CRITICAL THINKING AS INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE AND THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Eakkasak Yooktanan

Critical thinking, when taken literally, means the analysis of concepts and ideas, by breaking them into basic components in order to examine the degree of acceptability or unacceptability of an advanced belief couched in those concepts and ideas. In the area of education, it refers to a reform movement in higher education now going on in some western countries. For example, many universities in the U.S., i.e. University of Minnesota, Sonoma University, have centers of critical thinking with the mission to promote learning processes that foster student’s critical thinking ability. This educational reform movement has been undergone for over a decade and has extended toward lower levels of education as well. This movement is generally attributed to a belief that the world is now in the era of information. So education should provide the citizens ability to critically think through the information they’ve got. So that they may acquire the most appropriate beliefs and decisions for actions, as the bases for their living good and worthy life. In other words, it is an attempt to make higher education and education at all levels meet the ultimate goal of education.

Before we make the decision whether Thailand’s higher education and other levels of education need this reform, we should realize that we may take a cultural stance and ask ourselves if this reform is the product of development in the western culture. And it may not fit well with our own culture. This point of view is feasible, and some can raise it as an objection toward the incorporation of critical thinking in our educational system. In terms of history, critical thinking movement is definitely a product of western culture. It is originated by the direct influence of Western philosophy concerning the relationship between reason and meaning of life the orientation and the formal structure of educational processes. That means we have to understand that “critical thinking” in the western sense has to do with thinking about values and meaning of life on the basis of the careers toward which higher education trains a person. So, in the western sense, critical thinking means the ability to think, in such a way that the critical thinker becomes a doctor, a nurse, an engineer, a lawyer, etc., who performs his or her duty most efficiently and rightfully toward the ultimate benefit, or the Good, of his or her profession. And that ability must function in the context of the recognition that his or her profession is a minor part of life meanings supporting yet wider life meanings, namely, to live one’s whole life according to one’s own criteria of right and wrong and one’s own conception of the “Goods”. This spirit is a proliferation of Socrates’ ideals posed in his question of “How should we live”?
And in his answer, "we should live a perpetually examined life." His spirit and attitude toward reason and life laid down the foundation for the intellectual culture of the west almost over three thousand years ago. Despite the remoteness in time, the western world still holds on to his idea that self-examination is the only access to truths and meanings of life. The idea gains more significance today, since the current development of western philosophy has led toward an acceptance of pluralism regarding truths and meanings of life. This kind of pluralism holds that as soon as we move beyond what we know by ways of perceptual experience, everything is a theory, which can always be more than one. These theories await examination and adoption as guidance of life. Everyone has a right to choose theory, which would help one to lead the worthiest life. There is no one single answer, which has been proved to the status of the ultimate truth waiting for everybody to learn and adopt as the ultimate answer of life.

The latter reflection raises a question for Thai educators. Should we accept the above mentioned doctrines that underlie a classic intellectual culture of the west? In other words, should we accept the four following theses?

1. The ultimate goal of education is intellectual development as means toward (one's living) the worthiest life.
2. Examination is the sole access to truth.
3. The truth that we can access in any particular moment has a status of mere "theoretical truth", so there can always be more than one truth.
4. Individuals have right to choose their own truth independent from the determination of the society, since, after all, life belongs to each individual and cannot be reduced to the status of property owned by parents, relatives, or collective group of people.

If we reject even one of these theses, then there would be no reason why we should make the educational reform in the same direction as the west. Does our own culture hold that the ultimate goal of education is to prepare the citizen to function as "wheels and gears" of the society? That is to lead their life in accordance with the values and meanings of life which are readily available as the absolute formula, taken by our culture as the only kind of life which is true to the ultimate reality. If this is so, then there is no need for our education to equip members of the society with the ability to evaluate the system of beliefs which is taken as norm in our own culture. Otherwise our interest in higher educational reform would lack essence and become something that we take up only as a fashion and perhaps with self-contradiction. This can be seen from the saying of university administrators and professors that we want our students to have critical thinking to the extent that is appropriate to Thai culture.

