



## The dark side of critical thinking and the need to restore learning relationships

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### ABSTRACT

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, critical thinking emerged as an important ideal in and aim of education. Hardly anyone opposes critical thinking, its weight is re-enforced in debates on education and its positive value is largely taken for granted because of the manifold promises it carries. However, in this paper I will challenge critical thinking as an aim of and unanimous positive value in education. The climate for critical thinking has changed in the course of modernization, since modern society no longer carries an open inviting view of the future; rather, it has been overloaded with dystopian energy and meaning as a result of negative and affirmative critical thinking to the extent that it is becoming self-crippling and existentially alienating. In the paper, I discuss different and significant views of critical thinking in education and higher education in order to highlight why and in what ways it is cherished and extolled in education. I argue that processes of reflexive modernization in society have altered the conditions for critical thinking to the extent that the imaginaries, institutions and practices we used to trust and still rely on in social life and in education are paradoxically dead and alive. In this context, I explicate a dark side of critical thinking that we can no longer neglect. I argue that quite common ways of doing critical thinking may have self-crippling, existentially alienating and dystopian dynamics and effects in times when we need confidence and trust the most. Consequently, no matter how much we cherish critical thinking we are no longer in a position to think of it as an unanimous good or as an ultimate aim of education. Critical thinking is, like many practices obstructed by reflexive modernization, full of self-serving fictions, nurturing its status as an all-but-only-good-purpose skill. There is a need to rethink critical thinking, its role and status in education and restore its learning relationships without falling prey to its darker dynamics, or so I argue.

### KEYWORDS

Critical thinking; aims of education; critical theory; reflexive modernization; critical learning

## Introduction

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, critical thinking emerged as an important ideal in and aim of education. Hardly anyone opposes critical thinking, its weight is re-enforced in debates on education and its positive value is largely taken for granted (Hare, 1999), or, as Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) argue, it is perceived as the Promised Land of education. It carries a promise of making learning processes deeper and better, and it is expected to improve democratic participation and decision-making. It is indispensable for sorting out error from accuracy, and it brings with it the power to prepare us for challenging and changing conditions (Davies, 2015; Hare, 1999; Siegel, 1988). It is cherished because of its role in moral and political judgement, and because of its corrective force in combatting bias, prejudice, illegitimate use of power and issues of exclusion (Hare, 1999). It has been claimed to be vital for cultural reproduction, social integration and healthy identity formation in society (Habermas, 1987), including the urgency of planetary survival (Halpern & Butler, 2019). However, in this paper I will challenge critical thinking as an aim of and unanimous positive value in education. The climate for critical thinking has changed in the course of modernization, since modern society no longer carries an open inviting view of the future; rather, it has been overloaded with dystopian energy and meaning as a result of negative and affirmative critical thinking to the extent that it is becoming self-crippling and existentially alienating. Firstly, I will discuss significant examples of critical thinking in order to highlight why and in what ways critical thinking is cherished and extolled in education. Secondly, I argue that the reflexive modernization has altered the conditions for critical thinking to the extent that the imaginaries, institutions and practices we rely on are paradoxically dead and alive, and no longer loaded with utopian energy and inviting views of the future. Thirdly, I explicate a dark side of critical thinking and its dynamics that we can no longer neglect, one that robs critical thinking of its status as an ultimate end or intrinsic good in education. I argue that quite common and widespread ways of doing critical thinking may have self-crippling, existentially alienating and dystopian effects in times when we need confidence and trust the most. Finally, in my concluding remarks I argue that we need to re-think critical thinking, its role and status in education and restore its learning relationships without falling prey to its darker dynamics.

## Critical thinking as ultimate end or an intrinsic good in education

Since critical thinking is a special case of thinking and depends on our capacity to think, I will start out by bringing forward some initial thoughts about thinking. I agree with Davidson (1984, 2001) and Habermas (1987, 1998) that thinking is essentially holistic and takes place in a normative sphere of action based on three varieties of interdependent knowledge. In order to have one thought I must have many thoughts, but if I have a particular thought I cannot commit to any other thought. My thoughts form webs in which they relate to each other in significant ways, *inter alia*, inferential ways. I need to reach some degree of consistency or coherence in my web in order to be able to think at all, because if I don't, there will be no grounds for counting me as a thinker (or at least not as a human thinker). Hence, thinking is inescapably normative not because other people impose external norms on thinkers, but because there are norms constitutive of thinking. This is of crucial weight for critical thinkers since they typically use norms constitutive of thinking in an evaluative manner when they assess the thinking of others (Davidson, 1984, p. 135). A challenge for critical thinkers, therefore, is to grasp the intelligibility of others from the viewpoint of the other before she evaluates the thinking of the other from the viewpoint of herself.

