Critical Thinking as an Intellectual Right

Do children have the right to education for critical thinking? Do we as educators have a corresponding obligation to help students become capable, independent, autonomous thinkers? Why?

This chapter is adapted from Siegel (in press), in which I argue that the critical thinker is best thought of as one who is appropriately moved by reasons. In this view, critical thinking involves a variety of reasoning and other cognitive skills; knowledge of various sorts; a set tendencies or dispositions to exercise those skills and utilize that knowledge; the valuing of reasons and an appreciation of their epistemological force; and a certain sort of character. I am grateful to David Moshman and Carol Crowley for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Philosophers and educational theorists have long held that a central aim of education is the fostering of rationality, or critical thought. According to this view, a well-educated person is one who is able to think well – to evaluate claims and arguments put forward by others, to reasonably formulate his or her own beliefs, and to act and be disposed to act in accordance with the dictates of reason. At present, there is a significant amount of work, both theoretical and practical, being done on behalf of critical thinking. Curricula are being formulated, programs developed, and tests constructed, all aimed at the educational enhancement of critical thinking. At the same time, theorists are attempting to refine the concept of critical thinking, to define its proper role in education, and to justify it as an educational ideal.

One way to justify critical thinking as an educational ideal is to conceive of it as an intellectual right. In this conception, critical thinking is a legitimate and, indeed, central eduational ideal, because children have the right – the intellectual right – to an education aimed at the fostering or enhancing of critical thinking. That is, children have the right to the opportunity to become, insofar as they are able, critical thinkers.

Note that the right in question involves the opportunity to become a critical thinker, rather than a right to *be* a critical thinker. We cannot say that children have the right to be or become critical thinkers, any more than persons can have the right to be champion swimmers, gifted painters, or brilliant mathematicians. Native ability and personal effort play important roles in a person's actually becoming any of these things. What children may be said to have a right to is an opportunity to become critical thinkers, insofar as they are able. They have, therefore, not the right to be or become critical thinkers, but rather the right to an education that aims at fostering critical thinking. In what follows, "the right to be or become a critical thinker" should be taken as shorthand for "the right to an education that aims at fostering or enhancing critical thinking."

Can education for critical thinking appropriately be conceived of as an intellectual right? In what follows, I will argue that it can. I will argue, that is, that there are good reasons for believing that children have the right to an education that fosters critical thinking, and that educators have a corresponding obligation to help students become critical thinkers.

The Right to Be a Critical Thinker

Why should we think that the child has a right to an education aimed at the development of a certain sort of intellect, the right to an education for critical thinking? In what follows, I offer four reasons for thinking so.

Respect for Students as Persons. The first reason involves our moral obligations to students and is most directly relevant to the portion of critical thinking that has to do with the manner of teaching. That is, it purports to justify the claim that students have the right to be taught in the critical manner, which amounts to the right to be taught so as to become critical thinkers.

The *critical manner* is the manner of teaching that fosters critical thinking. A teacher who utilizes the critical manner seeks to encourage in his or her students the skills, habits, and dispositions necessary for the development of what may be called the critical spirit (compare Siegel, in press). This means, first, that the teacher always recognizes the right of the student to question and demand reasons and consequently recognizes an obligation to provide reasons whenever they are demanded. The critical manner thus demands of a teacher a willingness to subject all beliefs and practices to scrutiny, so as to allow students the genuine opportunity to understand the role reasons play in the justification of thought and action. The critical manner also demands honesty of a teacher: Reasons presented by a teacher must be genuine reasons, and the teacher must honestly appraise the power of those reasons. In addition, the teacher must submit her reasons to the independent evaluation of the student:

> *To teach . . . is at some points at least to submit oneself to the understanding and independent judgment of the pupil, to his demand for reasons, to his sense of what constitutes an adequate explanation. To teach someone that such and such is the case is not merely to try to get him to believe it: deception, for example, is not a*

> *method or a mode of teaching. Teaching involves further that, if we try to get the student to believe that such and such is the case, we try also to get him to believe it for reasons that, within the limits of his capacity to grasp, are* ***our*** *reasons. Teaching, in this way, requires us to reveal our reasons to the student and, by so doing, to submit them to his evaluation and criticism* [*Scheffler, 1960, p. 57*].

Teaching in the critical manner is thus teaching so as to develop in students the skills and attitudes consonant with critical thinking. It is, as Scheffler puts it, an attempt to initiate students "into the rational life, a life in which the critical quest for reasons is a dominant and integrating motive" (Scheffler, 1965, p. 107).

