

# ΣΟΦΙΑ—SOPHIA

## Critical attitude, a fundamental aspect in education

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## Abstract

This article reflects on the role of critical attitude in education, since the ability to think for oneself and to decide according to rational criteria are decisive aspects that every student should develop in order to encourage subjects able to evaluate knowledge. Another reason that makes it necessary is that teaching aims to encourage the formation of autonomous people, who participate actively in political, social and cultural life, aspects that involve critical and reflective exercise. The first part of the document presents some traits that identify critical education, as a model that tends to form human beings who think for themselves. Then, it is investigated about the promotion of educational practices that allow the development of logical and argumentative competences, since a critical attitude implies a rational evaluation. Finally, the roles of philosophy and science are emphasized, as they promote deliberations on theoretical and practical problems. In conclusion, the need to stimulate critical attitude is a priority that education must take into account, if it is to promote human beings and societies that rationally address current problems.

**Keywords:** Philosophy teaching, academic plans, logic, education policy, humanities.

## Introduction

The process of forming a human being is one of the great preoccupations that humanity has had since antiquity. The Greeks, who have been a point of reference for the West, asked themselves several questions in this regard: What is it to educate a human being? What is the relevant education for a being to reach its flowering? Is education a process thought to form autonomous men? Is there a direct relationship between education and a society where one lives worthily? Recurrent questions that, when attempting to be solved, require the theoretical scaffolds of different disciplines, in which the following ones stand out: psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, etc.

Education, traditionally understood as the process of schooling to which human beings are subjected to acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge which equips them with capacities to perform in their social environment, requires the teaching of subjects such as mathematics, biology, language, chemistry, physics, philosophy, ethics, etc. It is a procedure that seeks to refine the previous notions that persons have to understand the physical-chemical and biological phenomena, as well as those that are part of their cultural and psychic world. In this way, they gain a better understanding of themselves. To this end, it is intended to stimulate intellectual capacity and enable people to reflect on their actions and those of others. To this end, schools, academies, universities and other institutions have been built for the education of citizens. In relation to this, Werner Jaeger argues: "The nature of human beings in their dual corporeal and spiritual structure creates special conditions for the maintenance and transmission of their peculiar form, and it requires

physical and spiritual organizations that as, a whole, we call education." (Jaeger, 2004: 3).

Integral training is the slogan of educational institutions, regardless of the level, be it basic, intermediate or higher; the ideal of human beings capable of developing a highly complex mathematical problem is accompanied by their suitability to act appropriately in front of their peers. It is expected of a doctor that be both an excellent professional and a good father. Such training requires the development of cognitive, emotional, and moral capacities. For this reason, training in cognitive, procedural and axiological competences is important for the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge, in order to face the challenges of life in society.

Nevertheless, the modern distinction between exact and human sciences has allowed, on the one hand, to delimit the object of study of the different disciplines, in addition to reaching the expertise in their field of knowledge; but on the other, it has led to a radical separation between these two fields of knowledge.

In this sense, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her work *Non-profit* warns that the education that is given today is neglecting the humanities; for that reason she says:

Now, what are these drastic changes? Subjects and careers related to arts and humanities are being eradicated in almost all nations of the world, at primary and secondary level, as well as at tertiary and university level. Conceived as useless ornaments by those who define state policies at a time when nations must eliminate everything that has no utility to be competitive in the global marketplace, these careers and subjects lose ground

at high speed, both in curricula and in the minds and hearts of parents and (their) children. Moreover, what we might describe as the humanistic aspect of the sciences, i.e. the aspect related to imagination, creativity and rigor in critical thinking, is also losing ground as countries choose to promote short-term profitability through the cultivation of utilitarian and practical capabilities, capable of generating income. (Nussbaum, 2014: 20).

The denunciation of the American philosopher, then, indicates the boom that the business model has been gaining in the configuration of current educational policies, to the detriment of the humanistic model that pretends to be an autonomous and critical subject.

