normative Deliberation*). Hence, the extensional consideration (section 1) favors psychological constitutions that include a commitment to a thin ideal.

These claims follow from a more complicated argument that I made in a somewhat different context.[11] For our purposes, the argument could be based on the following illustration: "Tara" is committed non-derivatively both to minimizing suffering universally and to being honest. Unfortunately, there are situations where dishonest behavior is the only means to prevent suffering. Should Tara find herself in such a situation (given that the situational conditions are suitable for deliberation and there is no time pressure), we would expect her to carefully consider how this conflict should be resolved. We would usually expect a good resolution in such circumstances to *strike the right balance of reasons*, or to identify which commitment is *more important* (in the relevant type of situations). These descriptions (italicized in the previous statement) are anchored in thin normative concepts (and can be used to precisify "rightness" in the thin ideal of "doing what's right"). Had Tara been committed to a thin ideal, it could motivate her in this case to conduct the needed IND (with the right structural aim) and act accordingly. Had she not, why would Tara care about striking the right balance of reasons or any similarly thin aim?

No such thin aim can be rationally derived from minimizing suffering, or being honest, or from the combinations of these goals. If Tara is not committed to any thin ideal, it seems perfectly consistent with her goals to be moved (in the relevant conflicted situation) by the motivation that happens to be strongest at the moment, without any critical examination. Without any thin ideal, I cannot see what could motivate a person realistically and reliably in situations of this type to critically examine which resolution(s) would be appropriate, for the purpose of acting accordingly.

The most essential part of my argument can be summarized as follows: some situations—wherein we need to figure out what's right in order to act

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accordingly—call for critical thinking. In some such situations we are under justifiable, irreducibly-normative uncertainty and we should conduct IND. In most situations of this type, the thin aim of figuring out what's right in order to act accordingly cannot be rationally derived from any thick moral or prudential ideal or goal. But it can be rationally derived from a thin ideal such as doing what's right. Therefore, a thin ideal is necessary for reliably recommending and properly regulating IND at the right times.

Does it follow that educators should cultivate a thin ideal as motivation for thinking critically? A few qualifications are in order. First, while thin ideals are constituted to recommend critical thinking at the right times, I acknowledge that—due to our inability to be fully rational—thin ideals cannot guarantee critical thinking whenever it is called for. More generally, this paper is not meant to address important psychological and sociological question such as "under what conditions thin ideals can motivate effectively?" and "under what conditions can they be cultivated?". These important questions call for empirical research. Obviously, in situations wherein thin ideals cannot be cultivated or will not motivate effectively it is useless to try to cultivate them. Even in some situations wherein thin ideals can be cultivated and have the potential to motivate effectively, this cultivation might be too risky or too costly in terms of time and resources. Therefore, the practical question of whether and when to try to cultivate thin ideals, and which resources to invest in this cultivation, would be best answered only after taking into account the costs and alternatives under the particular circumstances.

Second, I say nothing in this paper against the possibility that it is good to cultivate other goals, dispositions, and habits as motivations for thinking critically *in addition* to the cultivation of a thin ideal. In general, thick moral ideals and habits have their advantages, and perhaps some of these advantages also apply to motivating critical thinking in certain situations.[12]

In light of these qualifications, the practical conclusion of my central argument comes down to: In situations wherein educators can cultivate a thin ideal such as "doing what's right" as an effective motivation for thinking critically, they have a *pro tanto* reason to do so; that is, a reason that may be outweighed

by countervailing reasons.

3. OBJECTIONS AND WORRIES

One objection may come from reductionists who believe that we know how to reduce thin ideals such as "doing what's right" to non-thin ideals. For example, some analytic utilitarians might reduce "doing what's right" to "maximizing happiness universally." Such views imply that every right decision is derivable from their prescribed non-normative ideal (in combination with the relevant non-normative information), without requiring a thin ideal.

Indeed, if we knew with justifiable certainty that one particular reductionist view is correct, the goal it prescribes might suffice as rational motivation to think critically at the right times. But I doubt that fallible human beings can be justifiably certain about any particular reductionist view. Even if—from an omniscient point of view—thin ideals such as "doing what's right" have no more value than a "ladder" that can lead us to a non-thin ideal, it is hard for me to imagine how we could ever be justified in throwing away this ladder, thinking that we will never need to climb down from the view we adopted. Accordingly, I think that every reductionist should acknowledge that her view might be wrong and reconsider her view at some points in time. Such reconsideration must engage with a question that features an irreducibly thin concept, such as: "*Should* I act according to this view?" "Would that be *right*?". (I will return to this point in section 4.) Such reconsideration amounts to IND and would be regulated in the best way by a thin ideal.[13]

Others may argue that the pursuit of thin ideals is non-virtuous because it is fetishistic. This view goes back to Michael Smith's claim that acting morally for the sake of doing what's right amounts to "moral fetishism."[14] However, the appeal of this claim comes from cases such as visiting a sick friend at the hospital. When a person pays such a visit, we might hope that she is moved by a concern for her friend's health, feelings or well-being, and it may seem problematic if she coldly derives these concerns only from a thin ideal such as "doing what's right." By contrast, it does not seem morally problematic to derive the importance of thinking critically from such a thin ideal. Furthermore, the

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"moral fetishism" charge attracted several plausible defenses of the opposing view that it is nevertheless virtuous to pursue thin ideals.[15]

Putting aside the question about what is most virtuous, as long as it is justified to pursue a thin ideal such as "doing what's right," it can be used to justify the importance of critical thinking—which accords with the justifiability consideration raised at the end of section 1.

