

◆◆ Chapter 10

Critical Thinking and the Critical Person

Abstract

Written for Thinking: The Second International Conference (1987), this paper explores a series of themes familiar to Richard Paul's readers: that most school learning is irrational rather than rational, that there are two different modes of critical thinking and hence two different kinds of critical persons, that strong sense critical thinking is embedded in the ancient Socratic ideal of living an examined life, and that social studies instruction today is, in the main, sociocentric. Paul illustrates this last point with items from a state department of education critical thinking test and illustrations from a popular university-level introductory political science text. Paul closes with an argument in favor of a new emphasis on developing the critical thinking abilities of teachers: "If, in our haste to bring critical thinking into the schools, we ignore the need to develop long-term strategies for nurturing the development of teachers' own critical powers and passions, we shall surely make the new emphasis on critical thinking into nothing more than a passing fad, or worse, into a new, more sophisticated form of social indoctrination and scholastic closedmindedness."

◆ *Introduction*

As the clarion call for critical thinking instruction from kindergarten to graduate school grows louder, those responsible for classroom instruction, heavily overworked as they typically are, naturally look for simple answers to the question, "What is critical thinking?", answers that generate routine and simple in-service strategies. Few see, in fact many *resist* seeing, how much of what is deeply ingrained in standard instructional procedures and theory needs serious reformation before students truly become critical thinkers in their daily personal, professional, and civic lives.

This chapter clarifies and develops some of the theoretical and practical implications of the concept of critical thinking. I consider the work of some of the leading critical thinking theorists. I contrast my views with the general approach of cognitive psychologists. I use social studies throughout to illustrate the problem. I, along with most critical thinking theorists, believe that global insights into the multifaceted obstacles to critical reflection, inquiry, and discussion on the part of students, teachers, and people in general are crucial

to sound design of critical thinking instruction. Such insights are severely limited unless one clearly and coherently grasps the "big picture". For example, few pay attention to John Passmore's claims that "being critical can be taught only by persons who can themselves freely participate in critical discussion" and that, "In many systems of public instruction ... it is a principal object of teacher training to turn out teachers who will firmly discourage free critical discussion."¹ Rarely do teachers grasp where and when "free critical discussion" is essential, what it means to conduct it, and what is required to empower students to pursue it with understanding and self-command. What follows, I hope, contributes something to those foundational understandings, to the insights on which successful critical thinking instruction depends.

◆ *Rational and Irrational Learning*

All rational learning presupposes rational assent. And, though we sometimes forget it, all learning is not automatically or even commonly rational. Much that we learn in everyday life is quite irrational. It is quite possible — and indeed the bulk of human learning is unfortunately of this character — to come to believe any number of things without knowing how or why. It is quite possible, in other words, to believe for irrational reasons: because those around us believe, because we are rewarded for believing, because we are afraid to disbelieve, because our vested interest is served by belief, because we are more comfortable with belief, because we have ego identified ourselves, our image, or our personal being with belief. In all these cases, our beliefs are without rational grounding, without good reason and evidence, without the foundation a rational person demands. We become rational, on the other hand, to the extent that our beliefs and actions are grounded in good reasons and evidence; to the extent that we recognize and critique our own irrationality; to the extent that we are not moved by bad reasons and a multiplicity of irrational motives, fears, desires; to the extent that we have cultivated a passion for clarity, accuracy, and fairmindedness. These global skills, passions, and dispositions integrated into a way of acting and thinking characterize the rational, the educated, and in my sense, the critical person.²

No one, in this view, is ever *fully* educated. Hence, we should view rational learning not as something completed by schooling but as something struggling to emerge against deep-seated, irrational, and uncritical tendencies and drives. Schools can be structured to foster belief without regard to rational justification. To make rational belief a probable outcome of schooling requires special design and distinctive commitment.

◆ *Thinking Critically in the "Strong" Sense*

One cannot develop a coherent concept of critical thinking without developing a coherent concept of rationality, irrationality, education, socialization,

the critical person, and the critical society, as they bear on and mutually illuminate one another. This holistic approach distinguishes the mode of theorizing of most philosophers working on the concept of critical thinking from that commonly used by most cognitive psychologists concerned with the nature of thinking. Cognitive psychologists often treat cognitive processes and their "pathology" separate from any consideration of the affective, social, or political life of the thinker. The research findings of clinical and social psychologists rarely integrate self-deception, egocentricity, or ethnocentricity into the problem definitions or conclusions of cognitive psychology.³ Consequently, cognitive psychologists rarely focus on messy real-life multilogical problems that cross disciplines, instead they restrict their attention to artificial or self-contained monological problems, problems whose solutions can typically be found in a field-specific conceptual framework without reference to major personal or social bias. The more basic and difficult human problems, for whose solutions there are competing frameworks, and in which the problem of bias and vested interest looms large, are routinely ignored.

It is hard to go very far into the core concept of the critical person, however, without recognizing the centrality of multilogical thinking, the ability to think accurately and fairly within opposing points of view and contradictory frames of reference. Multilogical problems, whose fairminded treatment requires us to suspend our egocentric tendency to confuse the framework of our own thinking with "reality" and reason within opposing points of view, are among the most significant human problems and among those most resistant to solution. The problems of human understanding, of war and peace, of economic, political, and social justice, of who our friends and who our enemies are, of what we should accept as the most basic framework of our thinking, of our own nature, our goodness and our evil, our history and that of those we oppose, of how we should interpret our place in the world, and how to best satisfy our needs and critically assess our desires — all such problems are at the heart of the basic frustrations and conflicts that plague human life and all require multi-system thinking. We cannot justifiably assume the correctness of any one point of view as the only perspective within which these basic human problems can be most rationally settled. Schooling should improve the student's ability to distinguish monological from multilogical problems and to address each appropriately.

On this view, we distinguish two important senses of critical thinking, a *weak* sense and a *strong* one. Those who think critically only with respect to monological issues and, as a result, consider multilogical issues with a pronounced monological bias have merely mastered weak sense critical thinking. They would lack the ability, and presumably the disposition also, to critique their own most fundamental categories of thought and analysis. They would, as a result, lack the ability to enter sympathetically into, and reconstruct, the strongest arguments and reasons for points of view fundamentally opposed to their own. When their monological thinking arises from an unconscious commitment to a personal point of view, their thinking is egocentric;

when it arises from an unconscious commitment to a social or cultural point of view, their thinking is ethnocentric. In either case they think more or less exclusively within their own frames of reference. They might use the basic vocabulary of critical thinking with rhetorical skill — their arguments and reasons might impress those who already shared their framework of thought — but they would lack the basic drives and abilities of what I call *strong sense* critical thinking: a) an ability to question deeply one's own framework of thought, b) an ability to reconstruct sympathetically and imaginatively the strongest versions of points of view and frameworks of thought opposed to one's own, and c) an ability to reason dialectically (multilogically) to determine when one's own point of view is weakest and when an opposing point of view is strongest.