### **Critical attitude: a necessary condition of education**

Education, understood as the training process that satisfies the needs of the market, seeks to train working men who do not have the capacity to reflect on their actions. This conception fails because it reduces individuals to a condition of subjects limited by external aspects and closely related to the economy, leaving aside basic elements that are part of their formation as a human beings. Faced with the above, it is necessary to ask: What characteristics should have an education that seeks to form autonomous human beings? Thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault have tried to answer this question. For the first, human beings must be able to evaluate the knowledge imparted by using rational criteria that do not depend on external attributes, be they the State, church or school; as well as to submit knowledge to a public and free examination. In this regard Kant states:

Our time is, in a special way, that of criticism. Everything has to submit to it. But religion and legislation are usually intended to escape from it. The first because of its holiness and the second because of its majesty. However, in doing so, they arouse justified suspicions against themselves and cannot demand a sincere respect, a respect which reason grants only to what is capable of resisting public and free examination. (Kant, 2005: 9).

A direct consequence of this critical evaluation is the need to get rid of the tutor, since it appeals to criteria independent of the judgments and prejudices that teachers have. In this sense, a first level of autonomy occurs when reviewing knowledge independently of tradition and authority. For Kant, it means that human beings free themselves from their self-induced inability to think by themselves. The following statement sums up his proposal: “Sapere aude! Have the courage to serve your own reason!” (Kant, 2015: 12). In addition, the philosopher of Königsberg warns that reason cannot be dogmatic, that is, it must be able to evaluate the principles and knowledge it holds, another quality that

education must convey to human beings. These aspects are necessary conditions to generate other elements of a critical education in which human beings think by themselves.

In this same sense, the French philosopher Michel Foucault discovers that the currency proper of the illustration brings with it a novelty: It introduces temporality in the philosophical analysis. And he does it when faces the problem of the present. With this, he identifies in the *Enlightenment* a critical exercise that cannot be based only on logical and epistemic criteria, but must be linked to a reflection on the present. This is how Foucault puts it:

The present can be represented as a certain belonging to an age (âge) of the world ... The present can be interrogated to try to decipher in it, signs announcing a future event ... The present can also be analyzed as a point of transition towards the dawn of a new future ... Now, the way in which Kant raises the question of Aufklärung is completely different from the three previous forms. For Kant, Aufklärung is neither an era of the world to which one belongs, nor an event from which signs are already perceived, nor the dawn of a realization (Foucault, 1994: 2-3).

In this way, the *Enlightenment* is not a determined historical epoch, but a *criticism* of the present that makes a difference in history. Therefore, the *Enlightenment* is identified with an exit, an *attitude* of transformation. Thus, the *critical attitude* allows to open the present day (today) to the tomorrow, to release in the *present* the desire to be another. The above agrees with the words of Foucault:

It would characterize, therefore, the philosophical *ethos*, proper of the critical ontology of ourselves, as a historical-practical proof of the limits that we can transcend and, therefore, as work of ourselves on ourselves, as long as we are free beings. (Foucault, 1994: 14).

Criticism, rather than a simple discursive practice that tries to separate us from mistakes, must be understood as a virtue in general. It is not simply an activity (that is) extrinsic to individuals, but an attitude that compromises what they are. Similarly, Foucault argues that the critical attitude, in addition to stimulating the intellectual and ethical capacities of the subject, is, above all, a political commitment, since it refers to our historical condition. Therefore, he says:

On the one hand, I have emphasized in the *Aufklärung* rootedness of a type of philosophical interrogation that simultaneously problematizes the relationship with the present, the historical mode of being and the constitution of itself as an autonomous subject. On the other hand, I wanted to

insist that the thread that can unite us in this way to the *Aufklärung* (...) is ... a philosophical ethos that could be characterized as a permanent criticism of our historical being (Foucault, 1994: 25).

From the above, the critical attitude provides tools, so the subject can evaluate knowledge, actions and decisions, whether epistemological, ethical or political; but this also produces an ethos, a way of being in the world. With this, the question arises: How can the critical attitude in the educational processes be stimulated?

