

The justification of critical thinking as an educational ideal

Whatever we do, I believe we ought to keep uppermost the ideal of rationality and its emphasis on the critical, questioning, responsible free mind.¹

Mankind in the main has always regarded reason as a bit of a joke.²

1 Why does the ideal need to be justified?

All of us right-thinking people regard the skills and dispositions constitutive of critical thinking as desirable things to have, and a critical thinker as a desirable thing to be. We think it important that our children, and young people generally, be educated in such a way as to foster in them the development of the traits of the critical thinker. Our efforts to write textbooks, design curriculum materials and courses, and encourage educators at all levels to incorporate critical thinking into the curriculum attest to our belief in the importance of, and commitment to, the fostering of critical thinking through education. What is the basis of our conviction? How do we justify educational interventions aimed at the development of critical thinking in students?

The question is not an idle one. For it is not the case that critical thinking is in fact universally accepted as an educational ideal.³ For example, various defenders of "scientific" creationism deny that science education should strive either to expose students to scientifically legitimate alternative theories, or to help students to become capable of objectively evaluating evidence for, and of fairly assessing the merits of, those alternatives. While some only implicitly deny this, and pay lip service to critical evaluation, others explicitly suggest that science education ought to conform, not to the ideal of critical thinking, but rather to basic religious tenets.⁴ More generally, fundamentalists of various stripes, and "TV preachers" such as Jerry Falwell, argue that parents *own* their children and have an unbridled right to indoctrinate their children into beliefs of all sorts.⁵ More generally still, members of the general public—not to mention members of school boards and school administrations—often argue

against the exposure of students to "dangerous" ideas, e.g. to "revisionist" ideas in US and world history and politics courses, to (non-distorted) communist/socialist/Marxist ideas in economics courses, to "liberal" (or "conservative") ideas regarding sex and related matters in health and hygiene courses, to ideas of all sorts in literature courses, etc. As a strictly political, practical matter, those who have opinions about, and determine the direction of, the education of children and young adults are not universally agreed that critical thinking ought to be regarded as a fundamental educational ideal.

But the challenge to critical thinking is mounted not only at the level of the "common," practical person who may or may not be active in the guidance of the education of young persons. The ideal is also challenged by several factions of the academic/intellectual community; that is, there are *theoretical* objections to taking critical thinking to be a fundamental educational ideal. For example, many feminist scholars distinguish between "male" and "female" thinking, label rational thinking (which I argued earlier is coextensive with critical thinking) as "male," and decry it as incomplete, biased, sexist, or worse. The educational vision promulgated by such theorists is not one which is compatible with the ideal of critical thinking as delineated here.⁶ Similarly, in literary theory deconstructionists such as Derrida deride rationality as "logocentric."⁷ Further, as I consider in the next chapter, some Marxists and other ideologues reject critical thinking as biased and bound up with unacceptable hegemonic interests. In addition, a surprising number of contemporary epistemologists and philosophers of science endorse views which favor one or another form of epistemological relativism,⁸ which undercut the ideal of critical thinking, or more directly disparage rationality. Feyerabend is perhaps the most extreme, but he is not alone, when he castigates reason and rationality as oppressors of the human spirit, and eagerly anticipates their demise:

Reason, at last, joins all those other abstract monsters such as Obligation, Duty, Morality, Truth and their more concrete predecessors, the Gods, which were once used to intimidate man and restrict his free and happy development: it withers away.⁹

More generally, writers from a variety of domains echo this sentiment, expressed by Dostoevsky, concerning a widely shared skepticism regarding rationality: "in some cases it is really more creditable to be carried away by an emotion, however unreasonable ... than to be unmoved ... a ... man who is always sensible is to be suspected and is of little worth."¹⁰ So within the scholarly and

literary community, no less than in the wider community, there are those who reject the idea that our educational institutions and activities ought to be organized and carried out with a view to fostering critical thinking.

