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Toward A Definition of Critical Inquiry

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1. THE TYRANNY OF TERMINOLOGY

What is "critical inquiry"? General concepts are necessarily complex ones, because they are interwoven with other concepts; and critical inquiry (like its cognates such as critical thinking, rationality, and the liberal arts) populate a family of closely related concepts. But as with other kinds of families, their relationships aren't always obvious, their boundaries are vague and porous, at times contentious, and their meanings overlap. Yet each of these concepts is useful if not indispensible. Sometimes all that differentiates them is their subtler connotations or the different contexts in which they tend to be used. Likewise, the terms themselves may have multiple usages, any of which, as one philosopher aptly notes, "may be valuable for the light it sheds and dangerous because of the shadow it casts."[i]

Acknowledging this predicament of complexity is our point of departure. Resolving that predicament – by relating the terms – isn't a simple matter of fitting the ideas together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle or countries on a map, with clear and unique boundaries; they don't fit together neatly or in a single correct way because their boundaries aren't logically pristine. We can't regard them as wholly separate and unrelated ideas, but neither can we usefully conflate them. Rather, they must be understood as both distinct and connected. We'll focus here on critical inquiry, while understanding that it is part of a larger conceptual family.

Various types and levels of rational thinking have evolved in the West since their emergence in Ancient Greece, along with the rise of liberal learning. Critical inquiry, I will suggest, usefully describes that spectrum of rationality as a whole, within the liberal arts context. It doesn't specify the particular subtypes of critical or rational thinking, nor does it encompass all uses of critical or rational thinking in the world at large, including the personal rationality – the coordinating and maximizing of means and ends – of, say, a hunter-gatherer, or a modern businessperson. Critical inquiry is rather the toolbox of liberal learning, so to speak, including all of the tools contained therein.

That said, I have no quarrel with the broad definition of critical inquiry proposed above by the University of South Carolina Aiken. In fact, it's a plausible one, if a bit vague. USC Aiken makes an admirable attempt to nail conceptual Jell-O to the wall; but it's still Jell-O, and in a sense, it must remain Jell-O. My own definition is somewhat narrower. It focuses on the bundle of critical thinking skills, emphasizing "well-reasoned analysis and understanding" and it implies, but doesn't stress, the process of "gathering and evaluating information" – without which, after all, there isn't much to think about. In short, I'm suggesting that critical inquiry broadly equates with rationality and with critical thinking, and that it's the beating heart (or perhaps we should say, the active brain) of the liberal arts.

2. STIPULATIVE DEFINITIONS

This tyranny of terminology is why we need a preliminary tool: stipulative definitions. A stipulative definition (such as the one I'm suggesting for "critical inquiry") is one that is based, in a non-arbitrary fashion, on both logic and convenience. In dealing with concepts of the gelatinous kind, it is often expedient or necessary to say: This is how I plan to use it. Doing so requires no sleight-of-hand, invention, or make-believe. Nor does it mean we can force any word to mean whatever we please, which would be self-defeating. It's rather a strategic and plausible delimiting of meaning for immediate purposes.

Common sense (which I won't attempt to define here) suggests three limiting conditions on the use of any stipulative definition: it should be clear; it should be used consistently; and while it may be broader or narrower than other uses of the term, it shouldn't contradict them or mean something else entirely. Using "critical inquiry" as an umbrella term for the spectrum of rational/critical thinking within the liberal arts meets those conditions, and also works on other levels. The words "critical" and "inquiry" each bring something important to their marriage: "critical" implies questioning and self-questioning, while "inquiry" denotes learning and searching. The vagueness of "critical inquiry" makes it ripe for such appropriation; in fact, there is no non-vague or non-general or uniquely sound way of using it without stipulating a definition.

