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THE TROUBLE WITH CRITICAL THINKING TODAY

Abstract. Critical thinking has been a buzzword in both business and academic environments, as it represents the one of the greatest skillsets to possess for succeeding on a professional and personal level. This text argues for the idea that critical thinking today is a limited endeavor and that it is shaped by three philosophical assumptions that escape critical investigation: aporia allergy, part-time thinking, and Eurocentric Promethean thinking. The text highlights the importance of redesigning critical thinking without relying on these assumptions.

Keywords: Critical thinking, aporia allergy, part-time thinking, Eurocentrism

1. A micro-history of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking (CT) has been a priority in Ancient Greek philosophy, despite not bearing this name. Socratic maieutics aims to provoke the interlocutor to know oneself (Cooper 1997, 165-168, 186). CT is supposedly a means to achieving that goal. In Socrates, we observe CT at play through his unorthodox questions and his ability to think “outside the box.” At the same time, we observe the lack of CT in his interlocutors. Despite

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having many variations, the lack of CT in Plato's dialogues crystalizes as a blockage in investigating further. This is a common occurrence in the dialogue: the interlocutor is puzzled by Socrates' problematization, renounces their attempt to showcase opinion, and simply follows the Socratic procedure by answering "yes," "no," "by the gods, you are right Socrates" and other short and compliant equivalent answers. In the context of having interlocutors with poor CT, Socrates tries to jumpstart their self-awareness by provoking them to think. He invites their interlocutors to reflect on their thinking. We take this model to be the original CT frame.

Despite the fact that the Socratic method was far from being a perfect and put together example of an use of CT, it was compared to the sophists' one. The sophists were trying to convince others that they used CT in order to support their claims and arguments. However, their use of CT was considered inappropriate compared to Socrates'. As Frankfurt would say, they were "bullshitters" (2005, 19). Sophists were interested in CT as a means of persuasion, but they were not interested in truth. Implicitly, they were not interested in reflecting on how to reflect to reach some truth or reasonable ideas.

Hellenistic philosophy took the original Socratic CT model further into practice and had palpable results. A very brief illustration focuses on three concepts. First, we have the stoic idea that we can only access our reaction to the world and not the world as such. As Epictetus says, "And so likewise, my principal task in life is this: to distinguish between things, and establish a division between them and say, 'External things are not within my power; choice is within my power. Where am I to seek the good and the bad? Within myself, in that which is my own'." (Epictetus 2014, 78). Second, we have the Epicurean idea to aspire for what is readily available (Epicurus 1926, 101). Clear thinking starts with avoiding lofty ambitions and connecting to available reality. Last, the triangle is completed by the skeptical *epoché* that allows someone to distance oneself from their beliefs and take things *cum grano salis*, which was endorsed by others such as the stoics (Mates 1996, 90; Marcus Aurelius 2013, 20-29; Castagnoli 2000). All of these ideas are about the way in which a person positions oneself to the world on a daily basis, whether it is about managing emotions, aspirations, or beliefs. These are

not only a skillset, but an attitude towards life. Therefore, the practical dimension is foundational for these ideas.

Further CT tools arose during the Medieval times, as did one of the assumptions which we will problematize further on. Ockham's razor stands out as an overdriven *epoché*, that is not only about bracketing opinion but about completely ignoring it: "For nothing ought to be posited without a reason given, unless it is self-evident (literally, known through itself) or known by experience or proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture." (Ockham, *Sent.* I, dist. 30, q. 1, *apud* Spade & Panaccio 2019). The effect of Ockham's razor is a radical simplification of an otherwise over-encumbered thinking process. In Medieval context, it was meant to eliminate unnecessary ontological entities for the sake of clarity. This is where the problem takes center stage. Medieval philosophy is mostly remembered for its Aristotelian revival under Christian auspices. This implied the revival and development of Aristotelian, or classical logic, together with its practice of the *deliberatio*. For instance, perhaps the most known textbooks from the Medieval period is Peter of Spain's 'Summulae Logicales'. In it, Peter of Spain not only presents the Aristotelian logic, but he also builds upon it, updating it to Medieval sensibilities. Then, the *deliberatio* loses its ethical connections Aristotle imbued it with and becomes Medieval, in the sense of becoming a profession more than it is a mark of personal growth. The problem, at least from the standpoint of a Socratic, a Hellenistic, or even an Aristotelian idea of practicing philosophy, is that the *deliberatio* divorces ordinary life. Furthermore, argumentative practices remain for a select few how are lucky enough to become literate and engage in intellectual activities, which were mostly related to medicine, law, and theology (Novikoff 2013). Even for them, the *deliberatio* becomes an aspect of their profession: theologians have their councils where they debate interpretations on holy texts, lawyers argue for or against judgments passed down upon their clients, and medics become interested in the theory behind the human body. Since CT is thought of as part of their profession, there is nothing stopping the average Medieval theologian, lawyer, or medic to cancel CT in their daily lives.

