

Embedded rationality and the contextualisation of critical thinking

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Abstract

The present article addresses the question of whether, and to what extent, critical thinking should make attunement to current social and political landscapes central to its practice. I begin by outlining what I consider to be the basic positions in the debate about the political contextualisation of critical thinking, which are referred to as the crypto-Enlightenment and the critical pedagogical models. I argue, on the basis of various strands of research, that there is a prima facie case to be made in favour of the critical pedagogical position that favours forefronting the social and political context of critical thinking and thinking in general. I then draw attention, however, to problems of coherence and justification in the critical pedagogical position, before turning, finally, to an alternative grounding of critical thinking that takes seriously the historical and social contextualisation of thinking without the coherence problems of critical pedagogy. My conclusion is that while the critical pedagogical model is right to point to the fatal incompleteness of Enlightenment-style critical thinking due to its failure to properly acknowledge the norm-saturated nature of historical consciousness, critical pedagogy itself fails to offer a coherent alternative to the problem of integrating value and rationality in a more full-blown grounding of critical thinking. I suggest that a hermeneutical model that integrates the rational, axiological and

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historical moments in consciousness provides a more satisfying foundation for understanding the trajectory and purpose of critical thinking.

KEYWORDS

critical thinking, critical pedagogy, hermeneutics, historical consciousness

In an age in which democracy and many of its attendant values are perceived to be under threat from the excesses of right- and left-wing politics, it is not surprising to see critical thinking forefronted with renewed urgency in teaching curricula across Europe and beyond (ACARA, 2019; Common Core, 2009; IB, 2019; UDIR, 2019). The valorisation of critical thinking is not in itself new, of course, but it is clear that events over the past five years or so have provided a new impetus for its incorporation into teaching plans from primary school to university. In respect to this, Martha Nussbaum's warning that 'cultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection are crucial in keeping democracies alive and awake' (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 10) has never been more salient.

There is, then, near-universal agreement that critical thinking is necessary if we are to have any chance of combatting misinformation and fake news, to challenge assumptions about the good and the true or indeed just to think clearly. This, in turn, has given rise to a vast and sprawling literature covering topics such as whether critical thinking is a first-order cognitive capacity or a second-order metacognitive capacity, whether it denotes an autonomous capacity exercised in different contexts or a capacity whose exercise is essentially subject-dependent and whether critical thinking is a deployed skill or a character disposition.

In the present article, I will address none of these questions, but will rather focus on a question that has been asked somewhat in the margins of the literature. This is the question concerning whether and to what extent, critical thinking should be attuned to the social and political landscapes in which thought and action take place. This is not so much a debate as a tension between those who make explicit political engagement central to the cultivation of critical thinking and those who, while not arguing against this approach, place the focus of critical thinking elsewhere; that is, in the cultivation of good thinking skills as such. In developing my argument, it will, unfortunately, be necessary to do a certain violence to the second kind of position by glossing over a good deal of the important nuance that characterises the various apolitical positions in the critical thinking literature. My justification for doing so is that while these nuances are important in themselves, they are not essential to the question at hand.

The structure of the article is as follows. I begin by outlining what I consider to be the basic positions in the debate about the political contextualisation of critical thinking. I will refer to these as the crypto-Enlightenment and the critical pedagogical models. In part II, I argue that there is a *prima facie* case to be made in favour of the critical pedagogical position that favours forefronting the social and political context of critical thinking and thinking in general, on the basis of various strands of research which have questioned the Enlightenment confidence in something such as an unsullied rational agency. In part III, however, I draw attention to problems of coherence in the critical pedagogical position, before turning, in part IV, to an alternative grounding of critical thinking that takes seriously the contextualisation of thinking without the coherence problems of critical pedagogy.

I will argue that while the critical pedagogical model is right to point to the fatal incompleteness of Enlightenment-style critical thinking due to its failure to properly acknowledge the norm-saturated nature of historical consciousness, critical pedagogy itself fails to offer a coherent alternative to the problem of integrating value and rationality in a more full-blown grounding of the possibility of critical thinking.

PARADIGMS OF CRITICAL THINKING

The Crypto-Enlightenment Model

It is uncontroversial to state that the major paradigm within the critical thinking literature looks broadly to the Enlightenment for its source and inspiration. Now of course, the Enlightenment as historical phenomenon denotes no single set of ideas, doctrines or thinkers. The historical Enlightenment comprised very different thinkers from different places and times, drawing from sources both secular and religious (Lehner, 2016), and with interests as diverse as the renewal of politics, human rights, the cultivation of science and the psychology of humankind (Frazer, 2010; Lloyd, 2013). In what follows, I therefore suggest the term 'crypto-Enlightenment' to designate the major paradigm in the critical thinking literature. This allows for acknowledgement of both the importance of the Enlightenment as an identity marker within this paradigm, with the caveat that there may be more to the Enlightenment than its identitarian function.

Reference to the Enlightenment is visible in the aforementioned curriculum documents in the emphasis on autonomy through rational agency, which to a great extent, echo Immanuel Kant's clarion call for the liberation of human rational agency from its self-imposed disenfranchisement (Kant, 2001).

The key moment in Kant's philosophy of Enlightenment is his identification of rational agency as the centrepiece of human life and human dignity. To be human is to be capable of thinking rationally and to think rationally is to be capable of living freely by taking responsibility for the trajectory of one's life as a truth-oriented and moral agent.