Finally, there is the important worry that thin ideals are too thin to regulate IND. The general thought is that ideals must include more non-normative information in order to provide any practical guidance. It seems that the best answer to this worry would precisify a relevant thin ideal and explain how it implies appropriate prescriptions that are relevant for IND. Such an account would have to cope with some of the biggest questions in moral epistemology and metaethics, and this important project falls outside the scope of this paper. But I make a few relevant points in an endnote.[16]

4. TOWARD THE CULTIVATION OF THIN IDEALS IN PRACTICE

I have argued that, under certain conditions, educators have a pro tanto reason to cultivate thin ideals such as "doing what's right" as motivation for thinking critically. My argument was based on the ineliminable role that thin ideals have in motivating and regulating Irreducibly Normative Deliberation (IND). Neither habits, nor thick moral concerns, nor a merely intellectual concern for rightness or for the truth, could play this role properly.

I hope that this article will encourage researchers to examine how thin ideals would best be cultivated. I have not conducted any empirical research on this topic and, as far as I know, none has yet been performed.

Nevertheless, one practical conjecture seems highly plausible to me, based on an insight from my theoretical work on this paper's main argument: I realized that I must base this argument on the special connection between thin ideals and thinking critically in IND, because IND is the only activity that only thin ideals can regulate properly. This suggests that without exposing students to IND you cannot demonstrate the most important function of thin ideals. Moreover: without understanding how a thin concept can function in IND, I

doubt (in light of conceptual role semantics) that one can fully understand the meaning of the relevant thin concept.[17] If your students have never engaged in IND, you should worry that they are reducing the thin ideal that you are trying to cultivate to a non-thin ideal, by reducing to non-normative terms the thin concept which anchors the thin ideal.

To illustrate, think of a student who conceives of "right" as analytically reducible to "meets the norms of our society." Such reductions conflict with treating "right" as a thin concept. The teacher could describe a hypothetical situation (for example, Nazism becomes the norm) wherein the question "is it right to meet the norms of our society?" would not seem to the student as having a trivial affirmative answer (trivial due to analyticity).[18] Only when the student could see this question as lacking such a trivial answer, her coping with it would constitute IND. Such engagement in IND would exhibit an understanding of "right" as a thin concept. Note that the same exercise could be performed with any reduction.

Therefore, it is safe to say that the cultivation of a thin ideal would be lacking without demonstrating how the thin concept that anchors it functions in Irreducibly Normative Deliberation.[19]

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Stephen Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinking* (Milton Keynes, UK: SRHE and Open University Press, 1987), xvii.
2 David Hitchcock, "Critical Thinking," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2022 Edition)*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/critical-thinking.
3 Robert H. Ennis, "Critical Thinking: A Streamlined Conception" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Thinking in Higher Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 31–47, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137378057_2.
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6 For a general theory of the nature of such deliberative commitments see Michael Bratman's work: Michael Bratman, *Structures of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For empirical research that demonstrates the influence of values on behavior see: Shalom Schwartz, "An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2012): https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116. Note that the terms "goal" "value" and "ideal" can be replaced interchangeably throughout my argument without diminishing its force (despite their differences).

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10 Daniel Y. Elstein and Thomas Hurka, "From Thick to Thin: Two Moral Reduction Plans," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39, no. 4 (2009): 515–535, https://doi.org/10.1353/cjp.0.0063.

11 Ron Aboodi, "One Thought Too Few: Where De Dicto Moral Motivation is Necessary," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20 (2017): 231–232. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-016-9742-5

12 I suggest some generalizations about the advantages of habits and thick moral ideals in: Ron Aboodi, "The Wrong Time to Aim at What's Right: When is De Dicto Moral Motivation Less Virtuous?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 115, no. 3 (2015): 307–314. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9264.2015.00396.x

13 Relatedly, I argue that educators' justifiable normative uncertainty gen-

erates a *pro tanto* reason to cultivate thin ideals, critical thinking, and other character qualities, in: Ron Aboodi, "Character Education under Normative Uncertainty," *Eyunim Bechinuch* 22 (2023): 20–35 (in Hebrew). https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FbOM6PnzSQLfCiXwXmxR-wjdclFAkXl5/view

14 Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 75; Brian Weatherson, "Running Risks Morally," *Philosophical Studies* 167, no. 1 (2014): 141–163, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-013-0227-2.

15 For example: Ron Aboodi, "One Thought Too Few"; Zoë Johnson King, "Praiseworthy Motivations," *Noûs* 54, no. 2 (2020): 408–430, https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12276.

16 The most prominent theory of how IND should be conducted offers the "wide reflective equilibrium" method; for example, Norman Daniels, "Reflective Equilibrium," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/reflective-equilibrium/). Arguably, this method provides the relevant guidance (at least to some extent). But the type of coherence that wide reflective equilibrium seeks among our beliefs cannot be reduced to mere consistency. The aim of this method cannot be characterized accurately without concepts that I would classify as irreducibly normative and thin, such as "acceptability," "credibility" or "reasonableness." Some would argue that we should be concerned with *the normative truth* in a more realist sense, which is irreducible to the conclusions that wide reflective equilibrium would lead to. For example: Thomas Kelly and Saras McGrath, "Is Reflective Equilibrium Enough?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (2010): 325–359. For a defense of a robust realist conception of the normative truth see: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

17 Ralph Wedgwood, "Conceptual Role Semantics for Moral Terms," *Philosophical Review* 110 (2001): 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-110-1-1.

18 I am echoing here G. E. Moore's open question argument, but not trying to establish the same conclusion; G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922).

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