The problem of a double standard for thinking is part of the broader Christian issue of declaring faith without being faithful. This led late medieval and Renaissance thinkers to fully tackle the problem of hypocrisy.

For instance, the Jesuit Ignatio de Loyola had radical spiritual exercises about this problem. Even Pascal, who criticized Jesuits, unites with him in criticizing hypocrisy. Because of hypocrisy,

“a prince can be the laughing stock of Europe and only he will not know it. [...] And so human life is nothing but a perpetual illusion; there is nothing but mutual deception and flattery. No one talks about us in our presence as they do in our absence. Human relationships are founded only on this mutual deception. [...] Mankind is therefore nothing but disguise, lies, and hypocrisy, both as individuals and with regard to others. They therefore do not want to be told the truth.” (Pascal 2008, 180-181)

These gloomy descriptions indicate that people, especially intellectuals, use their CT skills to steer away from the truth whenever it fits their agendas. At the end of the day, their agendas are more important than CT or truth. For this to exist, CT must be split from daily life and kept among other skills to be awakened, released, or bypassed whenever a person's interests and plans require it.

Last, what experts call modern philosophy contains the call for propagating Critical Thinking throughout society. Kant's formulation is probably the most famous: an emergence from self-imposed immaturity (Kant 1992). A society's transition from being a minor, not being able to decide for itself, to a society aware of itself, its path, and its potential, is nothing more than a society's strong inclination to practice CT. However, crossing into societal adulthood relies on each and every individual's personal effort to fully integrate CT into one's life. The problem remains up to this date, given that CT is still regarded as an ability that can be switched on and off. With Kant's philosophy in mind, switching is a problem because crossing into intellectual adulthood is not reversible. So being able to switch equates to not having crossed into intellectual maturity. Embracing critical thinking is an individual's internal decision that is independent of alterity, agendas included, despite having a societal impact regardless of the decision. Rejecting the full version of CT brings us to our present-day situation and to the consequences of failing to adopt CT as a way of relating to oneself and the world.

2. Aporia allergy

American pragmatist philosophies kickstarted the popularization of critical thinking as a key component of the pragmatic individual. According to James, the pragmatic method cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences (James 2000, 126). Every philosophical effort is oriented in relation to palpable reality, either other people's actions or states of affairs. In this context, CT is designed in relation to palpable reality. This understanding of CT directly contradicts the Aristotelian ideal of thought thinking itself from his *Metaphysics* (de Koninck 1994). Aristotle's point roughly translates in practice as an ideal that every individual with minimal philosophical aspirations should have: to be able to reflect on their thinking and, if viable, to reflect on thinking in the broadest sense possible. However, at least one difference exists between practicing philosophy and philosophical pragmatism. The former is about the tireless effort to think about how I and others can think, while the latter is about the efficient effort to think about the material, immediate, or practical consequences of human behavior. In other words, the former is about thinking, whereas the latter is about palpable output. As a consequence, two types of CT can emerge from these two frameworks: critical thinking which questions one's thinking, and critical thinking that questions known ways to produce output. To no surprise, the latter is what we now mostly know as "Critical thinking."

The output orientation in defining critical thinking is visible in contemporary definitions. For instance, Ennis' take on CT is that it is a "reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (1985, 45). To our mind, believing and doing are outputs of the mind, or at least, outputs to the internal process of reflecting on ideas and their daily life context. As such, CT is thought to facilitate good judgment (Lipman 1988, 39), or purposeful, self-regulatory judgment (Facione 1990, 3). It can even be taken to represent the "disciplined, self-directed thinking that exemplifies the perfections of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thought" (Paul 1992, 9). We understand that having a superior output becomes a duty of critical thinking, since it is goal-directed, purposive, it is a way of thinking aimed at forming a

judgment, where the thinking itself meets standards of adequacy and accuracy (Bailin et al. 1999b, 287; Lai 2011).

Assigning such duties to critical thinking belongs to an assumption we call "aporia allergy." As the name implies, critical thinking refuses to cave in to the idea that there are problems without solution. Instead, critical thinking becomes the workhorse skill that can be used for any problem to yield the best results. Here, the core assumption is that every problem can eventually be solved. This assumption is highly problematic. First, this assumption goes against the Ancient Greek concept of *aporia*, which is a founding concept for any philosophical methodology. Put shortly, an *aporia* is a problem, usually a thought problem, that cannot be solved no matter how diverse and rich our interpretation output might be. Philosophy itself is thought to exist upon the resistance that some problems keep when meeting answers: ontological, epistemological, ethical, political, or other topics pertaining to wisdom. Then, the critical thinking that claims it can solve any problem seeks to annul philosophy: once all problems are solved through critical thinking, we are probably left with good judgments that exemplify the perfections of thinking.

