

# truth, rhetoric, and critical thinking

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**[abstract]** Despite the extraordinary amount of attention critical thinking has received in the last few decades, the teaching and fostering of critical thinking in higher education is largely failing, and critical thinking has become an empty buzzword. However, given its importance as an aim of education, it needs to be “refilled”, but that is possible only after identifying the causes of the current failure, *i.e.* the obstacles to fostering critical thinking. Three such obstacles are identified in this paper, two actual and one hypothetical: (1) the lack of clarity and agreement about what critical thinking is, (2) current teaching practice, and (3) social resistance to (fostering) critical thinking. Based on a critical analysis of these obstacles, this paper suggests to remove or avoid them by refocusing critical thinking “instruction” in higher education on the idea that critical thinking is aiming for truth.

## introduction<sup>1</sup>

Since a few decades the vast majority of universities and colleges mention teaching and fostering critical thinking as one of their secondary or even primary goals. Likewise, many philosophers of education consider critical thinking to be one of the main aims of education, if not *the* main aim.<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, hardly a new idea—the importance of critical thinking in education was stressed by Russel and Dewey in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by Mill in the 19<sup>th</sup>, by Kant, Hume, and Voltaire in the 18<sup>th</sup>, by Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup>, and by Socrates and others in Greek Antiquity (*e.g.* Hare 1999). What is new, however, is the extent and level of attention that critical thinking has received over the last three decades. Such sudden, seemingly excessive attention raises the suspicion that we are really dealing with some fad or fashion, that critical

1 Working paper — version of November 2013 (first minor revision, and postscript added). This and other working papers are available at [www.lajosbrons.net](http://www.lajosbrons.net)

2 There are several terms for (sets of) “skills” (if that is the right term) that largely overlap (or even coincide) with critical thinking, such as “intellectual autonomy”. I’m ignoring the subtle differences between those here, and will group all of them under the label “critical thinking”. With this provision in mind, most of the essays in Marples (1999), but particularly those by Hare, Winch, Walker, and Steutel & Spieker, argue for some variant or aspect of critical thinking as the main aim of education.

thinking is nothing but a fashionable, but effectively empty buzzword. The data certainly seems to confirm this: a Google Scholar search for “critical thinking” returns well over half a million results; adding “buzzword” to the search results in over 4500 hits.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to most fashions or buzzwords, the elevated attention for critical thinking is not purely cosmetic, however; and the notion is not inherently empty. If indeed critical thinking has become an empty buzzword, if indeed we are failing to teach and foster critical thinking—and I will be arguing that this is the case—then this is not because of a lack of ideas and good intentions, but because there are a number of (other) obstacles in the way. And given the aims and purposes of education, if indeed critical thinking has become empty, it needs refilling, but that is possible only after figuring out what caused it to become mere empty rhetoric in the first place (in the same way that you can only refill a leaky bucket after finding and plugging its holes).

The obstacles to fostering critical thinking, the reasons why we are failing to instill critical thinking in our students, are threefold (although that number is a bit arbitrary as the first two are closely related and could be split up otherwise or not at all). The first obstacle is the *lack of clarity and agreement* about what critical thinking is; the second is *current teaching practice*; and the third is *social resistance*. It should be noted, that while the first two of these obstacles or problems are actual, the third is hypothetical. This does not mean, of course, that it is not actual, but that I do *not know* whether it is actual. Furthermore, the third obstacle is revealed only by an application of (an aspect/tool of) critical thinking to itself, and because of that, cannot be properly explained without explaining what critical thinking is (and what it is good for) first—or in other words, without addressing the first obstacle first, so that is where I will start.

## What is critical thinking and what is it good for?

Of the aforementioned obstacles or reasons why critical thinking education is failing, the first, and perhaps most fundamental, is the lack of an unambiguous and uncontroversial answer to the question: *What is critical thinking and what is it good for?* This problem has two related aspects which can be summarized as (1) teachers don’t know, and (2) theorists don’t agree. Illustrative for the first, one-and-a-half decade ago, Richard Paul (2005) found that 89% of Californian faculty considered critical thinking to be one of their main aims of instruction, but only 19% could actually explain what critical thinking is (and there is little reason to assume that there has been substantial improvement since). This lack of good understanding of the nature of critical thinking is most likely partly caused by the second aspect of the problem, the lack of agreement among theorists.

Most theorists of critical thinking can be classified as a member of one of two (or three) “schools”, although the term “school” may suggest more internal homogeneity and/or

<sup>3</sup> Search results of October 8th, 2013: “critical thinking”, 580,000 hits; “critical thinking” and “buzzword”, 4,640 hits. See also the *Google Ngram* in the appendix.

organization than there really is. These two schools—I'll omit the scare quotes from now on—are affiliated with the two traditions of contemporary Western philosophy, *analytic* and *continental* philosophy, that differ in style, focus, and concerns. I will not attempt to define or describe these two traditions, but will focus on how they shaped the two (or three) different schools of critical thinking.

When critical thinking moved into the center of attention of theorists and professionals of education in the early 1980s, the term was already in use in both these philosophical traditions, but was associated with different thinkers and different ideas. In the analytic tradition it was primarily associated with reasoning skills and related abilities, and with the advocacy thereof by Russell, Dewey, and others in the first half of the 20th century. In the continental tradition it was mostly associated with ideas explored in critical pedagogy and critical theory, such as Marx's notion of *ideology* and the various further developments and elaborations thereof like Adorno and Horkheimer's *culture industry* and Gramsci's *cultural hegemony*; with somewhat related ideas developed in French philosophy, most importantly those by Foucault and Derrida; and with postmodernism. These different backgrounds and associations lead to two very different notions of critical thinking, represented by the aforementioned two schools. Unfortunately, these schools seem to ignore each other more than that they enter into debate, and occasional criticism of one school by the other generally boils down to a failure (or unwillingness) to take proper account of the difference in understanding of what critical thinking is (and what it is good for).<sup>4</sup> I'll assess some of the criticism later within the context of the second problem or obstacle (*i.e.* current teaching practice), but before discussing what became of the schools of critical thinking, their backgrounds need some further elucidation.

### *critical thinking as analysis*

Within the analytic tradition (broadly conceived) in Western philosophy, critical thinking is centered on a *normative* ideal of rationality; it is “first and foremost, a variety of *good thinking*” (Bailin & Siegel 2003, 181; emphasis in original). The primary purposes of critical thinking are to get your own arguments right, and to be able to analyze whether and where the arguments of others go wrong. Because of this focus on arguments and argumentation, critical thinking is often identified with *informal logic* (*e.g.* Siegel 1985) and explicitly opposed to rhetoric. For example, in a critical thinking textbook belonging to this school, Bowell and Kemp (2010) contrast persuading by means of giving reasons to persuading by means of rhetorical techniques that appeal to the emotions and, therefore, “can be manipulative and coercive” and that “should generally be avoided by those who aspire to think critically and to persuade by reason” (p. 7).

Related to the two primary purposes mentioned, key “skills” (if that is the appropriate term) of a critical thinker come in positive and negative versions. The critical thinker *positively*

<sup>4</sup> Notable criticism of the analytic-based school by the other is Kaplan (1994) and Brookfield (2005). For a typical response of the former school to various criticisms, see Bailin & Siegel (2003).

avoids fallacies and appeals to emotion—*i.e.* rhetoric—in her own thinking and writing and *negatively* spots them in the arguments of others. The critical thinker *positively* reasons logically (*i.e.* validly), and is *negatively* able to analyze the arguments of others and find errors in reasoning. The critical thinker is—*both* negatively and positively—able to uncover and question hidden and/or unwarranted assumptions in arguments, and *positively* to use this “uncovery” to fix her own arguments. Generalizing these positive and negative aspects, this school’s understanding of critical thinking can be summarized in two keywords: *rationality* and *analysis*. *Positively*, critical thinking is rationality; *negatively*, it is analysis. Because it is generally assumed that the negative versions of these skills entail their positive counterparts, the focus is on analysis (*i.e.* on analyzing arguments). An even shorter summary, therefore, could be that *critical thinking is analysis*.

Although John Dewey’s advocacy of critical thinking influenced the analytical school, Dewey was not an analytic philosopher but a pragmatist, and more importantly, an advocate of a more general educational reform. Moreover, he would not have endorsed the identification of critical thinking with informal logic typical of most of the analytical school. The *Socratic approach* Dewey championed is argument-based like that of the analytical school, but more (self-) inquisitive, and correspondingly, his understanding of critical thinking was much broader than what is captured in the keyword “analysis” above. Illustrative for the Socratic approach’s view on the nature and purpose of critical thinking, Martha Nussbaum (2010), one of its most prominent current defenders, suggests that the approach “produces” citizens that are “active, critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure” (p. 72). However, although Dewey had considerable influence on (primary) education in the US, the Socratic approach itself is rarely used in mainstream education and its influence on teaching critical thinking is negligible. Furthermore, because the scope of the Socratic approach is much broader than *just* teaching and fostering critical thinking, it never played a significant role in theoretical debates about teaching critical thinking either. (Nevertheless, the nature and purpose of critical thinking favored in the last section of this paper has much in common with that of the Socratic approach, even though my proposal is much more modest in scope.)