### Tools that stimulate the critical attitude

Education, being understood as the way par excellence to form autonomous and free subjects, who think in a critical and committed way, should offer them the necessary tools to distinguish between opinion and informed judgment. For this, classes of logic and argumentation are required, regardless of the school level, because a person who has knowledge of rhetorical arguments and criteria to analyze when an argument is correct or incorrect, (also) has the basic instruments to critically evaluate the propositions that support a theory, a system of thought or to assess the premises that are exposed in a dialogue both by the interlocutor and for a self-examination. Lacking this type of training for Nussbaum is a difficulty, because:

(...) people who do not make a critical examination of themselves are very likely to be influenced. When a demagogue orator addressed the Athenians with poignant rhetoric, even though his arguments were not coherent, they were persuaded without analyzing these arguments. (Nussbaum, 2014: 78).

The ability to critically evaluate a theory and the arguments that support it has political implications, because it depends on this attitude that citizens make use of their reason, and therefore, make decisions with criteria, in addition to being aware that public policies can be questioned. These qualities are acquired through education, for this reason it is necessary to prioritize processes in which the rational assessment of situations be linked to concrete situations. Kant expressed this purpose more than two centuries ago, and it is still valid: "The art of education or pedagogy must therefore be rational, so that human nature can develop and reach its destiny" (Kant 1985: 13).

In this sense, education is a fundamental component to achieve the development of human beings capable of thinking themselves, and the society they belong to. It is through the use of an informed and critical reason that citizens can contribute to the construction of a democratic society. In such a way that education must be the base with which this type of social organization is constituted. However, this conception should not be

considered as opposing a learning that values other aspects of the human condition, such as art, or the development of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2001), because what it is sought is to develop basic skills to judge or evaluate, and it is not about the imposition of a modern ideal against contemporary pedagogical perspectives, but to highlight one of the most important functions of teaching, the modification of the subject. Foucault says:

We can call pedagogy the transmission of a truth that has the function of endowing any subject with attitudes, skills and knowledge that he did not possess, and that he should have at the end of the pedagogical relationship. Consequently, it could be called *psychagogia* to the transmission of a truth that does not have as function to endow a subject with attitudes, capacities and knowledge, but rather to modify the way of being of that subject. (Foucault, 2008: 387).

A basic aspect of this conception of education is the development of the critical component, which implies generating an adequate context, not only of transmitting knowledge, but also of attitudes towards knowledge. For this reason, as Nussbaum says, it is necessary "(...) to incorporate critical thinking into the pedagogical methodology of different courses, teaching students to investigate, evaluate tests, write their own works with well-structured arguments, and analyze arguments that are set out in other texts" (Nussbaum, 2014: 84). We must not forget that on some occasions, it has been postulated that education must be a training for work, or that overvaluation of critical attitude should be avoided, and therefore, the unnecessary presence of courses that introduce the student in the evaluation of thinking. Sometimes this perspective has become so important that thinkers like Dany Robert Dufour have spoken with force and irony against it. The following is an example that combines these qualities:

In this way we see how a whole stream of postmodern pedagogical research is installed, even in the university. Above all, avoid asking the "young people" to think. First you have to distract them, encourage them, not overwhelm them with courses but let them zapping from one subject to another at their pleasure and at the mercy of interactions. They simply have to be told to tell their lives, to show them that the advantages of logic are nothing more than abuse of power by "intellectuals" or "Western" thinking. Fundamentally we must show them that there is nothing to think about, there is no object of thought: everything is in the affirmation and management of oneself, through relationships, of this affirmation of oneself that must be defended, as every good consumer should know it. In a nutshell, it is, at best, to manufacture plethoric cretins, adapted to consumption. (Dufour, 2007: 164-165).