Thus, if our culture believes in the goal of education, which disagrees with the goal of critical thinking, then we should pay no attention to this movement in the
west. For it is impossible to select and foster in our students only the aspects and characteristics of critical thinking which are appropriate to Thai culture. It is impossible for a culture or society to circumscribe critical thinking, to delimit where critical thinking is allowed, and where it is forbidden. On the contrary, it is critical thinking that has power to move the boundary of what is speakable deeper into the area of what is un-speakable in the society and makes the latter shrink. In other words, it is critical thinking that creates an open society. So if critical thinking shall grow strong in our society, we have to admit before hand that it is impossible to make the students think critically in the classroom, and think in accordance with the norm of the society or culture when they are outside the classroom. What happens inside and outside the classroom must come naturally from the ability that we have created in our students. Critical thinking cannot be a game that students play by the rules aiming at the acquisition of something other than the interest of the activity, such as the acquisition of degrees. For they will cease to do the activity as soon as they are free from the circumstance requiring the activity for such external benefits.

The reason why critical thinking cannot be just a game expected to play by the students inside the classroom for the degree is because, in reality, critical thinking is a characteristic of mind and conduct, i.e. it is what we call “virtue”. A virtue is something that a person consciously trains oneself to do more and more so that it becomes one’s nature to do so whenever it is possible, in other words, it becomes one’s characteristic.

And it is a characteristic that one creates in oneself because of one’s desire to lead one life in a relationship to a certain Good. In the case of critical thinking, the good that one desires is Knowledge and Wisdom, or to put it in a modest word, intelligence. If students desire and cherish intelligence, what happens inside and outside the classroom cannot be different. It has to be an activity that springs out from the inner nature of the students. That inner nature drives students to do activity aiming at what students love and value, namely intelligence. As intelligence is nothing but a search for truth and meanings that bind and harmonize inner and outer experiences, then intelligence is to be found in personal experience, in real life outside classroom, in the interaction between oneself and the society and the surrounding nature, as well as in the classroom. So, when thinking critically has become a habit, it is impossible to make a person think critically only to the extent that is appropriate to his culture, especially in a society that some beliefs have been institutionalized as “absolute truth” that nobody is allowed to question without being labeled as blasphemy. In such society, critical thinking is bound to straightforwardly attack that “truth” by the reasons I shall expound in the following paragraphs.

In detail, critical thinking is a virtue or habit of applying reason to a throughout and serious investigation on a belief, or a set of believes, hold and proposed by other for one to take up. That has to be done in order for one to reach a decision whether one should accept or reject or withhold it until further information is available. If the
person decides to reject a belief, then he or she has to try to construct, by using the most of his or her intelligence, a thought or a belief for his or her own, regarding that subject. And one has to sincerely think and evaluate what is right and wrong, or, worthy and unworthy for oneself, others, and society, what kinds of action is possible and lead toward the goods and the worthy regarding that subject. And when one repeatedly performs an act, of which discretion informs that it is the most appropriate means toward the goods, that action becomes one’s characteristic. Then the person becomes “just”, “brave”, “ humane”. In other words, the “virtue” of critical thinking brings about other related virtues. And when love of truth and wisdom is compounded with love of righteousness and justice, critical thinking will combine with bravery in expression of opinions that contradicts social obsession with appearance and form and in actions which are meant to amend what is wrong in the society. This is known as “ethical courage”. When such opinions and acts are wide spread, by virtue of their closeness to truth and justice which are nobler than what society currently believes and practices, they will force the society to amend the mistakes that are previously hidden or turned blind eye to by majority of the society.

As such, “critical thinking” is the characteristic of the spirit that drives society toward higher level of moral development. So, even though critical thinking is prevalent in the western world and is the root of western intellectual culture, it cannot be rightfully claimed to belong to a particular culture, western or whatever. It is a universal property of human spirit that controls and determines the form and direction of moral development in every culture. So the cultural stance toward critical thinking has to be rejected.

