

by Brian G. Daigle

When someone tries to sell you something that isn't worth buying, they will drown you in a world of slogans and bumper-sticker logic. They will flood your emotions and thoughts with familiar and ambiguous terms, even popular and familiar images. They will amuse you. They will numb your mind and ignite your heart, tapping into fears and emotional sentiments until you will do almost any illogical thing they tell you to do. You will become so accustomed to hearing certain words and quickly attaching emotional responses to those words, you will begin to think that merely hearing the word is a good thing. This is how modern education works.

One such phrase modern educators use to attract their fluttering clients to their blue light—which looks a lot like a blue ribbon—is the phrase *critical thinking*. “We want to make critical thinkers,” they say. “We want our students to go into college and the world as critical thinkers.” But this is as far it goes. Begin asking what a *critical thinker* is and so begins the barrage of ambiguity, the myriad of modern slogans that have become a circus in themselves.

But what is a critical thinker? What *is* critical thinking? And what is the role of critical thinking in a Christian view of education? For now, let's start with a practice problem. What would you do with the underlined portion of the following sentence?

“A good education should do more than provide you with the means to making a living; it should teach you how to think critically.”

- A. No Change
- B. living it should
- C. living, it should
- D. living and it should

The above question was from an English section of a retired ACT test. The answer is *A* (no change). But punctuation is not my point. Look at the idea in the sentence, an idea which wizzes into the test-takers head with, ironically, little to no critical thought on the part of the student.

A Christian view of education would affirm the first half: “A good education should do more than provide you with the means to making a living.” Yes and amen. But what about the next part? Should a good education teach you how to think critically? This all rides on how we define a *good* education, and because I have done that extensively in other Gadfly articles, I won't rehash that here. It also depends on how we define *critical thinking*. Let's consider what critical thinking is. What do modern educators mean by critical thinking?

“Critical Thinking as Defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, 1987:

A statement by Michael Scriven & Richard Paul, presented at the 8th Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Education Reform, Summer 1987. Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual

values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.”¹

“Critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically.”²

“Critical thinking is that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem - in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them... Critical thinking is, in short, self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism.”³

“Our focus is helping students master basic skills while promoting the critical thinking and higher-level problem solving that will be the building blocks for life-long school success... The elementary curriculum is developmentally appropriate and involves hands-on activities. Teachers incorporate multiple teaching strategies and technologies to appeal to every learning style. Through careful planning and research, teachers are able to provide a strong foundation that fosters critical thinking skills.”⁴

“As a K-8 school, we offer a rare commitment to a child’s long-term growth and development, understanding that acquiring knowledge in the early grades sets the stage for analysis and critical thinking, required to succeed in high school, college, and life.”⁵

“This year's [standardized test] scores may be lower than in previous years because of changes in test composition. The new tests measured more complex, real-world skills such as critical-thinking, writing, and problem solving.”⁶

“All students, Pre-K through 12, Educators, and staff will learn, use, and take advantage of instructional technologies as powerful and concrete instruments for utilization in teaching critical thinking and problem solving skills in preparation for post-secondary education or to enter into the workforce.”⁷

By these statements, *critical thinking* is precisely one of the worst forms of thinking—skills based, self-centered, technology-driven, empathetic—if it is thinking at all. A quick search in the Common Core standards reveals at least one point in its favor: it does not have the phrase *critical thinking* anywhere in the standards. Excellent! It has 99 other problems, but this ain’t one. However, while it may have kicked out *critical thinking*, it

¹ Taken from Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools*, Foundation for Critical Thinking Press, 2008

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.parkviewbaptist.com/elementary/>

⁵ <http://www.bridgeacademybr.org/way/>

⁶ http://ebrschools.enschool.org/apps/news/show_news.jsp?REC_ID=378537&id=3

⁷ <http://www.zacharyschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2015-2020-Strategic-Plan-ZCSB.pdf>

did the same with *thinking* altogether. It mentions the word *thinking* a measly thirteen times in the Math standards (always as “Algebraic Thinking”), and an embarrassing two times—yes, 2—in the English Language Arts standards. It appears *thinking* isn’t a common or core standard either. Still, there are at least five reasons why the phrase *critical thinking* should be exiled from every serious educator’s vocabulary:

First, *critical thinking* is a thoughtless term. Think, truly think, for a moment on the denotative meaning of the words in the term *critical thinking*. The word *critical* is itself an ambiguous term, a term with more than one meaning. In one sense, *critical* means dire or serious, like when a man is rolled into triage in *critical condition*. In another sense, *critical* could mean *critique*—assess, exam, or judge. The term *critical thinking* means the latter. But even if it meant the former, my present critique would still hold. What about *thinking*? By definition, to *think* is to do something necessarily critical. Thinking involves observing, imagining, appraising, rearranging, synthesizing, affirming, denying, arguing, discerning, and concluding. This is precisely what *criticizing* means. It means to observe, imagine, appraise, rearrange, synthesize, affirm, deny, argue, and conclude. So, it is clear. This term *critical thinking* is poorly redundant. And those who use it with reckless abandon aren’t being thoughtful enough. That is, major proponents of *critical thinking* out to be the least trusted of all thinkers. But this is only the beginning of the problems.