Since being taught in the critical manner amounts to being taught so as to become a critical thinker, an obligation to teach in the critical manner constitutes a recognition of an obligation to teach so as to foster critical thinking. This latter obligation in turn involves a recognition of students' intellectual right to be so taught. And we are in fact obliged to teach in the critical manner. We are so obliged simply because we are morally obliged to treat students (and everyone else) with respect. If we are to conduct our interpersonal affairs morally, we must recognize and honor the fact that we are dealing with other persons, who as such deserve respect – that is, we must show respect for persons. This includes the recognition that other persons are of equal moral worth, which entails that we treat other persons in such a way that their moral worth is respected. This in turn requires that we recognize the needs, desires, and legitimate interests of other persons to be as worthy of consideration as our own. In our dealings with other persons, we must not grant our interests any more weight, simply beause they are *our* interests, than we grant the interests of others. The concept of respect for persons is a Kantian one, for it was Kant who urged that we treat others as ends and not as means (Kant, 1959). This involves recognizing the equal worth of all persons. Such worth is the basis of the respect that all persons are owed (compare Scheffler, 1985).

It is important to note that respect for persons has ramifications far beyond the realm of education. All persons in all situations deserve to be treated with respect, to be regarded as morally significant and worthy entities. This general point includes educational situations, since educational situations involve persons. Here is the relevance to education of the Kantian conception of respect for persons. It is also worth pointing out that the obligation to treat students with respect is independent of more specific educational aims. It is an obligation binding on us generally and so is not part of any particular educational setting or system. Whatever else we are trying to do in our educational institutions, we are obliged to treat students with respect.

What does it mean for a teacher to recognize the equal moral worth of students and to treat them with respect? Among other things, it means recognizing and honoring students' right to question, challenge, and demand reasons and justifications for what is being taught. The teacher who fails to recognize these rights of students fails to treat them with respect, for treating students with respect involves recognizing students' right to exercise independent judgment and powers of evaluation. To deny students this right is to deny them the status of "persons of equal moral worth." To treat students with respect is, moreover, to be honest with them. To deceive, indoctrinate, or otherwise fool students into believing anything, even if it is true, is to fail to treat them with respect. The Kantian principle of respect for persons thus requires that we treat students in a certain manner, one that honors students' demands for reasons and explanations, deals with students honestly, and recognizes the need to confront students' independent judgment.

Thus, the general moral requirement to treat persons with respect applies to the teacher's dealings with her students, simply because those students are persons and so are deserving of respect. It is independent of any specific educational aim. Nevertheless, it offers justification for conceiving of a critical thinking-oriented education as a student's intellectual right in that the way one teaches, according to the critical manner, is in crucial respects isomorphic to the way one teaches so as to respect students. In both, the student's right to question, challenge, and seek reasons, explanations, and justifications must be respected. In both, the teacher must deal honestly with the student. In both, the teacher must submit reasons for taking some claim to be true or some action to be justified to the student's independent judgment and critical scrutiny. In most respects, then, teaching in the critical manner is simply teaching in such a way as to treat students with respect. The obligation to treat students with the respect they are due as persons thus constitutes a reason for adopting the critical manner. In short, this manner of teaching is morally required. It is also part and parcel of the ideal of critical thinking. Thus, morality provides one powerful reason for operating our educational institutions, and conducting our educational affairs more generally, in ways that accord with that ideal. Concomitantly, morality provides a reason for regarding treatment that fosters critical thinking as a child's intellectual right.

Self-Sufficiency and Preparation for Adulthood. The second reason for taking critical thinking

to be an intellectual right has to do with education's generally recognized task of preparing students to become competent with respect to those abilities necessary for the successful management of adult life. We educate, at least in part, in order to prepare children for adulthood, but we cannot say in advance that Johnny will be a pilot, for example, and arrange his education accordingly, for Johnny may well decide to be something else. In general, when we say that education prepares children for adulthood, we do not mean for some specific adult role. Rather, we mean that education strives to enable children to face adulthood successfully.