Strong sense critical thinkers are not routinely blinded by their own points of view. They know that they *have* a point of view and therefore recognize on what framework of assumptions and ideas their own thinking rests. They realize they must put their own assumptions and ideas to the test of the strongest objections that can be leveled against them. Critical proponents of a socialist economic system, for example, can analyze economic events from the perspective of an insightful proponent of capitalism. Critical proponents of a capitalist economic system can analyze economic events from the perspective of an insightful proponent of socialism. This implies, by the way, that economics should not be taught in a way which presupposes capitalism, socialism, or any other economic system as *the* correct one. In other words, the issue as to what economic system is most justified is a multilogical issue.

Similarly, the strong sense critical thinker's thought is disciplined to avoid confusing concepts that belong in different categories. For example, they do not confuse "democracy", a political concept, with "capitalism", an economic concept. They realize that any important connection between democracy and capitalism must be argued for, not assumed, that *free enterprise* should not be routinely injected into U.S. social studies texts as a neutral synonym for *capitalism*, any more than *people's democracy* should be routinely injected into Soviet social studies texts as a neutral synonym for *Soviet communism*. They can recognize when terms are used in this question-begging way. A teacher who values strong sense critical thinking fosters these abilities.

The importance of strong sense critical thinking has been underscored, each in his own terms, by most leading critical thinking theorists: Robert Ennis,⁴ Harvey Siegel,⁵ Israel Scheffler,⁶ Michael Scriven,⁷ Matthew Lipman,⁸ R. S. Peters,⁹ John Passmore,¹⁰ Edward Glaser,¹¹ Ralph Johnson,¹² J. Anthony Blair,¹³ and others. I exemplify the point briefly with four of them: Ennis, Siegel, Scriven and Peters.

Robert Ennis defines critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking that is concerned with what to do or believe". He argues that the various component cognitive skills essential to critical thinking cannot lead to genuine "rational reflective thinking" unless used in conjunction with, as the manifestation of, a complex of dispositions. For example, in and of them-

selves, the component cognitive skills of critical thinking can be used to serve either closedminded or openminded thought. Those with genuine openmindedness, Ennis claims, will: *a)* Seriously consider points of view other than their own ("dialogical thinking"); *b)* reason from premises with which they disagree — without letting the disagreement interfere with their reasons ("suppositional thinking"); *c)* withhold judgment when the evidence and reasons are insufficient.¹⁴

Harvey Siegel argues that students cannot become genuine critical thinkers unless they develop "the critical spirit", and that students will not develop the critical spirit unless they are taught in "the critical manner":

The critical manner is that manner of teaching that reinforces the critical spirit. A teacher who utilizes the critical manner seeks to encourage in his or her students the skills, habits, and dispositions necessary for the development of the critical spirit. This means, first, that the teacher always recognizes the right of the student to question and demand reasons; and consequently recognizes an obligation to provide reasons whenever demanded. The critical manner thus demands of a teacher a willingness to subject all beliefs and practices to scrutiny, and so to allow students the genuine opportunity to understand the role reasons play in justifying thought and action. The critical manner also demands honesty of a teacher: reasons presented by a teacher must be genuine reasons, and a teacher must honestly appraise the power of those reasons. In addition, the teacher must submit his or her reasons to the independent evaluation of the student. Teaching in the critical manner is thus teaching so as to develop in the students skills and attitudes consonant with critical thinking. It is, as Scheffler puts it, an attempt to initiate students into the rational life, a life in which the critical quest for reasons is a dominant and integrating motive.¹⁵

Siegel's point is that for students to develop the passions of strong sense critical thinkers (the passion for accuracy, clarity, and fairmindedness), teachers must continually model those passions in their manner of teaching. The component micro-skills of critical thinking (the ability to clarify an issue, distinguish evidence from conclusions, recognize assumptions, implications, and contradictions, and so on) do not become the skills of a (strong sense) critical thinker, except insofar as they are integrated into "a life in which the critical quest for reasons is a dominant and integrating motive."

Michael Scriven represents (strong sense) critical thinking skills as not only requiring "a whole shift of values for most of us"¹⁶ but also as essential for survival in a world in which "the wrong decision can mean injury or long-term commitment to a disastrous form of life such as addiction or criminality or resented parenthood."¹⁷ For students to "transfer" their critical thinking skills to such situations, they need to practice fairminded thought on controversial (multilogical) issues:

The real case, in dealing with controversial issues is the case as put by real people who believe in what they are saying. But the schools — and to a varying but often equal extent the colleges — are not willing to let there be

that kind of serious discussion of the argument on both sides of controversial issues. Of course, they don't mind having the bad guys' position represented by someone who doesn't agree with it, in the course of dismissing it. But only the completely naive would suppose that such a presentation is likely to make the best case for the position. The notions of a fair hearing, or of confronting your accuser which are so deeply entrenched in our system of justice obviously transfer immediately to the intellectual sphere. If you want to hear the arguments for a political position other than those of the majority parties, for example the political position that the largest countries on earth espouse, you cannot possibly assume that it will be fully and fairly represented by someone to whom it is anathema."

Unfortunately, many teachers will naturally fear highlighting controversial issues in the classroom. It is fair to say, I believe, few teachers have had much experience working with such issues. Many know only processes for laying out and testing for "right" answers, not assessing contradictory arguments in terms of their relative strength in dialogical or dialectical settings. There are, in other words, both affective and cognitive obstacles to the genuine fostering of fairmindedness. Some of the affective obstacles are in educators themselves.

R. S. Peters has developed the significance of the affective side of reason and critical thought in his defense of the necessity of "rational passions":

There is, for instance, the hatred of contradictions and inconsistencies, together with the love of clarity and hatred of confusion without which words could not be held to relatively constant meanings and testable rules and generalizations stated. A reasonable man cannot, without some special explanation, slap his sides with delight or express indifference if he is told that what he says is confused, incoherent and perhaps riddled with contradictions.

Reason is the antithesis of arbitrariness. In its operation it is supported by the appropriate passions which are mainly negative in character — the hatred of irrelevance, special pleading and arbitrary fiat. The more developed emotion of indignation is aroused when some excess of arbitrariness is perpetuated in a situation where people's interests and claims are at stake. The positive side of this is the passion for fairness and impartial consideration of claims.

A man who is prepared to reason must feel strongly that he must follow the arguments and decide things in terms of where they lead. He must have a sense of the givenness of the impersonality of such considerations. In so far as thoughts about persons enter his head they should be tinged with the respect which is due to another who, like himself, may have a point of view which is worth considering, who may have a glimmering of the truth which has so far eluded himself. A person who proceeds in this way, who is influenced by such passions, is what we call a reasonable man."