Finally, I wish simply to point out that the simple *assumption* that critical thinking is a worthy educational goal is contentious, and masks enormous allied assumptions concerning the nature of education and the educated person. Many educational theorists have denied and would deny not only that critical thinking is a fundamental educational ideal, but that it is a worthwhile ideal at all. For many such theorists have favored educational ideals which are not only alternatives to, but are incompatible with, the ideal of critical thinking. Such alternatives include the production of docile citizens or good workers; the maximization of individual happiness; the fostering of ideological purity and commitment; and so on. In short, the aims of education are controversial and contentious. It is not *obvious* that the fostering of critical thinking is a good thing or a worthy aim of our educational endeavors.

The immediate lesson to be drawn from this point is that critical thinking, like any other putative educational ideal, must be justified if educational activities carried out in its name are to be justified; reasons must be given for its adoption, objections and criticisms answered, etc. A second, equally important lesson to be drawn is this: defenders of any educational ideal, and educators whose activities presuppose one or another ideal (as all such activities do), must squarely face central questions concerning the nature of education and the educated person. Such questions are traditional in the philosophy of education. Defenders of critical thinking, then, no less than proponents of alternative educational goals and activities, must confront the philosophy of education.

We could, of course, simply ignore the several foes of critical thinking just noted, and ignore the obligation to confront the philosophy of education and attempt to justify critical thinking as an educational ideal, secure in the knowledge that we right-minded thinkers recognize a fundamental educational ideal when we see one. But this will not do, so long as we regard ourselves as critical thinkers who honor the demand for reasons and justifications of our convictions. To justify critical thinking as an educational ideal is to offer a positive account of the desirability and worthiness of educational efforts which have as their aim the fostering of critical thinking in students; it is also to show that the sorts of challenges to the ideal just reviewed can be met, that the ideal can survive criticisms made against it. This is a large task. I do not claim to have completed it in what follows. But I do hope that it is a start, that it provides at least provisional justification for regarding critical

thinking as a fundamental educational ideal, and that it encourages members of the Informal Logic Movement, educators and educational theorists, and philosophers of education to engage in serious reflection concerning critical thinking, the nature and existence of educational ideals, and the justification of those ideals.

2 What sort of "justification" is wanted?

A word concerning the sort of justification wanted, and the audience to whom the justification is addressed, is here in order.¹¹ It would be one thing—and an important thing—to offer a justification of critical thinking that spoke to its practical utility, and was addressed to school administrators, legislators, school board members, etc. Convincing the "movers and shakers" of education, the people who can actually get critical thinking to be taken as a focus of educational activities, that it would be a good idea to do so is a task of the utmost practical importance. Nevertheless, this task—offering a "pragmatic" justification for critical thinking, addressed to the people who hold the strings governing educational policy—is not, however important practically, what I shall seek to offer below. What I am after, rather, is a "philosophical" justification of critical thinking: production of reasons for regarding critical thinking as a fundamental educational ideal which are rationally persuasive to a rational, objective (perhaps ideal) inquirer into the question of the proper aims of education. The justification is not aimed at any particular audience, save perhaps an ideal one. In particular, it is not aimed at the local high school principal, the school board member, or the curriculum designer, though of course to the extent that such persons are themselves critical thinkers and so appropriately moved by reasons they should recognize and acknowledge the force of the reasons produced. My aim is to show that critical thinking *is* a justified ideal, that there *are* reasons which establish its worthiness as a focus for educational affairs. These reasons are not aimed at anyone in particular—but of course they are offered to all who wish to be, and claim to be, rational in that they are moved by reasons.¹²

