Seminar 4

Critical Thinking, Ethical Reasoning, and Daily Life

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Contents:

In this seminar I will look first at the relations between critical thinking and ethical thinking, exploring point of contacts and potential relations between them. So, I will reflect on how ethics can bring critical thinking alive and how, in turn, critical thinking can perfect ethical thinking

I will then focus on how to develop critical thinking skills and how to apply such skills in our daily life, showing that critical thinking is crucially important and ubiquitous in our society.

Critical thinking, as we have seen, is the purposeful and reflective judgement about what to believe or what to do in response to observations

The word "ethics" refers to matters of right and wrong. Ethics can be therefore defined as the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group.

Whether or not to cheat is an ethical issue

Whether or not to dry your dishes with a dish towel as opposed to letting them air-dry is not an ethical issue.

While ethical considerations have some areas of universal overlap, ethical practices and solutions to problems are hardly universal, which is where the considerations of the connection between critical thinking and ethics are drawn.

The application of critical thinking to a defined situation often enable an individual to make the right decisions as to the right ethical choices or principles to apply to a particular situation and how, in turn, ethical thinking can bring critical thinking alive

Types or Varieties of Ethical Reasoning….

1. Value-Based Ethical Reasoning
2. Right-Based Ethical Reasoning
3. Consequence-Based Ethical Reasoning

1. Values-based ethical reasoning involves determining whether an action is right or wrong according to whether or not the action in question conforms to certain values, such as truthfulness, responsibility, justice, temperance, courage, self-control, wisdom, care, compassion, generosity, modesty, kindness and so on.

For example, consider this argument:

'You knocked over the vase, didn't you? And now you're trying to blame your sister for doing it! That's wrong. You should always take responsibility for your actions. And that includes accepting the consequences'.

The speaker is clearly appealing to the value of responsibility.

2. Rights-based ethical reasoning involves determining whether an action is right or wrong according to whose and which rights are upheld or violated by the act in question.

Such rights might include the right to free speech, the right to own property, the right to vote, the right to be free from harm, the right to go wherever you want, and so on.

In this case the general principle would be something like "One should respect the right of others to express their opinions" or "This action is wrong because it violates this person's freedom"

One of the main problems with the rights-based approach is what happens when rights collide? That is, what if doing X upholds my right to A but it violates your right to B? Whose rights are more important, mine or yours?

One possible approach to answering these questions is to revisit the basis for the rights in question; if one has a right to A because X and one has right to B because Y, and X is a more important end goal than Y, then the right to A would trump the right to B.

This approach wouldn't work, however, for natural rights

3.Consequence-based ethical reasoning involves determining whether an action is right or wrong according to its consequences. If a certain action will result in a good consequence, then it's the right thing to do; if it results in a bad consequence, it's the wrong thing to do.

Of course, in order to use this approach, one would have to define "good consequence" and "bad consequence." A common definition invokes concepts of pain and pleasure, both broadly defined to include more than just physical pains and pleasures. Other possible criteria of goodness include the concepts of happiness, well-being, and benefit.

Common errors in reasoning about ethical issues

Most errors in reasoning about ethical issues are those made in reasoning about other issues. 3 fallacies, however, are very peculiar in ethical reasoning: (i). ad hominem, (ii) the is/ought fallacy and (iii). the arbitrary line fallacy

Ad hominem
"you know who else had that viewpoint. Hitler!"
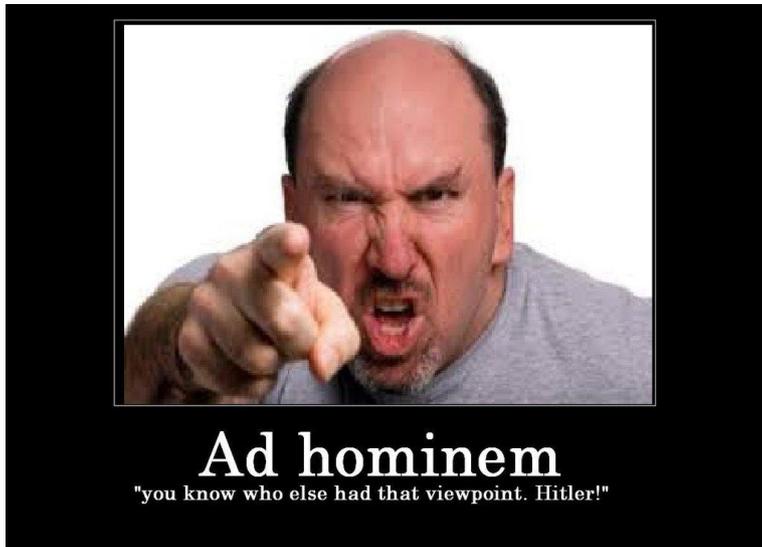
1. Ad hominem ("To the man) – The author directly attacks someone's character rather than focusing on the issue at hand, suggesting that because something is "wrong" with this person, whatever he says must also be wrong.