What implications does this have for students and teachers? It entails that the affective life of the student must be brought into the heart of classroom instruction and dealt with in the context of the problem of thinking fairmindedly. Students must come to terms not only with how they feel about issues both inside and outside the curriculum, but also with the rationality or irra-

tionality of those feelings. The teacher, on the other hand, must model rational passions and set the example of showing no favoritism to particular positions. The students must become convinced that the teacher is a fair and reasonable referee, an expert in nurturing the process by which truth and understanding is sought, not an authoritative judge of what is actually true or false. Questions rather than assertions should characterize the teacher's speech. The classroom environment should be structured so that students feel encouraged to decide for themselves what is and is not so. Teachers should treat no idea or point of view as in itself absurd, stupid, or "dangerous", whatever their personal views or those of the community. They should shield their students from the pressure to conform to peers or the community. Free and open discussion should be the sacred right in all classrooms.

It should be clear that strong sense critical thinking is embedded in a personal, social, and educational ideal. It is not simply a complex of atomistic cognitive skills. To think critically in this sense requires, as Passmore points out, "initiative, independence, courage, (and) imagination".²⁰ Let us now look briefly at the historical foundation for his concept.

◆ *Critical Thinking and the Socratic Ideal*

The concept of strong sense critical thinking, of critical thought integrated into the personal and social life of the individual, is not new. It was introduced into Western intellectual tradition in the chronicles of the life and death of Socrates (470-399 BC), one of the most important and influential teachers of ancient Greece. As a teacher, he was committed to the importance of ideas and their critique in the conduct of everyday human life. It is to him that the precept "the unexamined life is not worth living" is attributed. It is in him that the ideal of conscientious civil disobedience and critical autonomy of thought is first to be found. He illustrated the possibility and the value of sharpness of mind, clarity of thought, and commitment to practical insight based on autonomous reason. He championed reason, the rational life, and a rationally structured ethic, the intimate fusion of reason and passion. He disclaimed authority on his own part but claimed the right to independently criticize all authoritative beliefs and established institutions. He made it clear that teachers cannot be educators in the fullest sense unless they can criticize the received assumptions of their social groups and are willing to nurture a climate of questioning and doubt among their students. He demonstrated the intimate connection between a passionate love of truth and knowledge, the ability to learn through the art of skilled questioning, and the willingness to face personally and socially embarrassing truths. He spoke often with those who had a sophistic (weak sense) command of critical thinking skills, who could, through their skills of persuasion and knowledge of the vulnerabilities of people, make the false appear true and the true false.

Socrates taught by joining in discussions with others who thought they knew or understood a basic or important truth, for example, what justice is, or knowledge or virtue. When questioned by Socrates — who probed the justification and foundation for the belief, examining its consistency or inconsistency with other beliefs — it became clear that his discussants did not know or understand what they at first thought they did. As a result of Socrates' mode of questioning, his "students" realized that they lacked fundamental knowledge. Of course not all of Socrates' discussants appreciated the discovery. But those who did developed a new drive to seek out knowledge. This included an appreciation of dialectical thinking, a recognition of the need to subject putative knowledge to probing questioning, especially from the vantage point of opposing points of view. Socrates' students became comfortable with and adept in the art of dialectical questioning. All beliefs had first to pass the test of critical scrutiny through dialectical challenges before they were to be accepted.

The social reaction to Socrates' mode of teaching through probing questions illustrated the inevitable antagonism between schooling as socialization into accepted beliefs and practices and schooling as education in the art of autonomous thought. Although he did not foster any doctrines of his own (other than the values of intellectual integrity and critical autonomy), he was executed for "not believing in the gods the state believes in ... and also for corrupting the young" (see Plato's *Apology*).

Socrates' practice laid the cornerstone for the history of critical thought. He provided us with our first historic glimpse into how the organizing concepts by which humans live rarely reflect the organizing concepts through which they express their thoughts publicly. We must keep this example in mind when we conceptualize and elaborate the problem of learning to think critically. If we do, we certainly will not conceive of critical thinking in narrow intradisciplinary terms, nor will we ignore the significance of the affective dimensions of thought. It is intriguing to imagine classrooms in which the example of Socrates is highlighted and encouraged as a model of education.

◆ *The Egocentrically Critical Person*

Piaget's basic model for the egocentric mind, developed by studying the thinking of children, has significant application, with appropriate translation, to much adult thinking and therefore significant application for the design of critical thinking instruction. Few adults have experience in reciprocal critical thought, that is, in reasoning within their antagonists' point of view. Few have experience in making the structure of their own thought conscious. Few, as Socrates discovered, can explain intelligibly how they came to their beliefs, or provide rational justifications for them.

The egocentrism of most adult thought parallels the egocentrism of childish thought, as Piaget characterized it in *Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*:

Egocentrism of thought necessarily entails a certain degree of unconsciousness with the egocentric thinker 'in a perpetual state of belief', (p. 137)

[The egocentric thinker:]

- [is] confident in his own ideas,
- [is] naturally... (untroubled) about the reasons and motives which have guided his reasoning process,
- [seeks] to justify himself in the eyes of others ... only under the pressure of argument and opposition...
- [is] incapable either by introspection or retrospection of capturing the successive steps... [his] mind has taken (pp. 137-138)
- [is] not conscious of the meaning assigned to the concepts and words used ... (p. 149)
- suffers from illusions of perspective, (p. 165)
- ignorant of his own ego, takes his own point of view to be absolute, and fails to establish... that reciprocity which alone would ensure objectivity (p. 197)
- [is] intelligent without being particularly logical,
- [uses] thought ... at the service of desire,
- simply believes ... without trying to find the truth, (p. 203)
- assimilates everything he hears to his own point of view. (p. 208)

He does not try to prove whether such and such of his idea does or does not correspond to reality. When the question is put to him, he evades it. It does not interest him, and it is even alien to his whole mental attitude. (p. 247)¹

We naturally tend to think egocentrically, especially in domains of significant personal or social interests. Egocentrism is, in some sense, as typical of adult as childish thought. It takes a special cultivated discipline to recognize and attempt to correct for it. This becomes apparent when one formulates basic safeguards against egocentric thought and attempts to cultivate an interest in students or people in general in using them. Consider, for example, the platitude "one cannot disagree with a position one does not understand," that in other words "judgment presupposes understanding". Cultivating it as a critical principle means taking steps to ensure one clearly understands what someone else is saying before one "disagrees". In my experience most people, including some with a good deal of schooling, tend to uncritically assume understanding when they have done little or nothing to test it, and as a result, are much too quick to "disagree". Most people are surprised if, after they disagree with something said, the speaker says, "What exactly did you take me to be saying that you are disagreeing with?" Often they will be puzzled and say, "Well, perhaps you should say it again," or words to that effect.