Because I am after a philosophical rather than a pragmatic justification, certain powerful pragmatic considerations which speak in favor of critical thinking will not serve my purposes. For example, Michael Scriven, Ralph Johnson and J. Anthony Blair, and many others have urged critical thinking on the grounds that students need protection, self-defense, from unscrupulous advertizers, ideologues, and other potential manipulators of students' beliefs. This seems to me an enormously important practical point. But it will not serve as a philosophical justification of critical thinking, for it presupposes that

it is a good thing for students to be free of such manipulation—a seemingly obvious point, perhaps, but one which nevertheless must be (and below will be) argued for. Other pragmatic considerations could be listed, to the same effect. In seeking a philosophical rather than a pragmatic justification, I am in no way intending to belittle the latter. On the contrary, I believe that, if we truly seek to get our students to be critical thinkers, attention to pragmatic considerations is essential, and should be a focus of concern for us all. Nevertheless, if we are truly justified in so seeking, then philosophical considerations are more basic, for they ground the commitment to the educational vision which the pragmatic activity strives to realize. So pragmatic considerations, e.g. that critical thinking will help students to avoid being snookered and sucked in by bad arguments, however important in other contexts, are not what I am after here. It is a philosophical justification that I am attempting to provide in what follows. Such is required if our efforts to make critical thinking central to our educational endeavors are ultimately to be justified.¹³ (Henceforth all mention of “justification” should be taken to refer to philosophical justification, as just delineated.)

3 An unsuccessful attempt

It may be instructive to consider an effort to justify critical thinking which, while right-spirited, fails to establish it as an educational ideal. The effort is McPeck's, and, although he does not couch his discussion in terms of justification, its relevance to the justification of critical thinking is immediate and obvious.

McPeck argues that the relation between education and critical thinking is one of logical entailment; that critical thinking is a necessary condition for education:

what I shall argue is not only that it would be a good thing if our educational institutions could get students to be critical thinkers, but also that, insofar as the purpose of schools is to educate, this task logically cannot be accomplished without critical thinking. In short, critical thinking is a necessary condition for education.¹⁴

If McPeck is right, then the justification of educational efforts aimed at fostering critical thinking is automatic; if one is engaged in education, one is, as a matter of logic, *eo ipso* engaged in the fostering of critical thinking. Unfortunately, the justification of educational practices and ideals is not so easy.

McPeck's argument for the logical necessity of critical thinking in

education comes to this:

- 1 Education entails the acquisition of knowledge.
- 2 Knowledge presupposes justification.
- 3 Justification requires the temporary suspension of belief in order to assess the coherence of the evidence for the belief.
- 4 Such suspension and assessment simply is critical thinking.
- 5 Therefore, justification requires critical thinking.
- 6 Therefore, knowledge presupposes critical thinking.
- 7 Therefore, education entails critical thinking.

McPeck summarizes his argument's conclusion as follows: “Critical thinking must, therefore, command a place in any institution committed to the pursuit of education because critical thinking is a necessary condition of it.”¹⁵

McPeck's argument founders on its very first step. McPeck puts it this way:

Whatever else an analysis of education might reveal, it surely entails the acquisition of knowledge. Conceptual analysts and curriculum theorists might argue over the various types of knowledge that form constituents of education, but I can think of no one who would seriously doubt that knowledge of some sort is entailed by education.¹⁶

Unfortunately, this sort of reliance on conceptual analysis will not secure McPeck's point. No analysis of the concept of education will secure such a point, for what a concept entails depends crucially on whose concept it is.¹⁷ In fact it is easy to think of persons who *would* seriously doubt that knowledge is entailed by education, if knowledge is taken (as McPeck here takes it) as essentially involving rational justification. The ideologue who views education as a means of attaining or insuring ideological purity; the political, cultural, or religious conservative who views education as a means of maintaining the *status quo*; the “social systems manager” who views education as a means of maintaining a docile and compliant citizenry—all these and many others as well would indeed seriously doubt that education entails knowledge (taken to involve rational justification).¹⁸ One cannot settle the deep disputes that exist between those (like McPeck) who believe that education entails knowledge, and those who believe that education entails the passing on of basic religious (political, moral, etc.) commitments *sans* justification, by appealing to ordinary-language or conceptual analysis.