Thinking depends on three varieties of knowledge and three different kinds of access to the world, that is, subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity (Davidson, 2001). Thinking is subjective in the sense that thinkers have direct access to their own thoughts in a way nobody else can have. It is intersubjective in the sense that the thinker can only have indirect access to the thoughts of others (e.g., through verbal or non-verbal behaviour), and because repeated interaction and communication with other thinkers are essential for the development of one's own capacity for thinking. Thinking is also objective because it depends on objects and events in the world vital for

the content of our thoughts and for the semantic content of our languages, but also on a lifeworld already saturated with meaning accessible to thinkers who have the power to load objects and events with significant meaning as they co-construct their social reality (Habermas, 1998; Searle, 2011). Consequently, thinking is not only an internal activity in the mind of the subjective thinker; rather, thinking is entangled in webs spun in subjective minds, the minds of others and in our intermingling with a surrounding world. In this sense, thinkers depend on three varieties of knowledge and three different kinds of access to the world. Davidson (2001) claims that subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity are forming a tripod necessary for thinking, and he reminds us: 'if any leg [of the tripod] is lost, no part will stand' (Davidson, 2001, p. 219). This is what I mean when I claim that thinking is essentially holistic and takes place in a normative sphere of action based on three varieties of interdependent knowledge and access to the world, and it is against this backdrop that I consider and discuss critical thinking. Although critical thinking is widely cherished in education, the tribute choir is somewhat divided when its scope, meaning and theoretical grounding is exposed. Proponents of different views tend to cherish their own views but not necessarily the views of others. Hence, I will begin my re-visiting analysis of critical thinking in education by highlighting a few examples from philosophy of education and educational research focusing on general and higher education in order to grasp why and in what ways critical thinking is cherished, exalted and thought of as an intrinsic good.

Harvey Siegel's proposal has been widely discussed among educational researchers and philosophers (see Finochiarro, 1990; Garrison, 1999; Roth, 2019). Siegel (1980, 1988) argued that the goal of education should be to educate students into critical thinkers in terms of their developing reason evaluation skills and critical mindsets (or 'critical spirit' in Siegel's words). The evaluative skills Siegel proposes are closely related to rationalist or empiricist philosophical traditions circulating around distinguishing critical thinking from mere thinking, and such skills are, *inter alia*, knowledge of what counts as good reasons in terms of rational norms or logic, non-arbitrary judgement and evidence assessment (Siegel, 1980, 1988). Critical thinkers are capable of making up their minds about what to believe or what to do based on reasons, they are appropriately moved by reasons and they can assess the force of reasons when needed in a variety of matters. It is this educational character of critical thinking that lends it the elevated status as a regulative ideal for education, and, consequently, all aspects of education are open for critical assessment but not critical thinking itself since its elevated status allows for some degree of initiating indoctrination. However, the radical nature of Siegel's proposal is reflected in his analysis of science education and Kuhn's view of normal science. If teaching and learning lean too heavily on established fruits and conventional methods of science, then education is likely to be anticritical since initiation into established traditions, methods and knowledge cannot count as critical thinking.

Siegel conceptualizes critical thinking as a higher order thinking that takes ordinary thinking and practices as objects for evaluation, but other proponents of critical thinking may object that Siegel's view is not critical enough or even leads to problematic biases in its view of evaluating skills. Lam (2007) starts out with the simple idea that we can learn from our mistakes. However, the simple idea is developed within a falsificationist framework proposing that we should develop deductive reasoning skills, disconfirmation mindsets and dare to think of our scientific, cognitive and other accomplishments as mistakes by focusing on error and not on accuracy. Disconfirmation brings out mistakes and it shows appreciative recognition for the complex difficulties we face. Systematic disconfirmation, Lam (2007) argues with reference to Popper, is assumed to bring us closer to the truth and to the roots of problems. Disconfirmation is not all there is to problem solving, but it is claimed to have corrective power in relation to cognitive fallacies and confirmation bias in learning. Lam argues that people tend to act in pollyannish ways as they seek to avoid unpleasant thoughts, and in critical debate we tend to dissect the views of the opponent but not really the views of ourselves as we try to win intellectual or political battles (Lam, 2007, p. 238). The falsificationist proposal aims at responding to ill-deserved confidence in one's own work and cognitive arrogance disrespecting the challenges we face.