Or consider a more profound safeguard against egocentric thought, an attempt to probe the justification for one's belief by sympathetically formulating the strongest arguments for rejecting that belief from opposing points of view. After confidently stating a belief few can summarize strong arguments and reasons that have persuaded intelligent, rational others to believe in opposing positions.

Each of us, to the extent that we are egocentric, spontaneously think along lines that serve to justify our fears, desires, and vested interests. Few have developed a "Socratic" character. As a result, most everyday critical thought is egocentric. We unconsciously tend to think in the following ways: "Your thinking is well founded and insightful to the extent that it agrees with or supports my own. If it does not, then, as a matter of course, it is 'wrong' and I am obliged to criticize it." Much adult "critical" thought is not fairminded but rather egocentrically motivated and structured, lacking fairmindedness at its very core. Is it not also fair to say that few adults had opportunities in school to grapple with their own tendencies to think irrationally?

◆ *The Sociocentrically Critical Person
and the Ideal of a Critical Society*

In my view, Piaget rightly identifies uncritical thought with a tendency toward egocentrism, and critical thought with a tendency toward reciprocity. He recognizes, but does not explore, how egocentricity develops into and partially merges with sociocentricity:

The child begins with the assumption that the immediate attitudes arising out of our own special surroundings and activities are the only ones possible. This state of mind, which we shall term the unconscious egocentricity (both cognitive and affective) of the child is at first a stumbling-block both to the understanding of his own country and to the development of objective relations with other countries. Furthermore, to overcome his egocentric attitude it is necessary to train the faculty for cognitive and affective integration; this is a slow and laborious process consisting mainly in efforts at 'reciprocity', and at each new stage of the process, egocentricity re-emerges in new guises farther and farther removed from the child's initial center of interest. There are the various forms of sociocentricity — a survival of the original egocentricity — and they are the cause of subsequent disturbances or tensions, any understanding of which must be based on an accurate analysis of the initial stages and of the elementary conflicts between egocentricity and understanding of others (Reciprocity).²²

One manifestation of the irrational mind is to uncritically presuppose the truth of beliefs and doctrines embedded in social life or values. We intellectually and affectively absorb common frames of references from the social settings in which we live. Our interests and purposes find a place within a socially absorbed picture of the world. We use that picture to test the claims of contesting others. We imaginatively rehearse situations within portions of that picture. We rarely, however, describe that picture as a picture, as an image constructed by one social group as against that of another. We cannot easily place that picture at arm's length, so to speak, and for a time suspend our acquiescence to it. (For example, I cannot avoid feeling uncomfortable when an acquaintance of another culture stands "too close" to me while we talk, just as that acquaintance cannot avoid feeling somewhat offended that I

continually move "too far away" for conversation. To each of us, the proper distance seems obviously and objectively proper.) That our thought is often disturbed and distorted by ethnocentric tendencies is rarely an abiding recognition. At best, it occurs in most people in fleeting glimpses, to judge by how often it is recognized explicitly in everyday thought.

Although many talk about and research ethnocentrism or sociocentrism as a problem in education, there are no reasonable, effective means of combatting it. Institutions and beliefs tend to become "sacred" and "cherished"; the thinking that critiques them seems "dangerous", "subversive", or at least "disturbing" and "unsettling". Habits, customs, and faiths become deeply embedded in how we define ourselves, and intolerance, censorship, and oppression never seem to be such by those who carry them out in the name of "true belief".

Socrates is not the only thinker to imagine a society in which independent critical thought became embodied in the day-to-day lives of individuals; others, including William Graham Sumner, North America's distinguished conservative anthropologist, have formulated the ideal:

The critical habit of thought, if usual in a society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators and are never deceived by dithyrambic oratory. They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens.²³

Until critical habits of thought pervade our society, however, schools, as social institutions, will tend to transmit the prevailing world view more or less uncritically, transmit it as reality *itself*, not as a *picture* of reality. Our ability to solve social and international problems becomes constrained by the solutions credible and plausible within our prevailing ideas and assumptions. When solutions are suggested from contrary world views, they appear patently false to us because they appear to be based on false ideas, that is, ideas that don't square with "reality" (with our ideas of reality). Of course, those who live in other societies will themselves interpret our proposed solutions as patently false because they appear to them to be based on false ideas; that is, ideas that don't square with reality (with their ideas of reality). Hence, one society's freedom-fighters are another society's terrorists, and vice versa. Each is outraged at the flagrant propaganda of the other and is forced to conclude that the other must be knowingly distorting the facts, and hence is evil to the core. Citizens in any country who question the prevailing labels commonly have their patriotism questioned, or worse.

Ideas, in other words, do not enter into school life in neutral but in socially biased ways. Helping students think critically entails developing their ability to recognize and so to question this process.

Sociocentrically critical people may use the vocabulary of critical thinking. They may develop facility in its micro-skills. But they inadvertently function as apologists for the prevailing world view, nevertheless. They may conceive of themselves as hard-headed realists, fundamentally beyond "ideology" or naive "idealism", but the lack of reciprocity in their thought demonstrates their closedmindedness.

A critical society emerges only to the extent that it becomes socially unacceptable to routinely presuppose, rather than explicitly identify and argue for, one's fundamental ideas and assumptions. In the schools of a critical society, both teachers and students would recognize multilogical issues as demanding dialogical rather than monological treatment. Reasoning within opposing points of view would be the rule, not the rare exception. Social studies instruction in particular would play a significant role in fostering reciprocal multilogical thinking and so would contribute in a special way to the nurturing in the citizenry of values and skills essential to the conduct of everyday life in a critical manner.

◆ *Social Studies and the Fostering of Rational Belief*

We can assess any school program for its educative value by determining the extent to which it fosters *rational* as against *irrational* belief formation. To the extent that students merely memorize what the teacher or textbook says, or presuppose the correctness of one point of view, and so develop no sense of what would justify rational belief, to that extent the school fosters irrational learning and irrational belief.