In particular, we hope that education fosters in children the power and ability to control, insofar as they are able, their own lives. We guide a child's education primarily because the child cannot responsibly guide it herself, but we seek to bring her, as quickly as possible, to the point at which she can "take over the reins" and guide her own education and life generally. That is, we seek to render the child self-sufficient; to empower the student to control her destiny and create her future (compare Scheffler, 1973). To get the student to the point at which she can competently control her own life and responsibly contribute to social life is to bring the student into the adult community, to recognize the student as a fellow member of a community of equals. To thus empower the student is to raise her, in the most appropriate sense of the term, to her fullest potential, for any such potential surely includes the power to shape and choose, and to attain, possible potentials (compare Scheffler, 1985). Indeed, this is a fundamental obligation to children. Without proper education, children would not get to the point at which they could competently control their own destinies; many options would be forever closed to them because of their poor training. To meet our obligation to prepare children well for adulthood, we must strive to educate them in such a way that they are maximally self-sufficient.

How can we organize educational activities so as to empower the student? My suggestion, predictably enough, is that we organize those activities according to the dictates of critical thinking. To help students to become critical thinkers is to "encourage them to ask questions, to look for evidence, to seek and scrutinize alternatives, to be critical of their own ideas as well as those of others" (Scheffler, 1973, p. 143). Such encouragement conforms well to the effort to encourage self-sufficiency, since, as Scheffler puts it, "This educational course precludes taking schooling as an instrument for shaping [students'] minds to a preconceived idea. For if they seek reasons, it is their evaluation of such reasons that will determine what ideas they eventually accept" (Scheffler, 1973, p. 143). By encouraging critical thinking, then, we teach the student what we think is right, but we encourage the student to scrutinize our reasons and judge independently the rightness of our claims. In this way the student becomes a competent judge; more important for the present point, the student becomes an independent judge. That is, the student makes her own judgments regarding the appropriateness of alternative beliefs, courses of action, and attitudes. Such competence and independence of judgment are the sine qua non of self-sufficiency. The self-sufficient person is, moreover, a liberated person; such a person is free from the unwarranted and undesirable control of unjustified beliefs, unsupportable attitudes, and paucity of abilities, which can prevent that person from competently taking charge of her own life. Critical thinking thus liberates as it renders students self-sufficient (compare Scheffler, 1973). Insofar as we recognize our obligation to help children become competent, self-sufficient adults, that obligation provides a justification for the ideal of critical thinking, since education conceived along the lines suggested by that ideal recognizes obligation explicitly. Here, then, is a second reason for taking critical thinking to be a legitimate educational ideal and education for critical thinking to be a fundamental intellectual right of children.

Initiation into the Rational Traditions. As argued elsewhere (Siegel, in press), critical thinking is best seen as coextensive with rationality, and rationality is concerned with reasons. For a person to be rational, that person must (at least) grasp the relevance of various reasons for judgments and evaluate the weight of such reasons properly. How does a person learn to evaluate reasons properly?

One plausible account suggests that a person learns the proper assessment of reasons by being initiated into the traditions in which reasons play a role. Education, in this view, centrally involves the initiation of the student into the central human traditions (Peters, 1972). These traditions – science, literature, history, the arts, mathematics, and so on – have developed, over their long history, guidelines concerning the role and nature of reasons in their respective domains. Thus, for example, a science student must learn, among other things, what counts as a good reason for or against some hypothesis, theory, or procedure; how much weight the reason has; and how it compares with other relevant reasons. Science education amounts, at least ideally, to initiating the student into the scientific tradition, which in part consists in appreciating that tradition's standards governing the appraisal of reasons (McPeck, 1981, pp. 155-158). Similar remarks apply to other curricular areas.

If we can take education to involve significantly the initiation of students into the rational traditions, and

if such initiation consists in part in helping the student to appreciate the standards of rationality that govern the assessment of reasons (and so proper judgment) in each tradition, then we have a third reason for regarding critical thinking as an educational ideal and education for critical thinking as an intellectual right. Critical thinking, we have seen, involves a recognition of the importance of getting students to understand and appreciate the role of reasons in rational endeavor and of fostering in students those traits, attitudes, and dispositions that encourage the seeking of reasons for grounding judgment, belief, and action. Understanding the role and criteria of evaluation of reasons in the several rational traditions is crucial to being successfully initiated into those traditions. If education involves initiation into the rational traditions, then we should take critical thinking to be an educational ideal and eduation for critical thinking to be an intellectual right, because so taking it involves fostering in students those traits, dispositions, attitudes, and skills that are conducive to the successful initiation of students into the rational traditions. Seeing education as initiation thus offers justification for the ideal of critical thinking and for the recognition of education for critical thinking as an intellectual right of children. So long as children are entitled to be educated, they are entitled to education that seeks to foster critical thinking.