These postmodern perspectives have not only permeated education, they also present themselves in the social and human sciences. In the book *Intellectual Impostures*, Alan Sokal and Jean Brickmont present the theories of a group of authors who represent postmodernism with the intention of showing that this contemporary movement tends to abuse terms and concepts from science; in addition, it is common a series of confusions of thought in relation to the content of philosophy. Among the most problematic aspects are: talking about scientific theories that barely they know; incorporating aspects of the natural sciences into the human sciences without any empirical justification; using superficially an avalanche of technical terms in a context in which it is absurd their use; (and) an abuse of meaning, to the point of manipulating nonsense phrases ([Sokal and Brickmont, 2008](#)).

These confusions, which are widespread in some intellectual circles, are dangerous because they appear to have a high degree of knowledge and a profound disdain for the basic criteria of rationality, such as clarity in argumentation, precise use of meaning, care with metaphorical use of language, and the contextualization of the results of scientific knowledge. If this happens among scientific communities and thinkers, it is even more necessary that the education given in the classroom promote critical attitudes that allow judging adequately knowledge and participate wisely in social and political activities.

Another criticism of contempt for logic and argumentation, recreating Ulises Moulines in *Plurality and recursion* in the chapter “What is philosophy?”, when he states:

To make relativism more appealing, Richard Rorty (without naming it) proposes it as a philosophical attitude in which it is not a matter of knowing anything, of arguing or of substantiating anything, but of “chatting” kindly with one another to “build” future generations of rookie philosophers. But even the most trivial cafeteria talk, to the extent that it does not consist merely in the activity of producing noises for the pleasure of doing so, makes sense only if it presupposes in the participants a minimum common stock of concepts and principles, coupled with the objective of inform, convince, refute; in short, argue with (or against) the others ([Moulines, 1991: 27](#)).

Cognitive confusions coupled with the absence of a critical attitude towards knowledge are the breeding ground for irrational positions that affect not only the theoretical level but also the moral action and organization of societies. Moreover, the ideas for which we live for are seriously affected. This is remembered by Isaiah Berlin in the following passage:

One of the main causes of confusion, misery and fear, whatever its psychological and social roots, is the blind adherence to spent notions, the pathological mistrust of any form of critical self-examination; the frenzied efforts to prevent any degree of rational analysis of what we live for. ([Berlin, 1992: 42](#)).

A critical examination requires argumentative skills such as reading, understanding and taking a critical stand against an argumentative text or a particular situation. It is also necessary to argue with reasons the sustained stance, to elaborate arguments and to recognize the possible fallacies or argumentative errors that are being committed. For this reason, the teaching of logic, both in its formal aspects as well as its use in contexts or informal logic, becomes a basic tool.

This is not limited to a use of reason in an educational context, as stated by researchers of *Universidad Nacional* of Colombia: “For the academic, scientific or professional context of any kind, it is necessary to have logical criteria that, if made explicit, contribute significantly to a better development of work” ([Sánchez, Serrano and Peña, 2009: 13](#)). So a way of promoting critical attitude through education is linked to the teaching of logic, understood as a science and an art. These formal competencies for evaluating reasoning are useful to any student, as they combine scientific rigor with the ability of an art or activity, as expressed by Irving Copi and Carl Cohen:

Giving reasons may be something that comes naturally, but our ability to build arguments and test them can be strengthened by practice. It is more likely that someone who has developed this skill may reason correctly; in comparison with someone who has never thought about the principles that this involves ([Copi and Cohen, 2007: 5](#)).

Another aspect of a critical attitude is the evaluation of the reasons that are present on a topic or in a situation. However, confusion of thinking, ambiguous use of words, and the intention to deceive can often lead to errors in our evaluation of the arguments. For this reason, critical thinking, formal and informal logic as tools of reflection become useful to avoid error. The fallacies or errors in argumentation are not only theoretical problems; they flourish in daily activities, in mass media and in politics. Monserrat Bordes Solanas in *Circe Traps* recalls that an effective cure for these evils is a responsible and critical use of rationality, using logic along with a deep ethical conviction of our responsibility for the beliefs we hold. This is indicated when he states:

And being able to detect fallacies is the first step in avoiding the dangers of uncritical beliefs. The logic of argumentation is an instrument of evaluation

of our beliefs, many of which are stored in our minds often for spurious reasons: mental laziness, desiderative beliefs, byproducts of uncritically accepted rules, interested conformism or simple ignorance. We often engage in what may be called 'epistemic self-indulgence', the tendency to delight in comfortable but ill-justified beliefs. ([Borders](#), 2011: 32).