Critical inquiry, thus defined, equates with the set of values that we associate with intellectual rigor, and which are subsumable under a broad conception of rationality or critical thinking: clarity and consistency; adherence to the explicit rules of formal logic, as well as to the guidelines or best-practices of informal logic; a commitment to the pursuit of truth, however contextually defined; the refusal to take things or words at face value; the willingness to look below surfaces: in sum, the array of intellectual habits and best practices that are conducive to flexibility of thought and breadth and depth of (shared) understanding. Critical inquiry, finally, combines rigorous systematic thinking (thinking according to shared rules) and systemic thinking (seeing how things are related and how they are distinct). And it applies across disciplines, methodologies, and cultures.

3. THE USES AND LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY

As a toolbox for thinking, critical inquiry resembles its parent discipline, which is philosophy. So before proceeding, we need to consider philosophy's parental function, and (like any parent) its central but not unlimited role within the liberal arts universe. "You are no doubt well aware," wrote Cicero in De Oratore, "that of all the liberal arts in high repute philosophy is considered by the learned to be the mother, and 'the great original.'" Philosophy is the parent of most of the liberal arts disciplines – and stepparent to the rest – for reasons that are closely intertwined: historical, conceptual, and methodological. Saying this doesn't privilege philosophy, or Western thought in general; it's a matter of historical fact. But it's important to see why it's a fact. That's the conceptual and methodological side.

It is no accident that philosophy played, and continues to play, a unique foundational role in the evolution of Western learning. It was inevitable, given philosophy's nature and function as the attempt to think systematically and to organize knowledge. Philosophical thinking is by definition general thinking, and methodological thinking. It asks broad questions, e.g., about the nature of mind, knowledge, reality, and value, and how we think; and those questions recur in a narrower context within the other disciplines. Philosophical speculation thus led, over time, to more particular questions with narrower conceptual boundaries: for example, about the study of art, religion, economics, psychology, language, and so forth.

The Greeks posed basic questions about the mind and the world that previously had been raised, if at all, primarily within religious, mythic, and oral and narrative traditions: questions such as: What is nature? What is real? What is knowledge? What is causation? What is good? How did the world begin (cosmogony) and how is it arranged (cosmology)? Beginning with the surviving fragments of the Pre-Socratic thinkers, and continuing with Plato, Aristotle, and other Hellenic schools such as the Sophists and the Stoics, these inquiries merged into the distinctive philosophic tradition; and that tradition, over time, spun off other disciplines. In fact, when Plato uses the term "philosophy" he means something broader than what we mean by it: the Greek "love of wisdom" applied to all knowledge, not just to abstract concepts about thought and its relation to the world. In the process, however, he went a long way toward inventing the discipline we now call "philosophy."

Philosophy thus emerged, and has endured by default, as the systematic study of thought and knowledge in general, while offloading more particular questions to new, independent avenues of inquiry. That evolution began in earnest with Aristotle, who, in addition to being a great philosopher, pioneered not just the fields of logic and rhetoric but also physics, and largely invented the study of biology through his work in classifying plants and animals.

Fast-forward now some two thousand years. Economics, political science, psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, semiotics, interpretation theory, cognitive science: these are just some of the free-standing domains of inquiry that have emerged in recent centuries (and decades) as questions about, for example, money, language, social organization, institutions, art, and the human mind and behavior, have emerged along with new techniques for collecting, organizing, and assessing information.

To be sure, not everything we think about comes from Ancient Greek philosophy. Western literature originates with Homer and the Old Testament; drama and poetry trace back to Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and others. The practice of recording history began with Herodotus and was advanced by Thucydides; early mathematics owes much to Pythagoras. Ideas from China, India, the Arab world and elsewhere have since infiltrated and enriched the West. But even the great knowledge traditions that have evolved independently of philosophy are not immune to its generalizing and theorizing tendency, or its preoccupation with the nature of knowledge in general. Hence, philosophy's ongoing stepparent role.

Greek philosophy provided the unifying questions, methods, and conceptual apparatus for what became the liberal arts, because that was, and remains, philosophy's job. But every other serious field of inquiry shares certain content-independent intellectual values: truth, and logical consistency; analytic rigor; clarity of thought and expression.[ii] Thus, far from being a peripheral or esoteric subject, philosophy is both historically and conceptually central to all organized learning. Understanding its central and centripetal role in thought and learning is where critical thinking begins. Put another way: philosophical thinking is critical thinking, and critical thinking, no matter the subject, is philosophical thinking.

