

Critical Thinking and Philosophy

PHILIP A. PECORINO *Queensborough Community College, CUNY*

The question I wish to raise is: Just what is the relationship of critical thinking to philosophy? On the one hand, it can readily be acknowledged that critical thinking is what philosophers do, and that teaching critical thinking can be construed, at least in part, to be teaching philosophy. On the other hand, does teaching critical thinking alone suffice to introduce students to philosophy? Is critical thinking a necessary or a sufficient condition for philosophy?

What has led me to raise this issue is a condition that has arisen in the last few years at many two-year colleges and universities across the United States. Philosophers have been successful in introducing critical thinking or informal logic courses into the curriculum and in having them considered as philosophy courses. Then, in many instances, the credits taken in such courses have been applied toward the satisfaction of degree requirements in the liberal arts, the humanities, and (in the situation that concerns me most) in philosophy. At many two-year colleges, and to a lesser extent at some four-year colleges, it is now possible to take a course in critical thinking, practical reasoning or informal logic and not only have it count as a philosophy course but have it satisfy the philosophy requirement or part of the liberal arts requirement. The question I put before my colleagues is: what should be the content of such courses if they are to perform the function within the curriculum that requirements in philosophy were meant to serve? What justifies having a course in critical thinking as an introduction to philosophy? Should a course which deals primarily with form, processes, and thinking skills, be considered capable of accomplishing

what the standard introduction to philosophy courses could do for the students? Can courses which concentrate on form be equated with courses which are heavy with substance?

In order to look at the problem in more concrete terms the question is recast as follows: how can a student claim to have taken a course in philosophy or to have completed the philosophy requirement if he or she has taken a course on critical thinking but has not read or heard a single work of or about any of the great philosophers and has never even learned of the major branches of philosophy, let alone studied any work, major or minor, in those areas? What content should such courses have in order to satisfy minimally the intention of educators in having philosophy in the liberal arts and science core of any degree program?

Before going on, some disclaimers are in order, to avoid misconceptions. First, I am not opposed to the development of critical thinking or informal logic courses. I believe that they are a valuable addition to the curriculum and would like to see the demonstration of a proficiency in these areas as a requirement for any undergraduate degree. As to how best to insure the development of these skills, that is another matter. I have argued for the inclusion of critical thinking courses in various curricula. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere, that along with courses in applied ethics, courses in critical thinking are perhaps the most appropriate way to involve students with the philosophic tradition.¹ These two areas appear, to me at least, to capture more of the Socratic heritage than most other approaches to teaching philosophy to undergraduates. I have

also played some small role in promoting the development of such courses.² Second, I do not argue that such courses should be considered philosophy. I believe that philosophers are very well suited to teach such courses, that informal logic and reasoning are subjects more appropriate for philosophical inquiry and reflection than any other method of analysis or study, and that, in good measure, philosophers more typically display the characteristics of critical thought in a self-conscious way, and in a more thoroughgoing fashion, than thinkers in any other field. Third, I most especially do not want to oppose a trend that has been the saving grace for the employment of many philosophers and for the survival of many philosophy programs. Indeed, I am well aware that in some institutions of higher learning courses on critical thinking are fast becoming the "bread and butter" courses for the teaching staff. I can easily understand how this is happening. My concern is with what it portends for philosophy instruction if the trend continues unabated without philosophical reflection about it.

In many institutions the success of the courses in critical thinking in both an academic and a political sense can be attributed to the steady decline in the level of proficiency in the basic communication skills demonstrated by students seeking entry to post secondary education. In fact the level of the underlying intellectual skills prerequisite to and identified with those communication skills is deplorably below what one would expect of such students. The development of those skills has become an undeniable part of the agenda, overt or covert, of almost every institution of higher learning in the U.S. and Canada. Courses in critical thinking are in fact a reflection of that agenda. However, have these courses in the process allowed, or even encouraged, the co-option or subversion of philosophy by academic administrators, who have little or no appreciation for the philosophic tradition,

and who would reduce philosophy instruction to whatever serves the present social agenda of the institution? My suspicion is that this has happened.³ In some institutions the development of critical thinking courses is welcomed as a way to satisfy the philosophy requirement, while mostly performing the remedial function the college acknowledges that it must serve.

To see what is happening one might look at current textbooks. In reviewing critical thinking textbooks and course syllabi which have been produced over the last decade, I am struck by the almost total absence of any reference to the classical tradition in philosophy. In most textbooks there is almost no mention or use made of passages by well know philosophers, either as illustrations or in exercises. What is implied if philosophers are content to see students take such a course as their only philosophy course or have it serve as their introduction to the discipline? In most two-year colleges where philosophy is offered, and in many four-year colleges, students will take but one philosophy course, if they take any, and the most popular courses are in critical thinking or applied ethics, which characteristically are offered without any prerequisites in philosophy. If philosophers remain content with the enrollment figures, does this mean that they are content as well with the identification of philosophy with a set of intellectual skills: an identification made through the textbooks and curricula for such courses?

Is philosophy merely or mainly a methodology or does it have subject matter that is unique to it as a field of study? And who is to answer these questions? The significant point is that while they have been the subject for philosophical dialogue and reflection for millenia, they have hitherto been questions which philosophers themselves raised and debated. Now, however, it appears that the forces active within the academic marketplace are playing a role

not only in addressing these questions but in answering them as well. Factors other than philosophical consideration and reasoned discourse are operating to define what is to be considered philosophy, how it is to be valued and what purposes it is to serve. In very practical terms when non-philosophers determine the form in which philosophy is to be offered, and when that determination is based on enrollment figures or on the institution's need to remedy students' academic deficiencies, with no demur by philosophers, then the conception of philosophy is being shaped by non-philosophical activities and concerns.