### *critical thinking as critique*

Among theorists (as opposed to teachers and students) of critical thinking, the analytical approach is the majority view (or school). Its main (theoretical)<sup>5</sup> opponent is a school of critical thinking based on critical theory and other currents and ideas in continental philosophy, and that—in response to the perceived dominance of the analytical school—is “attempting to put

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that most of this subsection describes the main *theoretical* alternative to the analytical approach, which is related but *not* identical to its main competitor in current teaching practice. About the latter, see the next section.

the *critical* back into *critical thinking*” (Brookfield 2005, vii). Continental philosophy is a rather broad and heterogeneous tradition, however, comprising many different and conflicting strands of thought. By implication, as an offshoot thereof, this school of critical thinking is equally heterogeneous. Nevertheless, critical thinking works as a unifying theme, tying (at least) some of the strands together.

*Critical theory* was established in the 1940s by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno and has been an important influence in continental philosophy and in the social sciences and humanities for much of the second half of the twentieth century. Given its influence, and given the current’s name, it should not come as a surprise that critical thinking was associated therewith. An important idea in critical theory is that of the *culture industry*, introduced by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The term *culture industry* denotes the commercial manufacturing, packaging and distribution of a certain perspective on reality. Through its products, such as movies, music, and other forms of (commercial) entertainment, the culture industry largely determines how we perceive and understand the world around us.

The notion of *culture industry* and associated ideas in critical theory are heavily influenced by Marx’s notion of *ideology* and Gramsci’s elaboration thereof, *cultural hegemony*. “Ideology” (in the relevant sense) was introduced in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ *The German Ideology*, written around 1846 but first published in 1932. The term gained a life of its own and is used in a number of different ways, both by Marx and Engels themselves, and by later Marxists and others. In its original form, the notion of ideology is captured most briefly in the claim that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (MEW3, 46; my translation). Ideology is the whole of values, beliefs, norms, and ways of seeing and thinking of the ruling class that through that class’s dominance (or *cultural hegemony* in Gramsci’s terms) become the (common sense) values, beliefs and so forth of all. The *culture industry* plays—according to Horkheimer and Adorno—a central role in this proliferation of the ruling (class’s) ideology.<sup>6</sup> In Marx’s and Marxist writings the term “ideology” sometimes also includes or overlaps with *superstructure*, the whole of political, legal, and religious institutions, but it seems to me that ideology and superstructure are best kept apart. The former refers to ideas, primarily, while superstructure refers to the crystallization or embodiment of those ideas in rules and other institutions.

Both ideology and superstructure serve the class interest of the ruling class, but there is another use of “ideology” (by Marx) that generalizes this idea. Ideology in that sense is the whole of values, beliefs and so forth that serves the class interest of *some* particular class. Hence, in addition to the dominant ideology of the ruling class, there are also other ideologies: working class ideology, middle class ideology, and so forth.<sup>7</sup> Ideology in this sense can be an especially

<sup>6</sup> Related ideas worth mentioning are Lukes’s (1974) “third face of power” and Lyotard’s meta-narratives (see below). Lukes’s notion refers to the power to shape thoughts and desires, to make people believe that their choices are free and autonomous, while they are really determined by some powerful force outside them.

<sup>7</sup> For a good and accessible explanation of this version of the notion of ideology (and its implications for ethical theory), see Wood (1993).

productive idea if it is separated from the notion of class and attached to social divisions in general. Ideology does not need to be class-based, but can also be based on gender, race, language, or any other social characteristic. For example, the exclusion of women from various professions and other aspects of social life has long been defended with the claim that women are less rational and more emotional and caring than men, and therefore, better suitable as housewives and mothers than as doctors or politicians. This perspective on women is a collection of values and beliefs (*etc.*) that served (and still serves, perhaps) the interests of men — it is male ideology. Considering this, the embracing by some feminist thinkers of exactly these stereotypes of women — assuming they are *mere* ideological stereotypes indeed — in defense of so called feminist ethics, feminist epistemology, feminist sociology and so forth, should raise some questions. What ideological factors are at play here? Whose interests are being served?<sup>8</sup>

It is especially that last question that is important: ideology serves to promote the interest of some social group (at the cost of others), and analyzing how ideology influences thoughts, writings, and arguments — among others by asking what or whose interests are being served — is one of the most important aspects of critical thinking. Ideology in this sense also provides the link with some of the other of this school's theoretical roots that similarly focus on the socio-political contexts of beliefs, especially of those beliefs that are given the status of “knowledge”. Michel Foucault, for example, stressed the role of power in the generation and establishment of knowledge, and Bruno Latour showed how social processes and pressures influence (or even determine) what is declared scientific knowledge and what not.<sup>9</sup> Latour's work especially, became associated with *social constructionism*, a movement in postmodern thought according to which all our knowledge is socially constructed.<sup>10</sup>

Social constructionists generally argue that because all our knowledge is socially constructed, reality or the world *as we know and perceive it* is socially constructed. *Radical* (or anti-realist) forms of constructionism tend to omit the qualification “as we know and perceive it” and thus argue that reality itself is a social construction. This view has been shown to be incoherent by a number of philosophers — most influentially, by Donald Davidson (*e.g.* 1974) and Paul Boghossian (2006) — but remains oddly popular among scientist with a postmodernist orientation in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>11</sup> According to *moderate* (or realist) forms of constructionism, on the other hand, construction does not occur in a vacuum: there must be

**8** I do not know the answers to these questions. This is merely an example of an application of the notion of ideology to another kind of social division than class. For a critical and influential discussion of this issue — albeit without explicit mention of the role of ideology — see Nussbaum (1994).

**9** These themes play a central role in many of Foucault's writings, but probably most explicitly in *Surveiller et punir (Discipline and Punish)* (1975). For an introduction to this aspect of Foucault's thought, see Rouse (2003). Latour's best known work is *Laboratory Life* (Latour & Woolgar, 1979).

**10** The term “social construction” (in the relevant sense) was introduced in Berger & Luckmann (1966). Aside from that book, and Latour & Woolgar's (see previous footnote), an important influence on social constructionism was Kuhn's slightly earlier work (1962) in the history of science.

**11** A notable exception within philosophy is Rorty (see especially his 1972). For an accessible, critical discussion of Rorty's anti-realism, see chapter 4 of Farrell (1994).

“something”, some external reality, that perceived realities are constructed out of. Moderate constructionists disagree, however, about whether and to what extent it is possible to pierce through the process of construction, whether and to what extent we can perceive and know (aspects of) external reality itself, rather than the socially constructed reality as it appears.<sup>12</sup> Latour himself argued against radical constructionism and versions of moderate constructionism that put external reality forever out of reach. “The question was never to get away from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism” (2004, 231; emphasis in original).

“Ideology” and related notions such as “cultural hegemony” and “culture industry” influenced Jean-François Lyotard, a central figure in French postmodernist thought, in a very different way. Lyotard (1979) defined postmodernism as a critical attitude towards, or even rejection of *metanarratives* or *grand narratives*, dominant “stories” (or discourses) that explain and support Western modernity (such as myths of rationality and progress, the superiority of modern science and Western civilization, and so forth). Such grand narratives are ideological in the sense that they bolster, explain, and justify the *status quo*, and thus serve the interests of those who profit therefrom. Although Lyotard aimed his arrows at the metanarratives that provide “total” perspectives on reality, the notion has also been applied on a more local scale to large, dominant theoretical frameworks in science (more often as “grand narrative” than as “metanarrative”).<sup>13</sup> This postmodernist critique of *local* grand narratives blended with earlier antipositivist currents and ideas in the social sciences. Antipositivism rejects universal theories – or even all theory – and is mainly associated with Dilthey’s and Weber’s *Verstehen* (or interpretive sociology), but is also connected with hermeneutics, with humanistic approaches in the social sciences, and with Paul Feyerabend’s (1975) rejection of a single, universal scientific method. However, Jürgen Habermas (1981) and others have pointed out that postmodernism is just another grand (or meta-) narrative, and the same is true even for the notion of grand (or meta-) narrative itself. That being the case, the notion self-destructs, leaving nothing but a general skepticism of theory (or any kinds of universal claims to truth) in its wake.

