Introduction

Over the last few decades, there have been various lines of criticism from post-modern and feminist camps on the prevailing conception of critical thinking and its justification as the primary aim of education. Even if it’s status as one of the primary aims of education in our schools is not fully undermined, the concept and its justification as the aim of education have been under serious pressure for substantial modification. The contemporary attacks seem to be directed at one main target, that is, the Cartesian sense of rationality that the concept of critical thinking is based upon. The Cartesian sense of rationality is criticized for privileging rational and linear thought over intuition as well as for neglecting emotions and lived experiences from concrete situations (Kohli, 1999, p. 83). It is considered to politically exclude historically marginalized or oppressed groups by posing the universal standard of rationality as the formal procedure of our thinking. In other words, this unfavorable attitude to critical thinking today derives mainly from a morally motivated aspiration for inclusion.

However, in a solidly sustained defense of critical thinking, modernist educators, such as Robert H. Ennis and Harvey Siegel, try to redefine the concept of critical thinking in a broader sense. Ennis defines critical thinking as “reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do,” whereas Siegel describes it as an ability to judge in such a way as to meet “relevant standards or criteria of acceptability” (Blake et al., 2003, p. 181). Although also opposing the exclusion of historically marginalized or oppressed groups, they are still concerned with epistemic criteria or standards that reason must meet in order to be rightly judged to be good reasons, namely, reasons that warrant beliefs, claims, and actions. Thus, they...
counterattack their critics by asking them how they can coherently criticize the oppression or marginalization of particular groups without appealing to rational criteria that transcend cultural, social or gender-based boundaries. Their worry is that, if we do not have such criteria we would be easily led into relativism of rationality in public discourse, since different people have different ideas about what is rational.

To revisit critical thinking as one of the primary aims of education requires us to take seriously the respective concern of both sides as well as what is shared by them. The post-modern detractors of critical thinking seem to be interested in the question of how we can coexist or even flourish with differences and conflicts among those with different cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds, while the modernist advocates are concerned with the question of how the differences or conflicts can be rationally resolved. The former stresses our disposition to be open-minded, to bring into public discourse more voices from diverse groups, and the latter prioritizes the finding of a more objective knowledge on what to believe or act for the public arena. Despite this difference, however, both sides seem to share their moral concern, i.e., opposition to the injustice of excluding historically marginalized or oppressed groups. So I wonder if we can bring together the difference in their emphasis in regard to critical thinking for the purposes of moral education. If it can be shown how contributive to, or how limited for, our moral growth critical thinking actually is, we, as educators will be in a better position to situate critical thinking in education in general, and moral education in particular. Moreover, a crucial clue to begin this job can be seen in Bernard Williams’ carefully thought-out ideas regarding the limitations of philosophical arguments for ethics.

Williams puts forward two (post-modern) assumptions about the nature of ethics. One is that ethical knowledge on what is right or wrong, if there is such a thing, is not necessarily the best ethical state.2 The other is that “in the process of losing ethical knowledge (which we have already acquired), we may gain knowledge of other kinds, about human nature, history, what the world actually is like” (1985, p. 168). The first assumption indicates that the attainment of ethical knowledge, i.e., a moral belief that is rationally justifiable, may not be sufficient for moral education; so this assumption will help us take a critical stance from which we can see the limitation of the modernist advocacy for critical thinking, which is obsessed with epistemic criteria to achieve rationally justifiable moral knowledge. On the other hand, the second assumption implies that ethical knowledge is still educationally valuable since a process of losing it will bring to us other kinds of knowledge. Williams later describes these other kinds of knowledge as the understanding of the ethical, as opposed to ethical knowledge. Thus, the second assumption will be useful in alleviating the post-modern and feminist attacks on critical thinking and redirecting these attacks in a more fruitful way.

Taking Williams’ two assumptions as guiding principles, this paper aims at showing a fruitful way of situating critical thinking in moral education. To do so, I will first critically examine two earlier views on critical thinking, Siegel’s as modern and Burbules’ as post-modern, as a way of arguing for a new approach to critical thinking in moral education. Then, I will take up an analysis of Socrates’ teaching method demonstrated in the Meno to exemplify this new approach, which is now supposed to serve as a new educational purpose in moral education. This will reveal the educational possibilities and limitations of critical thinking in moral education.

A Critical Review of Two Earlier Approaches to Critical Thinking, Modern and Postmodern

What is critical thinking? The modernist theorists conceive of critical thinking in terms of both the ability and disposition to critically evaluate beliefs, their underlying assumptions, and the world views in which the beliefs are embedded. Siegel (1988, p. 23) emphasizes not only the critical thinker’s mastery of “epistemic criteria” that reasons must meet in order to be rightly judged to be good reasons that warrant beliefs, claims, and actions, but also their tendency to be “appropriately moved by reasons,” i.e., a tendency to be open-minded, fair-minded, and respectful of others in deliberation. However, it is important to note that, even if equally emphasizing these two components of critical thinking, Siegel also makes it clear that these two are conceptually distinct and have different priorities in constituting the concept of critical thinking. Contrasting epistemic criteria with epistemic virtues, Siegel (1997, p. 107, 172) argues that only the former can determine whether