Second, *aporia* allergy ultimately leads to the monopoly of judgment which, by definition, is anti-*maieutic*. Why is this? Because *maieutics* is a method of questioning that provokes the interlocutor not only to realise what they already know, but also to practice *maieutics* on a daily basis. In other words, *maieutics* is a method that teaches people to question and adopt an attitude of minimal doubt and distancing from all judgment. Just as *aporias* cannot survive in this CT environment, so will *maieutics* have an increasingly narrower space to question. There is no need to question the good judgment and the output that the perfections of thinking create. On the contrary, anyone daring to question something widely accepted as a good judgment will most probably suffer the fate that Plato's cave philosopher or wise navigator suffered (Cooper 1997, 1132-1137): ostracization at best, death at worst. Such an understanding and practice of CT ultimately deters the practice of philosophy and reduces it to a tool one can use when fit and discard when the need is gone. This idea connects to a second assumption we briefly mentioned before.

3. Part-time thinking

We previously touched upon the centuries-old switch that enables us to use and discard critical thinking whenever we see fit. Often, we use critical thinking in very limited range problems and refrain from using it when assessing our own thinking. Let us give you an example from our philosophical practice. Some of our clients are IT specialists. What we found out in our practice is that they very much enjoy puzzles, up to the point where they see their own lives as a dynamic collection of puzzles. They enjoy streamlining activities in their private lives as much as they enjoy streamlining their software production pipelines. Here is one consequence: one of our clients came complaining that he does not enjoy going on holidays because it represents wasted time, that breaks the streamlined life. Time off is, for this person, a leap outside the comfort zone provided by the desire to make all things efficient, regardless of their professional or private nature. Therefore, our practice with this client focuses on questioning the uselessness of taking a break.

Here is another example: another client reports that his relationship with his parents is problematic because they complain but do not listen to his solutions. The client describes the situation as a machine that accepts the code he writes but does not execute the code despite initially accepting the syntax. He complains that his parents claim to take rational actions and yet they refuse the rational solutions their son is proposing. However, the parents are not in focus here. The client's critical thinking is. In this case, his CT is efficient at conjuring up solutions for others, but fails to see his problem: that he has the impossible ambition to parent the parents and teach them how to handle themselves. Implicitly, he fails to come up with alternatives for his problem that he does not even see.

These two situations serve as an example of what we call "part-time thinking," the condition in which somebody is very efficient at solving some problems and completely blind in relation to, usually, their own problems. The problems part-time thinkers usually solve are split into two broad categories: those that actively involve human input and those that do not. The latter is mostly work-related. Such a part-time thinker delves into work tasks such as team management, paperwork, or puzzles that do not involve somebody else's agency. These problems either have

no human contact, or the potential human aspect is transformed into something abstract. For instance, organizing a team meeting in another country with people you never personally met is a rather abstract task. Even in jobs with frequent human contact, employees have procedures that help them strongly objectify other people into numbered inquiries. Critical thinking is often performed successfully in such cases, despite the fact that this creates CT fatigue, which renders the person unwilling to carry out CT on themselves.

The former type of part-time thinkers has a different target: alterity. In these cases, the part-time thinker is fully involved in other people's stories and problems, and do their best to understand and support them. The most common blind spot these individuals have is that they do not support themselves. For example, one of our philosophical practice clients was given the task to name the most important people in her life. To no surprise, she was nowhere on the list. She could not even conceive that on a rather long list she can make room for herself. Prioritizing herself was out of the question. Despite being a caring and competent proponent of solutions, this part-time thinker could not become a full-time thinker in knowing oneself because her idea of thinking did not include the possibility of thinking and changing oneself. In both puzzle and alterity-oriented part-time thinkers, self-reflection is avoided or completely missed, as is the idea to change how one thinks and what attitude one has about oneself.