A further influential strand of continental thought is Jacques Derrida’s (1967; 1971) *deconstruction*, which aims at revealing and overturning the inherent, but often hidden oppositions between pairs of concepts and/or the hierarchies between them (an idea he inherited from de Saussure’s and Lévi-Strauss’s *structuralism*). It is important to note that deconstruction can expose oppositions and the mis- and preconceptions they conceal, but that in doing so it necessarily makes use of and/or newly creates further concepts that involve further oppositions. In other words, deconstruction cannot move outside language; in Derrida’s

<sup>12</sup> This, as well as the realism - anti-realism debate itself, has been a central issue in much of Western philosophy since Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* at least, but also in Buddhist philosophy, for example. For a very brief introduction to this issue in both, see my (Brons 2013).

<sup>13</sup> These local grand narratives may seem very similar to Kuhn’s (1962) *paradigms*, but there is an important difference: while *paradigms* are models of “good” science, and accepted theoretical frameworks, grand narratives are the stories – or myths – justifying these.

words: “there is nothing outside the text”.<sup>14</sup> Deconstruction then, seems to side with radical constructionism in rejecting external reality, and by entailment, of a notion of truth as some kind of correspondence with that external reality, and although this is perhaps the most natural reading of Derrida, it is not the only option: in line with the above quote by Latour, rather than as a corollary of giving up truth, deconstruction could also be seen as a tool for getting closer to truth (e.g. Farrell 1994; Brons 2013).

Tied together, these strands of continental thought—Marx and critical theory, constructionism, Foucault, Derrida, and so forth—are sometimes captured under the heading of a single keyword: *critique* (not to be confused with “criticism”). Critique is exposing ideological preconceptions, social constructions, the role of power in knowledge claims, grand narratives, the preconceptions concealed by unconscious conceptual hierarchies, and so forth. In other words, *critical thinking is critique*. An important difference with the analytical school is that critique or critical analysis is not necessarily applied to (obvious) arguments, but to any kind of text or discourse, and even to non-textual phenomena such as architecture, painting, or music.

Despite the single keyword, the “critical school” is (or was)<sup>15</sup> a very heterogeneous school. Different sub-schools focus on different influences: some lean more towards Marx, others towards constructionism, and so forth. The main internal division within this school, already implied above, is that between *realism* and *anti-realism*. The latter sub-school gives up external or objective reality and the notion of truth that comes with it, while the former does not, and this has far-reaching consequences. The realist’s attitude towards rhetoric is much like that of the analytical school: it is to be avoided in one’s own thought and writing and to be exposed—by means of critique—in the thought and writings of others. Thus, like the analytical school, the realist sub-school involves both positive and negative aspects. And like the analytical school, it aims for truth: the purpose of critique is getting closer to truth (“getting closer to facts” in Latour’s words), getting it right. The anti-realist sub-school, on the other hand, is entirely negative. There is no truth, no getting it right, and any critical exposure of ideological preconceptions and so forth only gives way to other ideological preconceptions (*etc.*). Hence, there is no positive aspect of critical thinking in the form of avoiding preconceptions, avoiding “error”, avoiding rhetoric—there is nothing *but* rhetoric.

An important development that occurred largely outside the critical school in a strict sense, is that the radical/anti-realist sub-school spawned a third major approach to critical thinking. This third approach is a school even less than the analytical and critical schools, mostly because it inherited a highly skeptical attitude towards theory from postmodernism, its main influence, and because of that, lacks any *explicit* foundations. This *post-critical* current (as I shall call it) is similar to the anti-realist sub-school of the critical school, but with a stronger focus on postmodernism, and without the more political critique of critical theory (in a broad

<sup>14</sup> “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (1967 p. 227; my translation).

<sup>15</sup> The “culture wars” of the 1990s lead to a radicalization of the critical school, marginalizing its more moderate, realist branch(es).

sense). Contrary to the analytical and critical schools, the post-critical current has much stronger ties to literary theory than to philosophy, and has also for that reason (in addition to its anti-theoreticality) been almost completely silent in theoretical debates about critical thinking. It is, however, very influential on current teaching practice, as will become clear in the next section.<sup>16</sup>

### *What is critical thinking good for?*

The quote by Stephen Brookfield (in the beginning of the previous subsection) about “attempting to put the *critical* back into *critical thinking*” continues: “by emphasizing how thinking critically is an inherently political process” (2005, vii). The latter should be obvious now. Marx’s notion of ideology, Gramsci’s cultural hegemony, but also Foucault’s work on the relations between power and knowledge are undeniably political. Critical thinking as critique (*i.e.* the critical school) is indeed inherently political, but the analytical school of critical thinking has close ties to politics as well. To the question “What is critical thinking good for?”, *both* schools give political answers (among others). These are different (but not contradictory) answers, however.

The analytical school of critical thinking is associated with liberalism or liberal democracy. This is most obvious from the fact that the necessity of critical thinking for democratic citizenship is one of the most often mentioned purposes of critical thinking within this school. To give just one example of such a statement:

To the extent that we value democracy, we must be committed to the fostering of the abilities and dispositions of critical thinking. Democracy can flourish just to the extent that its citizenry is able to reason well regarding political issues and matters of public policy, scrutinize the media, and generally meet the demands of democratic citizenship, many of which require the abilities and dispositions constitutive of critical thinking. (Bailin & Siegel 2003, 189)

The necessity of critical thinking for democracy is not an exclusive idea of the analytical school, however, but is even more important to the Socratic approach (Dewey 1916; Nussbaum, 2010). Socrates himself considered his role as a critical thinker *and* as a teacher of critical thinking to be like that of a “gadfly” sent by the Gods to wake up democracy, which he compared to a “well-bred horse that has become sluggish because of its size” and which, because of that, is in *need* to be roused by critical thinkers (Plato, *Apology*, 30e).

The critical school, heterogeneous as it is, cannot be identified easily with a single political current, but there seems to be a more or less shared political purpose, even though different

<sup>16</sup> In the introduction to this section I repeatedly wrote “two (or three) schools”. That third is the post-critical current. It is bracketed because it constitutes a school even less than the other two, and because it has (by its own choice) no voice in theoretical debates about critical thinking.

thinkers and sub-schools will describe it differently.<sup>17</sup> Adopting Gramsci's term, the primary purpose of critical thinking (according to the critical school) is *opposing hegemony*. While the political purpose of critical thinking as analysis can be characterized as positive — contributing to democracy — the purpose of critical thinking as critique is negative — opposing, exposing, and perhaps even fighting hegemony.

Hegemony (or cultural hegemony) was mentioned above as an elaboration of Marx and Engels's notion of ideology. Gramsci distinguished two means of oppression or control, two tools the state and/or the ruling class can use to control the masses. Coercive power is the most obvious, but cultural hegemony is much more efficient and effective. Cultural hegemony refers to the masses' "spontaneous" consent to and adoption of the values, desires, ideas, beliefs, perspectives, knowledge claims and so forth that serve the interests of the state and/or some ruling class (see Gramsci 1971, I.1.2 & II.2.17). It should be obvious that hegemony is the enemy of democracy: by controlling ideas and desires, by limiting (apparent) options, by softly forcing people to internalize the values and objectives of the state and/or ruling class, by programming "free" choice, hegemony makes (real) democracy impossible.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the positive purpose of democratic citizenship and the negative purpose of opposing hegemony (the enemy of democracy) are not contradictory purposes: they are complementary, or even entailments of each other. However, from the critical perspective (*i.e.* that of critique), the positive purpose is too weak or insufficient, too accepting — and thus too uncritical — of options presented and of the *status quo*. According to the critical school, the analytical school's (often implicit) suggestion that "citizens who make an informed choice between options outlined by authorities have fully exercised their critical capacities" makes critical thinking an ally of hegemony, rather than a friend of democracy (Kaplan 1994, 209).

Critical thinking does not just have a political purpose (or political purposes). There are two other purposes that are often mentioned, and that most theorists in both schools seem to agree upon. The first of these is based on Kant's ideas of autonomy, respect for (or as) persons, and human dignity. We are morally required to treat people with respect as persons, as people who can think for themselves, as competent, rational, self-responsible human beings. But this means that people need to be enabled to actually think for themselves (rather than have hegemony thinking for them, the critical school might add), to be(come) self-responsible human beings (*etc.*), which means to be(come) critical thinkers.

The second and related (non-political) purpose of critical thinking does not focus on the thinkers, but on the educators. At the very least, education is supposed to prepare persons for adulthood, for some — however limited — socio-economic and intellectual independence, and

**17** Although the post-critical current developed out of part of the critical school, it does not belong to that school and does not share its broad political vision. Rather, the post-critical current, like most of postmodernism, is anti-political (which means that it implicitly accepts (if not supports) the *status quo* and thus effectively sides with conservatism).