Having acknowledged philosophy's centrality, however, we should also note its intrinsic limitations. But first a caveat: the fact that it may be too abstract for some tastes isn't one of those limitations; all thought is abstract. Without any abstraction, we could barely think or speak.[iii] So developing a facility with abstract ideas, as tools of meaning, isn't just for philosophers; it's for anyone who would engage in critical inquiry. But while the intellectual skills we're equating with critical inquiry represent

gateways to more effective and sophisticated thinking – in essence, to more philosophical thinking – they don't require immersion in philosophy itself. There are several related reasons why this is the case.

Most obviously, there are many things we need to learn and ways of learning them beyond philosophy and good thinking. For the world writ large, thinking alone doesn't suffice. As the discipline devoted to thinking about thinking, philosophy is maximally self-regulating and self-critical: the ultimate form of metacognition. But theory isn't an end in itself; it's a handmaiden, not a substitute, for other cognitive functions such as observation, fact-gathering, testing, analyzing information, arguing, criticizing, problem-solving, identifying questions and lines of inquiry, and, not least, the enduring value of the human imagination. While the intellectual ascent we're ascribing to critical inquiry owes a crucial debt to philosophy, it applies those philosophic gifts beyond philosophy itself. One could even argue that exporting those tools to other fields, and to non-philosophers, is philosophy's most important function.

To put it more bluntly: philosophy doesn't generate art, or teach us how to read or write novels, make money, save lives, exercise leadership, plant gardens, or raise children. Least of all does it reveal the "meaning of life"; spiritual practices may better serve that purpose. Philosophy doesn't add to the sum of knowledge, at least not in the way that science or empirical research archetypally does. Rather, it adds to the quality of knowledge by organizing and evaluating it, asking deeper questions, and enabling us to think more clearly, deeply, broadly, flexibly, and systematically.

Moreover, as the custodians of metacognitive thinking, philosophers are vexed by certain abstract questions (some very broad, others narrower and more technical) that don't and needn't necessarily vex the rest of us; and not being vexed by them doesn't prevent us from becoming better thinkers. Good philosophers are rigorous critical thinkers; but all rigorous critical thinkers aren't, and don't need to be, philosophers. Intellectual rigor isn't just transdisciplinary; it is philosophical rigor made available to all thinkers and subjects: the rigor of logic, analysis, truth-seeking, thoroughness, relevance, clarity, and precision.

Why focus on logic, truth, clarity, etc.? The answer is that these are essential pillars of community in the broadest sense. Like language itself, they are how we interact effectively in any collective enterprise. They are primarily values pertaining to communication; and there are few forms of human community that don't involve communication. Should you now ask: why community? I would paraphrase the old joke about the world resting on a turtle: very clever – but it's community all the way down.

Finally, becoming adept at critical inquiry doesn't require the formal study of philosophy (although it never hurts) for an even more basic reason. We're already philosophers, unconsciously and in spite of ourselves, whenever we use language to think – and especially when we use it carefully. All human thought and communication has a philosophical component – a rational component. Critical inquiry in the liberal arts simply makes us better philosophers.

When we think more critically, we meet the philosophers halfway, so to speak. But meeting philosophy halfway isn't a half-measure or compromise; rather, it's a fitting level of meta-cognition: thinking about our own thought, in the here-and-now, on matters ranging from the immediate to the remote, and from the more general to the more particular, across the liberal arts spectrum and in public discourse. In sum, we can acknowledge philosophy as the hub of learning – but we also need the rest of the wheel; and that wheel is in motion. As knowledge expands and evolves, even the hub moves, though more slowly than the rest. And so, having given philosophy its due, we can become advanced critical thinkers without being philosophers.