Critical Thinking and Democratic Living. Finally, consider the relation between critical thinking and democracy. It is a truism that the properly functioning democracy requires an educated citizenry. What sort of education does such a citizenry require?

The answer is not one-dimensional. The democratic citizen requires a wide variety of the many things education can provide. She needs to be well informed with respect to all sorts of matters of fact; to fully grasp the nature of democratic society and to fully embrace its responsibilities; to treat her fellow democrats as equal partners in political life; and so on. She also needs to be able to examine public policy concerns: to judge intelligently the many issues facing her society; to challenge and seek reasons for proposed changes (and continuations) of policy; to assess such reasons fairly and impartially and put aside self-interest when it is appropriate to do so; and so on. These latter abilities are central to critical thinking. Consequently, if the democratic citizen is not a critical thinker, she is significantly hampered in her ability to contribute helpfully to public life. Democracies rely for their health and well-being on the intelligence of their citizens. My point is simply that such intelligence, if it is truly to be of benefit, must consist in part of the skills, attitudes, abilities, and traits of the critical thinker. Democracy wants not simply an intelligent citizenry, but a critial one.

Indeed, the relationship between critical thinking and democracy is a very close one. For democracy, at least ideally,

> *aims so to structure the arrangements of society as to rest them ultimately upon the freely given consent of its members. Such an aim requires the institutionalization of reasoned procedures for the critical and public review of policy; it demands that judgments of policy be viewed not as the fixed privilege of any class or elite but as the common task of all, and it requires the supplanting of arbitrary and violent alteration of policy with institutionally channeled change ordered by reasoned persuasion and informed consent* [*Scheffler, 1973, p. 137*].

The fundamentality of reasoned procedures and critical talents and attitudes to democratic living is undeniable. Therefore, insofar as we are justifiably committed to democracy, and insofar as children have a right to participate fully in democratic life, we have yet another reason for regarding critical thinking as a fundamental educational ideal and education for critical thinking as a basic intellectual right. An education that takes as its central task the fostering of critical thinking is the education most suited for democratic life.

Critical Thinking and Indoctrination

We generally regard indoctrination as a bad thing, and an indoctrinating education as an education to be avoided. But what is so awful about indoctrination? Why should we avoid it?

These questions are insightfully considered, I think, in the context of a discussion of an intellectual right to an education for critial thinking, for an important implication of the right to an education for critical thinking is a concomitant right to avoid indoctrinative education.

There is a deep, although obvious, connection between what may be called "style of belief" and critical thinking. A person who has an evidential style of belief has a disposition to seek reasons and evidence and to believe on that basis, and this, we have seen, is a central component of critical thinking. A person with a nonevidential style of belief lacks this key feature of critical thinking. Thus far, I have offered a general defense of the ideal of critical thinking and of the child's right to become, insofar as she is able, a critical thinker. Here, I would like to say a bit more about the harm that both the ideal and the right suffer at the hands of indoctrination. Indoctrination,

insofar as it is a matter of fostering a nonevidential style of belief, is fundamentally anticritial.

If I have been indoctrinated and so have developed or had fostered in me a nonevidential style of belief, I have been significantly harmed. My autonomy has been dramatically compromised, for I do not have the ability to impartially settle questions of concern to me on the basis of a reasoned consideration of the matter at hand. I am, in an important sense, the prisoner of my convictions, for I cannot decide whether my convictions ought to be what they are, and I am unable to alter them for good reasons, even if there are good reasons for altering them. Indeed, lacking the disposition to seek reasons, I am doomed to unawareness of the desirability of aligning my beliefs and actions with the weight of relevant evidence. Consequently, my life is limited. Options with respect to belief and action – and, indeed, to basic aspects of my life-style and beliefs about the worthwhile life (if I have any) – are forever closed to me, given my predisposition against the contemplation both of challenges to my unreasoned but presently held convictions and of alternatives to them. I have been trapped in a set of beliefs I can neither escape nor even question; this is how my options, and my autonomy, have been limited. I have been shackled and denied the right to determine, insofar as I am able, my own future. In being indoctrinated, I have been placed in a kind of cognitive strait-jacket, in that my cognitive movements have been severely restricted. Worse, like the typical strait-jacketed person, I have also been sedated – drugged – so that I do not even realize my plight. Such a restricted life cannot be what we desire for our children, any more than we desire it for ourselves.