In the following part, the idea that critical thinking is intellectual virtue and the driving force toward moral development of a society shall be explained in more detail through the lesson learned by the western civilization, from the life and heroism of Socrates, the founding father of critical thinking in the west. His life will be compared with the life of Thai democratic hero, Professor Puey Ungphakorn, together with my remark on the Thai attitude toward critical thinking. Then, I will criticize Thai moral system. Next, I will make a final remark on the critical thinking movement in higher education indicating what kind of mistakes it is trying to remove.

The role of intelligence in the development of virtues was first explained in western philosophy in Aristotle’s Nicomachian Ethics. For Aristotle, wisdom is a product of intellectual activities, and he distinguished between two kinds of wisdom, theoretical and practical. He attributed virtues to the latter kind of wisdom.  

The history of this concept in Thailand is very interesting, as it was related to the study of western philosophy. It was introduced by the translation of Plato’s works into Thai, sometime before “Student Revolution”, and was widespread among Thai intellectuals around then. The concept seems to have died out since the subsequent suppression of students’ political activities. Since then, Greek classic has occupied no place in the circle of Thai intellectuals. Thus, the meaning of this concept waits to be relearned.
Ancient Greece was the first nation to seriously use reason to investigate and hypothesize about the nature, constructing models and representation of physical reality. Greek’s rationalism and naturalism were the foundation upon which modern sciences have been systematically built. During Greece time, models of the physical reality were characteristically numerous and vaguely represented, requiring extensive power of analysis and imagination and the correspondence with experiential facts, accessed by external senses, as criteria for degree of credibility. The close examination of these hypotheses with tools, to see which one them gives better explanation of the world, was still impossible. When Greek’s rationalism was loosely applied to affairs of life, a group of thinkers who called themselves "sophists" emerged. They proposed a moral theory called "ethical relativism", encapsulated in the phrase "man is a measure of all things." The doctrine insisted that right and wrong is nothing but personal preferences. The examination of sophists’ teaching was Socrates’ heroism. By putting himself into dialogues with each sophist, he thoroughly scrutinized sophists’ teaching and exposed the weakness in what they claimed to be their discovered "true knowledge" showing that, in fact, it was nothing but unfounded believes that could not answer major criticisms. However, his heroism ended up in a tragedy. For his uncompromising criticism of sophists led to hostility, which in turn led to an accusation that his thought was detrimental to the stability of Athenian society and he was consciously corrupting youth. He was forced to stop questioning socially respected figures, otherwise he had to face either a death sentence or being expelled.4

Socrates’ courageous act of choosing death taught the western world the intellectual virtue and the value and meaning of life nobler than possessed then by Greek culture. The same virtue and spirit reappeared in Galileo’s heroism, when he dared to prove the model of the universe that contradicted the Christian’s, at the dawn of modern science. His heroism initiated the driving force that resulted in the bible’s being reinterpreted as metaphor on the reality of the soul than being literally true of the physical world.

From the point of view of Thai culture, ones may claim that Socrates’ method shows that he lacked certain virtues that Thai culture strongly and typically admires and demands, namely, honor, respect, modesty, humbleness, considerateness, and compassion.5 They may claim that were Socrates had enough of these virtues, he would not have had created so strong hatred in other to the

---

4 Socrates lived during c. 470 – 399 B.C. The detail of his trial was portrayed in Plato's Apology and Xenophon’s Apology. See short introductory essay on his life and surrounding topics in I. G. Kidd, "Socrates" in Edwards Paul, (editor) The Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Vol. 7 New York: Macmillan, 1967. Pp. 480-486
5 I would like to call them “Thai nationalism virtues” as a challenge to those who believe that this group of virtues sets Thai culture apart and allows them to consider Thai culture as nobler than some other cultures.
extent that he had to sacrificed his life to prove his righteousness. Here is a defense for Socrates. To make use of Kant’s distinction between categorical imperatives and hypothetical imperatives, the righteousness of a virtue can always be justified on two different bases, i.e., as absolute and conditional. On one hand, we may admire and demand those mentioned virtues as something which are absolute, as ways of showing regards on others, that they are absolutely as honorable and worthy as ourselves. But on the other hand, we may admire and demand them as effective tools to reduce conflicts among persons operating their transaction in a certain kind of social structure. In other words, we may admire and demand them as tools to secure harmony among members in the society with hierarchical structure, where members are regarded as having more or less honor, or being more or less worthy, depending on the degree of authority one possesses and be entitled to exert over others. It is evident that Thai culture does not regard these virtues as absolute.