4. SOME "GATEWAY CONCEPTS" OF CRITICAL INQUIRY

If "critical inquiry" identifies the toolkit of essential critical thinking skills for liberal learning, many of the tools in that kit could be considered methodological. They are universal, content-independent rules and guidelines (for example, the strict rules of formal logic, and the looser best practices of informal logic) that help us to think in communities; and thinking is always a means to other ends: understanding, judgment, communication, problem-solving, deliberative action. But there are other useful items in the tool kit besides these methodological ones. Higher-level critical thinking also involves familiarity with a range of essential organizing or "gateway" concepts, which likewise transcend the individual disciplines and unify the liberal arts curriculum. Not surprisingly, they are also philosophy's progeny, and we owe most of them to the Greeks.

The gateway concepts I'm referring to identify ways of organizing thought and experience that persist over time and space and across the domains of knowledge. They include language itself, as the principle medium of thought; rationality (a conceptual umbrella, as I've suggested, for the various types of critical thinking); analysis; truth; causality; and complexity. These six concepts, and arguably others, are key points of entry to liberal learning. They don't constrain our thinking, but channel it in ways that are widely useful or necessary, because they reflect fundamental ways in which our minds organize and interact with the world, regardless of what is under investigation.

Obviously, there is room for debate about the roster I'm suggesting. Other ideas that serve as important conceptual gateways include nature, value, experience, knowledge, art, faith, morality, excellence, power, community, and freedom. Each of these sheds powerful light within the liberal arts domain, and is in some sense essential. But they are not necessarily gateways of the same level of generality.

A host of other concepts – including government, scientific method, transference, foreshadowing, interpretation, three-point perspective, opportunity cost, immanent critique, double-blind study, hubris, kinship, or means-testing, to name just a few – are salient or essential within one or more disciplines, or form useful interdisciplinary corridors; but they don't apply across the entire spectrum of liberal learning. Likewise, broad conceptual frameworks such as Marxism, feminism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and hermeneutics constitute sturdy theoretical umbrellas; but they don't cover everything, and where they do apply, they must compete with other frameworks.

Not so the gateway concepts. The concept of truth, for instance, is (despite its many complexities) almost self-evidently crucial to every intellectual arena. Without some shared facts and principles, our minds are rudderless and adrift. As individuals, we can't function effectively without the ability to judge what is real or true from what is a lie, a dream, a delusion, a belief, and so forth. Even in contexts where truth is elusive or hard to define, or where uncertainty, probability, indeterminacy, impermanence, or sheer speculation or guesswork is endemic, we can't abandon the notion of truth altogether, as both a moral and an intellectual value, without stumbling into incoherence or, at best, into anti-intellectual ghettoes. Truth is part of the very grammar of liberal learning.

The same is true (voilà!) for rationality. Reasoning is our shared system for thinking and communicating, to the extent that we do share it: a set of implicit rules guiding the movement from one shared thought to another. Rationality is thus a kind of meta-language, a grammar for all learning and public discourse. As such, it is also a form of community: a unifying, not a dividing force, at least for coalitions of the willing.

Similarly, the concept of causality is universal and intrinsic to how we organize the world. However much we may argue about what it is, how it works, or the different forms it takes, the idea of causality is necessary for any coherent account of history, nature, or morality; it is part of the very furniture of human consciousness. Learning and thinking are themselves causal processes. We argue about causality a lot – often implicitly, without realizing it, and often without resolution; but these are arguments we can't help having.

The concept of analysis constitutes another gateway because it is the methodological capstone of critical inquiry: the highest form of trans-disciplinary critical thinking, not just for philosophers, but for everyone. Analytic thinking embraces its own family of intellectual skills: establishing clear and useful definitions; making distinctions and connections; forming analogies; resolving or mitigating ambiguity.

The concept of complexity likewise opens a crucial door to liberal learning, one that underlies other arguments and alternate ways of organizing experience at a fundamental level. This is because complexity (and by extension, the simple/complex spectrum) captures something essential about how we perceive – and differently perceive – the structure of things. Indeed, the term "structure" implies a conception of complexity. How to balance complexity and simplicity in a particular case is another matter; it depends on the thinker, what is being thought about, and the audience. Often, what clear understanding requires is that we commute between the simpler and the more complex. Thus, calling complexity a gateway concept of critical inquiry does not demonstrate a bias toward complexity, or toward any point on the simple-complex spectrum, but is rather a way of foregrounding the spectrum itself.