This Kantian framework is easily recognisable as the dominant paradigm within theories of critical thinking in terms of the emphasis on the capacity to be both moved by reasons and to give an account of one's actions and beliefs in terms of reasons. Of course, the way in which the injunction to exercise and cultivate rational agency tends to differ widely. For some, critical thinking is directly oriented towards the world and questions of what to do and what to believe (Ennis, 1996; Norris and Ennis, 1995), while others place the emphasis of critical thinking at the metacognitive level, such that the task is to think critically about our thinking (Ellerton, 2015; Paul *et al.*, 1993). While some conceive of critical thinking as a general capacity that can be transferred to various domains of inquiry (Fisher, 2011, p. 1), others claim it to be inseparable from the demands of the specific discipline in which it is to be exercised (Ellerton, 2017, p. 10). And while many of these claims present critical thinking as something we do, it is sometimes conceived of as something we are. That is to say, critical thinking is something to be habituated so that it becomes a dispositional orientation of the agent (Siegel, 1988).

In spite of the richness and nuance of these positions, they can rightly be said to proceed under the auspices of the crypto-Enlightenment model, for the simple reason that they tend to forefront thinking as such, as propaedeutic to its exercise in the world of scientific inquiry or social action. In this respect, they conceive of critical thinking as an activity that can be isolated and developed according to its own internal norms.

This should not, however, be read as suggesting that crypto-Enlightenment positions are indifferent to the real-world exercise of critical thinking. We only need to remember that Kant's own motivation in *What is Enlightenment?* is explicitly social, political and above all human, in a way that is reflected in almost every one of the above-mentioned accounts of critical thinking and their focus on citizenship, democracy and freedom, as the contextual values that justify the need for exercising and cultivating our critical faculties.

But it is precisely because these values are so important that the crypto-Enlightenment model tends to want to isolate and focus on thinking itself as the means to their realisation. We are all born into traditions and communities in which all manner of claims to the true and the good are made. The world is already interpreted before we come on the scene, and we are increasingly bombarded in our everyday lives with claims made by advertisers and ideologues that call for notional and real assent from us. The confluence of all of these streams of influence can result in a set of uncritically held assumptions, motivated by appeal to a combination of reasons, associations and emotions, that may well be either externally or internally incoherent. The path to liberation, as such, lies precisely in cultivating the power

of thinking clearly and freely so that we might learn to evaluate what is presented to us, to discern the true from the false, fact from opinion and the credible from the incredible as well as to anchor our own positions within the space of reasons.

To do so requires taking a step back and sequestering our critical faculties so that we can allow the process of thinking and its criteria for judgement are explored for themselves. The task of critical thinking calls, then, for disembedding the rational actor from substantive contexts of life so that she might be able to meet others (and herself) on the neutral plain of argument and reason.

This conception is well expressed in Kurfiss' definition of critical thinking as

... an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question, or problem to arrive at a hypothesis or a conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that can therefore be convincingly justified. (Kurfiss, 1988, p. 2)

An obvious assumption made here is that while the substantive contexts into which we are born are contingent and temporal, the capacity to think well is timeless and thereby offers the promise of lifting us out of our passive beholderhood and into a state of autonomous freedom. It is for this reason, also, that crypto-Enlightenment accounts of critical thinking focus on the epistemic and procedural values that characterise good thinking. By epistemic values, I mean values such as evidence-based deliberation, valid use of inference, logic etc., while procedural values include fairness and respect for others in dialogue as well as open-mindedness and inclusion. While we may all bring different backgrounds and assumptions to the public sphere, we can at least, it is hoped, agree on the epistemic and procedural values that allow us to meet each other in collective inquiry or respectful disagreement and can, therefore, hold out the genuine hope of reaching a deepened understanding or even consensus.

We teach critical thinking most effectively in terms of those formal features which characterise good, fair and thorough thinking, regardless of the matter in question. This kind of approach is compatible with both subject and non-subject-based approaches to critical thinking, with cognitivist and metacognitivist approaches, and with skills and dispositional approaches. In all cases, the substantive framework which justifies critical thinking – namely democratic citizenship in all its forms – is precisely and deliberately quarantined in order that the very skill required for its maintenance can be given the oxygen to develop.

The Critical Pedagogical Model

We turn now to what can be considered an alternative paradigm within the critical thinking literature as it relates to the issue of engagement with the social and political contexts within which critical thinking takes place. This alternate paradigm is to be found within the research tradition broadly identified as critical pedagogy.¹

Researchers working in this tradition share with 'Enlightenment' thinkers all of the major commitments to substantive values such as democracy, citizenship, equality and mutual respect (Giroux, 2012, p. xiv). Where they differ is on the question of whether these can be set aside in order to work on the critical tools required for their pursuit and maintenance. For the crypto-Enlightenment thinkers, we are all at bottom rational actors, but inasmuch as we become entangled in unclear and uncritical forms of discourse, our inborn rational capacities can become compromised. The challenge, therefore, is to withdraw from social space in order to develop the kind of good thinking that will enable us to re-engage this space in a more enlightened way. Within the school system, for example this might entail working on students' critical thinking skills in ways that are disengaged from current social realities in order to cultivate the kind of thinkers that might later engage these realities in thoughtful and critical ways.