Social studies instruction is an excellent area to canvass in this regard because societies naturally inculcate an uncritical monological nationalistic perspective, despite the multilogical nature of the major issues in the field. The tendency is natural because people within a country or culture naturally ego identify with it and hence assume rather than question the policies of its leaders. Thus, the history of those policies and of the social representation of them continually gravitates in a self-serving direction. Reason inadvertently serves an intellectually dishonorable function: the rationalization of the prevailing structure of power and the idealization of national character. Karl Mannheim identified this as the inevitable development of *ideology*.²⁴ Louis Wirth suggests the practical problems for thought that it engenders:

Even today open, frank, and "objective" inquiry into the most sacred and cherished institutions and beliefs is more or less seriously restricted in every country of the world. It is virtually impossible, for instance, even in England and America, to enquire into the actual facts regarding communism, no matter how disinterestedly, without running the risk of being labelled a communist. (p. XIV, preface)²⁵

Yet, the field is clearly multilogical; that is to say, the issues in the field can be intellectually defined, analyzed, and "settled" from many perspectives. There are inevitably — to put it another way — *schools* of social thought. Whether one looks at the classic theorists (Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Mannheim, Sumner, etc.), or more recent theorists (Sorokin, Parsons, Mills, Merton, Pressman, Garfinkel, Berger, etc.), clearly there is no one agreed-upon frame of reference in which social behavior can be represented and understood. Those more "conservative" inevitably come to different conclusions about people and world events than those more "liberal". There is no way to abstract all discussion and study from basic disputes arising from conflicting frames of reference. For students to rationally understand social events, they must not only recognize this but also enter the debate actively. They need to hear, and themselves make the case for, a variety of conservative, liberal, and radical interpretations of events. They need to develop the critical tools for assessing differences among these views. These skills develop only with dialectical practice. There is no alternative.

When students cover a conflict between two countries — especially when one is their own — they should hear the case not just for one but both countries' perspectives. Often other perspectives are also relevant.

U.S. textbook writers canvassing the Cold War, for example, do not identify themselves as arguing for one selective representation of it. They do not identify themselves as having a pro-U.S. bias. They do not suggest that they represent only one out of a number of points of view. They imply rather that they give an "objective" account, as though the issues were intrinsically monological and so settleable by considering merely one point of view. They imply that the reader need not consider other points of view on the Cold War. They imply that the facts speak for themselves and that they (the textbooks) contain the facts, all the facts, and nothing but the facts. There is nothing dialogical about their modes of canvassing the material nor in the assignments that accompany the account the student is inevitably led to believe.

That some of the most distinguished historians have concluded that the United States bears a large share of the blame for the Cold War is never, to my knowledge, even casually mentioned. It would seem bizarre to most students in the United States, and their teachers, to hear a distinguished historian like Henry Steele Commager speak of the Cold War as follows:

How are we to explain our obsession with communism, our paranoid hostility to the Soviet Union, our preoccupations with the Cold War, our reliance on military rather than political or diplomatic solutions, and our new readiness to entertain as a possibility what was long regarded as unthinkable — atomic warfare?²⁶

The notion that U.S. citizens might be obsessed or the victims of "paranoid hostility" completely contradicts how textbooks in the U.S. characterize the country, its philosophy, behavior, and values.

Or consider Arnold Toynbee's characterization:

In examining America's situation in the world today, I can say, with my hand on my heart, that my feelings are sympathetic, not malicious. After all, mere regard for self-interest, apart from any more estimable considerations, would deter America's allies from wishing America ill (But) today America is no longer the inspirer and leader of the World Revolution ... by contrast, America is today, the leader of a world-wide, anti-revolutionary movement in defense of vested interests. She now stands for what Rome stood for. Rome consistently supported the rich against the poor in all foreign communities; and since the poor, so far, have always been far more numerous than the rich, Rome's policy made for inequality, for injustice, and for the least happiness for the greatest numbers. America's decision to adopt Rome's role has been deliberate, if I have gauged it right.²⁷

These views would shock most U.S. citizens. Their schooling has given them no inkling that the United States' and Britain's most distinguished historians could have such a low estimation of our policies. They *would* understand the recent California State Assembly resolution, endorsed on a vote of 52-0, that the Vietnam war was waged for a noble purpose.

Similar points can be made about every major issue in history and social studies. They can all be approached from more than one point of view. All history, to put it another way, is history-written-from-a-point-of-view, just as all social perception is perception-from-a-point-of-view. There are, inevitably, different philosophies of history and society based on different presuppositions about the nature of people and human society. Different schools of historical and social research inevitably use different organizing concepts and root metaphors.

Therefore, a rational approach to historical, sociological, and anthropological issues must reflect this diversity of approach. Just as juries must hear both the pro and con cases before coming to a judgment, irrespective of the strength of the case for either, so, too, must we insist, as rational students of history and human society, on hearing the case for more than one interpretation of key events and trends so that our own view may take into account this relevant evidence and reasoning. Intellectual honesty demands this, education requires it. It is irrational to assume *a priori* the correctness of one of these perspectives, and intellectually irresponsible to make fundamental frame of reference decisions for our students.

Once students consider conflicting perspectives, they should actually argue the cases for them, role playing the thought of those who insightfully hold them. This requires students to learn how to collect the "facts" each side marshals to defend its views and analyze their divergent use of key terms. For example, what exactly differentiates those we label *freedom fighters* from those we label *terrorists*? How can we define them without presupposing the truth of someone's ideology? These crucial terms and many others current in social disputes are often used in self-serving ways by nations and groups, begging most of the crucial social and moral issues. Students need skills in breaking down ideologically biased uses of language. This requires them to

develop concepts that do not presuppose specific national ideological slants. This, in turn, requires them to engage in the argumentation for and against their application in key cases.

Unfortunately, even when critical thinking becomes an explicit instructional objective and significant attention is given to formulation of curriculum, unless teachers and curriculum specialists have internalized the concept of strong sense critical thinking, instruction usually fosters sociocentric weak sense critical thinking skills rather than strong sense skills. Consider the following critical thinking writing prompts from a series of similarly constructed items for a state-wide testing program:

Critical Thinking Writing Prompt
History-Social Science

The Cold War: Cuban Missile Crisis

Directions: Read the conversation below that might have taken place between two United States citizens during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

- Speaker 1: These photographs in the newspaper show beyond a doubt that Russians are building missile bases in Cuba. It's time we took some strong action and did something about it. Let's get some bombers down there.
- Speaker 2: I agree that there are Russian missiles in Cuba, but I don't agree with the solution you suggest. What would the world think about America dropping bombs on a neighboring small island?
- Speaker 1: I think the only way to deal with the threat of force is force. If we do nothing, it's the same as saying it's okay to let them put in missiles that will threaten the whole hemisphere. Let's eliminate those missile bases now with military force.
- Speaker 2: The solution you propose would certainly eliminate those bases, but innocent people might be killed, and world opinion might be against us. What if we try talking to the Russians first and then try a blockade of their ships around Cuba, or something like that?
- Speaker 1: That kind of weak response won't get us anywhere. Communists only understand force.
- Speaker 2: I think we should try other less drastic measures that won't result in loss of life. Then, if they don't work, use military action.

Imagine that you are a concerned citizen in 1962. Based on the information above, write a letter to President Kennedy about the missile crisis. Take a position and explain to President Kennedy what you think should be done about the missiles in Cuba and why.

- State your position clearly.
- Use information from the conversation above and from what you know about the missile crisis to support your position.