Last but by no means least, critical inquiry, like philosophy, begins but doesn't end with careful attention to language. Because we think mainly with words, we can't be critical thinkers without examining those words – our own and others' – as complex tokens of meaning, and the various ways in which they help and hinder us in forming and sharing thoughts.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, the enigmatic Viennese-born philosopher, argued early in his career that the proper analysis of language would clear up philosophy's questions once and for all. In his short and dense Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921), Wittgenstein positioned himself as an anti-philosophical philosopher, purporting to resolve all the big questions once and for all by revealing them to be linguistic muddles. (His posthumous works, including the monumental Philosophical Investigations (1953), take a quite different view.)

Yet in attempting to bring philosophy to a close by, in effect, reducing it to problems of language, Wittgenstein paradoxically achieved the opposite result, giving the discipline an enormous burst of fresh intellectual energy. Linguistic problems, it turned out, are philosophical problems, not the other way around: problems not just about words, but about meaning, knowledge, reality, values, and minds. And we all have to deal with these problems at some level. If Wittgenstein is widely considered the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, it isn't because he was the last to turn out the lights.

Like the other gateway concepts, language is always problematic, and always central to thought. Clear and consistent use of language is essential to philosophy; but it isn't a substitute for philosophy, much less the graveyard of philosophy. More to the point, the importance of clear language extends far beyond philosophy. No understanding of critical inquiry can ignore it.

The so-called gateway concepts share several additional defining features along with their ubiquity and generality as intellectual tools. One is that they tend to raise important questions of a kind that philosophers call "essentially contested." These are questions that can never be finally resolved, because they don't admit of answers in the form of factual truths; instead, they rather generate a range of possible moral, political, aesthetic, or intellectual responses. (A paradigm case is the question of free

will versus determinism in causality.) Because there is no higher principle to appeal to in deciding among such responses, no final consensus is possible. Yet they are questions we can't avoid asking and arguing about.

When we talk about truth, rationality, causality, analysis, complexity, or language, we need to negotiate broad ranges of meaning and make and explain our choices. We need to distinguish between disagreements about facts, where we can achieve some consensus by closer examination of the world, and disagreements on other bases, such as values, worldviews, or ways of interpreting facts, where we can't. And the more general the concept (think of freedom, morality, justice, art, education, or knowledge), the wider the range of potential disagreement.

Another defining feature of the gateway concepts, previously noted, is that they are domain-independent and apply to all critical inquiry. They are structural elements of the liberal arts tradition, resting on its rational foundations – as well as active reminders that it originated in Ancient Greece, and largely in what the Greeks called "philosophy."

Beyond that historical lineage, these concepts are reminders that all rigorous learning, in whatever culture or tradition, involves some form of metacognition – self-conscious thinking about the nature, types, and limits of knowledge and of thought itself – and is thus inherently philosophical. It's about getting to the bottom of things and to the essence of things; seeing deeply as well as broadly or narrowly; asking how things are connected as well as how they are distinct. It's about managing the economy of meaning defined by those competing goals in order to communicate as clearly, fully, and precisely as possible. Again, critical inquiry doesn't require us to become philosophers; it merely urges us to recognize that we are already philosophers, no matter what we're thinking about, and to be the best philosophers we can.

5. SUMMING UP: CRITICAL INQUIRY IS CURVILINEAR

Early sailors used maps of the night sky and the known world to find their way, along with other navigational devices: compasses for direction; astrolabes, and later sextants, to determine latitude. While crude or inaccurate by modern standards, such instruments worked, within a certain margin of error, enabling navigators to guide their ships at sea and discover new lands. Similarly, the tools of critical inquiry enable us to navigate the natural, discursive, and symbolic worlds with greater precision and success until better ones come along. And most of the ones we're still using are a few thousand years old.