Critical thinking is also cherished in higher education (Davies, 2013; Liu et al., 2014; Moore, 2011). The positive value of critical thinking is rarely questioned in debates among researchers from different disciplines, but one significant controversy revolves around the question about the extent to which critical thinking is a generic and context-transcendent capability or not. Contextualists defend the view that critical thinking skills are best described without reference to generic or context-transcendent capabilities. Moore (2011) argues that critical thinkers can develop all that is important to critical thinking in different academic disciplines as they deal with subject matters in everyday academic action contexts. Moore thinks that it is useless to look for norms or standards for critical thinking above or outside the different academic contexts in which critical skills are put to work. In fact, Moore argues that generic skills imposed from the outside run the risk of interfering with the integrity and alterity of different academic practices and the developing of flexible, versatile and different critical thinkers (Moore, 2011, p. 273. See also Garrison [1999] for a similar objection to Siegel [1988]). Davies (2013, 2015), however, defends a generic view and he fears that contextualism leads to unwanted relativism. Consequently, he argues, the meaning of critical thinking will be lost, its skills will be eroded and it will end up as just another mode of thinking. In order to defend a generic view, Davies (2015) develops a taxonomy of generic critical thinking skills consisting of foundation skills (describing behaviour, recognizing concepts, interpreting behaviour identifying assumptions, listening), higher-level skills (applying concepts, evaluating claims, generating hypothesis, challenging), and complex skills (problem-solving, theory building, formal criticism, decision-making, collaboration). However, Davies's defence and proposal seems to lead to another slippery slope. Critical thinking is no longer a special case of evaluative or higher order thinking, its skills run the risk of being eroded and his taxonomy seems to target academic thinking and practice in general. However, other researchers have developed their generic critical thinking vocabulary around evaluative higher order thinking skills similar to the view of Siegel. Moreover, they frequently argue, in opposition to contextualist proposals, that higher education practices need to be infused with critical thinking skills since students do not sufficiently develop such critical thinking skills in everyday work with different subject matters (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Snyder et al., 2019).

Although critical thinking is cherished in education and higher education, its meaning and conceptualization differs to the extent that we can smell some trouble in the land of milk and honey. Generalist and contextualist views express one line of differences, but other differences of weight revolve around the nature and scope of critical thinking as a higher order thinking that takes ordinary thinking, action or events as its object. Siegel's regulative ideal and the falsificationist view of critical thinking can be linked to worldviews pervaded by (logical) empiricism. The critical thinker is depicted as a rational thinker bounded by deductive reasoning, formal and informal logical skills and empiricist or falsificationist evidence and reason assessment based on observational data and objective knowledge. Moreover, the practical rationality assumed in matters of decision making is based on an instrumental view of reason that does not differ substantially from the view developed by Hobbes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Heath, 2011). Instrumental rationality involves taking a goal as an outcome and then using one's material, cognitive or other resources to determine what actions will be most effective in bringing about the outcome. However, empiricism downplays one leg of the basic tripod of critical thinking, that is, intersubjectivity (and many aspects of social reality created by intersubjectivity), and, traditionally, it situates critical thinkers in subject-object relationship entailing objectifying attitudes to the objects of the critical thinking and a narrow view with regard to possible objects for critical thinking (Habermas, 1998; Papastephanou, 2004). Although reasoning skills bounded by empiricism are constitutive of thinking and vital for higher order thinking, it is possible to break out of the boundaries and thereby expand and renew the scope and nature of critical thinking. Such strategies usually draw their resources from critical theory, critical pedagogy, social criticism or so called 'post-modern' or 'post-structuralist' critique of modernity (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Papastephanou, 2021).

Papastephanou (2004) and Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) put forward an aporetic proposal aiming at decoupling critical thinking from parochial assumptions depriving critical thinkers of both

resources for and objects of critical thinking. Papastephanou (2004) remarks that the decreed nature of critical thinking in education has shifted in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The evaluative reasoning skills highlighted during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to, inter alia, combat 'irrational' and ideological thinking in liberal democratic open societies, shifted towards instrumental reasoning skills necessary for tasks, problem-solving and ends typically linked to imaginaries of the global economy. Although we can appreciate the merits of this practical turn, Papastephanou (2004) argues, the shift runs the risk of being parochial with regard to critical thinking and the mindsets of critical thinkers. The shift has led to a taken for granted acceptance of instrumental reasoning as a blueprint for critical thinking to the extent that critical thinkers tend to be reduced to technical problem solvers in relation to tasks that escape their influence. In order to avoid parochialism, the aporetic view departs from communicative reason as developed by Apel and Habermas (Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007), and it broadens the agency of the critical thinker and the scope of critical thinking compared to the instrumental norm which leaves many ethical and political phenomena untouched by reason (e.g., contesting the tasks and goals themselves and not only the effective ways to complete them). The normative reference point for the aporetic proposal is linked to conditions for communicative action oriented towards mutual understanding which opens up a wider scope and new strategies for critical thinking, and it expands the traditional evaluative aspects discussed earlier with a problematization component. Problematization is about questioning assumptions, goals, premises, standards, methods and other aspects of teaching and learning process in education, and not shying away from examining cherished, hidden or taken for granted assumptions and arrangements in which there seems to be no problem at all. Although Siegel's proposal allows for critical thinking about every aspect of education apart from critical thinking itself, the aporetic proposal, as I understand it, aims at ensuring that the scope and character of critical thinking is not parochialized because of its principled rationalist or empiricist and actual political boundaries. However, in the examples discussed above, the positive value of critical thinking is underscored, and, for some at least, it is elevated to an ultimate end or an intrinsic good. I argue that there is a need to further challenge the largely undisputed status of critical thinking and its role in education since the expansion of critical thinking in education and elsewhere has led to side-effects exposing a dark side we can no longer ignore.