The famous oracle indication about knowing oneself carries the strong difficulty of changing one's thinking, which involves the admittance that one's thinking is limited, wrong, confused, or misguided. The origin of part-time thinking is synonymous with the resistance a person has when facing self-failure and the need to change. As such, the cultural environment where knowing better than others is appreciated automatically involves the development of a strain of critical thinking that is strong in criticizing anything and anyone other than oneself. Even when a CT definition involves criticizing oneself, such criticism is oriented toward external results. For instance, Paul's definition stating that CT is "disciplined, self-directed thinking that exemplifies the perfections of thinking" (1992, 9) is problematic because it contains an internal contradiction regarding purpose. To our understanding, the point of disciplined, self-directed

thinking is to incorporate failure and transform it into motivation and learning opportunities. We have this understanding because, for us, thinking is not about achieving the correct answer, but about further questioning despite obtaining what appears to be the correct answer. Thus, any standard of perfection would be continuously questioned by someone practicing the critical thinking we refer to. The self-directed thinking Paul speaks about will not exemplify the perfections of thinking, but will instead challenge them.

In line with Paul's definition is Facione's, which states that CT is the way to produce "purposeful, self-regulatory judgment" (1990, 3). The problematic concept here is that of "judgment." The problem is best understood when we read the term "judgment," through one of its closest synonyms, which is "verdict." They are not necessarily equivalent. However, to the detriment of the part-time thinker, they are often interchangeable. Let us follow Facione's definition through an example. Imagine a philosophy professor who is very proficient in the history of ideas. He knows the place, the assets, and the limits of many philosophers' way of thinking. He also enjoys giving verdicts about these philosophers and their ideas: which of them are great philosophers, minor philosophers, misguided intellectuals, thinkers missing some point, or which of them almost got to an idea that was pinned by a later thinker. Yet, when questioned about his own thinking and his own philosophy, he continues to speak of various other philosophers, their texts, and their ideas. For him, speaking about other people's ideas is equivalent to reflecting on oneself. Here is this philosophy professor's verdict about thinking and philosophy: when you speak about philosophy, your mind is automatically transformed. Is this professor's judgment purposeful? Yes, he wants to show others and himself that he knows the ins and outs of philosophy, and most likely succeeds in doing so. Is this professor's judgment self-regulatory? Yes, he knows that whenever he wants to fulfill his need for intellectual validation all he has to do is to talk about what he read about what other thinkers said, did, or wrote. Does this professor's judgment contribute to any change in his thinking? Not necessarily. While reading about philosophers can provide a platform for self-change, it is often the case that giving verdicts and showcasing them to others is more important than admitting the limits

and flaws of one's thinking and questioning and changing one's thinking as a constant exercise in critical self-reflection. As an aggravating factor, we often observed in our clients that successfully exercising CT in a very limited framework (*i.e.* history of ideas, a programming language, architecture) gives the individual the impression that their intellect will do a great job in other areas of life as well. This is usually based on hasty generalizations or overconfidence bias. Verdicts disconnect the individual from others. The philosopher's famous ivory tower, as a symbol of separating from alterity, was constructed because of part-time thinkers whose verdicts appeared truthful to them but were proven to be false by alterity. In the end, the ivory tower goes directly against Socrates' idea of a philosopher practicing around the agora. Offering judgments or verdicts goes against questioning and thinking onwards despite having an answer. To the philosophy professor, and to many others, the idea to go past the first answer remains foreign.

4. Promethean thinking

"Vanity is definitely my favorite sin," (Lemkin, Gilroy 1995) says Al Pacino's devil character in *The devil's advocate*. But why is that? One interpretation suggests that vanity is the devil's favorite sin because it can make its way into anyone's life. No one is spared from it, not even intelligent individuals such as the philosophy professor from before. The part-time thinking coupled with the aporia allergy can be expressed in many behavioral patterns. The one we want to bring to the fore is Eurocentrism, and philosophical Eurocentrism in particular.

What has Eurocentrism got to do with critical thinking? Isn't CT supposed to be culture-neutral? As we mentioned before, critical thinking as we know it today is a crossover result between the Kantian, and more broadly the Enlightenment's aspiration to progress in all things human, including thinking at an individual and societal level, and the pragmatic goal-oriented Anglo-American culture. In this way, CT is the love child of both "Continental" and "Analytic" traditions, and, as such, is a modern European invention. In addition, CT has its roots in Ancient Greek philosophy and is defined by those practices. If we look at what Eurocentrism is, we find very similar points. As Samir notes,

“Greek heritage predisposed Europe to rationality. In this myth, Greece was the mother of rational philosophy, while the Orient never succeeded in going beyond metaphysics.” (2010, 167)

We understand that critical thinking is a product of the Enlightenment that is designed to serve the European Enlightenment aspirations of freedom of thought, efficiency, and progress in attaining the truth. In this, we also understand that CT is thought to be a product of the European mind, and thus, be a foreign tool for any Oriental, or at least non-European culture. To answer the questions that started this paragraph: despite striving to be a method of thinking in the broadest sense possible, CT retains Eurocentric features in its design.