**18** Democracy is based on the idea that citizens are free and rational; *i.e.* that they make their political choices freely and rationally. Hegemony, however, makes citizens *both unfree and irrational* by unconsciously limiting or even programming choice.

that requires at least some intellectual autonomy (some ability to think for oneself), *i.e.* some capability of critical thinking. Teaching critical thinking is and should, therefore, be a central aim of education. Furthermore, education is also intended to prepare students for at least some of the paths open to adults in our societies, and many of those require critical thinking. Coming up with an accurate medical diagnose requires critical thinking, but so does figuring out what is wrong with a car or a computer. Education may also have the purpose of enabling persons to take part in and contribute to some of the intellectual traditions of our societies such as science and art, and certainly no science is possible without critical thinking, and no new developments in the arts would have occurred if it wasn't for critical thinkers. The purpose of critical thinking then, is *independence*, the ability to independently participate in (and even contribute to) society, which involves both intellectual and socio-economic independence. And from the purposes of education it follows that — as educators — we are obliged to promote and foster this.<sup>19</sup>

Aside from the two main schools of critical thinking, there are a few outliers. Of those, Richard Paul is probably one of the most noticeable. Paul's understanding of critical thinking is much closer to that of the analytical school than to that of the critical school, but deviates from the former in one key respect: while according to the analytical school critical thinking is a more or less universal skill that does not significantly differ between disciplines, Paul (*e.g.* 2005) argues that it does. Within the discipline of biology, for example, critical thinking is thinking biologically (*i.e.* thinking like a biologist). This, of course, leads to a very different answer to the question what critical thinking is good for than the answers given above: the purpose of critical thinking is “to acquire a rich and extensive knowledge” of some discipline to assure that it becomes “a permanent acquisition in the mind” (p. 31). This is not a widely shared point of view, however, and because the underlying understanding of critical thinking differs significantly from those introduced above as well, I will further ignore it.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the converse of the question what critical thinking is good for, is the question “What—if anything—is critical thinking bad for?” According to the critical school, critical thinking as analysis is bad for (real) democracy because it insufficiently teaches students real intellectual autonomy: it stops at evaluating the options provided by authority (or hegemony), but does not question those. This, however, is really an answer to a different question, namely: “What is a bad approach to teaching critical thinking bad for?”, and it is, moreover, an answer that is in need of some independent verification if it is to be more than an empty accusation. A related charge is that teaching critical thinking by promoting rationality favors one particular

<sup>19</sup> On the aims and purposes of education (including the aims of intellectual autonomy and critical thinking), see Marples (1999). On these purposes of critical thinking, see also, for example, Siegel (1985).

<sup>20</sup> This should not be understood as a rejection of Paul's ideas. If he is right, then his approach may be useful to teach various subjects. However, this has relatively little to do with critical thinking as it is understood by the two (or three) main schools, and as it is understood in this paper. (And it is for largely the same reason that the Socratic approach, advocating an even more far-reaching educational reform, is *mostly* ignored in this paper.)

style of thought and thus is bad for intellectual diversity. This charge is difficult to make sense of, however, not in the least because it itself depends on—even is an example of—critical thinking. It is also sometimes claimed that critical thinking is bad for creativity, but this charge seems to be based on a lack of understanding of creative processes. Practical creative thinking is critical thinking about possible solutions for a problem, and artistic creativity is nearly always the product of concepts and ideas that result from critical thinking processes.<sup>21</sup> There is in fact, one thing, but only one thing that critical thinking is bad for: hegemony.

### from critical thinking to informal logic and rhetoric

The second obstacle to teaching critical thinking was identified in the introduction as “current teaching practice”. Courses in critical thinking in the US and its sphere of influence are—with few exceptions—offered either by philosophy departments or by English departments, and these departments have different interests and concerns. Richard Paul (2005) observed that “critical thinking courses taught in philosophy departments most likely substitute either formal or informal logic for critical thinking” and that “such a course taught in an English department probably focuses on persuasive writing and rhetoric” (p. 36). In terms of the schools and currents described above, philosophy departments tend to teach critical thinking as analysis, while English departments are affiliated with the post-critical current.<sup>22</sup> An obvious explanation for this difference is that philosophers are primarily concerned with arguments, and thus naturally drift towards the argument-based understanding of the analytical school, while English departments are (among others) concerned with literature, narrative, discourse, and other kinds of texts and contexts that are not primarily focused on argument, and therefore, drift towards the schools and currents that offers theories and tools to analyze those. Of those, the post-critical current became most important partly because of its affiliation with literary theory, but probably partly also because the political roots of the critical school were considered a liability by some.

Practice is (always) less clear-cut than theory, however. Not every aspect of current teaching practice can be explained *just* by referring to theoretical foundations (or lack thereof), and neither is the sectarian division complete. For example, persuasive writing courses and similar courses related to critical thinking taught by English departments usually also cover the fallacies, and conversely, critical thinking courses taught by philosophy departments *sometimes* mention aspects of critique (or adopt aspects of the Socratic approach). Despite such occasional boundary-crossings the sectarian division is problematic (see also the last section of this paper),

<sup>21</sup> For a brief summary (with references) of the criticism that critical thinking endorses one particular (rationalistic) style of thought and counters creative thinking, and a response thereto, see Bailin & Siegel (2003).

<sup>22</sup> The critical school does not play an important role in current teaching practice anymore, although it once did. The best chance to find a critique-based critical thinking course at a US university or college is probably in a pedagogy department.

but an even more serious problem is that course content in either school or current is but a pale shadow of the collection of theories, tools, and ideas in its background.

Courses in critical thinking as analysis usually focus on informal logic, and particularly on the aforementioned “negative aspect” of discovering flaws in the arguments of others. This focus on the negative seems to be based on the (implicit) assumption that the “positive aspect” of avoiding flaws in one’s own reasoning automatically follows from the negative aspect, but, although it might seem plausible at first glance, there is little ground for this assumption, and especially philosophers should be aware of that. The very purpose of philosophical debate – and arguably, without such debate there would be no philosophy – is to point out the flaws in other philosopher’s arguments that they did not and could not find themselves. The history of philosophy is a long series of expositions of flaws in arguments and responses in the form of new arguments, and nothing in that history suggests that the ability to expose flaws in others’ arguments entails the ability to avoid flaws in one’s own.<sup>23</sup>

A focus on the negative, furthermore, risks passivity. If critical thinking is all about the *negative* analysis of others’ arguments, then it risks becoming nothing but a *passive* waiting for the next object(s) of scrutiny. Then indeed, it may seem to follow that “citizens who make an informed choice between options outlined by authorities have fully exercised their critical capacities” (Kaplan 1994, 209; see above). But that is not sufficient. Critical thinking also includes the ability to question whatever is *behind* the options given, and to find (and scrutinize) further options (that were not given). Of course, critical thinking as analysis also includes this – one of the analytical skills mentioned above is to uncover hidden assumptions – but uncovering assumptions is the most difficult (and least formalizable or mechanical) part of critical thinking and is, for that reason, neglected in critical thinking courses. The consequence is that – at worst – what is left of critical thinking in courses taught by the analytical school is a sterile numbering and/or diagramming of arguments and checking them against the list of fallacies (Kaplan 1994, 206), but even at best, actual course content does not extend much beyond this.<sup>24</sup> (If this sketches a bleak picture of critical thinking education based in one school, the picture I’m about to sketch of the other is bleaker still.)

The background of critical thinking as taught by most English departments is *post-critical*; that is, it is based on a postmodernist off-shoot of the radical/anti-realist branch of the critical school, and is, therefore, anti-realist, anti-theoretical, and anti-political. Apparently plausible

**23** A related problem is a tendency in analytic philosophy to confuse critical thinking with a lack of charity (combined with a lack of recognition of the latter as such); that is, to identify being critical with (mis-) interpreting and reconstructing arguments to stress *apparent* flaws, and thus, to interpret arguments as weakly (rather than as strongly) as possible. Consequence hereof is a blurring (or even effective disappearance) of the line between critical response and straw-man argument.

**24** Aggravating the problem is that this is generally thought by means of short and artificial examples that present relatively clear and single arguments (with or without clear and single fallacies). The purpose of the analytical skills that are supposed to be taught, however, is application to “real life” texts and arguments, and those are generally longer and more convoluted, and there is little reason to believe that students can readily re-apply skills learned by means of simple examples to much more complicated contexts.

explanations for this postmodernist orientation are that truth, (objective) facts, and grand theories do not play an important role in literature, that the anti-realist rejection of any reality beyond texts (broadly conceived) chimes well with the focus and concerns of much of the humanities, and that the implication that there is nothing but rhetoric provides support for the centrality thereof in writing (and speaking) courses. It is no accident then, that critical thinking courses (or derivatives thereof) taught by English departments are generally called “persuasive writing” – that is what they are about: persuasion, by any means available.

The rejection of objective/external reality and truth implies, as mentioned, that there is nothing but (or beyond) rhetoric, and rhetoric is, therefore, the key ingredient in a persuasive writing course. One of the most influential ideas in rhetoric is that of Aristotle’s *modes of persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos* – roughly, the credibility of the rhetor (speaker or writer), the appeal to the emotions of the audience, and the persuasive quality of the argument.

