Communitarianism, Liberalism, and an Epistemic View of Critical Thinking

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Introduction

One of the standard criticisms of communitarianism is that it vitiates individuals' autonomy to rationally pursue their interests and it stresses the interest of the community at the expense of personal freedoms, interests, and rights. As some have argued, since individual autonomy is a necessary condition for critical thinking and such autonomy is vitiated in a communitarian system, the pertinent question is whether critical thinking is possible in a communitarian system. Autonomy involves the ability to think for oneself in order to make free and informed choices. Critical thinking, as an epistemic model of rationality (as opposed to a logical or practical model), involves the ability to think for oneself and make independent judgment on the basis of evidence with respect to which belief is reasonable to accept. This involves being moderately skeptical, being tentative and critical about beliefs, in order to avoid errors and accept beliefs that one finds reasonable, given the available evidence and one's set of coherent background beliefs. It is in this sense of rationality presupposing autonomy that Kant thinks of rationality as the maxim which tells one to "think for oneself."

John Hardwig also argues that "the core of rationality consists in preserving and adhering to one's own independent judgment." To this extent, it is argued that communitarianism would vitiate the commonplace view of critical thinking and rationality, with respect to what it takes for a person to be intellectually and epistemically responsible to engage in rational inquiry, and the acquisition and justification of beliefs. It has also been argued that education cannot occur in a communitarian system; what you have instead is the indoctrination of whatever beliefs are accepted by the system. I argue that critical thinking is possible in a communitarian system. I argue that some of the criticisms of communitarianism, especially with respect to vitiating individual autonomy, is based on (i) an implausible view of the nature of communitarianism, and (ii) a questionable individualistic and autonomous conception of rationality. I provide and defend a plausible constructivist view of communitarianism, an intersubjective view of epistemic justification or rationality, and a fallibilistic epistemic view of critical thinking. I show how this view of critical thinking, which is given credence by an intersubjective view of epistemic
justification, is plausible under communitarianism; perhaps, communitarianism is necessary for the plausibility of such a view given the limitations of our cognitive abilities and hence fallibilism.

A View of Communitarianism

Communitarianism makes a case for common human good and interest, the concern for general welfare, and responsibility towards the well-being of every individual in the society as the underlying basis for social or political structure. A community seeks to achieve a well-ordered society where individuals can achieve their rational life plans in the context of a common conception of the human good. The individual is seen as a constitutive part of that common good which the society has to seek to achieve. As such, the moral notions of love, caring, friendship, compassion, generosity, and sensitivity towards the need of others are part of the moral foundation of the society. The substantive nature and content of such common good as an interest, purpose, and end with respect to individuals is the underlying concern for the community. One such interest that a community may seek may be public education, which involves the attempt to equip students as good citizens of the community, who are capable of contributing to the common good. In a democratic context, communitarians believe that children need to be properly educated so that they can actively participate in discussion of public issues and make meaningful contributions. Communitarianism conceives of the individual as one who is shaped (perhaps by a liberal process of education) by the interests and aims of the community to which one belongs. It is along this line that MacIntyre argues:

the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide. Notice that rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it.4

In describing how the community, history, and social context can shape the identity of an individual, MacIntyre sees inquiry and education as an important part of a community, in terms of one of the functions the community has to perform and the responsibility it owes to its young members.

The community has the function of teaching and educating its young people and broadly imparting knowledge to them. Such function is necessary for a well-ordered relationship. Moreover, such relationship is contingent on people's ability for consistent truthfulness: people in the community owe one another truth in order to be in well-ordered relationship. MacIntyre compares his conception of a community to the community of scientists, in that they strive to have a well-ordered relationship as a community of inquirers. The kind of inquiry that characterizes the scientific paradigm involves placing high
value on truth via its rigorous process of critical inquiry. All communities, he indicates, are for the most part, communities of practical inquirers. People inquire about "everything that is actually and potentially relevant to the relationship of the individuals who compose it [as a community] and of the community itself to its and their good." To the extent that a community consists of people who are rational inquirers, MacIntyre argues, we owe one another truth via a variety of processes of transmitting knowledge: "For all the virtues, moral as well as intellectual, have to be developed throughout one's entire life, and this development requires a lifelong process of learning and imparting truths, learning in which reflection upon experience needs initially to be guided by teachers who enable one to learn from experience and so, later on in one's interactions with others, to contribute to their learning as well as to one's own, and in so doing to learn from them." Such process involves rational and public debates, discussion, and deliberation about competing claims about the nature of good in the community and how to achieve it. This also involves relying and depending on what others know and have evidence for. What derives from such debates is a commonly shared and constitutive conception of the human good which is then institutionalized in the life of the community.