### **Philosophy and science: foundation for a critical rationality**

Philosophy as a critical activity must be linked to educational curricula. The exercise of rationality, the discussion of ideas, the presentation of arguments and the clarity of arguments are basic elements if we understand it as an exercise and not as an accumulation of knowledge or a history of ideas. Therefore, Berlin tells us the following:

The task of philosophy, often difficult and painful, is to unearth, to bring to light the hidden categories and models according to which human beings think (that is, their use of words, images and other symbols), to reveal what is dark or contradictory in them; in order to discern the conflicts among them, which prevent the construction of more convenient ways of organizing, writing and explaining the experience ([Berlin](#), 1992: 40).

Science is another of those tools that allows a critical attitude. Scientific knowledge, with its specialization, its rigorous methods and its continuous attempt to explain and predict reality, is another basic component of a rational vision that promotes human beings who think for themselves and confront the problems we have. As Jesus Mosterín says: "If we really want to live well, the first thing we require is a correct map of reality." ([Mosterín](#), 2013: 40).

Science and philosophy have in common the continuous evaluation of theories. In addition, they present a series of attitudes towards knowledge and reflection: self-evaluation of beliefs, responsibility for what is thought, and intellectual honesty. These elements can be called intellectual virtues, and they are also part of the baggage of a critical attitude, which, in turn, is linked to a way of understanding the human being. In Kant and in his time, a humanism was constructed that looked for human beings to think by themselves. Today, this claim has not ceased to be necessary, as Mosterín recalls: Truth, generality, precision, self-consciousness and intellectual honesty have to be claimed as values of all kinds of research, both scientific and philosophical, or humanistic. The broken mirror of specialized research has to be recomposed in a unitary global image, if it is to serve as a framework in which to analyze and solve our individual and collective problems. The search for a global worldview, however provisional, is the

ultimate goal of all research. For this we need science, but also rationality and wisdom. In short, we need a new humanism at the height of our time, that make use of the treasures of information that science provides us, and that face without prejudice the current problems and challenges. ([Mosterín](#), 2000: 16).

Finally, education is the integrating axis between generations and culture. Therefore, if we want to face our current problems using science and rationality, we must promote a critical attitude. An education to satisfy the needs of the market, an education of science alone or an education without tools of reflection generates docile human beings who do not have the character that is required to face the problems of their time.

### **Conclusions**

A critical attitude must be propitiated in education, if by this we understand the formation of autonomous subjects capable of deciding for themselves. In this sense, this concept implies an ethos, a way of being and acting, of being in the world. Thus, this faculty is related, on the one hand, with epistemic and logical aspects; on the other, with ethical elements, such as intellectual responsibility, the importance of evaluating what morally imply our beliefs, and our social and political concerns. Beyond arguing against current education policies, this article emphasizes the importance of critical review of our beliefs. The enlightened ideal of a rational man that Kant raised in his three critiques continues in force, for human beings are still asking themselves: What can I know? How should I live? And what can I expect from the future? After all, in a critical attitude we find more than a problem of knowledge or education, a question of how human beings, with their limited capacities gained in time, face the problems of their time.

Likewise, the development of a critical attitude can be promoted through the teaching of logic, since it deals with principles and methods for reasoning correctly, so it is useful to evaluate when arguments are good or not. Philosophy, as a reflexive activity par excellence, should be taught because in its ways of proceeding with the subjects of inquiry, its methods and discussion of the arguments are exercises that train students to make use of rationality and think by themselves .

The sciences, as well as philosophy, are indispensable disciplines to elucidate how it is possible to form a critical attitude in people, since this knowledge allows to recognize that education cannot be reduced to a mere instrument whose use depends on the laws of the market, but which must be understood as the attainment of an attitude towards life.

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