Instructors in disciplines other than philosophy look to philosophers to improve students' basic reasoning skills so those students enter their classes better prepared to master their subjects. Philosophers at many institutions have been all too happy to oblige. However, something may have been lost in this accommodation. Philosophy was probably introduced into the curriculum as a "humanities" subject—as a way of transmitting something of the cultural heritage an educated person ought to possess—and not simply because it would be nice or useful for them to have nor because it gives employment to philosophers. It is owed to them by the previous generation, an obligation that was assumed by educational institutions. Access to the philosophical heritage is a student's right and it is part of the duty of colleges and universities to see that access realized. It is part of the student's cultural legacy towards which higher education provides the means for acquisition. Unfortunately, a good part of this perspective is often lost when administrators and instructors with too much concern for the economic aspects of enrollment patterns attempt to satisfy students' immediate needs, paying too little attention to past heritage and the long term needs of the students and their civilization. It isn't only or principally philosophy which has been so in-

fluenced by such factors. Far too many college courses in English literature have been reduced to little more than composition classes. Such courses are seen as serving the development of reading and writing skills while the value of the literary heritage is diminished. Just as the study of English literature is being reduced to proficiency in grammar and syntax, is the study of philosophy to be reduced to proficiency in the identification of fallacies and the evaluation of arguments? Are we to have an enrollment-driven definition of the basic humanities disciplines?

To return to the question posed at the beginning of these remarks: is critical thinking philosophy? Is philosophy to be equated with critical thinking to the point that a single course in critical thinking may be construed as having properly introduced a student to philosophy? I maintain that, while courses in critical thinking are philosophy they should not be used as substitutes for introductory philosophy courses. Critical thinking courses are to be considered as philosophy courses because they introduce students to, and aim to develop in them, the intellectual processes typically characteristic of philosophical discourse and reflection. They take as subject matter, if only in passing, questions of an epistemological nature which are well within the province of philosophy. Still, most critical thinking courses make no effort to introduce the scope of the philosophical tradition or the various branches or areas of philosophy, or the most significant traditions within the philosophic heritage. So they ought not be considered appropriate vehicles for introducing students to philosophy. Consequently, where there is a requirement in philosophy that was founded upon a desire to introduce students to the philosophical traditions and heritage, courses in critical thinking ought not be used to satisfy that requirement, or else they should be modified to include material which is now absent from them.

Three additional points are worth mentioning at this point. The first is that the traditional introduction to philosophy courses may in the past have placed too much emphasis on the substance of the tradition, on the content of philosophical discourse, and paid too little attention to the processes, skills and methods which produced those ideas. This may be a sin for which the discipline is now paying.

The second point is that the path for this equation of informal logic and critical thinking with the whole of philosophy was often paved by those situations in which courses in symbolic logic were permitted to satisfy philosophy requirements in their entirety.⁴ Rather than using that precedent to justify the present substitution of critical thinking instruction for philosophy, it is time to challenge the attempt to restrict the rationale for a philosophy requirement in the undergraduate curriculum to just the development of basic reasoning skills. The development of such skills is worthwhile, but the philosophical tradition has much more to offer. It ought to introduce students to those ideas which have marked the tradition as unique for millenia: truth, knowledge, and validation, yes: but also beauty, goodness, the nature of being, the existence and nature of a god, the meaning of a human life, the nature and value of art, religion and science, and even the nature and value of philosophy.

The third and final point is that learning critical thinking is not something which people had heretofore done by taking a specific course. In fact it would probably not be inaccurate to claim that those teaching such courses today did not themselves ever take one. Philosophers have learned to be critical thinkers in good measure through the study of the works of philosophers and through discourse with philosophers. It is in the study of the philosophical heritage that one sees evidence of critical thinking, indeed some of the finest examples of critical thinking the

human species has produced. The study of that tradition through the works themselves has served well to instruct others to become critical thinkers. Teaching the works of that tradition, with attention to the development of the intellectual skills, methods, and stratagem which produced them, would not be such a bad way to teach critical thinking today and it might serve students in more ways than most critical thinking courses do at present.

So, critical thinking and informal logic courses? Yes, by all means and for all students, because all educated people, and certainly all those who are awarded degrees in higher education, ought to evidence critical thinking skills. However, such courses ought not be used to satisfy a philosophy or a humanities requirement, for that would be to reduce philosophy to but a small part of what it has been, is and should continue to be.

Notes

- ¹ I presented papers at the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 1979, "Ethics and Career Education," and in 1981, "Informal Logic and the Two-Year Curriculum," for the Committee on Teaching Philosophy at Two-Year Colleges.
- ² I organized and presented workshops on teaching critical thinking for the Community College Humanities Association, funded in part by the Matchette Foundation, which were offered in various locations across the U.S. in 1983 and 1985. I presented workshops at the Conference on Critical Thinking in Newport News, VA. 1985 & 1986. I have served as a consultant to several colleges in the U.S. who were interested in developing a course or program in critical thinking.
- ³ At one technical college in South

Carolina the academic dean has announced his intention to make critical thinking a required course for all students starting in the Fall of 1987. He intends to use the one and only three-credit humanities requirement in the core program to do so. This one act will effectively destroy even the possibility of a philosophy program, not to mention the equally disastrous results for the literature, history, art and music programs.

There are other colleges, particularly two-year colleges, where the only courses being taught by the philosophy staff are critical thinking courses.

- ⁴ Colleges that permit logic courses to satisfy a philosophy requirement include: Long Island University, C.W. Post; City University of New York, Queensborough.

Dr. Philip A. Pecorino, Department of Social Sciences, Queensborough Community College of CUNY, Bayside, NY 11364. □