Critical Thinking Writing Prompt
History-Social Science

Directions: Read the information below and answer the questions that follow.

The Cold War: Cuban Missile Crisis

In 1962 an international crisis erupted when the Soviet Union installed missile-launching equipment in Cuba. Because Cuba is only 90 miles from Florida, many Americans felt threatened by the missile bases. On October 26, 1962, President Kennedy sent the following letter to the Soviet Union's premier, Nikita Khrushchev:

"You would agree to remove these weapons systems from Cuba under appropriate United Nations' supervision ... the first ingredient is the cessation of work on missile sites in Cuba"

Nikita Khrushchev responded in a letter shortly thereafter by saying:

"We accept your proposal, and have ordered the Soviet vessels bound for Cuba but not yet within the area of American warships' piratical activities to stay out of the interception area."

1. Based on the information above about the Cuban missile crisis, what do you think the central issue or concern is?

2. List two facts in the information about the missile crisis.

3. Do you see any words in either President Kennedy's or Premier Khrushchev's letters that might be considered biased or "loaded"? Find which one or ones are "loaded" and list why they are "loaded".

4. Based on the information above, which side do you think is the aggressor? Why?

5. Khrushchev had spoken earlier of the need for "peaceful coexistence" between the U.S. and USSR. Is arming Cuba with missiles *consistent* with this statement about peaceful coexistence? Why or why not?

6. If you had an opportunity to interview Khrushchev in 1962, what question would you ask to find out why he placed missiles in Cuba?

7. President Kennedy was convinced that there actually were missile bases in Cuba. If you were President Kennedy in 1962, what information would *you* need to conclude that missile bases actually existed in Cuba?

8. If Cuba had been permitted to install missile bases, what affect would this have had on Cuba's relationships with other countries?

Critical Thinking Writing Prompt
History-Social Science

The Cold War: Cuban Missile Crisis

Directions: Read the information below about missiles in Cuba and answer the questions that follow.

In 1962, an international crisis erupted when the Soviet Union installed missile-launching equipment in Cuba. Some of the facts relating to the incident are:

1. Photographs of Cuba taken by United States planes show missile sites under construction in Cuba.
2. Long-range missiles are observed near the sites.
3. Russian supply ships are bringing missile base equipment and technicians to Cuba.
4. Cuba is only 90 miles from the United States.
5. The President's military advisers recommend that the missiles be removed.

1. What is the central issue?

2. Write one question you might want to ask the United States military advisers.

3. Write one question you might want to ask Soviet Premier Khrushchev.

4. What does the United States assume that Cuba will do with the missiles?

5. List two actions the United States might have taken in response to this crisis.

6. List two facts that support one of the actions identified in item 5.

7. Imagine you are a concerned citizen who has been following the above events with great interest. You decide to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. Write your letter on this sheet of paper. In your letter, take a stand on the situation in Cuba and clearly explain your reasons.

- State your position clearly.
- Use information from the list and from what you know about the missile crisis to support your position.

Editor
Daily Bugle
Yourtown, USA

Dear Editor:

In every case, the student has *none* of the facts to which a Soviet might call attention, or any sense of how a Soviet might use them to develop an opposing line of reasoning.

Imagine, in contrast, a test item that provided a list of facts to which United States observers might allude (such as those preceding), followed by a list of facts to which Soviets might allude, including perhaps these: *a)* the United States already had placed many of its own missiles within 90 miles of the Soviet border; *b)* Cuba is a sovereign country; *c)* the United States had rejected Soviet complaints that it had put missiles too close to their borders by saying that the countries where the missiles were placed were sovereign countries.

After giving students the two lists of facts, one could give short arguments in favor of the opposed positions. Then the students might be asked to answer the same kinds of questions as the original prompt. Other contrasting lists of facts could be provided regarding many of the tense situations that have characterized the Cold War, and the students could be given a variety of dialogical writing and role-playing assignments. Through such assignments the students could come to understand how Soviets actually reason about the conflicts and tensions that have characterized the history of the two countries. They would learn not to presuppose that their country is always right. They would develop a much more realistic sense of how governments of all kinds often act in ways they themselves (the various governments) would disapprove of were "the enemy" to do what they do.

One of the major ways in which sociocentric bias is introduced into social studies texts is through the fostered illusion of "scientific" objectivity. Nothing suggests that the authors are taking a position on issues about which reasonable people could disagree, or at least that they are taking such a position only when they explicitly admit to it.

The textbook *American Democracy In World Perspective*,²⁸ written by four professors at the University of California for use in college political science courses, is an exemplary case in this regard. Virtually everything in its 700-plus pages is oriented toward persuading the reader that the United States has the best form of government, comes closest to "perfect" democracy, and that the fate of freedom in the world depends on the United States: "As democracy fares in the United States, so will it, in the long run, fare throughout the world."

The text divides all governments into two basic types, democratic and non-democratic, the non-democratic ones are divided into authoritarian and totalitarian ones, in accord with the figure 1.²⁹

Numerous features stand out in this chart. *Democracy* is a term that we apply to ourselves (a *positive* term with which virtually all people identify). *Authoritarian* and *totalitarian* are *negative* terms with which virtually no one identifies. The United States is characterized by a term that expresses an ideal, whereas its enemies, the USSR and its allies, are characterized by terms that in effect condemn them. The chart, presented as purely descriptive, obscures its tendentious character. By the same token, the distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism provides, under the guise of pure description, a means whereby support of dictators by the United States can be justified as the "better" of two evils. It does not take too much imagination to reconstruct how an equally tendentious chart might be fabricated for a "neutral" Soviet social studies text (see figure 2).

The authors also imply that most Americans believe in *reason and experience*, whereas Communists believe in *dogmatism*:

