



Critical Thinking: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

It is observed that at many times we are persuaded to do things, to believe things and to act. Critical thinking enables us to ensure that we have good reasons to believe or to do that which people attempted to persuade us to do or believe. Critical thinking is that mode of thinking about any subject, content, problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of him/her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them. The basic skills needed in critical thinking may be summarised as – foresightedness, observation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, evaluation, explanation, problem solving, decision making. Critical thinking has both some benefits and barriers.

KEYWORDS: critical thinking, argument, reasoning, rhetoric, barriers, benefits

In our day to day life at many times we are persuaded to do things, to believe things and to act. In those attempts to persuade us various procedures are taken. Sometimes languages are used. Sometimes images or combination of images with languages are used to persuade. In such situation we fail to take decision smoothly. We have to ask ourselves ‘why should I do that suggested by others at this moment or refrain from doing that? Why should I believe that or not believe it?’ Thus, by asking the question ‘WHY?’ we are asking for a reason for what we are persuaded to do or believe. In this way ‘We are asking for a justification for taking the action recommended or accepting the belief, not just a reason, but a good reason – one that ought to motivate us to act or believe as we are recommended to do....’ and ‘To attempt to persuade by giving good reasons is to give an argument’ (1). In other words while taking decisions we have to think critically about the situation. Critical thinking enables us to ensure that we have good reasons to believe or to do that which people attempt to persuade us to do or believe. It also helps us to

remain far away from doing or believing wrong things.

The dictionary meaning of ‘critical thinking’ is – the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement (2). Critical thinking is that mode of thinking about any subject, content, problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of him/her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them. As a human being it is natural to think of anything. However, at many times, our thinking is biased, distorted, partial, un-uniformed, down-right prejudiced. There is need of critical thinking at every step of our day to day life.

In 1987, Michael Scriven and Richard Paul presented a statement at the 8th Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Education Reform. According to them critical thinking is a intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing or evaluating information gathered from or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, communication as a guide to belief and action. Critical thinking is based on clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth and fairness of the subject. It is related to the elements of thought those are implicit in all reasoning- purpose, problem, question, assumptions, concepts, grounds, consequences, objections from counter view points and frame of references.

It is observed that there are different types of attempts to persuade us. Among these attempts some are non-arguments. A critical thinker primarily concerned with arguments and must be able to distinguish between arguments and non- arguments. The basic difference between arguments and non-arguments is that when we argue we attempt to give reasons but in the case of non-arguments there is an absence of an attempt to give reason.

In critical thinking it is necessary to develop the skill of analysing others attempts to persuade. It helps us to get accurate interpretation of



the sayings or writings. We can find out whether they are giving a good reason or argument. It will prevent us from doing or believing wrong things. Moreover, we can apply the techniques of analysis to us and avoid giving wrong or bad arguments. We can approach any issue in a critical and rational way. If we fail to determine whether we have been presented with a good argument or not, then also, by paying due attention to arguments, we can discover the truth of a matter or issue. In this context we repeat the sayings Socrates that 'the unexamined life not worth living' (3). At different moments of life the ability to interpret and evaluate person's reasons properly determines persons well being or life. At many times we have to take decisions regarding our lives or lives of others. Then we must apply logical thinking to detect errors in our own thinking and that of others.

After examination we found that all attempts to persuade by language are not attempts to persuade by arguments. Some attempts are made to persuade by means of rhetorical devices. Rhetoric may be defined as 'Any verbal or written attempt to persuade someone to believe, desire or do something that does not attempt to give good reasons for the believe, desire or action, but attempts to motivate that belief, desire or action by other means' (4). The distinction between argument and rhetoric may be described as –an attempt to persuade by argument is an attempt to provide one with reasons for believing or claim, desiring something or doing something. On the other hand, rhetoric tends to rely on the persuasive power of certain words and verbal techniques to influence one's beliefs, desires and actions. Arguments are appeal to one's reason but rhetoric is appeal to one's desires, fears and other feelings.

In critical thinking it is important to know how to distinguish arguments from other means of putting forward opinions and persuading people to act. It is said that arguments are attempt to provide reasons for thinking that some claims are true. We can state that a claim is true means what is claimed is how things actually are. An argument is constituted by more than one claim. The primary claim is the one we are trying to get others to accept it is called conclusion. The supporting claims that one intends to give reasons for accepting the conclusion is called premise/s. Premises may be certain or not certain. On the basis of the relation between premise and conclusion we can define an argument as a set of propositions of which one is conclusion and the others are premises who support conclusion. An argument is constituted by propositions. A proposition may be called a factual

content expressed by a declarative sentence on a particular occasion. A proposition may be expressed by different sentences. Conversely, a sentence can be expressed by different propositions. There may be some indexical words whose meaning changes relative to its context of use to the person to whom it refers.

An argument has a definite structure. But in the case of persuading argument it may not be well arranged. So, it is necessary to re-construct argument in a logical way. There is no limit of premises that particular argument may have. However, there must be single conclusion. Sometimes some premises may be unstated. We have to reconstruct it considering other statements. There are some indicator words that express conclusion or premises clearly. The conclusion indicator words are- therefore, hence, thus, it can be concluded that, implies etc. The premise indicator words are-since, because, for, as much as, as follows from, as shown by etc.