The main Eurocentric feature CT has is Prometheanism. What do we mean by this? Samir observes that the West sees itself as Promethean *par excellence* because it holds the separation of humankind from nature, supports the superiority of humankind over nature, and is tireless in turning nature into an object for human action (2010, 173). A similar criticism can be found in Heidegger’s *Question Concerning Technology* (1977, 3-35), despite the irony that Heidegger himself was a Eurocentric thinker. In which way does CT inherit this Promethean trait? We only have to look at the ground-level applications of CT. Most of them are in STEM education and engineering / IT professions. CT is expected to be performed when designing new technology, regardless of whether it is incorporated into buildings, airplanes, cloud finance apps, or AI-powered software (Douglas 2012). Similarly, CT is heralded as a key component of an entrepreneur, or a techpreneur’s skillset (Drummond 2012). Then, CT becomes crucial in the audit side of banking and finance (Carrithers *et al.* 2008), where a top priority is to ask the right questions that enable the auditor to search for relevant information. After that, CT is handy to have in law-related jobs, especially in being an attorney or a judge (James *et al.* 2010). Many countries, including Romania, included a reasoning, or critical thinking test, in the process of being admitted to a law or magistrate school. Last, CT becomes optional in jobs that are less about exact science and more about relating to other people, such as teachers (Janssen *et al.* 2019), social assistants (Santos *et al.* 2016), psychologists (Sharp *et al.* 2008), counselors, or philosophy practitioners.

We observe a correlation between jobs having a Promethean core to them and the importance that these Promethean jobs give to the problem-solving, part-time, perfectionistic CT design offering the best judgments possible. In other words, the rise in status of Promethean jobs equates to a deepening of this certain kind of critical thinking that is foreign from its Socratic and Hellenistic roots, namely from the self-reflection, self-betterment, and tireless questioning origins.

What is required for an alternative to the Eurocentric Promethean version of CT? Since this CT design relies on the deeply ingrained assumption that problem-solving is mostly in the service of humankind's superiority over nature, and in particular, of the West's superiority over all other cultures, an alternative will have to abandon this assumption and replace it with another. A possible alternative relies on the assumption that CT is used when reflecting on our limited role as part of nature. Some ancient philosophies embrace this idea. Stoicism supports the idea that we can only control our reaction to nature and not nature itself, which in turn favors a life governed by peace of mind. Epicureanism promotes the focus on what is ready at hand, in the context in which nature is always at hand in some way. Happiness springs out of this interpretation of ourselves being thrown into nature. Another example is Daoism, which promotes the *wu wei*, the non-doing (Lao Zi 2022, 82), or lacking agenda across all experience, ranging from not deforesting a hillside to build your business, all the way to not imposing your ideas when listening to your friend speaking. Even Confucianism, which is more society-oriented, perhaps the extreme opposite of Ancient Greek Cynicism, understands not-doing as conformity with society (Creel 1982, 59), in which society is a microcosmos reflecting broad nature. This context of ideas gives us a sense of the vanity behind contemporary CT. Switching CT on and off leads the CT-practicing individual to believe that they can enable CT at any time, with no effort, in any context. Not only is such an individual rejecting the concept of aporias, but he or she is also rejecting the idea that other ways of thinking other than those that they can conjure through their use of CT have any advantage over theirs. Eurocentrist thinking, such a version of CT, and Promethean expectations of oneself co-create one another. Then, the first question one can ask to break out of this scheme is this: is vanity worth more than knowing oneself?

5. Conclusion

The trouble with today's CT design comes from its founding assumptions. Throughout this text, we named these assumptions "aporia allergy," "part-time thinking," and "prometheanism." The main limit that CT has because of these assumptions is that it is conceived as an instrument to change the world and at the same time preserve oneself. This CT design is contrary to the Socratic ideal of "knowing oneself". Contrary to what many would think, knowing something implies a change in that which is being known. In contemporary physics, this is the observer effect related to the double-slit experiment. Sticking to its philosophical side reveals that even a reductionistic frame such as the pragmatic material one acknowledges that knowing something changes that which is known. Knowing oneself is no different: discovering how one thinks, and unearthing the dispositions and emotions related to important or frequent ideas one uses, all of these are transformative experiences that are hard or sometimes impossible to undo. In short, knowing oneself implies changing oneself. In our experience, the CT we use is a very effective transformative tool that is an essential part of philosophical practice. However, this CT is not comfortable, and not remotely as accessible as the common CT designed to change anything but oneself. The next step is to conceptualize a baseline CT frame that accommodates both areas of transformation. We assume this is, in itself, a transformative task.

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