Critical Thinking: A Socratic Model*

JOHN HOAGLUND

Center for Critical Thinking
Christopher Newport University
Newport News, Virginia 23606
U.S.A.

ABSTRACT: A concept of critical thinking is developed based on the Socratic method and called accordingly a Socratic model. First the features of critical thinking stressed in this model are stated and illustrated. The Socratic method is presented and interpreted, then taken to yield a model of critical thinking. The process of internalization by which the Socratic model helps us to become critical thinkers is described. Argument analysis is considered as a widely used instructional strategy adaptable for teaching critical thinking on the Socratic model. This Socratic model is advanced as one helpful way of organizing our ideas about critical thinking, helpful in unifying disparate factors and anchoring them in the humanist tradition.

KEY WORDS: Argument, argument analysis, critical thinking, Socratic method.

I. CRITICAL THINKING AS REFLECTIVE THINKING

I advance a concept of critical thinking based on the Socratic method and called accordingly a Socratic model. First I present and interpret the Socratic method, then consider how it may yield a model of critical thinking. Next, I describe the process of internalization by which the Socratic model helps us become critical thinkers. Finally, I consider argument analysis as a basis for the design of a critical thinking course on the Socratic model. This model is advanced as one helpful way of organizing our ideas about critical thinking, helpful in unifying disparate factors and anchoring them in the humanist tradition. I begin by illustrating central features of critical thinking on the Socratic model.

Critical thinking is reflective thinking. But what does it mean for thinking to be reflective in a way that would tend to make it critical? My thesis is that critical thinking as reflective is careful thinking that reflects on its own operations or steps, evaluates them to understand what justifies them, and when they prove wanting, improves them. This reflective, self-monitoring and self-correcting factor tends to make critical thinking autonomous in the sense that it does not depend on the critique of others in order to appreciate its strengths and weaknesses. The reflective character of the thinking unfolds into its self-monitoring and self-corrective capacity. It is possible that thinking could be reflective without evaluating or correcting itself. But a reflective thinking that did so, would be uncritical and hence would form no part of critical thinking. On the other hand, thinking cannot evaluate and correct itself without being
reflective. To evaluate itself it must scrutinize its own steps with some normative guidance to distinguish the good from the poor, and to do this is to be reflective.

For example, look at different ways of solving a logical puzzle. You can solve the puzzle by guessing, finding out what works and what doesn’t, and narrowing down the possibilities until you have a solution that appears to satisfy all the conditions. All of this is thinking, but only a small part – that where possible solutions are evaluated – is critical thinking.

We can also solve a puzzle in another way that greatly increases the amount of critical thinking going into the solution. Critical thinking goes beyond just thinking. In critical thinking the person doing the thinking is aware of the steps she is taking and assumes responsibility for justifying them. By contrast the uncritical thinker is not the person who doesn’t think; it is the person who thinks uncritically. The uncritical thinker may think logically. But as unreflective she is unaware of the logical steps of her thought, so she is unable to show that and how she is thinking logically. So even though she finds a solution to a puzzle, she can’t prove that it is a solution by demonstrating how it is a solution. Though we are contrasting here the uncritical with the critical thinker, in actuality we always deal with a lesser or greater amount of critical thinking. Hardly anyone thinks totally uncritically, and no one is an ideal critical thinker.

How can we solve a logical puzzle in a way that compels us to think critically about our reasoning and the steps we are taking? We proceed methodically from a starting point and take no step that we cannot justify by reference to acceptable reasoning about given information or previous steps. This way, at the same time we solve the puzzle, we demonstrate that our solution is indeed a solution. This results in a logical proof or demonstration, though our interest here is in the process of critical thinking that produces it rather than in the resulting proof.

We develop this proof in the context of a dialogue between us and a sceptic or challenger, one who continually asks, “How do you know that?” or “Can you prove that?” There doesn’t have to be an actual challenger or sceptic pressuring us with such questions. We simply must formulate our solution so that we can demonstrate to such a challenger that our solution is a good one.

First of all, we must be clear about just what it is that we are trying to find out, or what the puzzle is we are trying to solve. Then we must also be clear about what the given information is. We need to put this given information into a form where we can refer to parts of it clearly and unambiguously. This can be accomplished by giving each simple piece of information a separate statement, then numbering or lettering each statement so that we can refer to it unequivocally. Here is an example (Copi, 59).

Alice, Betty, Caro, and Dorothy were either a lifeguard, a lawyer, a pilot, or a professor. Each wore a white, yellow, pink or blue dress.

The lifeguard beat Betty at canasta, and Carol and the pilot often played bridge with the women in pink and blue dresses. Alice and the professor envied the woman in the blue dress, but this was not the lawyer, as she always wore a white dress.