Since the achievement of the human good in terms of common interest is the basis for the community, any procedure that could help achieve this cannot be vitiated. It is in this sense that liberalism which allows for free debate and open discussion is considered good. The commonplace view is that liberalism which is characterized by freedom of expression is hostile to the conception and value of communitarianism. In other words, the attempt by a community to enforce a common set of beliefs and interest, which is what characterizes communitarianism, is illiberal and intolerant. Liberalism is seen to be at odds with the notion of a set of common interests and beliefs, since such notion implies that no other contrary interest or belief may be accommodated. Hence, people may argue that the notion of a 'liberal community' is an oxymoron. However, Ronald Dworkin has argued for the plausibility of a liberal community, where the political or social community can have a moral and rational primacy over the individual lives of people in the community without being authoritarian. He argues that this is plausible because we all need a just and well-ordered society or community to achieve our individual life plans. To the extent that a community will want to achieve justice in order to exist and flourish, the interests of the individual become a constitutive interest of the community. In this sense, Dworkin argues that the lives of individual people are parasitic on the success of the community and hence, the community has moral primacy.

J.S. Mill's argument as to why freedom of expression as an indication of liberalism is important is that it engenders rational discussion, debates, and a critical examination of ideas and issues, and is not inconsistent with the spirit and values of communitarianism. Mill understands freedom of speech or expression to involve the following: freedom of thought, feeling, conscience,
opinion, sentiments, association, freedom to publish, and express opinions. I assume that freedom of the press is also associated with freedom of expression. The basic argument by Mill is that we as human beings are fallible. All rational human beings realize this, and as such, we should not suppress any opinion—for we never know which opinion will turn out to be true or false. He says, "the opinion which it is attempted to suppress by authority may possibly be true. Those who desire to suppress it, of course, deny its truth; but they are not infallible. ... To refuse a hearing to an opinion because they are sure that it is false is to assume that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility." Mill suggests that there is a connection between epistemic fallibilism and discussion, via freedom of expression, in that the realization of our fallibility may engender open discussion as a process of critical thinking and inquiry. As such, one should not discount another person's view as bad or false, to the extent of saying that it is not worth considering. We have to entertain and consider all possible views and critically examine them in order to come to the most plausible view. An opinion that someone may be convinced about could be an example of an error to which humans being are susceptible.

Mill argues that people usually do not think it necessary to take reasonable precautions against their own fallibility. The provision and guarantee of freedom of speech and expression, to the extent that it engenders critical debates and open discussion, may be one way to guide against such fallibility. Such provision will allow every opinion to be given due recognition and critically examined to determine its acceptability or otherwise. He argues that a plausible argument against his fallibilistic basis for freedom of expression would be to insist that a public authority has the responsibility to make a judgment to forbid the propagation of error. Doing this is an assumption of fallibility, in that allowing for the propagation of such errors exploits the fact of human fallibility. Although the judgment that public authorities make with respect to what is bad or in error is not exempt from error, it is made on the basis of a strong conviction. If we were never to act on opinions that we are strongly convinced about because it could be fallible, then many interests will go unattended. However, Mill argues that there is a difference between assuming that an opinion is true because every opportunity to refute it has been explored but all such efforts have failed to refute it, and assuming that it is true because we want to prevent the possibility of exploring the opportunities to refute it. Freedom of speech allows for discussion and critical examination of ideas, which is a way of exploring the opportunity to refute or falsify them. This is consistent with the falsification principle of science which is considered a rigorous process of inquiry and knowledge acquisition.

So, guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression provides the opportunity to engage an opinion in discussion and debate, and to subject it to the stringent strictures of critical inquiry in order to determine its justifiability or likelihood of being true. This involves openness or tolerance towards any view
or process of inquiry in terms of providing the opportunity for it to be critically examined. He supports his point by alluding to history to indicate that many eminent people did in fact hold opinions that they were convinced about which we now know to be false. He argues that a feature of human rationality involves the ability to correct one's errors: "He is capable of rectifying his mistakes by discussion and experience." We would not be able to correct our opinions if we do not allow for discussion which involves critical examination of all plausible alternatives. Mill's fallibilistic epistemological argument for freedom of speech suggests we may only accept an opinion as reasonable tentatively, given the strength of evidence we have in its favor, and only after a critical examination of all plausible alternatives via discussion and debate. Freedom of expression is important only because it engenders discussion, and discussion as a stringent process of inquiry helps us to see when we are wrong. However, meaningful discussion can only take place in a community which has some commonly shared beliefs (including epistemic practices and principles) and interests; otherwise, there will be no basis for discussion. A fallibilistic attitude of critical thinking—as a stringent process of inquiry—helps to establish the reasonableness of an opinion. Such attitude depends on open discussion, in that discussion involves the process of placing evidential strictures on beliefs to yield adequate knowledge. This involves determining relevant alternatives, seeking plausible counter-evidence or information which others may have but you do not, by engaging and depending on others in a community.

In this respect, Chandran Kukathas' definition of a community is illuminating. He defines a community as "an association of individuals who share an understanding about what is public and what is private within the association." People agree on what constitute the public realm in the context of the common good with respect to the kind of issues that are open to political resolution and what practices are subject to political control. These are the issues that are subject to public debate that would require the intelligent and meaningful contribution by members of the community. The fact that a generally agreed upon set of interests and beliefs in the public realm derives from a rational debate by individuals implies that the community's interest is constitutive of such a set of interests or beliefs that individuals rationally share in common. The individual interest and beliefs that constitute those of the community involves self-conscious rational interests and beliefs. They do not just coincide only as a matter of accident; they are constitutive because they derive from a rational, self-conscious, transformational process of critical discussion and debates. It is in this sense that Daniel Bell argues that a community involves structuring "society in accordance with people's deepest shared understandings." These shared beliefs are not imposed; they could constitutively derive from the logical situation of a rational social contract. The people engage in rational inquiry and debate with respect to how to achieve what they consider their common good or constitutively shared beliefs from their rational perspective, other beliefs, and considered judgments.
People have to determine how their beliefs and interests are manifested in other people's lives and it is in the context of such that the notions education, inquiry, learning, and teaching make sense, because the context and subject matter of education and inquiry have to do with issues involving and affecting different aspects of human relationships. It is interesting that MacIntyre's notions of education, inquiry, learning and teaching in a community of well-ordered relationship requires that they should not be restricted to formal and specialized settings like schools; it also requires informal settings. In other words, education and learning require some sense of 'practice in a variety of modes, of local modes of communal activity, in teaching and learning, in farming, in craftsmanship of various kinds.' The notion of inquiry with respect to the community, as MacIntyre sees it, does not preclude the fact that an individual could be rationally creative, inventive, critical, analytic, and imaginative, which are necessary for one to engage in critical thinking. I make this point against the backdrop of Kwame Gyekye's criticism of what he calls radical and extreme communitarianism of MacIntyre. According to him,

Extreme or unrestricted communitarianism fails to give adequate recognition to the creativity, inventiveness, imagination, and idealistic proclivities of some human individuals in matters relating to the production of ideas and the experience of visions. The powers of inventiveness, imagination, and so on are not entirely a function of the communal culture; they are instead a function of natural talents or endowment, even though they can only be nurtured and exercised in a cultural community.