Otherwise it will demand those who are ranged higher, in the social hierarchy, to practice these virtues toward those who are ranged lower, to the same degree as it demands those who are ranged lower to practice these virtues toward those who are ranged higher. That is definitely not the case. For, it is not hard to see that practices of virtues in Thai society show characteristics of double standard. They are grouped together and demanded practice according to the appropriateness for those holding different social functions and statuses. In other words, they are classified according to social class; there are virtues for the subordinates and virtues for the superiors. (The former centers on generosity and compassion, the latter on respect, humbleness, and obsequiousness.) Then, we can infer that Thai culture takes virtues only as tools.

I shall now argue that if we take respect, humbleness, and considerateness, as absolute good, Socrates did not lack any of them. But he had to refrain from practicing them for greater goods. And if we take them as conditions for social harmony, then we have to answer if social harmony must always be secured over truth and righteousness. If so, then how could a society learn a new truth and righteousness? Truth is necessarily in conflict with falsehood, and always leads to a division in society of pro and con, of two sides holding right or wrong beliefs. Buddhism rejected basic doctrines of Hinduism and broke off as different religion, and thus divided Indian society. Christians were executed.

In the university where I teach, students are still practicing SOTUS (seniority, order, tradition, unity, and solidarity). Respect to senior is explained in terms of humbleness. But when 200 students were asked why one should always be humble, and 15 minutes were given for them to think of the best answer. They could not explain it in any other terms except as a practice that promotes one’s own interest. This supports my claim that “Thai virtues” have never been taught to Thai youth as categorical imperative.

---

6 See in Gregor, Mary. (editor) Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. Cambridge University Press, 1998, p 25.
Critical thinking as Intellectual Virtue and the Driving Force behind Cultural Development

on the accusation of heresy and jeopardizing the integrity of Roman Society. Conflict between proponents and opponents of certain beliefs is a normal stage in the intellectual development of society. The desire to secure social harmony often become the force that turns against intellectual development of the society, especially when social harmony hides mistakes in reasoning and ethical deficiency among majority and authority in the society. And that is the reason why there has to be an attempt to propose new truth as a corrective. When we put Professor Puey Ungphakorn’s heroism and tragedy along side Socrates’, the identity of essence is easily discerned. Ungpakorn’s heroic deeds occurred in the context of certain social and political setting, together with certain moral problems of Thai society. It was the culture of feudalism in which individuals were taken as unequal in dignity, and the fascist political system in which those who had power ruled with no constitution, abused and exploited bureaucracy to rob the nation. And behind the fascist system was the lack of political consciousness in the majority. Being full with those typical “Thai” virtues did not help him to escape conflict caused by his ethical and political courage. In the end he met with the same fate as Socrates, being accused of jeopardizing the stability of the society, and expelled out of his native land, for which he had devoted his life and found his meaning of life.8

So, Socrates’ heroism is not cultural bound, cannot be reduced to western culture. But it is the manifestation of human universal property in the sense that it can happen in any human society, and it underlies the search for meanings of life and the role of truth and intelligence in every human society. It is the force behind intellectual and moral development of every culture. So his life is a lesson for every culture that has not yet learned the value of intellectual freedom, including Thai culture.