### **Modernity dead and alive and changed conditions for critical thinking**

It may come as a surprise that critical thinking has kept its one-sided positive value relatively intact as modern society and education has evolved in an intellectual climate where all aspects of modern society have been subject to all-pervading critique. Anthony Giddens (1994) explained the modern cognitive order in terms of a shift from tradition-guided to knowledge-guided thinking and action (Giddens, 1994). Charles Taylor (2007) explicated the modern social and moral order in terms of imaginaries lived among members of society as free and equal rational beings meant to collaborate in peace for their mutual benefit; the economy and democratic self-rule of a sovereign people are two social imaginaries capturing how modern individuals make up society as individual and collective agents. Modernization was to a large degree built on confidence and trust, and it nurtured an inviting view of an open future for many people for which traditional habits and practices were sacrificed. However, the confidence and trust in modernization is shaken among many, if not all, members of society, and this means altered conditions for critical thinking and its educational promises.

Over the last decades critical thinkers have taught us that the modern society is not what we imagined it to be. We have, for example, learnt that the modern socio-political organization of nation-states are becoming fictions stripped of power and sovereignty (Beck, 2016), and that they are not only guarantors of welfare but also capable of exclusion, domestic violence, totalitarian terror and genocide (Chernilo, 2006). Critical thinkers have taught us that the economy does not secure the distribution of wealth among members of society by benevolent invisible hands; rather,



invisible hands seem to belong to a few rich and they are often backed up by the unmistakably visible fists of military power (Tully, 2014). When many people suffered financially during the Covid-19 pandemic the wealth of billionaires skyrocketed (Inequality.org, n.d.). For decades critics have told us that our democratic institutions are incapable of dealing with common concerns, threats and dangers that show no respect for national borders (Held, 2010), and when we collaborate internationally we end up in discouraging gridlock (Hale et al., 2013). We have recently learned that modernization is guilty of anthropocentric uninterrupted cravings for growth to the extent that we are now facing extinction (Herbrechter et al., 2022), and technological development, once celebrated as a backbone of modernization, is increasingly thought of as an uncontrollable force we have reason to fear. Although education is increasingly recognized as a right and a necessity in society it is by no means foreclosed from undermining criticism maintaining that people are losing trust in ordinary schools (Biesta, 2020), higher education (Lewis, 2014) and educational theory (Siegel & Biesta, 2022).

The existential conditions of modernity require that we can live and learn under fallible and changing conditions. Doubt and scepticism are both the creation of and a response to the modern order and its existential conditions. In modern society, nothing can be immune to critical scrutiny but over the last decades critical thinkers have been much more successful in undermining confidence in our agency and trust in society to the degree that inviting futures and promises are undermined (Kompridis, 2006). We are experiencing a widespread everyday scepticism nourished by critical thinking and enabled by the modern existential conditions themselves. The society we depend on, and continue to do so, seems to be paradoxically dead and alive, that is, the imaginaries, institutions and practices we rely on come out as deeply flawed and full of self-serving fictions to the extent that confidence and trust are profoundly shaken or lost. This situation was caught by Beck (2009) in his work on reflexive modernization. The current phase of modernization, Beck argued, leads to a world risk society marked by shattered, hazardous, uncontrollable dynamics accelerated by globalization, capitalism and individualisation. The change in dynamics gives rise to a paradoxical situation in which modern society is simultaneously dead and alive. It is a victim of its own success since its triumph leads to its destruction when processes of modernization strike back on us in terms of unintended and unforeseen side effects, and an increased production of manufactured risks and danger. We used to think of modern institutions as guarantors of common goods but now they have become co-producers of risks. Consequently, the institutions we expect to take care of and deal with common concerns are simultaneously involved in manufacturing and nurturing the problems we rely on them to protect us from and productively deal with (Beck, 2009).