Although Gyekye criticizes MacIntyre, the qualification at the end of the passage that human rational talents with respect to inquiry can only be nurtured and exercised in a cultural community underscores MacIntyre's point about the role of the community in fostering critical inquiry.

In this sense, MacIntyre's account of the nature of inquiry in the context of community meets Gyekye's practical requirement: "that allowing free rein for the exercise of individual rights, which obviously includes the exercise of the unique qualities, talents, and dispositions of the individual, will enhance the cultural development and success of the community." The exercise of talents here surely includes both intellectual and other ones. The exercise of talent which is the aim of critical thinking has to involve the ability of a person who is 'epistemically inferior' to epistemically and rationally depend and rely on or learn from another person who is 'epistemically superior'. A person x is epistemically superior to y (and y is epistemically inferior to x) with respect to a belief w, just in case x is more knowledgeable, has more information, has a better understanding of, and has more evidence to prove that w has a high probability of being true, to warrant its acceptability, than y. Hardwig has argued that this kind of epistemic dependence is not only rational but necessary for inquiry. If there is no community where one can epistemically depend on another, inquiry will be limited, one would always have to epistemically bootstrap to engage in any kind of critical and rigorous inquiry that is
supposed to be engendered by critical thinking ability. So, to be able to think critically, one needs to depend on others in a community for some evidence or counter-evidence which one may not have. You also need an epistemic community to delimit a set of relevant alternatives and some fundamental epistemic practices and principles, which are necessary for one to engage in critical inquiry.

The Epistemic Nature of Critical Thinking

The paradigm sense of rationality, on the basis of which people have conceived of the nature of critical thinking, suggests that one can determine for oneself, alone, if one’s independent judgment is consistent with the epistemic ideal and an objective state of affairs, i.e., to have a legitimate knowledge claim. Such critical determination, made on the basis of evidence, it is thought, would make one’s independent judgment a justified belief. A plausible conception of critical thinking is a normative epistemic view which is grounded in fallibilism. This view with respect to how we ought to acquire knowledge and justify beliefs—which involves the process of critical thinking—depends on some factual properties about the fallibility of human cognitive abilities with respect to inquiry. Critical thinking in this regard involves an understanding of the criteria for assessing reasons offered for the justification of one’s beliefs—which may also involve being able to apply these criteria. To think critically involves being able to evaluate the reasonableness and adequacy of justifications, in order to be able to place strictures on one’s doxastic attitudes and the process of justification: the process of debate and discussion is important in this regard. Because we are fallible and our reasons are subject to revision, we need to be rigorous and stringent in order to do a critical examination of the relevance and adequacy of the reasons we bring to bear on our beliefs, to make our knowledge or beliefs reasonable in the attempt to approximate truth. So, the pertinent point is, what does the attitude or principle of rigorous inquiry entail, which a critical thinker must have? It involves fallibilism. The principle of fallibilism embedded in the theory of fallibilistic epistemology requires one to critically examine evidence which points to the reasonableness of one’s beliefs.

According to Siegel, fallibilism is “the thesis that all our knowledge-claims are open to revision and are possibly mistaken.”\(^16\) A theory of fallibilistic epistemology allows for the condition in which S can know that q, only if there is a justification r for q, such that r being a confirmed and ‘undefeated’ evidence for q only makes q highly probable. This theory allows a person to know ‘something’ on the condition that a plausible justification exists in support for what one claims to know, such that the supporting evidence being confirmed and ‘undefeated’ only makes what one knows reasonable, highly likely or probable, as opposed to being absolutely true. Our knowledge is only highly probable on the basis of ‘undefeated’ available evidence and the relevant alternatives. If the state of knowledge should improve or change, the
hitherto warranted evidence may no longer support our beliefs. Thus we are bound to change or modify our beliefs. The fact that our knowledge is only highly probable implies a window of opportunity exists for one to be in error. Insofar as there is such a window of opportunity for error, no matter how small, we should be committed to critically examining our beliefs, since the greater and more rigorous the exploration we engage in, the nearer to certainty our knowledge will be. Siegel makes this point with respect to the connection between critical thinking and fallibilism, when he argues that "Fallibilism ... requires that we keep open the possibility of criticizing the very criteria of legitimate criticism we utilize." Thus, human knowledge—based on induction, the 'defeasibility' of evidence, and hence susceptibility to error—can be conceived only in terms of verisimilitude.