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. (...) Persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions. (...) Persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question. (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a; translation: Barnes (ed.) 1984, p. 2155)

If there is no such thing as objective truth, or getting it right – except perhaps as a misleading metaphor for convincing oneself – then “proofs” can only be *apparently* true, and are no different from the other modes of persuasion. All three modes are tools to convince, to get one’s way, and they are all legitimate tools. And with truth and objectivity, falsity goes, and liars and impostors are nothing but unskilled rhetoricians. The purpose then, of proper references and “reliable” data sources is merely the credibility of the author (“building *ethos*”). Arguments do not need to be valid or well-supported, and proofs only need to *appear* to be true, and thus even fallacies are not necessarily to be avoided, but may be used, as long as this is done in such a way that the audience doesn’t notice. And any manipulative appeal to emotions is allowed, as long as it works. This is an extreme view, of course, and it is rarely taught as such *explicitly* (but it may very well be the implicit message of most persuasive writing courses and textbooks). Furthermore, it is generally tempered somewhat by course ingredients that focus more on argument than on rhetoric. Most important among these are an overview of some of the most common fallacies, and *the Toulmin model*.

The popularity of Stephen Toulmin’s (1958) approach to argumentation (and argument analysis) is probably partly due to the resonance of his rejection of universalism (or “absolutism”) with a similar stance in postmodernist thought, and partly due to the fact that “real life” arguments are often (much) more easily analyzed in Toulmin’s terms than by means of the tools of formal logic. Toulmin distinguished three different essential components of

arguments, and three additional components. The three essential components are (1) the *claim* or conclusion; (2) the *ground*, evidence, fact, or data on which that claim rests; and (3) the *warrant* that connects the ground with the claim. For example, the claim that “hegemony is immoral” is connected to its ground “hegemony frustrates the development and precedence of the virtues” by means of the warrant “any frustration of the development and precedence of the virtues is immoral”. Obviously, this warrant is in need of some *backing* and a *qualifier*, two of Toulmin’s three additional components; particularly, it needs a qualification like “from the perspective of virtue ethics”. Problems in the argument, such as insufficient warrant and/or backing, or a lacking qualifier, are revealed by questioning the warrant. Perhaps, the very essence of critical thinking can be summarized in that maxim: *question the warrant*, but unfortunately this is not a common perspective in persuasive writing courses.

The general disregard for analytical skills in persuasive writing — *i.e.* the skills involved in questioning (and even identifying) the warrant — is not just a consequence of a postmodernist rejection of truth in favor of rhetoric, however. (Probably that would be more theoretical than the — equally postmodernist — anti-theoretical attitude of much of the post-critical current allows.) It is also related to the explicit focus on writing (and speaking, in some courses). But, the near exclusive focus on writing — at the expense of teaching the necessary critical/analytical skills — is that a course in persuasive writing is (generally)<sup>25</sup> just that: it teaches how to persuade rather than how to argue, or how to convince rather than how to be right. Students do not learn how to analyze arguments or discourses, how to pick up on ideological distortions, how to detect flaws in reasoning or rhetorical tricks. Critical thinking thus is voided not just of the “critical” aspect, but of “thinking” as well, and degenerates into trying to get one’s way.<sup>26</sup>

## rhetoric and ideology in critical thinking

There are no inherent limits to critical thinking, and certainly, critical thinking itself is not excluded from critical (self-) reflection. In fact, to proceed beyond the mere identification of obstacles and things that went wrong — that is, to find underlying causes and hints towards solutions — critical thinking *needs* to be applied to itself. Lacking single, coherent answers to the questions *what* critical thinking is, and *how* it should be done, pragmatic answers will have to do for now. Since critical thinking is not a single, clear argument, but a discourse (or collection of discourses, actually) the tools of the critical school are more *useful* than the argument-based tools of the analytical school, thus that is the approach that I will adopt here. This means, that what I would like to put into question is whether and to what extent critical thinking (in any of its various forms and guises) is ideology; is an instrument of hegemony; and so forth; and what

<sup>25</sup> Of course, a name is just a name, and it is entirely possible that some courses called “persuasive writing” do not exactly correspond to the picture sketched here. Nevertheless, the name itself, because of the focus it implies, is part of the problem described.

<sup>26</sup> And this, of course, makes the designation “post-critical” all the more appropriate for the ideas underlying this teaching approach.

— if anything— this means. (Of course, in a short paper like this, there is insufficient space to deal with all relevant questions of this kind, or even answer one of them in depth, but even a somewhat shallow and selective critique may be sufficient for the present purpose.)

Of the concepts and theories of critique, Gramsci's notion of *cultural hegemony* deserves special attention as it was mentioned above that critical thinking is the enemy of hegemony. Cultural hegemony was roughly defined as the "spontaneous" (*i.e.* uncritical)<sup>27</sup> consent to and adoption of the values, desires, ideas, beliefs, perspectives, knowledge claims and so forth that serve the interests of the state and/or the ruling class. A critical thinker will resist the uncritical, thoughtless adoption of *any* value or idea, and will thus resist hegemony. But if critical thinking is the enemy of hegemony, perhaps even its main enemy,<sup>28</sup> then it should be expected that hegemony will resist critical thinking as well. And if that is the case, hegemony presents a formidable obstacle to fostering critical thinking. However, hegemony is not an organization, institution, or conspiracy; it is the largely unconscious dissemination and persistence— as "common sense"— of the dominant values and beliefs in a society; that is, the values and beliefs of those in political, economic, and social control, the ruling elite. And this raises the question: How can hegemony *resist* anything if it is just that?

Hegemony is not a thing, but the name (or a metaphor) for a collection of social processes (in the same way that Adam Smith's "invisible hand" is not a real hand). Hegemony's resistance should, therefore, be sought in those processes and the actors involved. Critical thinking threatens hegemony because it questions its fundamental values and beliefs, but those values and beliefs are held by people (as common sense values and beliefs) and critical thinking thus poses a potential threat to *their* values and beliefs (and if hegemony is effective, these are deeply held values and beliefs). And these "representatives" of hegemony (and that is virtually everyone in a hegemonic society) resist the critical threat to *their* values and beliefs, and thus to hegemony.

One's initial reflex to this account of hegemony and critical thinking may be that it is largely irrelevant. It sketches some kind of totalitarian dictatorship, not the liberal democracies we live in. But like any (common sense) belief, this belief itself may be hegemonic. A critical thinker, at least, will not uncritically accept it.

Hegemony can only be public if its public face corresponds to its real structure, or in other words, if the hegemonic common sense values are favorable towards an openly hegemonic society. In such a society, common sense would be that it is wrong to doubt common sense and the (political, economic, social, *etc.*) *status quo*. Moreover, it would be wrong to do so, because the common sense belief is that hegemony is right. This does not mean that some accidentally hegemonic political system or political ideology is considered right, but that hegemony *itself* is

<sup>27</sup> Intellectual laziness probably plays a key role in hegemony. Hegemonic values and beliefs are accepted "spontaneously" by the masses according to Gramsci, and that certainly suggests that intellectual laziness is either the chief ally of hegemony or even an essential part thereof.

<sup>28</sup> Hegemony *depends* on the uncritical — "spontaneous" — acceptance of values and ideas, and therefore, critical thinking opposes the very core of hegemony. For that reason it seems plausible indeed that critical thinking is the *main* enemy of hegemony.

considered right; that is, that the values and beliefs that serve the interests of the state and/or the ruling class are the inherently right values and beliefs for all, *just because they serve the interests of the state and/or ruling class (i.e. just because they are hegemonic)*. It is doubtful that such a society can exist: hegemony always needs ideology to hide behind. It is that ideology then, that gives the public reason why the hegemonic values and beliefs are right for all. Hegemony itself is never public; in fact, it is a necessary hegemonic core belief that there is no hegemony.

Does this mean then, that (actual; not theoretical)<sup>29</sup> liberal democracy is just an ideological cover for hegemony? If Gramsci is right that (common sense) values and beliefs (*etc.*) are largely determined by hegemony—let’s call this “*the Gramscian Thesis*”—and hegemony necessarily involves an ideological cover, then the answer to the question seems to be “yes”. Conversely, if the answer to the question is “yes”, that would certainly be strong evidence for the pervasive influence of hegemony, and thus for the Gramscian Thesis. By implication, the two theses (that (actual) liberal democracy is an ideological cover for hegemony and the more general Gramscian Thesis) come or go together.