The elevated status of critical thinking in education rested on assumptions largely warranted by an earlier phase of modernization largely characterized by confidence, trust and inviting views on the future. The tradition-guided society was proclaimed dead and the imagined order to come was loaded with vitality and utopian energy, but now we are in a situation in which modern society has been proclaimed dead without an inviting future to come, and this shift affects the unexamined status of critical thinking as an unanimous positive value. What is at stake is, as Kompridis (2006) argues, not our losing confidence and trust in particular institutions or practices; rather, successful critical thinking seems to nourish the side-effect that the confidence in our own agency and trust in society is profoundly shaken to the degree that there are no longer any obvious ways forward for restoring them. In recent decades, we have learnt a lot from critical thinkers engaging in undermining, unmasking, disconfirming, disrobing or deconstructing critique. However, since much of what has been labelled as 'postmodern' or 'post-structuralist' critique is overloaded with dystopian energy or meaning, critical thinking runs the risk of being self-crippling and leading to existential alienation. In this situation we can no longer cherish and uncritically extol critical thinking the way we used to do and still do, and there is a need to find less dystopian and more imaginative ways of learning in education and elsewhere without dismissing valuable insights from critics unmasking the flaws and self-serving fictions of modern society. It is in this reflexive modern context that I argue that there is a dark side of critical thinking. It goes deep in a society dead and alive and

it is manufacturing an overload of dystopian energy and meaning. In what follows, I will explicate the dark side of critical thinking and break down its dynamics.

### **The dark side of critical thinking: negative, affirmative, self-crippling, existentially alienating**

Critical thinking is not a self-sustaining practice. It is dependent on its object or semantic content. In this sense, critical thinking is a higher order thinking and practice since it takes ordinary thinking and practices as its target. However, the paradoxical negative and affirmative character of critical thinking comes to the foreground when it repeatedly re-affirms the object of critique and finally drains the critical thinking of its energy, or when it repeatedly affirms and loads it with dystopian energy and meaning (Kompridis, 2006). The negative and affirmative character of critical thinking is often linked to postmodern or post-structuralist deconstruction of modern imaginaries, institutions and practices, and their problematizing, decomposing, destabilizing, complicating, contesting, unmasking and undermining labour (Papastephanou, 2021), but it can also be nurtured by typical, higher order evaluative thinking in education. Evaluative thinking employing norms for reasoning, such as coherence, consistency, relevance and transitivity, in an external manner may re-affirm the object of critique. External evaluation does not in itself alter the object of critique. Critical thinking that limits itself to the rational conditions for its own practice can be considered too thin to contest dystopian re-affirmation, and different kinds of deconstructive diagnostics of the present often result in too many vague and underdetermined possibilities and thereby re-affirming the object of critique. Actually, it has become fashionable among post-structuralist critical thinkers to think that undermining negative and affirmative critique is all there is to critical thinking (Papastephanou, 2021).

One problem with negative and affirmative critical thinking is that it does not sufficiently alter the object of critique. Kompridis (2005) argues that this situation calls for developing new ways of critical thinking and learning that are less likely to result in re-affirmation of the aspects of modern society we tend to perceive as dead, flawed or full of self-serving fiction. He argues that deconstructive critical thinking needs to be complemented (and by no means replaced) with more imaginative ways of learning that may open up our critical minds to real but yet unexplored possibilities by disclosing alternative futures (Kompridis, 2006, p. 258). However, the paradoxical character of reflexive modernization adds another twist to negative affirmative critical thinking since it may nurture parasitical affirmation. The critical thinker may depend on the object of critique for his or her academic success with the peculiar effect that the critical thinker shies away from altering the object of critique since its re-affirmation is a condition for the academic success of the critical thinker. In this situation, the object of critique is dead and alive in an odd parasitical sense since it can be objectively or socio-politically flawed but still rewarding for the individual critical thinker who parasitically feeds on its negative affirmation for a living.

Hence, in order to break out of negative re-affirming critical thinking loaded with dystopian energy and meaning, we may seek out other and more substantial ways of critical thinking and learning. Substantial critical thinking may alter the object or the semantic content of critique, but in recent history of critical thinking and critical theory we have seen such attempts doing more harm than good. The problem with substantial critical thinking aiming at alteration is that it can be too substantial, distanced and transformed to a totalizing ideology or elitist prescriptions (Honneth, 2009). Substantial critical thinkers often assume an underlying view of the one way the world is or a closed normative foundation for critical thinking, but critical thinking grounded in such assumptions tends to come out as more of a problem than a solution, or as a threat to practice rather than a helpful critical hand (Rönnsström, 2018). For example, Axel Honneth (2009) admits that the Frankfurt School was too substantial as they were leaning on a speculative philosophy of history and on a unified view of universal reason. Modern capitalist society was imagined to produce social practices and personality structures that resulted in a pathological deformation of our capacities for

reason, and the substantial criticism departed from the idea that critical thinkers can open up processes of enlightenment in society based on a universal idea of reason and thereby overcoming the pathological deformation of reason caused by capitalism. Honneth (2009) maintains that his academic forerunners have been rightly accused of performing substantial critique with too much distance from a given society, neglecting its plurality of practices, and in doing so, losing important normative real-life reference points and thereby interfering destructively with the integrity of different social practices. Honneth (2009) argues that critical thinkers can no longer overshadow values and commitments of local practices by appealing to external criteria or substantial proposals, and by operating with a distanced objectifying attitude out of reach for the addressees of critique. Such a distanced attitude, Honneth (2009) argues, 'runs the risk of claiming an elitist specialized knowledge that can readily be abused for manipulative purposes' (p. 44).