A universal and intuitive appeal exists for fallibilistic epistemology. Part of this appeal derives from the obvious truth that human beings by their very nature are susceptible to error. As Mill observed, human beings realize as part of their rationality that they are fallible, and this is also reflected in our cognitive processes that play an important role in our inquiry and the acquisition, justification, and modification of beliefs. Our perception and reasoning are susceptible to error, and since knowledge is a product of either the process of reasoning or perception or both, it will invariably be susceptible to error—as a function of the faulty process. People have a very strong intuition that we do know many things. The theory of fallibilistic epistemology is the attempt to articulate a theory of knowledge, which will square with our commonsense view that we do know many things, and that we are also susceptible to error. In this sense, fallibilism provides an epistemic foundation for Nicholas Burbules' contextual conception of critical thinking as reasonableness, which he argues, involves "being willing to admit that one is wrong." Such reasonableness suggests that we be willing to evaluate and we make concerted efforts to provide justifications that are adequate, stringent, and relevant. Fallibilistic epistemology thus provides a theoretical motivation for fostering the development of this kind of reasonableness in a substantive way. It does this by providing a set of criteria and methods we may use to inquire into how the reasonableness of beliefs and inquiry can be fostered. This involves some inquiry "into the contexts that support or encourage them; and into the barriers that impede them."

The principles of critical thinking, in relation to the strictures on the process of inquiry, given human fallibilism, are relevant to the possibility for the open discussion and debate of issues that are of interest to people—in the context of a community—because people need to be able to analyze issues, make reasoned and clear judgments about the adequacy of views, in terms of whether they are likely to be accepted by others. People have to be able to articulate their views clearly, coherently, and properly; they also have to look for ways and strategies to make their views known, and to convince others about them. The interest people have in wanting to acquire these skills and the
associated principles derives from the fact that they are seen as necessary to engage in the kind of rigorous inquiry or discussion that yields knowledge and justified belief, which, according to MacIntyre, is necessary for well-ordered relationship in community. The skills for independent inquiry which involve accepting a belief on the basis of a justifiable ascription of reasonableness is what educators argue students need in order to be liberally educated. In Goldman's view, an epistemic theory of justified belief—couched in terms of fallibilism—is necessary to account for a justifiable ascription of reasonableness to a belief or a line of reasoning. Such theory would be contingent on the fallible cognitive processes of a person as the causal and justificatory process for acquiring belief in the context of the consequent background beliefs, meta-beliefs, and conceptual scheme. 21

One plausible arguments for a fallibilistic epistemic conception of critical thinking is that it is given credence by the falsification method of inquiry in science. (Science is considered a paradigm of rigorous inquiry.) It involves the rigorous process of trying to falsify the reasons we bring to bear on our beliefs to test their relevance, adequacy, and reasonableness. This process of critical thinking with respect to critical inquiry implies open-endedness, because being critical suggests that the reasons that are provided to support a belief may not make it absolutely certain. As a result, critical thinking requires that we continuously subject our beliefs and evidence to critical analysis, to determine their plausibility in terms of verisimilitude—nearness to the ideal truth. Being critical of our beliefs implies that we have to adopt a moderately 'skeptical' or fallibilistic position, which, I think, is epistemically healthy, necessary, and reasonable, because there is always the actual possibility that we are in error. 22 This position requires that we be tentative about our beliefs—with a critical attitude—which is necessary for critical thinking.