Second, critical thinking isn’t necessarily *thinking*. Another thing we can say of thinking is that it’s the pursuit of sound conclusions, conclusions which logically follow from true premises (deductive reasoning), or at least follows from strong evidence (inductive reasoning). To *think* is to therefore pursue the truth. The end of critical thinking, as seen today, does not have the same aim. The goal today is to merely point out something different than what’s there, to see there is merely *another* way. But to see another way than what is presented before you isn’t necessarily thinking; it is an observation of the other, the least apparent, but it is not the fullness of thought, for how might one determine if that other way is better than the one being critiqued? To answer such a question requires epistemology (logic and rhetoric), ethics, and metaphysics. In short, it requires philosophy, and that was kicked out of popular education decades ago. Hence, the swelling presence of a term like *critical thinking*.

Third, critical thinking isn’t necessarily *critical*. To be truly critical is to compare by way of quality, and difference in quality necessitates an ethical structure. As said at the end of the first section above, to think well requires the three branches of philosophy (especially ethics), and so does criticizing well. Critical thinking, as modern educators use it, is really just *cynical* thinking. Again, it is the recognition of the other, the least apparent, and it then, because our modern sentiments concerning personal oppression and relativism, becomes the *affirmation* of that other, merely because it is different, *avant garde*, bohemian, unorthodox, or apparently authentic. In a world where a perverted form of tolerance has become one of the greatest social goods, truly criticizing is a crime against liberty, or at least against a form of perverted liberty. This is why *critical thinking today is nothing more than thinking differently than our parents did*. It is cynical rebellion at the heart, a call to dishonor one’s father and mother, even one’s theological, philosophical, and historical fathers and mothers, which is why *self* is at the center of the definitions given by The Foundation for Critical Thinking.

Fourth, critical thinking isn’t necessarily logical. This relates to the second point above. Critical thinking has become the ability to open one’s mind to what’s not there, to be different and to do so only for the sake of being different. The closest modern educators come to convincing me that I too should be teaching our students to become critical thinkers is when they connect it to logic, which is rare, if ever. They will say things like “If our students become critical thinkers, they will be better learners; they will be better thinkers.” Besides this being wildly circular, and therefore illogical, becoming a critical thinker is not the same as becoming a logical thinker.

Logic is defined as the art and science of reasoning well. Reasoning is defined as the ability to draw proper conclusions from other information. But it's simple to see the problem with modern thinking here if we probe one simple area in all schools: how many of the schools which espouse critical thinking also teach a course of formal and informal logic? To go one step further, how many of our teachers and principals who are *critical thinking* gurus are at an intermediate level in formal and informal logic? How can a man become a thinker without logic? How can a man become truly critical without proper reasoning? What does it say about the curriculum for "critical thinker" schools if they work toward and praise critical thinking and yet never give students the proper tools of logic, the very foundation of *thinking* whatsoever.

Fifth, critical thinking doesn't necessarily lead to wisdom. Mere critics, by definition, aren't philosophers. And they likely aren't poets or priests. In this sense, they don't seek to have a brotherly love of wisdom. They seek to nay-say. "We want our students to become critical thinkers, because we want them to be innovators, we want them to solve today's technological, political, and economic problems." But how do we define what a *problem* is? One man's problem may be another man's solution, and vice versa, right? Therefore, as already stated, critical thinkers today are those who break with tradition, they break with the *status quo*, the old one, and especially one's biases. Critical thinkers are seen as progressives, as innovators. But why? Chesterton reminds us that progress, to be progress, must have a goal in mind, and it must have important—even theological—reasons for aiming at that goal. Breaking with tradition for the sake of not doing what has already been done isn't *good* in and of itself. It is, quite honestly, a logical fallacy; it is chronological snobbery.

At its core, critical thinking is a rebirth of *new skepticism*. New skepticism during the Enlightenment said "question everything." An affirmation of critical thinking—lacking a course on categorical logic, Christian theology, and a proper ethics—creates radical revolutionaries and rogue informationalists. Critical thinking devoid of truth, goodness, beauty, and wisdom makes cynics and cyborgs. G.K. Chesterton once said the purpose of an open mind is so that it can close on truth. We can adapt this idea to critical thinking. The purpose of criticizing and thinking is to know and love the truth. What children most need in education today are not tools for honing their critical faculties, but tools for sharpening their wit and wisdom. The world does not need self-centered cynics and cyborgs. The world needs virtuous and intelligent men and women.