It is not surprising, then, that Jürgen Habermas (1987) aimed at reconstructing critical theory with a healthy distance to substantial, elitist and totalizing fallacies. However, Habermas's strategy for saving critical theory from sliding into totalizing ideology came with the high price of depriving the reflexive modern critical thinker of substantial resources for restoring confidence and trust. Habermas's widely respected strategy was to replace philosophical theories of subject-centred reason with a theory of communicative or intersubjective reason (Habermas, 1998). In doing so, he extended the dominant empiricist and instrumental norms of rationality discussed earlier with a broader and arguably more basic concept of communicative reason departing from a primacy of intersubjectivity compared to empiricist worldviews in which subjectivity and objectivity are primary and intersubjectivity is derived. Habermas's new reference point is based on his theory of communicative action, and specifically the formal pragmatic conditions for such actions oriented to what Habermas calls 'validity claims'. However, Kompridis (2006) argues that Habermas went too far in his shying away from substantial critique in order to develop a proceduralist view of reason. Habermas's proceduralism assumes that arriving at the right normative procedures is the best way forward for critical theory and social criticism in order to take on the challenge of altering disgruntling conditions in society. However, the formal pragmatic strategy avoids substantial fallacies and unwanted elitism but it does not really target the problem of doubt, disbelief and scepticism in a society loaded with dystopian meaning.

In order to avoid neglecting important contexts and overriding substantial proposals, and in order to not detrimentally interfere with the integrity of practices and people, critical thinking is conceptualized in non-substantial proceduralist terms. The proceduralist proposal shifted focus from bringing substantial content into critical thinking as a condition for its own practice, to a focus on the agreement on substantial content as a possible outcome of critical thinking. However, this situation forms a dilemma for students, educators and theorists caring for critical thinking and wanting to break out of negative re-affirmation in a society simultaneously dead and alive. Yet, critical thinking and criticism is, as Walzer (2002, p. 18) argues, not merely a backward-looking retributive punishment for, or an undermining diagnostic of the present of, the mischiefs and flaws of modern society. Critical thinking and criticism carry some future resonance, explicitly or implicitly, but this is more or less the same as carrying normative implications. Consequently, breaking out of negative and affirmative critical thinking calls for openness and context responsiveness and substantial elements capable of altering the object of or the semantic content of critical thinking without detrimental interference. However, Papastephanou (2021) argues that there is unexploited potential in caring and cautious substantial critical thinking if we dare to re-think normativity. Future resonance and normative implications are always there because of the non-circumventability of normativity, she argues, but it may be hidden, encrypted, unexamined, imaginary or just vaguely stated. Papastephanou (2021, p. 263) maintains that we need to re-think normativity without falling prey to substantial fallacies, prescriptivism or unwanted elitism. However, many significant critical thinkers and much of the critical thinking we encounter today nurturing negative and affirmative criticism are hostile to the very idea of normative implications and they endorse anti- or non-normative views of critical thinking (Papastephanou, 2021, p. 257). A side effect of negative



affirmative critical thinking is, thus, that it breeds dystopian meaning and shies away from alteration to the extent that the objects of critique claimed to be dead are also kept alive. However, the dynamics of negative affirmation robs critical thinking of its promising powers and it is steadily becoming another practice we can think of as dead and alive.

I am now in a position to explicate the dark side of critical thinking, and its worrying dynamics and effects. Critical thinking is a higher order practice since it takes ordinary thinking, practices or objects as its target, but it is not a self-sustaining practice since it depends on its objects. Undermining critique and fierce deconstruction are not problematic as such, but critical thinking grows darker as negative critique repeatedly re-affirms the object of critique, drains the critical thinking of its energy and loads its objects with dystopian energy and meaning. This is not unique for so called 'post-modern' or 'post-structuralist' criticism since any kind of critical thinking may fuel dystopian energy and meaning. In recent decades, critical thinkers have come to undermine confidence and trust in modern imaginaries, institutions and practices to the degree that inviting futures have been overshadowed by dystopian energy and meaning. Consequently, we can no longer think of critical thinking as exclusively possessing the positive and promising powers we tend to ascribe to it; rather, there is a growing need to recognize its two-faced nature and pay attention to its self-crippling and existentially alienating forces. Critical thinking can be self-crippling if critical thinkers are deprived of adequate scope and important objects for critical thinking. However, it is most discouraging when critical thinkers undermine their own futures by an overload of dystopian meaning, when they no longer are appropriately moved by reasons important for their own individual and collective agency, and when they no longer trust the society they form together as they participate in its continuation. Critical thinkers may be lost when they no longer are capable of imagining a future less harmful or more inviting than the paradoxical society dead and alive they occupy today, and when they are instructed to undermine only, and never enter, normative and imaginative territories. A dark side-effect of negative affirmative critical thinking seems to be a growing number of individuals experiencing existential alienation which is reflected in the recent revival of the concept of alienation in political, social and critical theory (Oversveen, 2021).