For those working in the critical pedagogy tradition, this is precisely what we should not do. Any attempt to develop critical thinking skills in a vacuum is not only naïve, they claim, but directly undercuts the real capacity for the

emergence of critical thinking. We might say that while the Enlightenment perspective places especial emphasis on the thinking part of critical thinking, the critical pedagogical places greater emphasis on the role of critique. To think critically is not about developing specific skills, first and foremost, but about subjecting social norms, practices and institutions to critical assessment. As Linker puts it, thinking critically means thinking critically about 'social identity and social difference' in the service of understanding difference and inequality (2014, p. 7). The primary concern should not be with developing argumentative strategies or learning to point out flaws in the reasoning of others, but to challenge and re-shape inequitable institutions and relations in the name of social justice (Burbules and Berk, 1999; Cowden and Singh, 2015, pp. 565–566).

Crucial to this agenda is the need to critique our rational assumptions from the inside. Giroux makes the claim that

A (critical) pedagogy of representation focuses on demystifying the act and process of representing by revealing how images are produced within relations of power that narrate identities through history, social forms, and modes of ethical address that appear objective, universally valid, and consensual. (Giroux and McLaren, 1994, p. 47)

The point here is that our very capacity to conceptualise problems in social space is already coloured by normative assumptions that cannot be left unchallenged if the democratic mandate of critical thinking is to make any headway. Models of critical thinking on the Enlightenment paradigm risk starting too far up when they do engage with social issues by taking these as given rather than inquiring back into the sources of their framing and representation (Brookfield, 2015, p. 530). As such, they risk addressing only superficial issues of instrumental reasoning and remain blind to the substantive logic of oppression that underwrites social reality.

Critical thinking cannot, as such, be detached from close attention to current social reality and must become attuned to the fruits of the ethic of capitalism as these manifest themselves all around us (Brookfield, 2015, p. 531; Giroux, 2012; Giroux and McLaren, 1994). While the Enlightenment model of critical thinking placed reason, freedom and authenticity at its core, critical pedagogy makes justice and emancipation its central pillars. To reason and to think critically is not first and foremost a duty I owe to myself by virtue of my status as an autonomous, rational subject. Rather, critical thinking denotes the duty I have to those others who are marginalised and excluded by dominant narratives and representations of reality, which falsely claim universal normative status in ways that initiate dichotomies of inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, the scalpel of this critical impulse must be directed both outwards to institutions and practices, and inwards to my own reproduction of these inequalities in my thinking and action (Brookfield, 2012; Linker, 2014, p. 11).

While both paradigms of critical thinking employ a dialectic between the individual and the collective, they can nevertheless be characterised in broad terms as individualist and collectivist perspectives respectively. That is, while the crypto-Enlightenment model begins with the individual thinker and moves outwards into social space, the critical pedagogy model begins with social critique and moves inwards to the individual. While the crypto-Enlightenment paradigm tends to view the society as a reflection of the quality of the thinker, the critical pedagogical views the thinker as a reflection of the quality of the society.

THE INELUCTABLE EMBEDDEDNESS OF CRITICAL THINKING

At stake here is a tension between the two models concerning the social status of rational agency. And, it would seem that the crypto-Enlightenment model has a case to answer from its post-Enlightenment counterpart.

To be clear, both paradigms are committed to the idea that the exercise of rational agency is embedded, but they differ markedly in their conception of the dynamics of this embeddedness. The anthropology that undergirds the crypto-Enlightenment position conceives of the human being as a rational individual, whose flourishing is best facilitated by

the cultivation of rational agency in such a way that the contingencies of our embeddedness in natural and social settings can be transformed in the light of reason (Kant, 2001, p. 42).

Critical thinking, as it is envisaged by researchers from the critical pedagogy tradition draws, on the other hand, from later sources that are largely sceptical to the Enlightenment project, or at least to what they view as its naïve commitment to an unsullied, neutral reason. These include figures such as Nietzsche, Freud and, especially, Marx (Ricoeur, 1970). According to these thinkers, our rationality is essentially and ineradicably a reflection of the conditions of our concrete existence. We are social beings through and through, such that every act of thinking is simultaneously a position-taking in relation to the social world. Any attempt to draw the thinker out of the conditions of existence in order to cultivate thinking as such, is naïve because the agent will always take with her the norms, conventions, categories and definitions of her social world. Thus, to cultivate thinking, independent of a consideration of factual existence, amounts to an implicit acquiescence to the status quo and a commitment to devote one's rational capacities to problem-solving and, therefore, maintenance of this status quo. What is required is not the crypto-Enlightenment model's first-order thinking that actually masks and supports hidden valuations and normalisations in social space, but rather, a second-order form of critical thinking whose goal is to unmask the hidden logic that supports power structures through the various representative categories that are taken as unproblematically given.

Thus, of course, the concern for the sources of thinking and valuing is not unique to critical pedagogy or to Marxist perspectives more generally. It is a mainstay of hermeneutics and has recently gained much attention in a growing body of social science research that points to the enormous capacity of both individuals and groups for self-deception when it comes to the exercise of critical reasoning (Gigerenzer, 2008; Greene, 2015; Haidt, 2013; Kahan *et al.*, 2017; Sperber and Mercier, 2018). Rather than reasoning our way in a straight line from uncertainty through evidence to conviction, as we would like to believe we do, their experiments tend to show, somewhat depressingly, a movement in the other direction, from conviction to rationalisation by means of cherry-picking the evidence that suits us and ignoring what does not (Haidt, 2013). This is not simply a problem of fast, heuristic thinking producing errors whose antidote is a slower, more careful form of analytic attention (Kahneman, 2011) to the details of the problem at hand, but points to the very apparatus of critical thinking as technique being subservient to hidden desires, values and interests that structure the very operations of critical thought. Our susceptibility to bias has also been indicated by a good deal of recent educational research that highlights the tendency of so-called neutral, rational deliberation models to surreptitiously import normative assumptions into social space (Mattei and Broeks, 2016; Olsen, 2016; Tarozzi *et al.*, 2013).