Fallibilistic epistemology implies that if we have a belief it is positively confirmed, we have not found any negative counterexample or 'defeater' to vitiate our justification, and we hold it as conditional knowledge in the given context of relevant alternatives and available evidence. Yet we admit that new evidence could render our reasons inadequate and our beliefs false. Knowing, understanding, and being able to apply the principles of rigorous inquiry and having the ability and attitude to engage in this kind of inquiry is regarded as the hallmark of an educated person. 23 These epistemic principles, ability, and attitude are, in some respects, what many people have articulated broadly as critical thinking. 24 The normative epistemic notion of 'reason' and its cognates, such as, rationality, reasonableness, justification, evaluation, assessment, and judgment feature pervasively in the different conceptions of critical thinking. Critical thinking, in this sense, involves having the complex ability to rationally assess and evaluate beliefs and reasoning in general. These abilities enable people to accept certain views and arrive at understanding on the basis of appropriate reasons.
How does this fallibilistic epistemic view of critical thinking jibe with some standard views? In general, critical thinking is construed to involve the ability, principles, disposition, or attitude of rigorous inquiry which leads one to a reasonable set of beliefs. Some of the general critical thinking abilities—construed in its broad sense as a complex set of abilities—which people should acquire and apply involve the ability: (i) to analyze ideas and issues, (ii) to evaluate and question the adequacy of opinions and beliefs in terms of the relevance of evidence, (iii) to identify problems and find creative approaches to solving them, (iv) to articulate, organize, and express ideas clearly, (v) to arrive at informed beliefs and reasoned judgment about issues expressed in various works and texts, (vi) to reason on the basis of evidence to arrive at informed and acceptable decisions. These ideas in (ii), (v), and (vi) indicate the epistemic conception of critical thinking. These ideas are consistent with the view of critical thinking as: "the intellectual disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action," as well as Robert Ennis's twelve aspects of critical thinking.

According to Harvey Siegel, critical thinking as an epistemic skill involves being "appropriately moved by reasons," it involves the reasoning skills, critical dispositions, attitudes, and habits that are required to assess statements, beliefs, and issues. However, he accepts that the criteria by which we assess the appropriateness of the reasons which 'move' us to accept beliefs are fallible, open to revision, and are possibly mistaken. As such, critical thinking must require that we be able to critically assess our criteria and the general context in which we determine the appropriateness of our beliefs. Thus, critical thinking is seen as an epistemic process of evaluating statements, beliefs, arguments, knowledge, and experience, where such process or skill is dependent on certain attitudes. In this respect, McPeck argues that critical thinking involves principles which require that we be 'methodologically' and tentatively skeptical. It requires that we tentatively accept a belief or suspend judgment until we have enough evidence. As a normative process, it involves the assessment and evaluation of one's justification as a basis for believing, disbelieving, or suspending judgment. And such assessment is done in a given context of the available evidence, counter-evidence, and relevant alternatives. Some have argued that there is need to make the normative epistemic standards embedded in the notion of critical thinking, such as, 'appropriate judgment,' 'correct assessment' and 'reasonable evaluation' more substantive, in terms of specifying a set of actions by which one demonstrates critical thinking skills.

Evaluating knowledge and understanding and making intellectual judgments require some objective normative logical standards of human reasoning. This kind of understanding and knowledge, according to Siegel, involves among other things, "a proper understanding of the relevance of reasons and the rules of inference and evidence." The ability to apply these standards in
a substantive way to determine the relevance of evidence is, in some sense, instantiated in the process of proper inquiry, especially when this is done with a view to seeking and eliciting information and acquiring knowledge. These standards and rules of inference are also sometimes couched by logicians in terms of the principles of the formal validity of arguments. McPeck agrees that "In addition to the assessment of statements, critical thinking may include the use (or rejection) of methods, strategies and techniques as exemplars." These views suggest a logical (as opposed to an epistemic) conception of critical thinking. Logic involves the study of such methods and strategies for assessing statements with respect to arguments. So, logic is a normative discipline, in that it tries to specify the principles and standards underlying good and bad reasoning, and the methods or strategies for distinguishing between correct and incorrect reasoning expressed in the form of an argument. According to Copi, "the study of logic is the study of the methods and principles used to distinguish good (correct) from bad (incorrect) reasoning." Good reasoning indicates that our beliefs are contingent on how (in terms of cognitive processes and reasons) we come to believe them.