### **Concluding remarks: Re-thinking critical thinking and its learning relationships with future resonance**

I started out this re-visiting analysis by acknowledging the fact that critical thinking has emerged as an important ideal and aim in education. However, there is a growing need to re-think and think critically about critical thinking in education because it can no longer uphold the elevated status of an ultimate aim or an intrinsic good. I have argued that critical thinking is a higher order thinking and practice targeting ordinary thinking and practice. However, education is typically about equipping individuals with capabilities that allow them to thrive, grow and participate in society, and not merely to evaluate themselves, other thinkers and social imaginaries, institutions and practices. Roth (2019, p. 29) reaches a similar conclusion from a Kantian standpoint when he argues that it is human agency as a whole that is truly important to education rather than only its evaluative or reason assessing faculties. Moreover, education is also about contributing to and participating in the continuation of society and not primarily about the evaluation or undermining deconstruction of society.

No matter how much we cherish critical thinking we are no longer in a position to think of it as an unanimous or intrinsic good. It is, perhaps, neither good nor bad, since it can be used for countless of purposes, agendas and parasitical drives, but, more importantly, there is a need to recognise a dark side of critical thinking because of its negative and affirmative, dystopian, self-crippling and existentially alienating forces and effects. Critical thinking is, like many practices obstructed by reflexive modernization, full of self-serving fictions, nurturing its status as an all-but-only-good-purpose skill. Therefore, it is important to think critically about critical thinking to avoid succumbing to negative reaffirmation that would cause us to lose faith in such process as an

important educational practice. It is better to think, I argue, of critical thinking as an indispensable practice because of its close kinship with learning, and because of its (at least partly) constitutive role in thinking and learning processes. However, it is an indispensable practice we need to care for, stimulate with caution and work hard to renew since it tends to be more successful in undermining society and load it with dystopian meaning than it is in ensuring its healthy and inviting, or at least less not harmful, perhaps sustainable, continuation. In this situation, proponents of different views of critical thinking are wise to develop learning relationships with one another and refrain from merely defending their own and opposing the views of the other, either by subsuming themselves in monadic subject-object relationships overlooking the work of their fellow critical thinkers or by taking a strictly undermining stance and thereby excluding the possibility of reciprocal learning relationships. It is on this collaborative note I will make some concluding remarks with some future resonance with regard to critical thinking; the key of my suggestion lies in the importance of developing learning relationships in critical thinking and among critical thinkers.

The aporetic proposal offers a satisfying starting point for re-thinking critical thinking under reflexive modern conditions in a society dead and alive. It builds on the prior work of other critical thinkers and its conceptualization does not deprive critical thinkers of resources for and objects of critical thinking. Moreover, its normative frame of reference is drawn from conditions for communicative action oriented towards understanding, which, in turn, departs from an analysis of ordinary situations in which someone is saying something to someone about something. The frame of reference evades monadic subject-object relationships that run the risk of distorting learning relationships among critical thinkers, and it is not likely to deprive critical thinkers of healthy de-centring, openness and possibilities for action. It recognizes the vital role of intersubjectivity and restoring learning relationships in critical thinking. It also respects, as discussed in the first section, thinking as an essentially holistic practice which takes place in a normative sphere of action based on three varieties of interdependent knowledge and three different kinds of access to the world. Remember, the problem we face in this theoretical exercise is not only about conceptual adequacy and theoretical grounding; rather, it is also to face self-crippling and dystopian tendencies and to develop new ways of learning and learning relationships that may restore confidence and trust lost in the course of reflexive modernization. However, there are no obvious routes or trampled paths; rather, we have to learn the way forward together and apart. I suggest that we take the following subjective, intersubjective, and objective or substantial learning relationships seriously as we practice and re-think critical thinking.