While we cannot enter into a discussion about the details of these debates, we can stipulate that their confluence strongly suggests that human reason is far less transparent than advocates of the crypto-Enlightenment have tended to argue. We are complex beings whose orientation in the world is coloured by emotion, circumstances, history, language and a host of other factors, in ways we are not always aware. This is not to deny that we are also rational – the critical pedagogy approach assumes our capacity to engage critically as the possibility of our reason – but we are not *only* rational.

FATAL INCOHERENCE IN THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

But while the general point of the critical pedagogues concerning the embeddedness of thinking is well taken, I would suggest that this does not, without further ado, support the more substantive aspects of their critical thinking program as this is usually developed. In what follows, I draw attention to four points, though there may be more, where this program becomes incoherent. These are (a) critique and self-critique, (b) anthropology and the possibility of critique, (c) the paradox of value and (d) negativity and the return to procedure.

Critique and Self-Critique

While it is both prudent and praiseworthy that critical thinking on the critical pedagogy model trains its critical lens as much on the definition and framing of problems as on the problems themselves, it is striking that the position from which this endeavour proceeds is rarely, if ever, itself subjected to critique or even justification. Critical pedagogy draws on Marx and Marxist thinking in order to draw out the features of the social landscape in which thinking and problem-solving take place, but rarely offers reasons for why attention to the contextual embeddedness of thinking should be precisely Marxist. Instead, this framework is simply taken as given.

One of its leading proponents, Stephen Brookfield, acknowledges this problem (Brookfield, 2015, p. 531) to be fair, but ultimately rejects its cogency by claiming that Marx-inspired critical thinking is, in spite of appearances, properly self-critical. He bases his defence on its attention to the various developments of the 20th and 21st centuries, such as the rise of mass communications, that were not foreseen by Marx and therefore not part of his analysis. Inasmuch as such social developments are incorporated into the analyses of critical theorists, Brookfield concludes with Bronner and Kellner, that critical pedagogy is 'intrinsically open to development and revision' (Bronner and Kellner, 1989; Brookfield, 2015, p. 532). But it is difficult to see in what sense this adaptation of the fundamentals of Marxist analysis to contemporary vicissitudes is genuinely self-critical. At best, it amounts to an updating of the theory to deal with new empirical data. Ultimately Brookfield, along with many of his colleagues (Giroux, 2012; Linker, 2014), is happy to state that critical thinking serves a specific politics, whose agenda is simply assumed as unproblematic.

The result of this lack of self-critique is a tendency towards dogmatism that is insightful in pointing to the non-neutrality of (Enlightenment) thinking, but which insists on a very specific normative framework as the uncritical foundation for its own critique of the former. This is evident in the categories according to which social space is understood – racism, sexism, homophobia, white supremacy – which are unfolded from the overarching framework of the narrative of power relations as fundamental, in an almost positivist fashion (Brookfield, 2015; Giroux, 2012, p. xvi). In other words, a very specific account of the nature of our social and historical embeddedness is taken for granted such that these categories are presented as social facts that are both (a) incontestable and (b) the only categories that really matter in terms of thought, action and human relations (Kendi, 2019). They purportedly constitute the landscape and the logic of social space, they are the values that non-socially attuned critical thinking supports (inadvertently or not), and must therefore be the prime targets of a critical thinking that is awake to the embeddedness of thought and action. But are things really so simple?

Anthropology and the possibility of Critique

The critical pedagogue may object at this point that her critical thinking model is being developed and argued for within the context of Education research rather than Philosophy, so it is unfair to expect the kind of radical justification of epistemological and anthropological starting points that one might expect in the latter discipline. However, on deeper reflection over the anthropology operative within critical pedagogy, we discover tensions that threaten to unravel the project from within. We noted earlier that critical pedagogues are committed to a view of the social as a space in which the interests of the few are not only pursued at the expense of the many, but in which this process is represented as normal, as the way things should be (Giroux and McLaren, 1994, p. 47). The result is an ideological framework that shapes everything from government to education and which must become the target of critique and critical thinking.

The problem is that the universalisation of this logic of power, subterfuge and exclusion through representation leaves the critical pedagogue with a problem concerning the normative ground from which a critique can be launched. It threatens to mire us in a Nietzschean space in which everything is will-to-power. It is one in which the masked can

indeed be unmasked, but only in the light of an honest acknowledgement of power as the undifferentiated basis of relations and valuing as such. Former Dean of Yale Law Anthony Kronman puts the point elegantly when he notes that

Each (belief, value, idea) is the disguised expression of an interest that itself is deaf and dumb – a brute appetite that can be challenged only by another appetite of the same inarticulate kind in a contest of powers that reason cannot adjudicate because there is no reason in it. (Kronman, 2007, p. 187)

But critical pedagogy in general and critical thinking in particular are intended as normatively grounded enterprises that are ethically motivated and that serve the interests of the marginalised, that speak truth to power and that open the space in which the other can be seen and heard. This is not impossible in the context of an anthropology of power, but it cannot be justified as legitimate. Critical thinking can indeed be the scalpel that cuts through the purportedly incontestable givens of our normative social landscape, but it struggles to account for the righteousness of this project on normative terms of its own. If critique comes from another source than the order of power and representation, then whence? We need somehow to account for our thought and action as both mired in the corrupt valuations of our socio-historical embeddedness and, at the same time, as capable of seeing these as corrupt.