The child has an overwhelming interest in avoiding indoctrination. To be so shackled, and to have her options and future so limited, is to narrow her life in a way that is as unacceptable as it is out of her control. In being indoctrinated, the child is cut off from all but a narrow band of possibilities. Her freedom and her dignity are short-circuited, her autonomy is denied, her control over her own life and her ability to contribute to community life are truncated, her mental life is impoverished. This is a description more apt of child abuse than of acceptable education. Just as we have a moral obligation to stand against child abuse, so we have a similar obligation with respect to indoctrination. Here, against the background of a comparison with critical thinking, we see what is so awful about indoctrination, and why the child should be thought of as having the right, in having the right to be a critical thinker, to avoid it.

One might think that indoctrination, even in an eduational program aimed at the fostering of critical thinking, is unavoidable. Even in such a program, some beliefs must be passed along to students in the absence of rational justification, if only because students do not start life aware of the nature of reasons. It is best, however, not to regard all cases of belief inculcation without rational justification as cases of indoctrination. It must be granted that we sometimes have no alternative but to teach children, or at least to inculcate beliefs, without providing reasons that justify those beliefs. Before we can pass along reasons, the child must come to understand what a reason is. Nevertheless, we can inculcate beliefs that enhance rationality and help to develop an evidential style of belief. Such belief inculcation – even though it does not, out of necessity, include the passing on of reasons that are seen by the believer as warrant for the inculcated beliefs – ought to be considered nonindoctrinative belief inculcation.

If I get a young child to believe that the sun is ninety-three million miles from the earth, that it is better to share her toys with her friends than not to share, that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that it is desirable to believe on the basis of reasons, I am not necessarily indoctrinating. I am indoctrinating only if I pass on these beliefs in such a way that the child is not encouraged to, or is prevented from, actively inquiring into their rational status – that is, if her rationality is stunted, and if she is brought to develop a nonevidential style of belief. If we inculcate beliefs without reasons but encourage the development of rationality and an evidential style of belief – that is, if we encourage the development of critical thinking – we are not indoctrinating. We cannot start out giving reasons, for the child has to learn what a reason is and what counts as a good reason – that is, the child has to learn how to evaluate reasons – before our giving reasons even makes sense (Siegel, 1980, pp. 41-42). Consequently, we have no choice but to begin by inculcating beliefs in the absence of justifying reasons, but this should not blind us to the central distinction between doing so as a necessary prelude to the development of rationality and an evidential style of belief, and doing so without regard to such further development. Only the latter is appropriately considered indoctrination. We avoid indoctrination by taking the former path: by encouraging the student to become our "critical equal" and assess for herself the strength of the support that reasons offer for inculcated beliefs; to subject reasons that we take as justificatory to her independent judgment; and to transcend her intellectual dependence on us and drive, ever more competently, her own doxastic engine. We avoid indoctrination, in short, by taking seriously – even as we inculcate beliefs, as we sometimes must, in the absence of reasons that justify those beliefs – the ideal of critical thinking and the child's right to an education for critical thinking.

Thus, we need not indoctrinate students to help them become critical thinkers. We can nonindoctrinatively educate for critical thinking. Thus, we need not violate one right of the student (the right not to be indoctrinated) in order to honor another.

Critical thinking – its status as an educational ideal, and the child's right to an education aimed at fostering it – affords a fine explanation of the undesirability of indoctrinative eduation. Such an eduation flouts not only a fundamental educational ideal but also a basic intellectual right of children. In recognizing the child's right to an education that aims to foster critical thinking, we recognize the anticritical nature of indoctrination. This anticritical nature is precisely what is wrong with indoctrination and why we should avoid it.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are good reasons for thinking that children have at least one intellectual right: the right to an education aimed at the enhancement of critical thinking. The reasons offered – respect for persons, self-sufficiency and preparation for adulthood, initiation into the rational traditions, and democratic living – are diverse and wide-ranging. The implications for indoctrination are also instructive. These very different considerations all suggest not only that critical thinking is a worthy educational ideal and that the fostering of it is an important educational aim, but also that children have a right to an education that takes this aim seriously, and that we violate their right if we educate in such a way as to frustrate or fail to honor that ideal. Honoring that particular intellectual right is basic to our educational endeavors.

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