In terms of intellectual virtue, we may say of conflict between Socrates and sophists that sophists had intellectual virtue at least at the basic level. They embarked on their inquiry with open mind accepting evidence from every available source relevant to their problem. As their problem was “What is the criteria of right and wrong among humans?” The intellectual virtue demands us to search for information from different societies and cultures. But implied in the question is an assumption that there are reasons behind moral phenomena. That, in a sense, amounts to a belief in criteria underlying and supporting human moral judgements. The opposite is a belief that the phenomena just happen with no reason whatsoever. Sophists’ vice lies in their act of insisting on the simplest hypothesis, as the

8 He held many terms as both the Chancellor of Thammasat University, and the Governor of National Bank. His teachings were part of the force leading to “student revolution” in 1973 that ended three years later in suppression, in the riot where hundreds of Thammasat University students were brutally killed by the middle class right wing radicals backed up by the military. He was asked by the government to leave the country and spent the rest of his life in England. Sometime after his exile, the government apologized for the incident and paid allowance to the end of his life.
result of indecisive data, namely “right and wrong is nothing but personal or societal, or cultural, preferences”, even though that amounts to rejecting the initial assumption underlying their inquiry. In other words, they prepared to reject the role of reason, which, earlier, set them on their course, simply because of the indecisiveness in their data. Whereas, an alternative was available, namely, by making a hypothesis that there are criteria of right and wrong, but they are very complex and need extensive analysis as well as profound thinking in order to come up with a hypothesis that can accommodate all conflicting data. This can be done, by starting with a simple positive explanation that can subsume the most remarkable data, then, increase its complexity by testing it against additional data, then qualifying it with supplementary explanation. Perhaps, this process has to be repeated over and over endlessly. For, even though we have never reach the hypothesis that can accommodate every available data, it does not show that such explanation do not exist. There may be such an explanation, but we still have not built our understanding up to it. The spirit of persisting search for answer through the power of reason is the intellectual virtue that Socrates possessed in the degree to which the sophists were no match. Though, they embarked on the course of reason, they abandoned it just as when they finished the first step, simply because of one major obstacle. They abandoned reason only to exploit it and took advantage over it, by exchanging their skill in logic and rhetoric for personal benefits, teaching those who sought political power, to win their positions in Greek democratic system, through ability to capture and manipulate majority’s opinion. Socrates, on the contrary, prepared to abandon all personal benefit, but refused to withdraw from using reason as means toward the worthiest life he could live. And the worthiest life for him was teaching others the value of reason and intelligence. Professor Puey Ungphakorn, in the same spirit, refused to withdraw from speaking and teaching on whatever would lead to social justice and political righteousness. His commitment to Thai political justice was the meaning of his life. For him, it was the only way to live the worthiest life. And he definitely derived his view of the value of life through power of reason, i.e. his intellectual virtue. His heroism, as well as Socrates’, is a precious lesson on meanings and values of life for later generations. In other words, their lives are heritage of mankind to be passed down to enrich the lives of those who seek for better and worthier life than what is readily available in their immediate society.

Socrates created dialectic, which is the process of finding truth by attempting to falsify it. (An idea can be accepted as true only if it can overcome other ideas that try to show that it is false.) It is the most precious heritage he left for the western world, apart from his meanings of life. It led to the continuous development of western philosophy along side the development of sciences. Science itself is nothing but dialectic that uses empirical evidence to falsify an idea. This is the second thesis I raised early as to whether we would accept it.

3
From a certain point of view, the critical thinking movement in higher education is a demand on higher education
to aim at developing the thinking ability of undergraduate students in every field to equal that of the graduate students. In other words, it demands the undergraduate students to be able to construct knowledge and to test its validity for themselves just like the graduate students. It may seem very idealistic and hard to reach, but, as a matter of fact, it is perfectly possible. We just have to understand that the weakness of higher education in the past results from certain mistakes, which are definitely avoidable. Education for the first degree has been aiming at transferring the output of the knowledge construction process, rather than at the process of knowledge construction itself. It is only at the level of higher degrees that education seriously emphasizes on the processes of acquiring knowledge and of testing its validity for oneself. First degree education tends to impart informational knowledge and operative skills necessary for fulfilling rather basic mission of the professions, which mobilizes the basic mechanism of society. That makes first degree education amount to no more than the transferring of information applicable to known situations, as ready-made knowledge, instead of creating ability to confront with new situations which are more complex than what is already known. It is clear that the latter demands ability to search for or construct new knowledge rather than to memorize the ready-made knowledge.