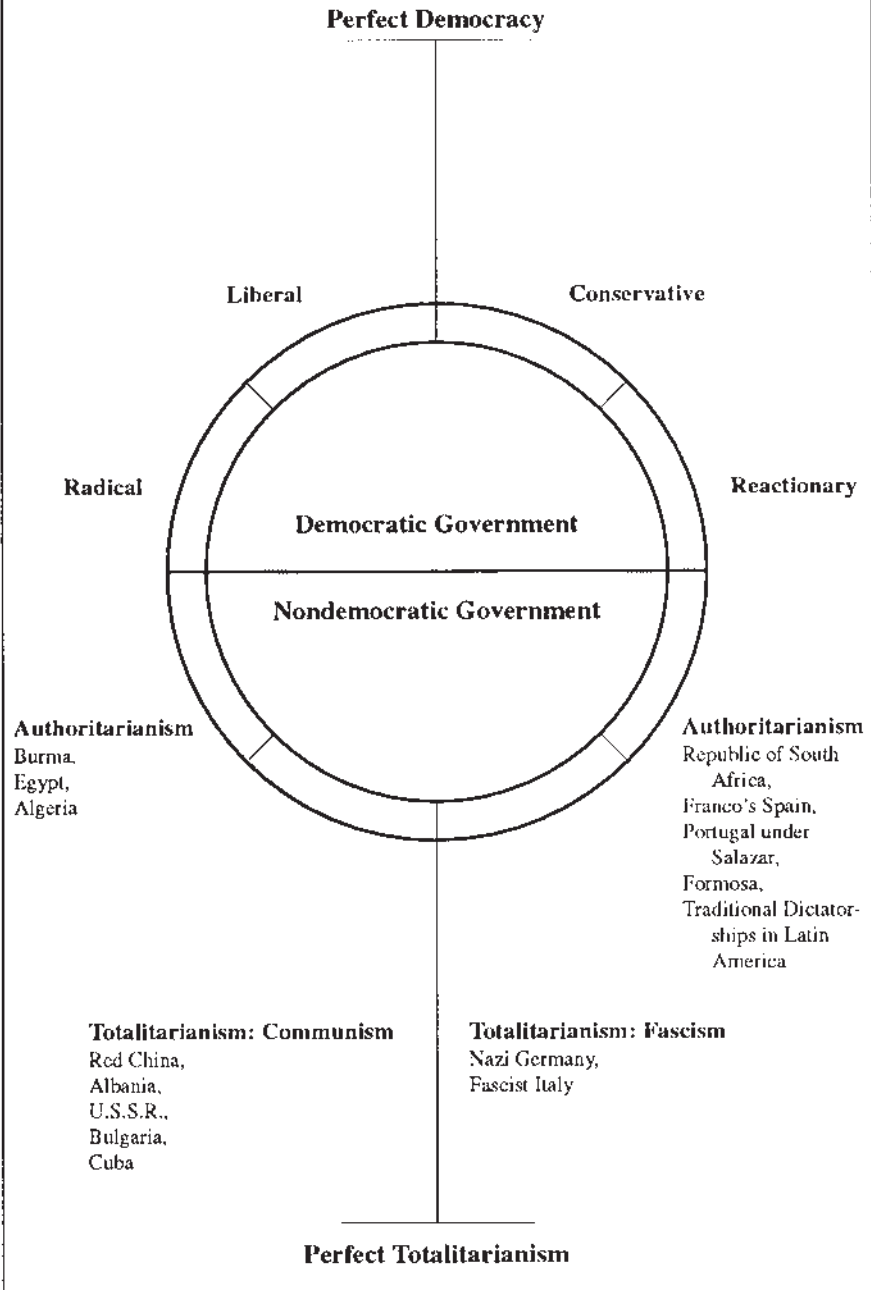
By using reasons and experience, man has scored impressive advances in the mastery of nature Democrats believe that reason and experience can be fruitfully used in the understanding and harmonious adjustment of human relations In contrast, dogmatists (such as Communists or Fascists) reject this belief in reason and experience.³⁰

At the same time, the text gives lip service to the need for free discussion of issues in social studies.

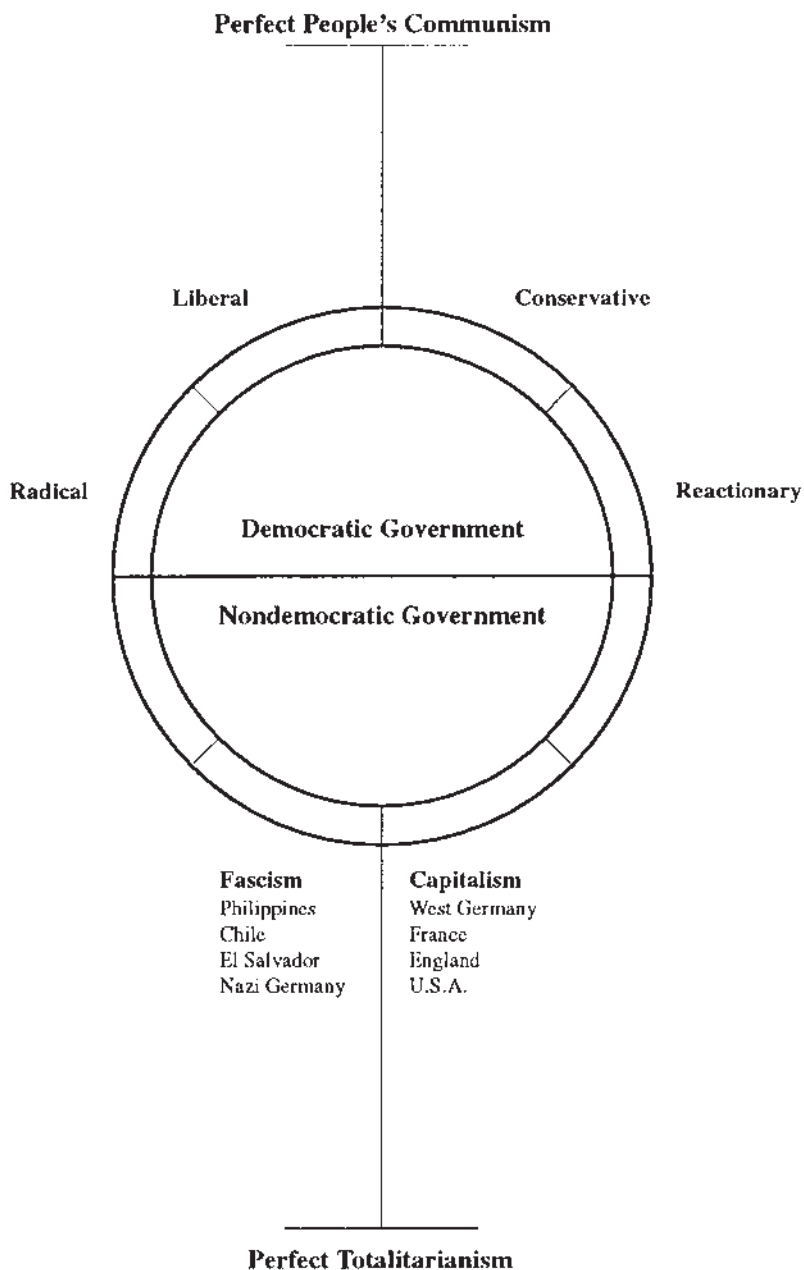
In trying to present a fair and balanced picture of American democracy, we have not sought to avoid controversial issues. The United States owes its existence to controversy and conflict, and throughout its history, as today, there has never been a dearth of highly controversial questions.³¹

I know of no textbook presently used in a large public school system that focuses on the multilogical issues of social studies or highlights the importance of strong sense critical thinking skills. Monological thinking that presupposes

The World Political Spectrum



The World Political Spectrum



a U.S. world view clearly dominates. At the same time, students do not recognize that they are learning, not to think, but to think like “Americans”, within one out of many possible points of view.

