

What “Critical” Means in “Critical Thinking”

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The term, “critical thinking”, has gained currency both within the Academy’s walls and outside them. Colleges offer courses in critical thinking. “Ordinary educated laypersons” talk about the importance of critical thinking as a key result of having undertaken college study.

Listening to the discourse to which this term is central, one might get the idea that what is meant by “critical thinking” is, somehow, more acute thinking, or more acute reading or — well, the same kinds of skills one had *before* a course in critical thinking, rendered superior, a sort of hyper-whatever. Another common use of the term is popular with lit-crit types and at MLA get-togethers: Critique is a matter of — often psychologically informed — understanding of an author’s (or artist’s) meaning, better than that person’s own understanding.

However appropriate such uses may be to an era in which the cybernetic is paramount, and however well it may accord with standard dictionary definitions, this notion misses the precise, technical meaning of “critique”.

Critique is something very recent. It is first adumbrated as such at the culmination of the Enlightenment in Kant’s inaugural dissertation. It is elaborated by Kant and others over the ensuing quarter-century. Its clearest formulation (to which I shall have recourse later) is in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.

It was clear to the intellectual community of the time that this was a significant and novel development in thinking. Certainly, there had been *similar* developments in past times. The human mind is an inquiring one, and some questions do seem perennial. But neither the Greeks nor the Scholastics, nor the thinkers of South and East Asia developed what is meant by *critical* and *critique*. Indeed, critique, as a way of thinking, appears to have arisen when it did, at least in part as the resolution of an hiatus between Continental rationalism and Anglo-Scots-Irish empiricism; Kant, in a number of places, says he is completing Leibniz and transcending Descartes; in other places he acknowledges the influence of Hume.

The debate surrounding the development of critique and the critical philosophy was, to put it mildly, furious. Neither is it clear that the critical philosophy was altogether successful. By the end of Kant’s lifetime, the great trio of German Idealism — Fichte, Schelling and Hegel — are mounting the stage. Kant at first embraces the development Fichte proposes, then rejects it.

German Idealism flourishes, expanding in various ways to France and England and eventually Italy and the rest of Europe. The vogue for European thinking being what it has been, the “official” school-philosophies of just about everywhere have been some variant on the Idealist screed.

Critical philosophy certainly did not disappear. Rather, it persists throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries as a species of “minority opinion”. For example, the seminal American philosopher, C. S. Peirce, is clearly committed to the critical philosophy. Peirce clearly thought that the more mainstream version of Pragmatism (that of James), and the even more conventional Idealism of Josiah Royce, erred; he marked his frustration with James, by renaming the Peircean original as Pragmaticism (a name he hoped so utterly dysphonic that it would not be adopted by others). The revival of Peirce studies over the last couple decades — more in Europe, than in the United States — has been one signal of a return to critique.

Critical philosophy shares the same Rationalist heritage as the Idealist philosophy (as Enlightenment is founded in the same cultural matrix as Romanticism). There are two essential points of divergence:

Idealism asserts that what is properly *known* is only that which proceeds directly from the Understanding; it also asserts — more and more explicitly as it develops, until it becomes quite unambiguous at the beginning of the 20th century — that only that which is properly *known* is really real. That which is merely *perceived* in sensible intuition, a putative external, independent reality, is not really real. That is, Idealism asserts that the Ideal is, both epistemologically and metaphysically, the *only* reality.

Critical philosophy is less positive about the Ideal. What is known is clearly that which proceeds from the Understanding (that is a tautology). The existence of an external Reality is not rejected; the critical philosophy has been influenced by the Empiricism of the British Isles. But Kant makes a technical distinction between what is *gegenständlich* and what is *objektiv*. One — that which is available to the Understanding in appearance through sensible intuition (it is *phenomenal*) — is dubitable. On the other hand, that appearance has something “under it” which stands up before us, which is *not* available to the Understanding, and which is not properly known, except derivatively. This is to say, What-is-known is Ideal; however, what-is is Real and has independent existence. The critical philosophy, unlike Idealism, insists on metaphysical Realism,

however Idealist its epistemology.

Critical thinking is the way in which the hiatus between the Understanding and an external reality can be resolved. Perhaps the clearest statement of how the critique occurs is the one Kant gives in section 74 of the *Critique of Judgment*:

We deal with a concept dogmatically... if we consider it as contained under another concept of the object which constitutes a principle of reason and determine it in conformity with this. But we deal with it merely critically if we consider it only in reference to our cognitive faculties and consequently to the subjective conditions of thinking it, without undertaking to decide anything about its object.

There *are* difficulties. Kant talks only of *concepts*. The Understanding still has only concepts with which to deal, after all. I think these difficulties yield fairly readily to not-overly-torturous explanation.

What is more interesting is the relationship between dogmatism and criticism. In dogmatic thinking, that which is immediately-and-indeterminantly-before in consciousness is subsumed under, and mediated by, and determined by, a more general concept. Call such a concept a "theory" and this becomes a good deal clearer, without, I think, doing violence to what Kant has in mind.

If what is present immediately and indeterminantly before us is considered *as it is in that presentation*, it appears Kant believes considering the ways in which it is possible to think that appearance will throw up its own explanatory theory. In critique, the immediate and indeterminant is allowed to mediate and determine itself in its being-present, in a certain sense. [This is where the difficulties get really sticky, and debate on how successful the Kantian view is, is usually a hot business.]

Two very different kinds of thinking are at play in dogmatic and critical approaches. Dogmatic thinking is essentially a matter of evaluative judgment. In natural philosophy, the evaluation is, as described, a subsumption of the particular case under the general explanation. In moral philosophy, the particular case is subsumed under a particular value in the value-totality; one obvious example of this is a means-ends relation.

Critical thinking suspends the general explanatory or value schemes, and the whole

process of merely evaluative judgment, to see what is actually found in the experience of what is present before one. Critical reasoning begins in the question, how is this-before-me (in consciousness? in fact?) possible?

One certainly would not want to give up dogmatism. It is our normal way of thinking — and indeed, *not* thinking. We normally want know what has to be done: Bopping down Chambers to West Street and crossing, one does not want to have to think about how to avoid becoming road-pizza; the subsumption of the particular case, corner-with-traffic-light under the general explanatory schema, cross-on-the-green-&c., makes life simple. Most of the time, this works just splendidly.

Sometimes things change. The explanatory scheme doesn't fit the circumstances well. Critical suspension of normal explanatory or evaluative schemata is in order. Fail to do so, and be certain that mistakes will occur. The more prevalent change is at a given time, the more demand for critique — and the greater likelihood that, failing the critical moment, thinking itself will fail.

Two observations close this comment: First, teaching is, as it is usually done, dogmatic. The focus is on skill-sets, which are properly understood as ways of responding to arising occurrences. As one goes along through the educational process, the explanatory or evaluative schemata for these skills are trotted out, more or less as set in stone. This is the normal level of understanding; making it more acute clearly has nothing to do with critique.

Second, things seem to be changing in a larger-than-usual way. There is a serious minority view that the very paradigmatic foundation, the usually-unquestioned assumption as to what is really real (unquestioned, because after all, most folks *know* what is really real — and even the Academy is generally uncomfortable with a question like *τι το ον*), is going through an epochal shift not unlike that which separated the Mediæval way of thinking from that of the Modern world. The old dogmata won't work in that case, critique becomes a survival skill.

Of course, whether that skill can be *taught*, is something else altogether.

[1577 words]