However, logicians are sometimes concerned about the soundness, strength, and cogency of arguments, that is, whether the premises are true. Determining whether an argument (deductive or inductive) is sound, strong, or cogent, requires one to have knowledge of facts with respect to real life or a specific subject matter regarding the truth or falsity of a statement. The knowledge of specific subject matter complements and gives substance to the understanding and application of logical principles by determining the truth of statements and, potentially, the soundness of an argument. According to Siegel, what McPeck's view of critical thinking suggests in this respect is, "not that logic is always irrelevant to reason assessment, but only that it is largely or mostly irrelevant. ... simply showing that logic is sometimes relevant to reason assessment is not sufficient to justify general critical thinking courses." Alvin Goldman argues that logic offers no appropriate answer for certain issues about reasoning; it alone cannot provide an appropriate theory for what constitutes a set of justified beliefs: "Although logic gives principles for deciding whether an argument is valid or invalid, it gives no principles for deciding whether a person who correctly ascribes validity (or invalidity) to a given argument makes that ascription justifiably." Thus, an epistemic theory of justified belief, which is sensitive to the notion of critical thinking as a rigorous process of inquiry and justifying belief, and grounded in fallibilism, is necessary and fundamental.

I do not want to downplay the logical conception of critical thinking, the idea that an epistemic attitude of critical thinking requires some objective logical formal principles that enable human beings to evaluate and be systematically critical of knowledge: that is, determining whether certain beliefs are warranted given other beliefs—meta-beliefs, background beliefs, and evidence—and perhaps, a critical evaluation of these other beliefs. However, these formal
principles alone do not address the material conditions of inquiry which are supplied by a liberal community. R. W. Paul’s conception of critical thinking, with respect to his distinction between the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ senses of critical thinking, and his view that critical thinking involves a consideration of one’s context, are illuminating to the issue of the material conditions of a community. An account of such conditions will illuminate the plausible parasitic relation among fallibilism, epistemic justification with respect to inquiry and critical thinking, and freedom of expression with respect to open discussion in a liberal community. The fallibilistic epistemic view of critical thinking I articulate here makes reference to certain principles of justification; it involves critically and rigorously engaging in open discussion and inquiry in a community to examine the reasonableness of one’s evidence with a view to arriving at knowledge. This involves an attempt to move away from what Paul calls the ‘weak’ sense of critical thinking, whereby a person masters one-by-one logical techniques, standard fallacies, and other formal skills, but “without any significant attention being given to the problems of self-deception, background logic, and multi-categorical ethical issues.”38 Such problems can only be dealt with when we consider the material conditions that determine critical thinking, which involve human fallibilism, freedom of expression, and discussion.

The ‘strong’ sense of critical thinking involves, (1) the avoidance of an atomistic view of logical errors in reasoning, (2) a concern about self-deception with respect to reasoning, and (3) the disposition of a person in a given context to have a reasonable doxastic attitude. It also involves being sensitive to the psychological, cognitive, egocentric and sociocentric components of people’s world-views, which shape one’s beliefs and process of reasoning. Thus, the ‘strong’ sense of critical thinking requires the exploration of the general network of arguments, issues, and views as the context for justification, in the attempt to ‘depersonalize’ one’s world-view, which would demand a critical discussion, debate, and dialogue between opposing views. Critical discussion is only plausible in the context of a community where the issue of a common interest and the means to achieve it has to be grounded in some intersubjective epistemic basis. This implies that people are encouraged to actively seek to question, challenge, critically discuss and criticize their most fundamental beliefs as a basis to arrive at a constitutive set of common beliefs and interests. This is a strength, in spite of Siegel’s criticism that Paul’s view implies some kind of relativism and dogmatism, which is what critical thinking attempts to avoid; it suggests “that the criteria of evaluation of informal arguments, and the criteria of critical thinking, are ultimately grounded in world-views.”39 However, one’s world-views, which may be rooted in the community’s beliefs and interests, are not exempt from critical examination, thus lending credence to a community as a social context of justification.
Rationality, Critical Thinking and the Social Context of Justification