The Paradox of Value and Social Change

One possible solution to this problem could come in the form of an appeal to something like Levinasian phenomenology, in which response to the otherness of the other cuts through systems of power that otherwise characterise the socio-historical world (Lévinas, 1969, p. 46). In an analogue to the Enlightenment conception of a transhistorical rational agency, this would involve the claim that while we find ourselves given over to spaces in which power relations have dominated normative discourses in self-serving ways, we retain the capacity to perceive another normativity that cuts through these by responding to the call of the marginalised other in a way that is motivated outside of our concrete situatedness. In this sense, valuation is both historical, in the sense of constituting the interest-driven logic of social space, and outside of time in the form of ethical response.

But even if the critical pedagogue chooses this solution of a two-tier normativity – and it is far from clear that the two orders are compatible – she encounters the problem of the possibility of instituting the fruits of critique. While it is beyond the scope of this article to engage in a lengthy treatment of the philosophy of Lévinas, we can note that responsiveness takes place for him, as an event. This is to say, response is a possibility that is always outside the instituted social world, which by definition is a sedimentation that fixes others as ontic realities within a calculus of the instrumental. The social world is the world that institutes what is comprehended, while to comprehend is always to fix and therefore to draw boundaries between inside and outside in ways that are necessarily exclusionary. The ethics of response, by contrast, calls for an alertness to see what cannot be instituted or fixed and which is always outside of time. On this model, a response that is ethically motivated is possible, but only because it is wholly other as what cannot be domesticated in the world of instituted social relations. It is, perhaps, interesting to note in this context that Jacques Derrida, following Lévinas, once claimed that justice is the only conception that cannot be deconstructed because justice is the motivating force of deconstruction (Derrida, 1992, p. 7). To deconstruct is to hold open, to refuse the closure of meaning, to defer and to critique. And it is so precisely to allow the other to appear. This is indeed compatible with critical pedagogy's commitment to justice as the alpha and omega of critical thinking, and would perhaps even allow one to make sense of the commitment to justice in a world that is otherwise the product of self-interested power, but it comes at a price. It grounds the impetus to social change in a form of ethical insight that precisely operates outside the logic of the social. As such, it must paradoxically renege on the possibility of social change in order to justify critical thinking motivated by social change.

The Return to the Procedural

This leaves us with a puzzle about the status of reason within the critical pedagogy framework. Critical pedagogues tend to be dismissive of Enlightenment models of critical thinking, which assume that reason is inessentially indexed to social and historical contexts. They reject the idea that we can become critical thinkers by simply dissecting arguments and logic or by monitoring the anatomy of our own argumentative constructions. Thinking, they say, does not operate within value-neutral contexts and there is no neutral, common plain upon which we can meet each other, stripped of our historicity, as pure rational agents.

And yet, while value neutrality is the terminus a quo for Enlightenment models (Rawls, 1999), from which a common view of the good and the true can emerge through consensus, it becomes paradoxically the terminus ad quem for the critical pedagogues. Why? Because while critical pedagogy is highly normative, its normativity is only properly contoured as negative. That is, it draws attention to the various ways in which institutional practice has been maligned, through analyses of racist, sexist, homophobic and Islamophobic impulses. Critical thinking, as we have seen, amounts to unmasking these impulses and holding them in check. But if the goal of this project is only to secure a space in which normative closure is held in check against new forms of exclusionary closure, the positive target of critical thinking can be nothing more than a neutral space in which the good remains precisely undefined in order for a plurality of voices to occupy that space freely.

This is paradoxical because it is seemingly only achievable on the basis of the procedural values that constituted the initial horizon of the Enlightenment approach. Thus, we see critical pedagogues appeal to values such as inclusion, equality, turn-taking etc. (Brookfield, 2015, p. 539; Linker, 2014), as the sovereign values which define the practical operation of critique. This can be understood in one of two ways, neither of which is particularly satisfying. On the one hand, it might entail an 'end of history' motif, according to which the Enlightenment model of critical thinking is, after all, possible, but only after the work of dismantling the ethic of capitalism has achieved its goal and a new form of social existence has been made possible. But this is the idea of a social space that is so transformed and unanchored from its past that it is difficult to imagine as it is one in which the kind of rational practice that was never before possible has been made possible. It should be added that it is also, as such, indistinguishable from the dream of the Enlightenment. Alternatively, the work of critical attunement might be envisaged as an endless task that requires perpetual vigilance to the possibility of corruption (Derrida, 1992). But in this case, commitment to the procedural values of openness and inclusion are propaedeutic to nothing since nothing more substantive is conceivable.

As such, we are left with the choice between neutral reason as the starting point from which consensus and community is sought (Enlightenment), or neutral reason as that which critique endlessly seeks to realise (critical pedagogy). And worse still, critical pedagogy appears to have anchored this project in an anthropology that puts it forever out of our reach. So, at the same time that critical pedagogy is eminently sensitive to the historically conditioned nature of thinking, it cannot account for the normative sources of its own resistance, nor how critical faculties can be sufficiently purified to be employed in the service of this normativity, nor in the positive target of the trajectory of radical critique. This results in the paradoxical situation in which the procedural space of openness and inclusion which was a starting point for critical thinking on the Enlightenment model, becomes an end in itself for critical pedagogy such that we end up in a situation in which radical critique of Enlightenment sensibilities points to a world of hyper-Enlightenment values.