I am not suggesting that such disputes are not rationally adjudicable. On the contrary, I believe not only that they are; I

believe that they must be addressed if the vision of education McPeck and other friends of critical thinking propound is to be justified, or even taken seriously. It is of fundamental importance to justify critical thinking as an educational ideal, and so to establish the fostering of critical thinking as a justifiable educational aim and efforts at such fostering as justifiable activities. My point here is simply that McPeck's view of the relation between education and critical thinking—that the one entails the other, and that this entailment relation is established by conceptual analysis—will not do. If education for critical thinking is rationally preferable to education for ideological purity, maintenance of the political and social *status quo*, maintenance of a docile and unquestioning citizenry, the transmission of fundamental religious commitments, or any other "uncritical" educational aim, that rational preferability must be established by means of substantive philosophical argument concerning educational ideals and the aims of education. If critical thinking is to be a central focus of our educational efforts, this cannot be justified on the basis of the meaning of "education," but only on the basis of our best-justified educational ideals. In short, and to repeat, those who take seriously the educational agenda of the Informal Logic Movement, and defenders of critical thinking more generally, must squarely face basic issues in the philosophy of education. I have criticized McPeck's account of the relationship between critical thinking and education, but I applaud his recognition that that relationship must be addressed, and not simply assumed, by proponents of critical thinking who themselves endeavor to justify their commitment to that ideal. It is crucial that we who value critical thinking attend to the task of justifying our allegiance to that value. Onward, then, to the justificatory task at hand.

4 Some final preliminaries

If we accept critical thinking as a fundamental educational ideal, we explicitly acknowledge the desirability of the attainment by students of self-sufficiency and autonomy. If we think it good that a student become a critical thinker, we must approve as well of the student's ability and disposition to consult her own independent judgment concerning matters of concern to her. The critical thinker must be *autonomous*—that is, free to act and judge independently of external constraint, on the basis of her own reasoned appraisal of the matter at hand.¹⁹ Relatedly, if we take the ideal of critical thinking seriously, we must endeavor to render the student self-sufficient and capable of determining (insofar as is possible) her own future. In this way we

aim to bring the student quickly to the point at which she can join the adult community and be recognized as a fellow member of a community of equals. Critical thinking, in its open striving for the student's early achievement of a significant degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency, is incompatible with any educational plan which aims at the preparation of the student for some preconceived adult role or pre-established slot in some social arrangement. Rather, critical thinking aims at getting the student to be an active participant in the establishment and creation of her adult life, and of the social arrangements in which she is engaged.

As these preliminary remarks make clear, critical thinking is no rubber-stamp friend of the *status quo*; indeed, it is an enemy of the unjustifiable *status quo*.²⁰ This is not only an important fact about critical thinking; it also makes clear how threatening a full embrace of the ideal can be to the maintenance of the established social order, and so explains a certain sort of resistance to that embrace. Making critical thinking a basic aim of our collective educational endeavors in effect grants those endeavors a special status: it establishes education, and its concern for critical thinking, as an independent critic and guide of democratic society. This conception of education, and its role in and relationship to the larger society, is a profound one, and indicates the immense depth of the philosophical issues raised by a consideration of critical thinking. I regret that I cannot pursue the matter here.²¹ It is long past time that the task of justification be faced.

5 The justification of the ideal

How can the educational ideal of critical thinking—which promulgates the development in students of autonomy, self-sufficiency, the skills of reason assessment, and the attitudes, dispositions, habits of mind, and character traits of the critical spirit, and erects those features of persons as the fundamental guidelines for the evaluation and transformation of society—be justified? I would like to offer four considerations which I hope constitute at least the beginning of a justification.