The Gramscian Thesis is problematic, however, because it is unfalsifiable: it cannot be proven wrong, or so it seems at least. The most obvious falsifying evidence would be the lack of experience of hegemony, but if we do not consciously experience hegemony at work in our societies, does that mean that they are not hegemonic, or that hegemony is hiding? The defender of the Thesis would give the second answer because hegemony *cannot* be public (*i.e.* it must be hiding), and therefore, the apparently falsifying evidence turns out not to be falsifying at all. But if the Gramscian Thesis is unfalsifiable, does that mean that it is unscientific, or perhaps even meaningless? If we accept Popper’s falsification criterion, this certainly seems to be the case, but a critical thinker should not hurry to conclusions, and we have not yet established that the most obvious way of falsification is the *only possible* way of falsification.<sup>30</sup>

A second problem with the Thesis is that it is rather vague: “hegemony *largely* determines values and beliefs”. This vagueness could be remedied easily by eliminating the italicized qualification, but that would result in an absurd dichotomy: the resulting thesis would be either false or true, meaning that hegemony would either be absent or complete. This is very implausible, however. More likely hegemonic control is somewhere in between negligible and *near-total*. The question then, is not whether the Gramscian Thesis is *just* true or false, but to *what extent*, or in other words, to what extent hegemony determines values and beliefs, and to what extent (actual) liberal democracy is an ideological cover for hegemony.

<sup>29</sup> This distinction is important. Democracy as it is supposed to be *in theory* is anti-hegemonic (see above); it is “democracy” as it really functions in practice that *may* be an ideological cover for hegemony.

<sup>30</sup> A critical thinker does not necessarily have to accept Popper’s falsification criterion either, and in fact, only few adherents of the critical school will do so, which would imply that to much of that school the unfalsifiability “problem” is not a problem for the Gramscian Thesis at all. It would be a problem for the analytical school, however, and since I’m not taking sides between schools (yet), it is, therefore, an issue that cannot be ignored.

If the Gramscian Thesis would be true, what would that imply? Particularly, what would that imply for critical thinking and teaching thereof (because that is what this paper is about)? As explained above, critical thinking has a two-faced political purpose: fostering liberal democracy and fighting hegemony; and because hegemony makes (real) democracy impossible, these two faces are complementary. If critical thinking is necessary for democratic citizenship — as this political purpose suggests — then the thesis that (actual) liberal democracy is an ideological cover for hegemony (*i.e.* the political corollary of the Gramscian Thesis) implies that critical thinking (as part and pillar of democracy) is ideology as well. But that seems obviously contradictory: critical thinking is the enemy of hegemony; how can it be part of its ideological cover as well? There only is a contradiction, however, if the rhetoric and practice of critical thinking coincide, but the previous section(s) give(s) little reason to believe that that is the case. If the Gramscian Thesis would be true, then it would be the *rhetoric* of critical thinking that is part of hegemony's ideological cover, while the *practice* would be such that whatever passes for "critical thinking" does not actually foster critical thinking, or at least not to such an extent that it threatens hegemony. That, arguably, is exactly the case. The analytical school teaches a passive and harmless response to options handed down from above, and does not even teach how to do that well; and the post-critical approach confuses critical thinking with trying to get one's way, and by giving up truth gives up any ground for critical judgment other than rhetorical skill. In other words, the current practice *is* harmless, can be no threat to hegemony, and that means that the rhetoric of critical thinking (for democracy and/or against hegemony) is empty, exactly what would be the case if the Gramscian Thesis would be true.<sup>31</sup> This would only be evidence for the Thesis, however, if there is no other explanation for the debilitating degeneration of critical thinking in (most of) current educational practice, but the previous section showed that there *are* other explanations, namely those related to disciplinary interests and concerns. Hence, we still do not have an answer to the question whether the Gramscian Thesis is true or false. Perhaps, we do not need an answer to that question, however. It may only *seem* that we need an answer because hegemony conflicts with our beliefs about what society should be like.

From any prevalent perspective in moral theory, hegemony is immoral — for Kantians because it denies human autonomy and dignity; for Utilitarians because it ignores suffering and does not take everyone's interests and happiness into account (but only those of the state and/or the ruling elite); for Contractarians because hegemony could not possibly be (contractually) agreed upon; for Virtue Ethicist because hegemony frustrates the development and precedence of virtue(s). The immorality of hegemony places a heavy burden on teachers. Education plays a key role in the dissemination of hegemonic values and beliefs and its covering ideology; and teachers, therefore, are the foot-soldiers of hegemony (to the extent that the Gramscian Thesis is true, of course). This obviously conflicts with the aim of education to foster

<sup>31</sup> Although the term "hegemony" does not occur in chapter 2 of Nussbaum's *Not for Profit* (2010), and she is by no means a Gramscian, her account of "education for profit" reads much like an account of the hegemonic repression of critical thinking.

intellectual autonomy (*i.e.* critical thinking; see above), but that aim too, may be mere empty rhetoric, ideology. Let us assume that it is not; then what are a teacher's options? Either to be a foot-soldier of some immoral force, or to take the aims of education seriously and teach students to think. But to knowingly serve some immoral force is to be immoral oneself, and therefore, there really is only one option: to fight hegemony. This being so, it seems even more necessary to find an answer to the question whether the Gramscian Thesis is true or false, whether — and to what extent — we are under the influence of hegemony. That, however, is not the case, we may *want* to know, but the answer should not matter.

If the Gramscian Thesis is true, if we are living in a hegemonic society, then it is our moral duty as teachers to enable our students to resist hegemony, which means to help them to become critical thinkers. If the Gramscian Thesis is false, if we are living in a free and truly democratic society (of free-thinking, critical individuals), then from the aims of education (which then would not be ideological) it follows that it is our duty as educators to teach students to participate in that society, which means to help them to become critical thinkers. In other words, regardless of whether the Gramscian Thesis is true or false, what we should do is to teach critical thinking, *real* critical thinking, not (just) informal logic or rhetoric.<sup>32</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

As a critique of critical thinking (as rhetoric) the above is as much about critical thinking as it is a (good or bad) example thereof. Perhaps, the perspective chosen is too radical for some. However, the point of the above is not to endorse some radical perspective, but to wonder what it would mean *if* that perspective is right. Critical thinking involves a receptivity for different options and different perspectives than those we are used to, a willingness to explore and rethink, to put (familiar) things in new light. Let me repeat, the point of the above is not to endorse some perspective; that would only replace one grand narrative (the “myth of liberal democracy”) with another (the “dictatorship of hegemony”). Whether the Gramscian Thesis is true remains an open question. And perhaps that is a good thing. The lack of an answer is a good reason to keep one's eyes — and mind — open.

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At the end of the opening chapter of his book *Frame Analysis*, Goffman (1974) added a series of comments and observations separated by centered asterisks, just like those separating this comment from the one above. The above comment and this comment thereon are partly intended to introduce frame analysis, by Goffman

<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, the answer to the question *does* matter — albeit not with regards to the necessary course of action — because if the Gramscian Thesis is true, then hegemony will resist, and critical thinking will remain an empty buzzword. This assumes, however, that hegemony is either absent or complete, but that — as mentioned — is implausible. More likely is that the Gramscian Thesis is true to some extent (and thus false to some extent as well), meaning that we are under the influence of hegemony, but not completely, and not all to the same extent. So *even* if the Gramscian Thesis is true to a considerable extent, there will be some openings in the clouds, openings that can (hopefully) be forced open further. The stronger hegemony, the stronger the resistance will be. Perhaps, that is the only way to test the Gramscian Thesis: by trying to teach *real* critical thinking and gauging the resistance.

himself illustrated in this exact way. “Framing” is the way a text or other communication is organized, the way its issues are defined, constructed, and explained. Frames are perspectives or filters that (consciously or unconsciously) reflect the author’s way of seeing things and that (intentionally or unintentionally) may induce a similar way of seeing things in the reader or listener. Frame analysis is one more tool in the critical thinker’s toolbox.

\* \* \* \* \*

I will not attempt a frame analysis of my own paper here, but there is one conspicuous feature that is worth pointing out explicitly: this paper is critical from the outset. It is not just *about* critical thinking, but it is framed in criticism/critique. This framing finds its most obvious expression in negativity; critical thinking is called an “empty buzzword” in the introduction, for example, and current teaching practices are even called a “debilitating degeneration” above. More important than this observation is that the critical frame (like any frame) sets limits on style, approach, and content of the paper — as a critical paper on critical thinking, there are certain “things” that the paper (or I as its author) cannot do. This is not a good example of persuasive writing, for example, and neither is it intended to be. (The occasional (?) negativity just mentioned probably only negatively affects *pathos*, and there is little — if any — conscious effort to build *ethos*.) This paper is intended to defend the importance of being right (or trying to, at least) contra the prevailing view that it is more important to be convincing (or persuasive). *If* I manage to convince anyone, I want — and *have* — to do so by being right (or by trying to be right) not by means of rhetoric. The reason for that is simple: if this paper would convince anyone through rhetoric rather than argument, then it would be self-defeating.