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNES AND THE 'HERMENEUTICS OF CHARITY'

Taken together, these comprise a significant problem for the attempt to build a model of critical thinking on the basis of critical pedagogy. If we are to take seriously the idea that thought and action are embedded in social and historical contexts of pre-given meaning – which is in itself an almost irresistible insight – then any version of the Enlightenment model of critical thinking will suffer from an essential incompleteness.² But while critical pedagogy rightly draws

attention to the tacit normativity that nourishes our critical faculties, it fails in its attempt to account for the normative sources that nourish its own capacity for critique and so ends up being incoherent and dogmatic. As such, we will need to look elsewhere for a coherent anchoring of critical thinking.

Any viable candidate for the task will need to be able to deal with the four problems mentioned above, at least, and thereby offer a more satisfactory account of the relationship between critique and normativity than critical pedagogy models can.

So, how can critical thinking be both historically conditioned and simultaneously critical in a genuine fashion? My suggestion is that the only coherent way to ground the possibility of critical thinking within the framework of historical consciousness is through a more hermeneutic acknowledgement of the fecund tension between indebtedness and distantiating that characterises the historically situated nature of our thinking. I would like to enlarge this point by offering a reflection on how this dialectic is played out in the context of the axiological and institutional landscape of historical consciousness.

The Axiological Realm

Both major positions in the discussion so far take as given to be human is to be historically situated. But both are, for different reasons, wary of the tendency of this embeddedness to infect our (critical) thinking. According to one side, the tradition is suspect until it has been placed on a firmly rational footing, while the other side sees it as inherently suspicious because whether rational or not, it amounts to a complex story of power relations that seeks to define an inside against an outside, a normal against a deviant, an us against a them and so on. So, one side takes our value commitments as unproblematic but confused until we can deliberate on how to materialise these using pure reason. The other side sees values as expressions of sectarian interest that are rationalised through our critical faculties and that require root and branch critique in the light of a value commitment that comes from elsewhere. Both these positions are ultimately dualist because while the one requires us to step out of our historical embeddedness on to the ground of pure reason, the other requires us to do so on to the ground of pure value response.

According to a hermeneutic sensibility, however, the relationship between thinking and valuation is more subtle. Our value sensibility is the product of various strands of influence – scientific, religious, philosophical, aesthetic, moral – comprising a tradition which has erred, sometimes most egregiously, but which embodies a core of substantive values which does not merely condition our thinking, but which encapsulates the ideals to which we aspire and which are the soil from which critical thinking can grow (Gadamer, 2004, p. 285). These include values such as dignity, respect, compassion, inclusion, etc – as constitutive of the conversation to which we are given over and in which we seek to orient ourselves so that we might contribute (Ricoeur, 2008, p. 30). While these values are stipulated by thinkers in both traditions, they tend to be viewed as somewhat extrinsic – either as obvious framework values or as ecstatic values that cut into the settled categories of thinking from elsewhere.³

On the hermeneutical model, by contrast, these values condition our thinking, but are also the condition of possibility for our critical sensibilities. They constitute the legitimate prejudices that shape our capacity to think and to value and which are more fundamental than the neutral reason to which the Enlightenment project seeks to subject all authority (Gadamer, 2004, p. 279). As Gadamer elsewhere puts it:

The great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future... It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being. (Gadamer, 2008, pp. 8–9)

And he goes on to specify the centrality of this hermeneutical consciousness to critique by insisting that it is our inherited prejudices that allow us to see what is questionable (Gadamer, 2008, p. 13). This is because the very act of understanding is conceived as ‘participating in an event of tradition’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. 291) that addresses us as a ‘thou’ in a living dialogue in which it is our values, ideas and their realisation that is at stake (Gadamer, 2004, p. 352).

His re-appropriation of the notion of prejudice entails the idea that we are not only tied to the valuations and categorisations of the past in terms of our commitments and beliefs but empowered by these in our capacity to question and to critique. In this way, the hermeneutic approach suggests a dynamism in our inheritance that was lacking in the critical pedagogy paradigm. Rather than an inflexible, frozen landscape of interest-driven norms, we inherit a platform of values and ideals that both delimits our social and political space as well as nourishing the very critical sensibilities that become capable of seeing its excesses and its injustices.

According to this view, we do not need to reach outside of our historical embeddedness in order to become critical, since critique is part of the internal dynamic of historical consciousness. In contradistinction to Enlightenment – and bizarrely enough Marxist – sensibilities, our prejudices are not blind dogmas, but the living anchors of our very capacity to understand and to make questionable.

This means that the prejudices inherited from our historical embedding are not a dead hand, but initiate us into the world of value insight and orientation that have emerged as a *consensus gentium* (Gadamer, 2004, p. 279; Kronman, 2007, p. 81; von Hildebrand, 2019, p. 112). This provides an orientation for the thinker, but it also provides her with the kind of sensitivity to the contours of a moral landscape against which the unjust, undignified and corrupt is profiled. In practice, this means that critique works as an immanent dialectic that unfolds within our historical situation.