Beyond those tools of intellectual rigor, critical inquiry is boundless; there are no fixed rules governing the direction of its inquiries and conversations. The roster of gateway concepts and buttressing ideas I've proposed is partial and contestable; in the end, they may simply be convenient ways of carving reality "at the joints," as Plato suggests. They are not shortcuts or substitutes for specific knowledge of the way things are, what things mean, or how things work. Rather, they are essential implements for the navigational skills that we need to be critical thinkers and effective citizens.

In equating critical inquiry with rationality and critical thinking, and using the metaphor of navigation, one might be accused of excessive linearity; and to be sure, any sound conception of the liberal arts must encompass other forms of cognition: association, memory, expressions of opinion, emotion, observation and data collection, and all the rest. The world isn't made up of lines, rules, or formulas, just as it isn't made up of maps. As Leonardo Da Vinci observes in his Notebooks, lines don't exist in nature; rather, artists, architects, and others inscribe them on a flat surface in order to depict or represent nature.

Like words, however, lines (straight or otherwise) are indispensable tools for modeling the world. They tell us where the horizon is, when Monday becomes Tuesday, and where Colorado ends and Wyoming begins. Lines are bifurcations (they have two sides), not just connections between points; and although it's either Monday or Tuesday, and you're either in Colorado or Wyoming, binary thinking is inadequate in many contexts. Like the artist, the architect, or the mapmaker drawing lines on paper, we use black and white words and sentences to depict gray zones and layers of complexity. Model vs. reality, map vs. world, binary vs. non-binary: critical inquiry has the power to bridge such dichotomies. It insists on a continual accommodation between thought and the world, not the predominance of either domain. The only requisite metaphysical assumption is that the mind and the world are always distinct, and always connected.

Critical inquiry might therefore be better described as curvilinear: it uses lines to map the world in all its curves, depth, and variety. The map isn't the territory, but they are fundamentally related, and we can't dispense with either. To be useful, any map – or any sentence, diagram, graph, photograph, recipe, checklist, playlist, etc. – must in some way represent the territory it identifies. But it is never a perfect or final representation.

Thinking is how we make sense of the world in all its flux, adapting to and organizing the flow of conscious experience so that we can act upon it with greater efficacy. It isn't a triumph over nature, or our emotive selves, but their complement. It isn't an exalted or ennobling activity, and it isn't for an elite few. It's just what we do, as well as we can, to grasp the bigger or more integrated picture, the smaller or more granular picture, the more elusive or unobvious picture, the other person's or other culture's picture, as the case may be. It is what distinguishes us as a species, empowering our agency by making us better learners, creators, and decision-makers – in short, better citizens.

Thinking is quintessentially a process of individuating and relating things: facts, ideas, objects, events, processes, people, institutions, the general and the particular, past and the present. It is only as good as the tools and methods we devise for modeling the world, and for revising those models as necessary, to make it more coherent and manageable. It's seldom a perfect fit, because

thoughts, like maps, are essentially linear, static, partial, imperfect models of a dynamic world. Thought and action form an endless looping series of semi-coordinated initiatives, accommodations, recognitions, resignations, risks, hedges, guesses, and little triumphs and disasters as we navigate our daily lives. Yet we muddle through, because thinking isn't useless, experience isn't incoherent, free agency isn't entirely illusory, and what is complex isn't inscrutable. And in the end, it's all we've got.

REFERENCES

1) Renford Bambrough, "Aristotle on Justice: A Paradigm of Philosophy," p. 165.
2) Philosophy continues to inform other disciplines in various ways. As Subrena E. Smith observes [https://aeon.co/ideas/why-philosophy-is-so-important-in-science- education]: "Albert Einstein's philosophical thought experiments made Cassini possible. Aristotle's logic is the basis for computer science, which gave us laptops and smartphones. And philosophers' work on the mind-body problem set the stage for the emergence of neuropsychology and therefore brain-imaging technology… [and] science brims with important conceptual, methodological and ethical issues that philosophers are uniquely situated to address…"
3) Even the knowledge necessary for, e.g., preliterate hunter-gatherers to survive involves cognitive abstraction. Identifying prey, predators, and survival strategies requires selection and organization of memories, skills, and strategies based on relational thinking about objects, events, and causality.