(A) Respect for students as persons

The first consideration involves our moral obligations to students, and is most directly relevant to that portion of critical thinking which has to do with the manner of teaching. That is, it purports to justify the claim that our manner of teaching ought to accord with the critical manner.

This first consideration is simply that we are morally obliged to treat students (and everyone else) with respect. If we are to conduct our interpersonal affairs morally, we must recognize and honor the fact that we are dealing with other persons who as such deserve respect—that is, we must show *respect for persons*. This includes the recognition that other persons are of equal moral worth, which entails that we treat other persons in such a way that their moral worth is respected. This in turn requires that we recognize the needs, desires, and legitimate interests of other persons to be as worthy of consideration as our own. In our dealings with other persons, we must not grant our interests any more weight, simply because they are *our* interests, than the interests of others. The concept of respect for persons is a Kantian one, for it was Kant who urged that we treat others as *ends* and not means.²² This involves recognizing the equal worth of all persons. Such worth is the basis of the respect which all persons are due.

It is important to note that respect for persons has ramifications far beyond the realm of education. All persons, in all situations, deserve to be treated with respect; to be regarded as morally significant and worthy entities. This general point includes educational situations, since educational situations involve persons. Here is the relevance of the Kantian conception of respect for persons to education. It is also worth pointing out that the obligation to treat students with respect is independent of more specific educational aims. It is an obligation binding on us generally, and so is not part of any particular educational setting or system. Whatever else we are trying to do in our educational institutions, we are obliged to treat students with respect.

The Kantian principle of respect for persons requires that we treat students in a certain manner—one which honors students' demand for reasons and explanations, deals with students honestly, and recognizes the need to confront students' independent judgment. For what does it mean for a teacher to recognize the equal moral worth of students and to treat them with respect? Among other things, it means recognizing and honoring the student's right to question, to challenge, and to demand reasons and justifications for what is being taught. The teacher who fails to recognize these rights of the student fails to treat the student with respect, for treating the student with respect involves recognizing the student's right to exercise her independent judgment and powers of evaluation. To deny the student this right is to deny her the status of "person of equal moral worth." To treat students with respect is, moreover, to be honest with them. To deceive, indoctrinate, or otherwise fool students into believing anything, even if true, is to fail to treat them with respect.

The general moral requirement to treat persons with respect thus

applies to the teacher's dealing with her students simply because those students are persons and so are deserving of respect. It is independent of any specific educational aim. Nevertheless, it offers justification for the ideal of critical thinking in that the way one teaches, according to the critical manner, is in crucial respects isomorphic to the way one teaches so as to respect students. In both, the student's right to question, challenge, and seek reasons, explanations, and justifications must be respected. In both, the teacher must deal honestly with the student. In both, the teacher must submit reasons for taking some claim to be true or some action to be justified to the student's independent judgment and critical scrutiny. In most respects, then, teaching in the critical manner simply *is* teaching in such a way as to treat students with respect; the obligation to treat students with the respect they are due as persons thus constitutes a reason for adopting the critical manner. In short, this manner of teaching is morally required; it is also part and parcel of the ideal of critical thinking. So morality provides one powerful reason for operating our educational institutions, and conducting our educational affairs more generally, in ways which accord with that ideal.²³

(B) Self-sufficiency and preparation for adulthood

The second reason for taking critical thinking to be a worthy educational ideal has to do with education's generally recognized task of preparing students to become competent with respect to those abilities necessary for the successful management of adult life. We educate, at least in part, in order to prepare children for adulthood. But we cannot say in advance that Johnny will be a pilot, for example, and arrange his education accordingly, for Johnny might well decide to be something else. In general, when we say that education prepares children for adulthood, we do not mean for some specific adult role. Rather, we mean that education strives to enable children to face adulthood successfully. In particular, we hope that education fosters in children the power and ability to control, insofar as they are able, their own lives. We guide a child's education primarily because the child cannot responsibly guide it herself, but we seek to bring her, as quickly as possible, to the point at which she can "take over the reins" and guide her own education and life generally. That is, we seek to render the child *self-sufficient*; to *empower* the student to control her destiny and to *create* her future, not submit to it.²⁴ To get the student to the point at which she can competently control her own life and responsibly contribute to social life is to bring the student into the adult community, to recognize the student as a fellow member of a community of equals. To thus