## aiming for truth

The previous sections identified and described three “obstacles”, three reasons why critical thinking instruction in higher education is failing. These three obstacles are (1) the *lack of clarity and agreement* about what critical thinking is, (2) *current teaching practice*, and (3) *social (i.e. hegemonic) resistance* to critical thinking; but it should be noted again that contrary to the first two, the third obstacle is hypothetical, which means that the extent to which hegemony actually resists (fostering) critical thinking is an unsettled matter. Regardless of the extent to which hegemony is an actual obstacle, the previous section concluded that we have an obligation to teach critical thinking, *real* critical thinking, not (just) informal logic or rhetoric. The remaining, and arguably most important question, therefore, is how to overcome the obstacles — assuming that that is possible, of course — and how to teach critical thinking.

## *taking sides*

The first obstacle is the lack of agreement on the answer(s) to the question: What is critical thinking and what is it good for? Outlining their theoretical backgrounds, two main schools, and some further variants and offshoots, were distinguished. The two main schools are the analytical

and critical schools, rooted in analytic philosophy, and critical theory and postmodernism, respectively. Additionally, the critical school has a moderate/realist and a radical/anti-realist branch, and an institutionally separate post-critical current developed out of the latter branch. This gives a total of four substantially different schools, approaches, or interpretations: (1) analytical, (2) realist critical, (3) anti-realist critical, and (4) post-critical, but it should be noted that this classification ignores the fact that (2) and (3) are moderate and radical versions of the same school, and that (4) is a further development out of (3).<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately it is unavoidable to take sides between these. (1) and (2) are realist, while (3) and (4) are anti-realist, and there is no compromise possible that would accommodate both realism and anti-realism.<sup>34</sup> The chasm between realism and anti-realism is in fact so deep that even agreement about how to decide the issue cannot be reached. For example, arguments that show anti-realism to be incoherent (see above) are irrelevant to anti-realism (or at least to the kinds of anti-realism that matter in the present context)<sup>35</sup> because the judgment of incoherence follows from an understanding and application of logic and rationality that need not be (and often is not) accepted by anti-realists. A skeptic might conclude that the issue cannot be decided and that we, therefore, should suspend judgment, but it is questionable whether a critical thinker should be a skeptic (there might be something like unreasonable doubt which a critical thinker would want to avoid), and there may be another option.

In Classical India, the philosophical landscape was divided into a number of competing schools that—like realists and anti-realists—often even disagreed on how to settle their differences. The Indian answer to this problem was that in a debate, one would try to refute the opponent's position from within—the debater would provisionally accept the opponent's position and then show it to be incoherent (or problematic at least) without making use of theories or ideas that are not accepted by that position. Probably the main attempt to refute realism from within is that by Dummett (1975; 1976) and Wright (1987),<sup>36</sup> but their approach is

**33** I'm ignoring the Socratic approach here because that is not so much a school of critical thinking as a general educational approach that *also* favors critical thinking. Nevertheless, the understanding of critical thinking developed in this section, including its practical aims, has much in common with that of the Socratic approach. However, rather than proposing large-scale educational reform (which may or may not be necessary—I'll leave that aside), I'm merely proposing a reform of critical thinking "instruction" (noting that the term "instruction" is rather inappropriate when it comes to teaching and fostering critical thinking).

**34** An *apparent* compromise (based on some form of pragmatism or relativism) could be that realism is more useful (or more true, perhaps) in some contexts, and anti-realism in others. However, this boils down to a rejection of context-independent truth and objectivity, and thus to anti-realism (*i.e.* a choice for one side in the debate rather than a compromise).

**35** It certainly matters to the few philosophers that defend a kind of anti-realism (especially those in the analytic tradition), but there are significant differences between those anti-realisms and (post-) critical anti-realism.

**36** In short, their idea is more or less the following. We learn words and interpret others by correlating statements with things in the world, but that can only be the world as we experience it and not some kind of transcendental (external, objective) reality. What we mean when we say (or write) something is, therefore, always in reference to *experienced* reality. We cannot (mean to) say (or write) anything

controversial and seems to succeed in showing only that *talk about* external reality is nonsensical, which may lead to the rejection of some versions of realism, but not of all. Similarly, an internal refutation of critical anti-realism may not imply a refutation of post-critical anti-realism and *vice versa*.

The normative ground of realism is truth and validity—that is, what makes an argument, theory, or idea a good one, is that it is based on true premises and involves valid reasoning. Importantly, truth and validity are transparent and public: they can be checked by anyone with the right tools and abilities.<sup>37</sup> Teaching those abilities is the main aim of education (and of teaching critical thinking in particular). On the other hand, the only possible normative grounds of anti-realism, which rejects objective truth and reality (and even validity in some cases), can be rhetorical—it is only its persuasive *force* that makes an argument, theory, or idea a good one. Anti-realism thus founds normativity on power, on the “soft” power of rhetorical skill; and indeed, that skill is what critical thinking courses based on anti-realism (*i.e.* persuasive writing) aim to teach. But this is (or should be) unacceptable for the critical school—the purpose of exposing ideology (*etc.*) is to *oppose* (the role of) power in knowledge formation, in deciding what is true and what is not.<sup>38</sup> Rather than opposing power, however, anti-realism puts it on an epistemic pedestal. The problem for the critical school, is that it needs a firm and interest-independent (non-ideological, objective) normative ground for its critique, and only truth and validity can be that ground. Therefore, the anti-realism of the radical sub-school cannot be acceptable to that sub-school itself. Critique needs truth, or to quote Latour once more, “the question was never to get away from facts but *closer* to them”.

This does not refute *post-critical* anti-realism, however, and it is thereon that one of the two main teaching approaches—namely that of persuasive writing and similar courses—is based. While the critical school cannot possibly accept the anti-realist surrender to the soft power of rhetoric, post-critical anti-realism seems to embrace it. And if the previous section is right, then post-critical anti-realism could be an instrument of hegemony (and therefore, immoral), but that too would be irrelevant to the staunch post-critical anti-realist. Furthermore, given that *only* persuasive force matters to a post-critical anti-realist, there is no single, universal (internal) refutation possible: each adherent would have to be persuaded separately.

So does that mean that we still have no ground for taking sides? The skeptic, once again, would say so indeed, but let’s look once more at what we have established thus far. The radical

about transcendental (*etc.*) reality: because we cannot correlate statements with something that is out of reach, statements about transcendental reality are literally meaningless.

**37** However, some tools may be out of reach for the vast majority of people. Hence, the effective transparency is not complete.

**38** Critical anti-realism is (*a.o.*) based on the inference from (P) all truth claims are grounded in power to (C) truth is relative to the social networks under the influence of that power. This argument is invalid, however, as (P) is about truth *claims* and (C) is about *truth*. Substituting “truth claims” for “truth” in (C) does not lead to anti-realism. (And the converse substitution is nonsense.) A similar, equally fallacious argument exists with regards to ideology: all truth claims are ideological, but that does not imply (*as assumed*) that they are all false; *i.e.* that there is no truth.

position within the critical school no longer seems to be a viable option, as that school *needs* objective truth and reality to ground critique. This means that the anti-realist field is reduced to a single option, the post-critical one, which may seem attractive from an internal point of view, but considerably less so when seen from the outside. From that perspective, post-critical anti-realism is a cynical surrender to rhetorical trickery, an ally of hegemony (and therefore, immoral),<sup>39</sup> and most obvious of all, at odds with almost everything most of us believe and teach. According to anti-realism, nothing we teach is (literally or objectively) true, and thus, unless one believes that *everything* taught in classes on physics, history, biology, grammar, economics, mathematics, sociology, and so forth, is mere rhetoric, anti-realism conflicts with all of that.<sup>40</sup> The skeptic may still feel the need to suspend judgment, but there is a point where doubt becomes unreasonable, and where suspending judgment is a luxury one cannot afford. We have well passed that point.

Critical thinking must be based on a variety of realism; anti-realism is not an acceptable option. Critical thinking is (and must be) trying to get it right, aiming for truth; and negatively, exposing errors to get closer to truth. But this doesn't answer the question: Which variety of realism?

The choice between realism and anti-realism was forced by the fact that there is no available perspective that accommodates both, but this is not the case for the relevant variants of realism. Both the theoretically thin realism required for the analytical school's understanding of critical thinking, and the more moderate (or even relativist) realism required for the critical school are coherent with a form of *perspectival realism* as defended, for example, in Farrell (1994), Searle (1995), and some of my own recent papers (Brons 2011; 2012; 2013). It is not necessary here to explain the details of these theories; all that matters is that the *availability* of an overarching framework makes choice unnecessary (or avoidable, at least). In other words, we do not need to take sides between the analytical and the critical school (in its moderate version). "Need not" does not imply "should not", however.