Let me clarify what this kind of hermeneutical consciousness looks like by means of an example. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is rightly considered one of the finest reflections on the ethical life that has been produced in the Western tradition, at least. The text is not just a classic because it happens to have been much read, but because it contains profound insight into the role of prudential reasoning, value hierarchies and friendship, among other topics, in human flourishing. Readers are nevertheless aware that Aristotle had – by the standards of later periods – a most unfortunate view of women – who he considered lacking in full-blown (male) rationality – and that he endorsed the practice of slavery. But this realisation need not issue in a rejection of his work even when these works are specifically concerned with the ethical and political spheres in which these views really matter. Rather, we might attribute Aristotle's less desirable views to a local myopia, a certain narrowness in his conception of who the citizen is, which is attributable to his historical situatedness. But beyond simply explaining why and how these limitations become part of his text, we might also read the text in a way that extends the reach of the very ethical categories he himself articulates. That is to say, we unfold a potential in his thinking which he himself did not see. The duty to 'wish the other's good for the other's own sake', for example might be extended beyond free men to cross lines of gender and ethnicity in ways unforeseen by Aristotle.

This kind of hermeneutic of charity is important not in relation to Aristotle the man but in relation to his ideas. In reading Aristotle in this way, we are not trying to imply that he may after all have meant that women and slaves were the equal of free men but was prevented from saying so for one reason or other. Nor do we congratulate him for how far he came but lament that he could not come further. We are well aware that the extension of the scope of application of Aristotle's ethical categories may be one with which Aristotle himself would disagree. But this is not the point. Rather, the claim is that Aristotle's ideas contain within them insights about the human condition that goes beyond what he himself was able to see. In other words, his texts are canonical in and of themselves, but this is in large part because they are fertile enough to transcend the embeddedness of their origin. They contain within them possibilities of understanding, which go beyond what was explicitly intended by Aristotle the man and which have informed the contours of our cultural landscape long after his passing (Gadamer, 2004, p. 295).

What Aristotle does, by contrast, is to express insight into a value that allows us to see the partiality of its application *by him*. That is to say, it is because the text opens our eyes to what concern for the other is, that we rebel against the exclusion of women, slaves and foreigners from the range of those to whom this applies. Again, the hermeneutic of charity is not about insinuating that the author may have meant something more (or less) than she has written, but that there is *meaning* in what has been written which concerns something more universal than what was literally inscribed (Gadamer, 2004, p. 296).

Most importantly, this grounds the self-critical impulse that critical pedagogy esteemed but could not justify because it identifies the motivating sources of this critique within our cultural inheritance itself.

The Institutional Realm

The dialectic that occurs between discourse and interpretation shapes our critical sensibilities not only in the reception of texts but also within the institutional space of social reality. Consistent with hermeneutic sensibilities on this point, we note that thinkers as diverse as Bourdieu (1990, pp. 56–57) and Axel Honneth insist that the ethos out of which we think is not only realised in the tradition as a spiritual inheritance, but through the institutions which make this inheritance concrete. Honneth claims that

If subjects only make their will dependent on the idea of the good that is, in principle, capable of universal acceptance, then... subjects lack a sufficiently concrete conception of the goals that could guide their actions. After all, this formal rule remains 'empty' and in a certain sense circular, as long as it is not substantiated with references to the social institutions and roles in which a thinking subject finds itself at any moment. (2012, p. 29)

And again that 'it is only by taking part in institutionalised practices of individual self-restriction that we can experience our own will as being free' (Honneth, 2012, p. viii). More concretely this means that the good life is not the end product of a process of reflection based on either formal principles or radical critique, but is rather realised and experienced in the institutions and tradition into which we are born. In other words, our thinking does indeed operate within the pre-giveness of normative frameworks (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 172), but while these constrain, they are, at the same time, an opening to think. They attest to the way previous generations have attempted to make the good manifest in practice and invites us to engage dialogically in this conversation (Ricoeur, 2008a, p. 30), not because what is instituted is perfect or due respect because it is instituted but precisely because it is the imperfect realisation of what brings us into the space of common meaning and value (Taylor, 1989; 2014, p. 322f).

This point is again best illustrated by an example. The school is an institution with a long and complex history, which has existed with a great degree of variety and whose influence on individual children and society in general has, at times, been mixed (Gray, 2015). In spite of this, the basic institutional features of the school can be seen to give material expression to the very values that are usually invoked when the practice of the school is critiqued. For example, Arendt points to the existence of curricula as an expression of a love of the world that is to be both communicated and transferred to the student in a way that subtly navigates the vulnerability of the old to the new and vice versa (2006, p. 188). And in the realisation of this aim, the very physical construction of the school (Bengtsson, 2011) and the anatomy of the classroom (Masschelein and Simons, 2013, pp. 38–39) testify to the values of truth, of productive imitation, of the exposure of the given to the destabilising impulse of the new and of the precious gift of the world as an object of inquiry. And it is the complex, material constellation of these values as the school that provides the context in which education can both appear as value and motivate reflection over its sense and meaning.⁴

That the school is a monument to these values by no means insulates the institution from critique. To the contrary, it is the very values instituted by the school that can be and are the driving force of the critical sensibilities that lament the dissolution of much of modern school in an age of measurement and New Public Management (Biesta, 2007, 2011; Ellerton, 2017, p. 7; Giroux, 2012). It is precisely because we have instituted the values of equality and inclusion, of love of the world and love of the child (Arendt, 2006) *in the form of the school* that we are righteously outraged by constellations in the system that betrays these values.