2. When one derives "ought" from "is"—when one says that something ought to be the case because it is the case—one is committing the is/ought fallacy.

Why is it a fallacy, you may ask? Well, just because something is the case, that doesn't mean it should be the case. Just because we do something, it doesn't follow that we should do it.

For example, an angry person may lose her temper and hit someone. Surely we wouldn't conclude that she should lose her temper and hit someone again.

The is/ought fallacy is also called the fact-value fallacy: you assume that a fact (the ways things actually are) implies a value (that they should be that way).

(iii). The arbitrary line fallacy, while not limited to ethical arguments, is perhaps most common in ethical arguments. The error consists in concluding that since the line between L and M, two points close together on some continuum, is arbitrary, there is no justification for differentiating between D and W, two points considerably further apart.

For example, one might argue that the line between the first trimester and second trimester of a pregnancy is arbitrary: there is no real difference between the developing human being at 12 weeks and the developing human being at 12 weeks and a day. True enough.

However, to conclude that what applies to the 8-month-old fetus is also applicable to the 2-day-old fertilized egg is mistaken, since there are many and clear differences between a 8-month-old fetus and a 2-day-old fertilized egg.

So, just because we draw an arbitrary line somewhere, it doesn't follow that it's not a line worth drawing. It may well separate points that are significantly different.

These examples show how ethical reasoning makes critical thinking come alive. Critical thinking however can also improve and perfect ethical thinking. Specifically it enables:

● precise thinking when analysing and formulating complex and controversial moral or ethical problems;

● deepening person's understanding of one own moral experience (judgement, emotions, actions) and the ability to clearly and precisely express it.

● possibility to react differently to a given problem;

● indeterminate answers, which means that, at least at the initial stage, we are avoiding phrases such as "correct answer", "right solution" and therefore remain open

Thus, critical and ethical thinking can help clarifying the conceptual phrases involved in moral decision-making. They can also contribute to fight egotism, prejudice, and self-deception through the systematic cultivation of honesty and integrity.

These are all very important skills for anyone nowadays.

Having looked very briefly at the relations between critical and ethical thinking, I next want to focus on how to develop critical thinking skills and how to apply such skills in our daily lives.

Most of us are not what we could be. We are less. We have great capacity. But most of it is dormant; most is undeveloped.

Improvement in thinking is like improvement in basketball, in ballet, or in playing the saxophone. It is unlikely to take place in the absence of a conscious commitment to learn.

Development in thinking requires a gradual process requiring plateaus of learning and just plain hard work. It is not possible to become an excellent thinker simply because one wills it.

Changing one's habits of thought is a long-range project, happening over years, not weeks or months.

How, then, can we develop as critical thinkers? How can we help ourselves and our students to practice better thinking in everyday life?
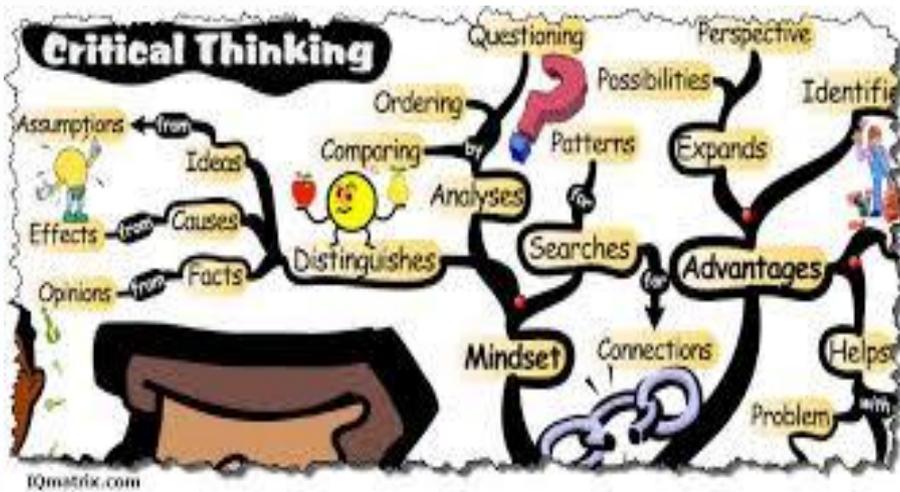
In the second part of this lecture I offer a few tips and suggestions -based on common sense- to help you grow into a mature Critical Thinker ...