◆ *Concluding Remarks: The Critical Teacher*

To be in the best position to encourage critical thinking in their students, teachers must first value it highly in their personal, social, and civic lives. A teacher of critical thinking must be a critical person, a person comfortable with and experienced in critical discussion, critical reflection, and critical inquiry; must be willing to make questions rather than assertions the heart of his or her contribution to student learning; must explicitly understand his or her own frame of reference and that fostered in the society at large; must be willing to treat no idea as intrinsically good or bad; must have confidence in reason, evidence, and open discussion; must deeply value clarity, accuracy, and fairmindedness; and must be willing to help students develop the various critical thinking micro-proficiencies in the context of these values and ideals. To do so, teachers must be students of human irrationality, egocentricity, and prejudice. Their interest must be both theoretical and practical. They must experience (and recognize) irrational drives and behavior in themselves as well as others. A teacher must be patient and capable of the long view, for people, schools, and society change only in the long run, never quickly, and always with some frustration, conflict, and misunderstanding.

Few now realize that the critical teacher is rare and that most of the critical thinking cultivated in students today is, at best, monological and technical, and, at worst, sociocentric and sophistic. The concept of strong sense critical thinking — of what it is to live or teach critically — has as yet had little perceptible influence on schools as a whole. If, in our haste to bring critical thinking into the schools, we ignore the need to develop long-term strategies for nurturing the development of teachers’ own critical powers and passions, then we shall truly make the new emphasis on critical thinking into nothing more than a passing fad, or worse, into a new, more sophisticated form of social indoctrination and scholastic closedmindedness.

◆ *Footnotes*

- ¹ John Passmore, “On Teaching to be Critical,” included in *The Concept of Education*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London: 1967, pp. 192–211.
- ² For a sense of the dimensions requiring critical thinking, see the Phi Kappa Phi *National Forum* special issue on *Critical Thinking*, edited by myself, and including articles by Neil Postman, Sabini and Silver, Matthew Lipman, Edward Glaser, Robert Ennis, Michael Scriven, Ernest Boyer, and myself. Winter 1985.
See also my “Critical Thinking; Fundamental to Education For a Free Society,” *Educational Leadership*, September 1984; “Teaching Critical Thinking in the Strong Sense,” *Informal Logic*, 1982, Vol. 4, p. 3; and “Bloom’s Taxonomy and Critical Thinking Instruction,” *Educational Leadership*, May 1985.

- ³ "Dialogical Thinking: Critical Thought Essential to the Acquisition of Rational Knowledge and Passions," delivered at the *Connecticut Thinking Skills Conference*, March 11-13, 1985, forthcoming in *Teaching Thinking Skills: Theory and Practice*, W.H. Freeman, New York, edited by Joan Baron and Robert J. Sternberg, 1987.
- ⁴ Robert Ennis heads the Illinois Critical Thinking Project, co-authored the Cornell Critical Thinking Tests, and has written many seminal articles on critical thinking, beginning with his "A Concept of Critical Thinking," *Harvard Educational Review*, 1962, Vol. 32(1), 81-111.
- ⁵ Harvey Siegel has developed a number of ideas implicit in the writings of Israel Scheffler. Most important for critical thinking theory is Siegel's contribution "Critical Thinking as Educational Ideal," *The Educational Forum*, November 1980, pp. 7-23.
- ⁶ See Israel Scheffler's *Reason and Teaching*, Bobbs-Merrill, New York: 1973; and *Conditions of Knowledge*, Scott Foresman, Chicago: 1965.
- ⁷ See Scriven's "Critical For Survival" in the *National Forum's* special issue on critical thinking and his textbook, *Reasoning*, McGraw-Hill, New York: 1976.
- ⁸ Matthew Lipman has developed a multitude of innovative instructional strategies for bringing critical reflection into classroom discussions, third through twelfth grades, in the process of creating the *Philosophy for Children Program*.
- ⁹ See R. S. Peters' *Reason and Compassion*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London: 1973.
- ¹⁰ Passmore, op. cit.
- ¹¹ Edward Glaser is one of the founding fathers of the critical thinking movement in the United States. Its early stirrings can be traced back to his *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking* (1941) and his development with Watson of the *Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Test* (1940).
- ^{12,13} Ralph Johnson and J. Anthony Blair have been the major Canadian leaders in the Informal Logic/Critical Thinking movement. They have organized two major international conferences at the University of Windsor, have written many important papers in the field, edit *Informal Logic* (the major journal for those working on the theory of critical thinking), and have written an excellent text, *Logical Self-Defense*, McGraw-Hill, Toronto: 1977.
- ¹⁴ Ennis, "Critical Thinking," a handout developed in July 1985. *Illinois Critical Thinking Project*, University of Illinois/Champaign.
- ¹⁵ "Critical Thinking as Educational Ideal," op. cit., p. 11.
- ¹⁶ *Reasoning*, op. cit., p. ix.
- ¹⁷ "Critical for Survival," op. cit., p. 9
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ *Reason and Compassion*, op. cit., p. 79.
- ²⁰ op. cit., p. 198
- ²¹ Piaget, Jean. *Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*, Littlefield, Adams, Totowa, N.J.: 1976. Compare R. S. Peters: "The connection of being unreasonable with egocentricity is obvious enough. There is lacking even the stability in behavior that comes from acting in the light of established beliefs and practices. Beliefs tend to be infected with arbitrariness and particularity. Little attempt is made to fit them into a coherent system. A behavior is governed largely by wants and aversions of an immediate, short-term character. Little account is taken of the viewpoint or claims of others. Indeed, the behavior of others is seen largely in a self-referential way as it impinges on, threatens or thwarts the demands of the greedy, restless ego. ..." op. cit., p. 97.

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- ²² Piaget, from "The Development in Children of the Idea of the Homeland and of Relations with Other Countries," *The International Social Science Bulletin*, Vol. III, no. 3, 1951, pp. 561–578.
- ²³ William Graham Sumner, *Folkways*, originally 1906, reissued by Dover Publications, New York: 1959, p. 633.
- ²⁴ See Karl Mannheim's magnificent classic *Ideology and Utopia*, a seminal work whose contribution to the theory of critical thinking has yet to be absorbed.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, Louis Wirth in his preface to Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*.
- ²⁶ Commager, Henry Steele *The Atlantic*, March 1982.
- ²⁷ Toynbee, Arnold *America and the World Revolution*, Oxford University Press, New York and London: 1962, p. 92.
- ²⁸ Eberstein, Pritchett, Turner, and Mann, *American Democracy in World Perspective*, Harper & Row, New York: 1967, all quotes pp. 3–5.
- ²⁹ *op. cit.*, chart printed on inside covers.
- ³⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*