empower the student is to raise her, in the most appropriate sense of the term, to her "fullest potential," for any such potential surely includes the power to shape and choose, and to attain, possible potentials.²⁵ Indeed, this is a fundamental obligation to children. Without proper education, children would not get to the point at which they could competently control their own destinies; many options would be forever closed to them because of their poor education. To meet our obligation to children to prepare them well for adulthood, we must strive to educate them in such a way that they are maximally self-sufficient.²⁶

How can we organize educational activities so as to empower the student? My suggestion, predictably enough, is that we organize those activities according to the dictates of critical thinking. To help students to become critical thinkers is to "encourage them to ask questions, to look for evidence, to seek and scrutinize alternatives, to be critical of their own ideas as well as those of others."²⁷ Such encouragement conforms well to the effort to encourage self-sufficiency, since, as Scheffler puts it:

This educational course precludes taking schooling as an instrument for shaping [students'] minds to a preconceived idea. For if they seek reasons, it is their evaluation of such reasons that will determine what ideas they eventually accept.²⁸

By encouraging critical thinking, then, we teach the student what we think is right, but we encourage the student to scrutinize our reasons and judge independently the rightness of our claims. In this way the student becomes a competent judge; more importantly for the present point, the student becomes an independent judge. That is, the student makes her own judgments regarding the appropriateness of alternative beliefs, courses of action, and attitudes. Such independence of judgment²⁹ is the *sine qua non* of self-sufficiency. The self-sufficient person is, moreover, a *liberated* person; such a person is free from the unwarranted and undesirable control of unjustified beliefs, unsupportable attitudes, and paucity of abilities, which can prevent that person from competently taking charge of her own life. Critical thinking thus liberates³⁰ as it renders students self-sufficient. Insofar as we recognize our obligation to help children become competent, self-sufficient adults, that obligation provides a justification for the ideal of critical thinking, for education conceived along the lines suggested by that ideal recognizes that obligation explicitly. Here, then, is a second reason for taking critical thinking to be a legitimate educational ideal.

(C) Initiation into the rational traditions

As argued earlier, critical thinking is best seen as coextensive with rationality, and rationality is concerned with reasons. For a person to be rational, that person must (at least) grasp the relevance of various reasons for judgments and evaluate the weight of such reasons properly. How does a person learn how to evaluate reasons properly?

One plausible account suggests that a person learns the proper assessment of reasons by being initiated into the traditions in which reasons play a role. Education, on this view, amounts to the initiation of the student into the central human traditions.³¹ These traditions—science, literature, history, the arts, mathematics, and so on—have evolved, over the long history of their development, guidelines concerning the role and nature of reasons in their respective domains. Thus, for example, a science student must learn, among other things, what counts as a good reason for or against some hypothesis, theory, or procedure; how much weight the reason has; and how it compares with other relevant reasons. Science education amounts to initiating the student into the scientific tradition, which in part consists in appreciating that tradition's standards governing the appraisal of reasons.³²

Such appraisal is, moreover, not static. Standards of rationality evolve and must be seen as part of a constantly evolving tradition:

Rationality in natural inquiry is embodied in the relatively young tradition of science, which defines and redefines those principles by means of which evidence is to be interpreted and meshed with theory. Rational judgment in the realm of science is, consequently, judgment that accords with such principles, as crystallized at the time in question. To teach rationality in science is to interiorize these principles in the student, and furthermore, to introduce him to the live and evolving *tradition* of natural science. . . .