1. Utilize "Wasted" Time, Productively:

All of us waste some time during the course of our day; i.e., fail to use all of our time either productively or even enjoyably! Why not take advantage of the time we generally waste by practicing and honing our critical thinking skills?

For example, instead of sitting in front of the TV idly, we could utilize that time by thinking back over our day and evaluating what went well and what could have been handled differently.

It is recommended that we record our observations so that we are forced to spell out the details explicitly. And each time we do this, we will inevitably get better at it, better at analysing our own thoughts and where we went wrong

2. A Problem A Day:

At the beginning of each day choose a problem to focus on when you have free moments throughout the day. Figure out the problem elements. In other words, systematically think through the questions: How can I define the problem? What are the ways in which I can solve it?

Assess the short-term and long-term implications of the problem and its likely solutions. Be prepared to realign your analysis of the problem as more information becomes available to you.

3. Do Your Emotions Rule You?

Whenever emotions surge within you, systematically ask yourself: What exactly prompted that emotion?

For example, if you are angry, ask yourself, what is that is making me angry? What are the alternative ways of looking at the situation? Can I perceive the situation from a humorous angle? Channel your thinking and match your emotions to your thinking patterns.

4. How Edgy is Your Ego?

Recognise instance of egocentric thinking in yours action by contemplating answers to the following questions: Do I often become irritable over petty things? Do I do or say anything "irrational" just to get my way? Do I impose my will upon others? Do I fail to speak my mind when I feel strongly about something and then later feel disempowered?

Once you identify egocentric thinking on a rampage, you can then work to replace it with more rational, systematic self-reflection.

5. Revisit Your Views:

A key attribute of the critical thinking process is the willingness to consider alternate points of view so you can develop more refined, well-rounded opinions, which must essentially include accepting that your current views might need a bit of conditioning.

For example, if you encounter a senior at your workplace who seems to dislike you, you might think that you could have done something undesirable, or embody a not-so-likeable personality trait.

Instead, recognize that your current view is only one possibility, and that the reason the concerned person doesn't seem to like you could be due to some conflicting issue at his/her end.

In fact, you might eventually realize that you were incorrect in assessing that the person disliked you in the first place, which could then lead you to analyze the interpretations of your current thought process. It's always important that you are flexible enough to be open to revisit and realign your way of thinking, as the situation so demands.

6. Filter Fact from Fiction:

While listening to another colleague or friend, show some hesitance in readily accepting the piece of information shared; as fact.

Instead, ask yourself what you actually know about the subject, and about the source of that knowledge. Is s/he actually an expert on the subject? Did s/he learn this information from a credible source? Can they explain how they arrived at the conclusions?

Even at the risk of appearing sceptical; ensure that you are flexible enough to pleasantly explain that you are not necessarily trying to prove anyone wrong, but are attempting to ascertain whether these are facts or opinions (that might be open for further investigation).
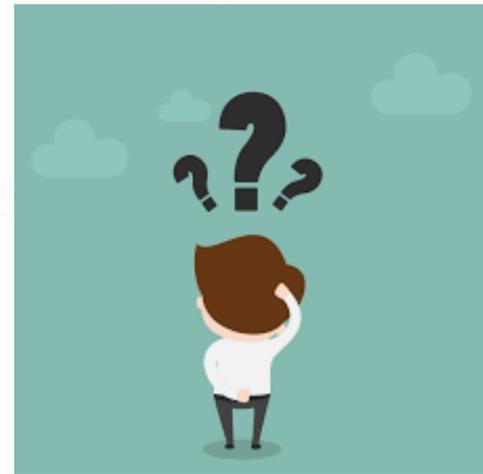
7. Question Quick Fixes:

When working in a team , if a colleague offers a solution that seems hasty or too good to be true, don't readily accept it as the best plan of action. Instead, raise your valid concerns to the group regarding the feasibility of the solution over the longer-term.