This has important implications for the way we conceive of the relationship between critical thinking, rational agency and value. Thinking is always anchored in value contexts, but our contact with these values is first lived, before it is espoused. The formal principles to which both Enlightenment thinkers and critical pedagogues give their assent are, in this sense, abstracted from the forms of concrete practice in a way that allows a dialectical dynamic in which the one is evaluated against the other. This means that the values embodied in cultural institutions (law courts, universities, museums, churches, schools) are distilled and abstracted such that they can be used to critique the failure of current practice to live up to the values extolled. They are the values for which the tradition has stood, but which it has

never fully realised and it is precisely this nagging sense of insufficiency that undergirds our moral restlessness and our critical attunement. Another way of putting this is to say that there is dialectic between practice and theory in which each is illumined, or found wanting, in the light of the other. Without institutions embodying robust core values, there is no possibility of critique, because there is nothing to think about. To be more precise, it is not only that we happen to think critically as subjects in a social sphere of institutions but that we think critically in terms of the values that these open up for us.

This perspective provides, at the same time, a route to a rapprochement with Enlightenment models of critical thinking, precisely because one of the values endorsed in the tradition is the commitment to critical reflection and the consequent belief in the capacity of human agency to know the world through wonder, doubt and dialogue. These are not values that require radical disembedding and purification, but characteristics of the historical lifeworld's commitment to the life of discovery which, while rooted in the past, shrivels and dies if it does not re-institute its past adaptively and creatively (Arendt, 2006; Husserl, 1970; Ricoeur, 2008b). Thus, just as the instituted is *sine qua non*, the process of value formalisation as the explicit framework of critical thinking provides a necessary antidote to tradition fetishism.

This is to be understood in a substantive way in the sense that the lived experience of the communal and the realisation of value in our cultural institutions are what motivate thinking and reflection about the values of citizenship, equality and inclusion. They motivate this by realising these fundamental aspirations, but inasmuch as this realisation is always imperfect, partial and deficient, they also demand that we take responsibility for how these ideals are to be cultivated and conserved. Thus, our cultural institutions stretch us between past and future (Arendt, 2006) in a logic of loyalty that loses its way if it reneges on the past and atrophies if it fails to re-invent itself towards the future.⁵ This, indeed, is the inner meaning of Arendt's conservatism as a sensibility that acknowledges the past as bringing us into the space of genuine thinking in a way that puts itself in play in this very continuity.

CONCLUSION

It is, I hope, clear that this suggestion meets all four of the coherence criteria in terms of which the critical pedagogy model struggled. By locating the sources of our critical sensibilities in historical consciousness itself, the hermeneutic model (a) offers a subtle integration of the critical and self-critical in a way that avoids the arbitrariness of simply applying a critical model from the outside. Moreover, this model (b) suggests the unfolding of a view of the human agent within the axiological and institutional landscape of historical consciousness, which are both the impetus for this unfolding and the justification for critical destabilisation of that landscape. In turn, (c) this means that institutional change is demanded (and made possible) from within the contexts of the values that ground the institutions themselves. And finally, (d) procedural values are justified as nested within a complex commitment to rational agency, which itself is subordinated to the task of materialising a world that is responsive to the dignity of the human being.

This argument is not meant as a prescription for how we should relate to our spiritual past, but a claim that our past is constituted by fundamental ideas and values which motivate, sustain and justify thought and action and out of which critical thinking sensibilities must grow. These fundamental ideas and their institutional realisation both give us over to the space of critical reflection as well as constituting the landscape within which critical thinking unfolds. As such, the hermeneutic model is not only a preferred option but the only one that is coherent by integrating the historical, rational and evaluative moments that constitute the landscape of critical thinking.

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ENDNOTES

¹ It is worth noting that critical pedagogy is not simply synonymous with a model for critical thinking. The agenda of critical pedagogy, which is traceable to the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (Freire, 2000) is much wider and more

comprehensive. Nevertheless, several writers within this tradition have explicitly addressed the meaning of critical pedagogy for critical thinking. It is their work that is addressed in what follows.

- ² As I mentioned in the introduction, there is a lot of nuance in the various Enlightenment positions and I repeat here that these are, in themselves, of great value. It is certainly not my intention to throw out the baby of logical analysis and argumentative rigour with the bathwater of the Enlightenment ideal of pure, unsullied rational agency. My position commits me only to accepting the initial cogency of claims that situate thinking in living subjective and intersubjective contexts. As I will suggest later, our historical facticity can, in fact, be engaged and acknowledged without destroying the possibility of a practice of critical thinking that incorporates central aspects of the Enlightenment tradition.
- ³ This is, again, the Levinasian moment, in which response is always event and *ekststasis* that lifts us out of the landscape of the given.
- ⁴ Recent work within the field of evolutionary biology has taken up the importance of the institutionalisation of knowledge transfer suggesting that the school, or something like it, is an emergent phenomenon within social space (Csibra and Gergely, 2009; Sterelny, 2014). This would support the idea that what is instituted first expresses values in material form, which over time can motivate a process of abstraction, reflection and critique in which what is materialised is subjected to a kind of immanent self-examination.
- ⁵ It is precisely such a spirit that makes the tradition a living and dynamic one and thereby avoids the kind of fetishisation of tradition that certain crypto-Enlightenment models, against their own intentions, often initiate (Mattei and Broeks, 2016; Olsen, 2016); see also von Hildebrand (2019, p. 123).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest in the production, research or authorship of this manuscript.

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