Similar remarks might be made also with respect to other areas, e.g. law, philosophy and the politics of democratic society. The fundamental point is that rationality cannot be taken simply as an abstract and general idea. It is embodied in *multiple evolving traditions*, in which the basic condition holds that issues are resolved by reference to reasons, themselves defined by *principles* purporting to be impartial and universal.³³

If we can take education to involve significantly the initiation of students into the rational traditions, and such initiation consists in part in helping the student to appreciate the standards of rationality

which govern the assessment of reasons (and so proper judgment) in each tradition, then we have a third reason for regarding critical thinking as an educational ideal. Critical thinking, we have seen, recognizes the importance of getting students to understand and appreciate the role of reasons in rational endeavor, and of fostering in students those traits, attitudes, and dispositions which encourage the seeking of reasons for grounding judgment, belief, and action. Understanding the role and criteria of evaluation of reasons in the several rational traditions is crucial to being successfully initiated into those traditions. If education involves initiation into the rational traditions, then we should take critical thinking to be an educational ideal because so taking it involves fostering in students those traits, dispositions, attitudes and skills which are conducive to the successful initiation of students into the rational traditions. Seeing education as initiation thus offers justification for the ideal of critical thinking.³⁴

(D) Critical thinking and democratic living

Finally, consider the relation between critical thinking and democracy. It is a truism that the properly functioning democracy requires an educated citizenry. What sort of education does such a citizenry require?

The answer is not one-dimensional. The democratic citizen requires a wide variety of the many things which education can provide. She needs to be well-informed with respect to all sorts of matters of fact; to grasp fully the nature of democratic institutions and to embrace fully their responsibilities; to treat her fellow democrats as equal partners in political life, etc. She also needs to be able to examine public policy concerns: to judge intelligently the many issues facing her society; to challenge and seek reasons for proposed changes (and continuations) of policy; to assess such reasons fairly and impartially, and to put aside self-interest when it is appropriate to do so; and so on. If the democratic citizen is not a critical thinker, she is significantly hampered in her ability to contribute helpfully to public life. Democracies rely for their health and well being on the intelligence of their citizens. My point is simply that such intelligence, if it is truly to be of benefit, must consist in part of the skills, attitudes, abilities and traits of the critical thinker. It is not simply an intelligent citizenry, but a critical one, which democracy wants.

Indeed, the relationship between critical thinking and democracy is a very close one. For democracy, at least ideally:

aims so to structure the arrangements of society as to rest them

ultimately upon the freely given consent of its members. Such an aim requires the institutionalization of reasoned procedures for the critical and public review of policy; it demands that judgments of policy be viewed not as the fixed privilege of any class or elite but as the common task of all; and it requires the supplanting of arbitrary and violent alteration of policy with institutionally channeled change ordered by reasoned persuasion and informed consent.³⁵

The fundamentality of reasoned procedures and critical talents and attitudes to democratic living is undeniable. Insofar as we are committed to democracy, then, that commitment affords yet another reason for regarding critical thinking as a fundamental educational ideal, for an education which takes as its central task the fostering of critical thinking is the education most suited for democratic life.³⁶

These four putative reasons for regarding critical thinking as a fundamental educational ideal—morality and respect for persons, self-sufficiency and preparation for adulthood, initiation into the rational traditions, and the requirements of democratic living—are clearly not the last word. Much more needs to be said concerning all of them. Perhaps there are other justifications to be brought forth. I hope that the discussion offered thus far helps to stimulate members of the Informal Logic Movement, philosophers of education, and all who are interested in and/or committed to critical thinking to join in the investigation of the justificatory question. For, as I argued earlier, the ideal needs to be justified if our commitment to it is to be so. It is an important philosophical matter which underlies our practical endeavors and commitments.

As noted earlier, a full justification of the ideal would include not only positive reasons for embracing the ideal (four of which have just been given), but also rebuttals of independent objections and challenges to it. The next two chapters attempt to respond to two such challenges.