Analyze solutions to see if anything has been overlooked. You might eventually find that the quick fix actually is the best plan! However, you will soon realize that your desire to investigate has led you away from a quick-fix strategy towards team & organizational success. If you don't question and challenge status quo, you'll never get any better at what you currently do!

8. Trust Your Intellect:

While you do need to closely monitor your ego and any rigid opinions you may possess for a lack of openness, you also need to trust that you are capable of analyzing a situation and reaching your own informed conclusions.

In other words, trust yourself and your ability to assess situations, analyze data and draw intelligent & informed conclusions.

Ensure that you follow the above techniques, especially the ones involving others as amicably as you can, in a polite yet persuasive manner, else it just might backfire with a bang!

When using these techniques; it is important to keep in mind that you are engaged in a personal experiment. You are testing ideas in your everyday life. You are assimilating and building on them in the light of your actual experience.

Honing your critical thinking, much like any other skill viz. tennis, piano or photography calls for assiduous practice and the right attitude! Your practice will bring progress. And with progress, insightful thinking will slowly but surely become second-nature to you.
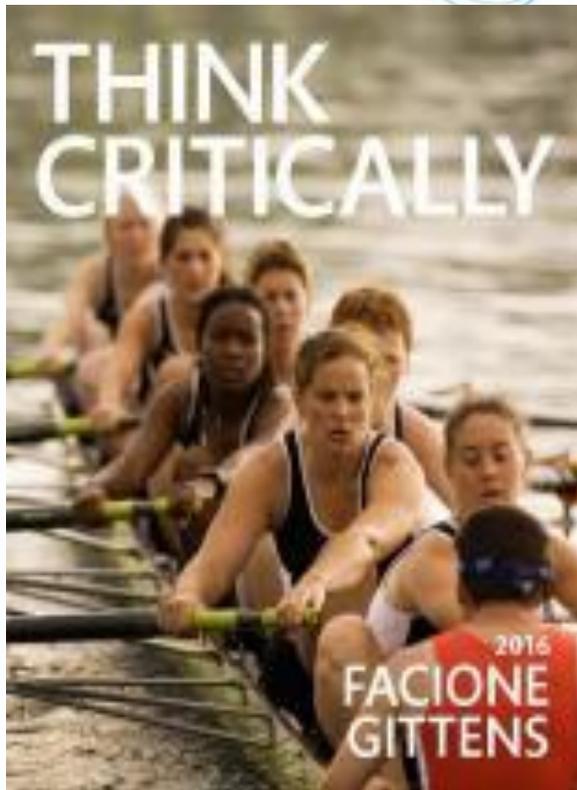
Here are ten positive examples of critical thinking in daily life (the examples are taken from from Facione, P. & Gittens C. *Think Critically*, Pearson Education)

1. A person trying to interpret an angry friend's needs, expressed through a rush of emotion, and give that friend some help and support

2. A manager trying to be as objective as possible when settling a dispute by summarizing the alternatives, with fairness to all sides to a disagreement

3. A team of scientists working with great precision through a complex experiment in an effort to gather and analyze data

4. A creative writer organizing ideas for the plot of a story and attending to the complex motivations and personalities of the fictional characters

5. A person running a small business trying to anticipate the possible economic and human consequences of various ways to increase sales or reduce costs

6. A general working out the tactical plans for a dangerous military mission.

7. A soccer coach working during halftime on new tactics for attacking the weaknesses of the other team when the match resumes

8. A student explaining to his or her peers the methodology used to reach a particular conclusion, or why and how a certain methodology or standard of proof was applied

9. An educator using clever questioning to guide a student to new insights

10. Police detectives, crime scene analysts, lawyers, judges, and juries systematically investigating, interrogating, examining, and evaluating the evidence in a trial as they seek justice

See. We all encounter opportunities in our daily lives to engage problems and decisions using strong critical thinking. So, everyone really needs to think ahead, to plan and to problem solve. Therefore, everyone needs critical thinking and that is why you should study it.