Even though higher education reform movement stresses critical thinking in professional dimension, this dimension is not as important as the dimension of pure intelligence and value of life. The ability of critical thinking in professions must come together with liberal education. In other words, sciences (including social sciences) and applied sciences must come together with humanities (philosophy and religion, history, art and literature). For, science concerns only raw facts and provides no guidance for life. As for applied science, although they assume certain values, it alone can not help professionals to be able to evaluate and associate values of their professions with higher values of life. It is only humanities that can provide guidance toward higher values of life. As only through humanities, students may see life as actually practiced from generations to generations, various ideas and incidents that sprang out of the quest for worthy life.

In the first part of this paper, I posed a question about critical thinking, in terms of cultural relativism. In conclusion, I cannot see how it is possible for our ideal of educational to be different from the western culture's. That means we have to accept the first thesis and take it as universal. Of course, cultural relativists may oppose this. But, by comparing Socrates and sophists, I have already shown why relativism is wrong. Different culture can be compared, to search for common or universal aspects, or to compare their weaknesses and the strengths on different aspects, or to see different levels of developmental stage. Our intellectual culture is weaker than the West's.9 This, in turn, results in weakness in our political culture, which

---

9 When I say this, I do not in anyway imply that Thai culture is consequently spiritually weaker than the west. Prawet Wasi said in
has just led us into the worst economic crisis ever, and in much more severe social problems than in the west. So the educational reform under the concept of “critical thinking” is necessary and much more urgent for us than for the west. However, our social and cultural background puts us at a disadvantage. There is no doubt that our negative attitude toward critical thinking results from our cultural condition. The problem lies in the culture of nepotism and authoritarianism, which dominates every dimension of lives in Thai society. A culture like this is likely to admire virtues of respect, obsequiousness, humbleness, gratitude, and compassion, but, at the same time, tends to refuse individuality and intellectual freedom, which manifests itself in opposing and criticizing others, and insisting on one own ideas, no matter how different they are from others’. That type of behavior will be taken as challenge to authority, which disturbs the hierarchical order of the society. So, it is possible that we may not accept the theses number 2 to 4, simply because they do not go along well with Thai way of thinking. But when we look harder at them, we will find that we have no ground to deny their righteousness, other than that they do not correspond with the structure of Thai society.

There is a point I want to make regarding Thai social structure. It has been coined as “patron-client-authoritarian” system (which I prefer to call “nepotism-authoritarianism”). It implies that Thai moral standard is higher than in the system that the powered class inhumanely and ruthlessly exploit and take advantage over the powerless class. This is a potential topic for research. Is it really the case? What actually is Thai moral system? Do Thai moral standards resemble Greek’s morality under the influence of Sophists? Do Thais hold relativist moral standard, namely, what is right is what suits my interests”? This
can be disguised under the veil of majority’s interest, just like what we have seen in Socrates’ life. The moral teaching that typically fills Thai youth’s ears is a utilitarian one. Do Thais really hold utilitarian standard? Anyway, from the point of view of ethics, classic utilitarianism has a certain problem. It condones a certain form of injustice, i.e. toward minority. Thus, it is a lesser moral standard. The superior one is human rights morality, which can be call “humanitarian morality”. It holds that all humans are equal: no individual’s dignity can be reduced, or none’s value can be made to become lesser than anybody else’s. Whatever interest a majority may have in common, the rights of even one individual can not be infringed. Whatever Thai morality is in reality, when compared to western morality, it definitely is pre-Kantian. It does not count on individual’s conscience, whatever that means, nor on the power of “pure reason” that it enables different individuals to formulate maxims for his or her own conduct. And as pure reason is universal, possessed by all humans, the maxims will also be universal. Thai society will progress toward this kind of morality, only when it has already surpassed the culture of nepotism-authoritarianism, which means, only when individuals have true freedom in their thoughts and actions. So, the development of critical thinking ability among members of Thai society is the only way to make Thai moral standards develop to a higher stage. That in turn will bring about a change in the structure of Thai society, and open ways out of its current weaknesses, to the strength of egalitarian society.