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Introduction

The history of critical thinking as an educational ideal is as long as the history of Western philosophy and democracy itself. Throughout the history of Western philosophy of education, critical thinking has been linked to values such as democracy, freedom, and autonomy. Today, the notion of critical thinking is used as a buzzword in almost every educational program and ideology. However, the concept of critical thinking is losing its philosophical depth, as it is used to legitimize educational programs that have little or nothing to do with critical thinking as it is understood in the field of philosophy. The idea of this special issue is to provide philosophical analysis and discussion on this fundamental educational ideal and to connect this discussion with contemporary philosophical and empirical literature.

Inspiration for this special issue comes from the NERA 2013 Conference in Reykjavik, for which the Nordic Society for Philosophy of Education organized a pre-conference on critical thinking. Harvey Siegel, whose philosophical work on the theme is indisputably one of the most eminent in our time, had promised to speak at the pre-conference. The worst storm of the decade in Iceland canceled the meeting, but the idea of the Nordic special issue on critical thinking with Siegel's commentary survived, and here it is: three independent essays on critical thinking followed by Siegel's comments, criticisms, and concluding remarks.

All three articles relate somehow to Siegel's work, by building on it, further elaborating it, or analyzing its various dimensions. In the first essay, Guðmundur Heiðar Frímansson considers the normative nature of critical thinking, defends the reasons conception of critical thinking, and explores the nature of the reasons, by drawing on both past and contemporary philosophers. In my own essay, I investigate the nature of the "critical spirit," by discussing the psychological and moral dimensions of critical thinking. I also consider some potential criticisms of my arguments. These criticisms relate to the alleged moral neutrality of the ideal of critical thinking and the danger of "psychologism" in my interpretation of the concept. In the last essay, Juho Ritola extends the discussion to political philosophy by analyzing how contemporary empirical research challenges an ideal picture of deliberative decision making. He connects this discussion to his defense of epistemological internalism. Along the lines of the other two authors, Ritola argues that education should foster not only the skills but also the disposition of critical thinking.

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All three articles emphasize, from different angles, the normative nature of critical thinking and the importance of the character and personality of a critical thinker. From the point of view of educational research and practice, the task of fostering personalities of this kind, is far from easy. The aim of creating genuine critical thinkers calls for further philosophical and empirical research, as well as cooperation between these two research fields. I hope these four essays have demonstrated, at a minimum, that a philosophically-justified definition of critical thinking inevitably involves deep moral and psychological concerns.