Thinkers have direct access to their own thoughts in a way that no outsider can have, but direct access may nurture confirmation bias since we do not infer our own thoughts from behavioural evidence. In critical thinking we have a tendency to neglect critical self-reflection as we focus on critically undermining the view of others, and we tend to protect the integrity of our own views when they become the target of others (Lam, 2007) In a similar fashion, practitioners in schools, universities and elsewhere have direct access to their own practices in ways no outsider can have, but direct access may nurture biased confirmation of critical thinking habits and ongoing practices. Consequently, contextualists defending the plurality and integrity of practices run the risk of disabling important learning relationships. Critical thinkers may not sufficiently develop learning relationships related to their own subjectivities, and practitioners may not develop learning relationships to their own practices if they deny the value of constitutive norms of thinking, the possibility of context-transcendence or if they merely defend themselves against the disruptive perspectives of outside critics. Moreover, contextualists defending the integrity of practice tend to conflate ordinary and higher order practice, initiation and socialization with critical evaluation, and, as Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) point out, being effective with being critical. However, self-serving confirmation bias cannot only be curbed by disheartening systematic disconfirmation. We can learn about and expand our own thinking and practices by gauging our own thoughts with the thoughts of others, and by collaborating with and learning from others, near or distant.

Critical thinkers typically use norms constitutive of thinking in evaluative ways that may overlook the subjectivity of the critical thinker they assess with their own standards. However, when doing so they need to care for and engage in grasping the view of the other before they engage in evaluating the other, because if they don't, they merely impose their own views on the other and they fail to establish a learning relationship. Arguably, critical thinkers must commit to a special kind of charity that allow them to come as close as possible to the views of their targets. They are wise to maximise the intelligibility of the other by paying attention to constitutive normativity in the thinking of others, their situation, their behaviour and use of language that may or may not converge with their sociolinguistic surroundings, or in Davidson's words, they have to be ready for radical interpretation (Davidson, 1984, p. 135). Similarly, when critical thinkers assess practices in society they need to care for and engage in those practices. Or, as Kompridis (2006) argues, critical thinkers need to commit to intimacy and connection and refrain from distance and separation. They need to respect the integrity of practices, their internal normative reference points and what insiders see in their practices, because if they don't, they merely impose their critical standards on others and they rob themselves of the possibility of identifying flaws and self-serving fictions in a way that can be grasped by and revitalizing for insiders. Critical thinkers operating with abstract, formal or theoretical categories with hardly any substantial resonance in the practices that they target run the risk of irrelevance, disconnection, unwanted elitism and even totalizing ideology. Honneth's (2009) warning can explain the justified fear of unwanted intrusion expressed by contextualists. There are numerous examples of how uses of reason slide into the pathologies of reason. Thus, care, charity, connection and intimacy are essential in order to develop and restore learning relationships among critical thinkers and their different targets.

Finally, I have argued that there is a dark side of critical thinking and I have explained its dynamics in terms of negative and affirmative critical thinking about the flaws and self-serving fictions of modern society resulting in an overload of dystopian energy and meaning. Critical thinking, as discussed above, departs from assumptions of its warranting purposes, such as perfecting our reasoning skills, collaborative search for truth or undermining the self-serving fictions of modern society. Critical thinkers run the risk of being caught in a dilemma, as argued, between imposing substantial views as if they were universally valid in a way that neglect the plurality of thinkers and practices, or avoiding substantial fallacies by proposing procedures that allow critical thinkers to reach universal agreement by orienting themselves towards validity claims and by being appropriately moved the unforced force of reasons. However, in order to face the dark side of critical thinking I suggest that we think differently about critical thinking in a way that is no longer restricted to assumptions of prior universal validity resulting in far too substantial criticism, or assumptions about procedures that may result in universal assent among critical thinkers orienting themselves towards validity claims as they seek out the better argument. Fortunately, there are other ways to establish learning relationships in critical thinking and collaboration since assumptions of universal assent in substantial terms may deprive critical thinkers of possible ways forward, a richer field of possibilities and re-imagination of modern society (Kompridis, 2005). Critical thinking in a society loaded with dystopian energy and meaning can be imaginative in a specific sense. It can break out of negative re-affirmation by altering the objects of critique as critical thinkers engage in identifying real possibilities, inspiring examples, re-appropriated practices, alternative social arrangements, and disclosing possible ways of going about that contrast with the flawed conditions they target today. We can think of critical thinking as a possibility disclosing practice with real life connection in which imagination brings about alteration, and in thinking so we remind ourselves about the social fact that we actually live in an imagined real world in need of continuous re-imagination. Imaginary critical thinking can re-open the future in a society dead and alive by restoring utopian energy and meaning in education and elsewhere. We can imagine a different, maybe better or at least less harmful or unfair tomorrow, compared to the self-crippling, existentially alienating and dystopian conditions too many people experience and re-affirm today (Papastephanou, 2008; Rönnsström, 2019).

## Notes on contributor

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