The section about current teaching practice explained many of the differences in content and orientation of the two main kinds of critical thinking courses (*i.e.* informal logic and persuasive writing) by pointing at differences in disciplinary interests. In a loose sense of "ideology" these differences could, therefore, be called ideological differences. If these ideological differences are ignored, there is an odd discrepancy between practical focus and content of these courses. To write well, one needs to be able to argue well; to analyze well, one needs to understand rhetoric (in the broadest possible sense of that term); but these two kinds of courses get things the wrong way around. More important than this observation, however, is that a critical thinker needs *both* the ability to argue well and the ability to analyze (arguments, texts, discourses, *etc.*) well. The analytical school focuses on some of these abilities (particularly

**39** This assumes, of course, the truth of the Gramscian Thesis.

**40** It has been argued by many that much of what passes for economics is just rhetoric, but if that is true, this claim is not nearly strong enough to satisfy the anti-realist's needs. The anti-realist would have to endorse the claim that *everything* in economics *and all other knowledge domains* is mere rhetoric. To the anti-realist, there is nothing but rhetoric.

those related to arguing well); the critical school on others (particularly those related to certain aspects of critical analysis). Consequently, it is not just unnecessary to take sides between these schools, doing so would be counterproductive.

### *teaching critical thinking*

The purpose of critical thinking is getting it right, getting closer to truth (not to persuade, or only indirectly: by being right); thinking critically is aiming to be right, and exposing falsehoods; but falsehoods come in many forms, ranging from ideological fabrications to formal fallacies, and that implies that tools and theories of both the analytical and critical schools are needed. The answer to the question what critical thinking is, therefore, also addresses the problem of sectarianism by taking an inclusive position. That answer, already given above, can be summarized without losing anything essential in just six words: *critical thinking is aiming for truth.*<sup>41</sup>

This clears away the first obstacle, but what about the other two? Addressing the second obstacle means redesigning critical thinking courses around the idea that critical thinking is aiming for truth. Disciplinary interests and ideologies may frustrate this, and the second obstacle *may* be related to the third, hegemony, which *might* make such redesigning even more difficult. If the Gramscian Thesis is (mostly) true, then hegemony will resist the attempt to teach and foster critical thinking, but if the Gramscian Thesis is true, it is our moral duty to do so nevertheless. If the Gramscian Thesis is (mostly) wrong, then teaching critical thinking is a primary aim of education in democratic societies. Hence, although hegemony may be a formidable obstacle if Gramsci is right, it should not matter for our choice of action.

This leaves us with one final question: What does it mean for teaching practice that critical thinking is aiming for truth? According to logic, the truth of a conclusion is guaranteed by the soundness of an argument, and an argument is sound if its premises are true and the reasoning valid. According to Toulmin's model of argument, the merit of a claim depends on its ground or evidence and the warrant that connects the ground with the claim (see above). While there are significant differences between these approaches, they also have much in common, although some commonalities are classified and labeled differently. For example, warrants include both certain kinds of premises (background assumptions, among others) and applications of reasoning patterns. Where the logician might be looking for hidden premisses, the "Toulminian"

<sup>41</sup> I have used the phrase "getting it right" and variants thereof a few times above, but there are (at least) two reasons to prefer "aiming for truth". Firstly, "getting it right" suggests much more strongly to refer to one's own thinking exclusively, while "aiming for truth" is a more general attitude towards both one's own and others thinking (and writing, arguments, and so forth). Secondly, one cannot always get it right, but one can always aim for truth. In other words, "getting it right" is meaningful only in contexts where the right answer is attainable, but that is not always the case: for whatever reason, the right answer (*i.e.* truth) may be out of reach, but even if that is the case one can *aim* for truth, *i.e.* to get as close as possible (perhaps, until someone else gets even closer, and so forth *ad infinitum*).

would be questioning warrants. Where the former would ask whether the conclusion can be inferred validly from the premises, the latter would ask whether the grounds warrant the claim. Importantly, both models aim at exposing the structure of arguments, and as such, both models are useful tools for thinking about one's own and others' arguments. Furthermore, both models stress the importance of getting one's facts straight (or one's premises true).

Questioning warrants, looking for hidden premises, getting one's facts straight, exposing problems in reasoning (*i.e.* invalidity or insufficient warrant), and so forth require a number of additional skills and ideas. Logical analogies are a very powerful tool to expose errors in reasoning and to find hidden premises, for example. To get one's facts straight one needs to be able to find the facts first, which means being able to search for the relevant data and to assess its quality and reliability.<sup>42</sup> But questioning warrants, assessing data, and looking for hidden premises also requires an ability to see through trickery, fabrications, and deception, regardless of whether those are conscious and intentional or unconscious and accidental. And this requires at the very least an ability to recognize (and avoid) the most common fallacies and a basic understanding of rhetoric (particularly Aristotle's modes of persuasion and their abuse) and of a generalized notion of ideology centered on the question "What (or whose) interests are being served?"<sup>43</sup> It should further be noted that much of this cannot be taught by means of short and abstract examples that bear little resemblance to the convoluted "reasoning" and discourses that critical thinkers have to confront in real life. Some political columns are goldmines of fallacious and other invalid reasoning, of ideological preoccupations, and so forth, but it may also be a valuable exercise for students to critically analyze a movie (*i.e.* a product of the culture industry). These considerations then, give us a *possible* list of (some of) the core ingredients of a critical thinking course:

- the key terms of logic: *argument, soundness, validity, etc.*;
- the Toulmin model (with special attention for the maxim "Question the warrant!");
- searching for data (information, *etc.*) and judging its quality and reliability;
- the use of logical analogy to analyze arguments;
- the most common (formal and informal) fallacies;
- Aristotle's modes of persuasion and their abuse (*i.e.* persuasion by rhetoric rather than argument);
- a generalized notion of ideology ("What or whose interests are being served?").

There is much that could—and perhaps should—be taught in addition to these "core ingredients" (which may be partially dependent on disciplinary interests and concerns, or social

<sup>42</sup> This is more often taught as part of some research skills or academic skills class, but it is part of critical thinking as well, and if this is also taught in another course it would be preferable to repeat it in a critical thinking course.

<sup>43</sup> Additionally, getting one's facts straight and critical thinking in general also requires an ability to see things in different light, from different (theoretical, cultural, *etc.*) perspectives. This, however, requires education in the humanities (art, history, literature, cultural traditions, *etc.*) in general, and thus far exceeds the scope of a critical thinking course. On the necessity of the humanities for critical thinking (and therefore, for democracy), see Nussbaum (2010).

circumstances).<sup>44</sup> Extending the list into a detailed blueprint is most likely counter-productive, however. Perhaps, rather than extending it, it should be shortened to a single item instead, a single item from which the rest can be derived. That single item, the single “thing” a prospective critical thinker should be taught, is *aiming for truth*.

## postscript

“I will not attempt a frame analysis of my own paper here”, I wrote on page 20, but perhaps I should have, as – since writing it – I realized that there is (at least) one big framing problem. My approach to answering the question what critical thinking is, is framed in the analytic - continental divide in philosophy, but that is really a “misframing”. Much of the debate about critical thinking (and related debates) has taken place outside philosophy: in sociology of science, literary theory, and/or in the context of methodological (self-) reflections on/in the humanities and social sciences. I do not think that correcting this “misframing” will lead to any important changes, but there is another, more serious problem that might.

The political purpose of critical thinking mentioned in this paper is based on the common assumption that an increase of critical thinking skills (in individuals and populations thereof) automatically leads to an increase of the *use* of those skills in political decision making (democratic choice, *etc.*) but there is a growing body of evidence from experimental psychology that puts this assumption in doubt (particularly with regards to critical thinking as analysis). Having a skill does not guarantee the use of that skill, especially if there are reasons not to. One such reason may be membership in some moral/political community: following the community line may outweigh rationality, even for critical thinkers (or actually, because non-conformity may have more direct repercussions, it may be rational to be “irrational”/uncritical). But if this is true, then this does not only affect one of the main purposes of (teaching/fostering) critical thinking, but also its relation with hegemony: if conformity often outweighs rationality, then hegemony has much less to fear from critical thinking than assumed in this paper. For critical thinking to perform its role as a pillar of democracy (and a gadfly of hegemony) it would then need to be supplemented by fostering empathy, tolerance, and open-mindedness (assuming that those would increase the acceptance of non-conformity)<sup>45</sup>. These are not among the (primary) educational goals of teaching critical thinking, but as Nussbaum (2010) argued, they are taught and/or promoted through literature and the humanities in general. In other words, critical thinking would need to be supplemented with a “proper” education in the humanities to do its work.

<sup>44</sup> Bitzer’s (1968) theory of the *rhetorical situation* may be a useful framework to tie some of these ingredients together, for example.

<sup>45</sup> This is, of course, just another assumption in need of a warrant.

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## appendix: Google Ngram for "critical thinking"



Y-axis: the percentage of books (that are accessible to Google) in which the phrase "critical thinking" occurs.  
 (source: <http://books.google.com/ngrams>)