We have to remember that the conclusion of a particular argument may become the premise of another argument. There are some formal and informal fallacies found in some arguments. In analysing argument, it is necessary to find out if any fallacies are implicit in the argument. Moreover, in logic and everyday discourse sometimes arguments are stated enthymematically. An enthymematic argument is formed by missing some part of the argument. It is defined as an 'argument that is stated incompletely, part being "understood" or only "in the Mind", is called enthymeme' (5). While discussing the persuasive argument we have to study if there is any argument in the form of enthymeme. In that case, we have to reconstruct the argument by stating the missing part.

By applying critical thinking skills we can evaluate the quality of the argument and decide for ourselves whether or not to believe it. Here, first of all we need to understand or analyse the structures of the argument. In this context we have to ask the following questions(6) –

- ✓ What are the issues and the conclusion?
- ✓ What are the reasons?
- ✓ What are the assumptions?
- ✓ Are there any fallacy?
- ✓ How good are the evidences?

The basic skills needed in critical thinking may be summarised as –foresightedness, observation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, evaluation, explanation, problem solving, decision making.

The various steps taken in critical thinking are-

- ✓ Find out a problem or topic or issue in an objective and critical way. It means that



we first have to state the problem and then make an attempt to elaborate it with examples. Thus, we have to illustrate it.

- ✓ Identify the different arguments that are related to a particular issue or problem.
- ✓ Evaluate a point of view to determine how strong or valid it is.
- ✓ Recognise any weakness or negative points that are in the evidence or argument.
- ✓ Notice what implications there might be behind a statement or argument.
- ✓ Provide structured reasoning and support for an argument that we wish to make.

We can simply state that the sequence of critical thinking are-

Identify the problem > Re construct the argument > Generate potential solutions > Choose one solution > Implementation of solution > Evaluate results

With the help/study of critical thinking one becomes able to-

- Understand the link between ideas. He/she becomes more rational in decision making.
- Determine the importance and relevance of arguments and ideas. He/she can avoid the unnecessary part of reasoning.
- Build, recognise and appraise arguments. He/she can exercise by him/her own.
- Identify inconsistencies and errors in the reasoning. He/she can develop self learning.
- Approach problems in a consistent and systematic way. He/she becomes more logical.
- Justify own assumptions, beliefs and values. He/she can reflect on and examine own decisions.
- Open minded. He/she always ready to think and re- think own ideas and others.

There are various barriers of critical thinking. It can be summarised as follows –

- Social brainwashing and our view of the world
Generally, our understandings of the world are influenced by parents, teachers, neighbours, friends, idol persons, media etc. They sometimes control our critical thought process.
- Tendencies to think in binaries
Most of our thought processes are related to binaries like good-bad, just-unjust, liberal-conservative, black-white etc. But the world and its objects cannot be judged only in terms of binaries.

- Fears regarding free thinking
Very often, though we feel that something is wrong, we support them due to the scare of being the first to voice a new opinion. It happens because of social discouraging of free thinking.
- Group thinking
At many times we accept what is admitted by common people. Instead of questioning we follow the mass. To overcome it individual has to stand apart from the group and question opinions, thoughts and popular ideas.
- Social conditioning
There are discriminations in society. Economic conditions, racism, poverty, social conflict, differences in ideology – have influenced our critical thinking processes.
- Egocentrism
Generally, we consider that we are the centre of the universe individually. None but ‘I am’ right. As a critical thinker we have to go beyond our own experiences, perspectives and be able to appreciate the other ways of looking at things.
- Personal interests and personal experiences
Everybody has his/her own field of interest. We have certain commitments that determine the direction of our journey. Our allegiances, social and emotional commitments are determined by past experiences. Sometimes it seems difficult to have influence of reason upon past experiences and commitments. We sometimes, do not want to question our so called beliefs.
- Drone mentality
It means not paying any attention to what is going on around somebody. To avoid it one has to change daily routines.
- Biased experiences
Sometimes, personal biases prevent the thinker from being fair, rational and open minded.
- Arrogance and intolerance
To think critically person should have control over his/her emotions, have patience and open minded. He/she must be able to observe the situation or the problem from different standpoints.
- Schedule pressure
Time management is necessary condition in critical thinking. Information gathering in time, proper environment, use of



technology in data analysis etc. required in critical thinking.

We may mention besides them some other barriers of critical thinking as –

- Misunderstandings
- Unwillingness to be objective
- Insufficient knowledge
- Unnecessary assumptions
- Personal emotions

The above barriers of critical thinking may be broadly divided into – physical, sociological and psychological barriers. To overcome these barriers we should take the following measures –

- ❖ For overcoming social barriers - involve the community, create working environment, keep your focus, accept cultural differences, staying open minded.
- ❖ For overcoming psychological barriers – physical, mental and emotional control, acceptance one’s imperfectness, practice of relaxation techniques, boosting mental health.
- ❖ For overcoming physical barriers – provide healthy environment, personal communication, develop the use of modern tools and techniques.

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