Some authors have argued that there is a necessary social and contextual basis for justification of beliefs. For instance, David Annis has argued that an adequate theory of justification should include social and cultural components. The social context of a community is necessary to delimit relevant alternatives, evidence, and counter-evidence. It is along this line that Appiah argues that "accepting beliefs from one's culture [or community] and holding onto them in the absence of countervailing evidence can be reasonable... if you view reasonableness as a matter of trying to develop habits of belief acquisition that make it likely that you will react to evidence and reflection in ways that have a tendency to produce truth." This social and contextual account of justification is plausible because justification for our beliefs involves the preponderance of evidence in a particular context and time. This is based on the plausibility of the principle of evidentialism in justification which states that, "Doxastic attitude D toward a proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence S has at t." This thesis, which only attempts to state the necessary and sufficient conditions for epistemic justification, is consistent with the notion that epistemic justification is not absolute; it allows for degrees of strength based on the preponderance of evidence that one has at a given time in a relevant epistemic context. So, epistemic rationality as a basis for critical thinking involves: (i) the ability to see degrees of strength, preponderance of evidence, and the adequacy of justification or evidence at different times and contexts in order to employ the evidence in one's epistemic reasoning to justify a belief; (ii) the ability to recognize the existence of human fallibility and our ability to modify our belief and doxastic attitude in a social context in the face of some new information or evidence that points to truth; (iii) the ability to transfer relevant information from one context to another; (iv) the ability to reasonably rely on a mechanism which has had the tendency to produce more truths than falsehoods in the past, such as the dependence of others as epistemic authorities, if there are no countervailing reasons not to rely on it; this idea involves the principles of reliabilism, epistemic dependence, and induction (especially inference to the best explanation). These are commonplace epistemic principles which need not be rehashed here.

We can distinguish among three kinds of rational epistemic justification as a basis to understand community as a context for justification with respect to epistemic view of critical thinking. These are: (i) the ideal rational justification, (ii) the intersubjective rational justification, and (iii) the subjective rational justification. One is ideally rationally justified in believing a proposition to be true, if and only if, one has an adequate method for getting the relevant and all possible evidence, such that there could be no defeater to undermine such evidence. One is intersubjectively rationally justified in believing a proposition to be...
true, if and only if, given the acceptable beliefs in a social or epistemic community, one has a set of prima facie good reasons or acceptable evidence, such that there are no known defeaters in the community that would undermine the evidence. One is subjectively rationally justified in believing a proposition to be true, if and only if, given one's reasoning and warranted background beliefs, one has a set of prima facie good reasons or acceptable evidence for believing, such that one does not know any defeaters that undermine one's evidence. The issue here is, which of the above is the most plausible understanding of the notion of rational justification, and in what way is this justification consistent with critical thinking and communitarianism? The second—intersubjective rational justification—is the most plausible understanding of epistemic justification, and it is consistent with fallibilistic epistemology, critical thinking, and liberal communitarianism.

The traditional understanding of justification in the context of Kant's individualistic and autonomous characterization of rationality suggests that only the ideal or objective rational variant is plausible. It suggests that one can determine for oneself alone whether one's independent or perhaps subjective judgment is consistent with the ideal objective state of affairs. One can determine what is true and how the condition of truth is relevant to the evidentiary basis for one's belief. Such determination, it is thought, is what makes one's subjective judgment valid. This view implies that an individual can use solely his independent rationality and cognitive ability (of testing, considering evidence, rigorous critical inquiry, and logical analysis), to arrive at the adequate, ideal, universal, objective, or optimal reasons for believing a proposition to be true, such that it is not possible for a defeater for his justification to exist. The idea here is that the 'unjustified' overriding of an individual's will implicit in the primacy of a community's interests and beliefs would discourage the very epistemic inquiry or reasoning methods that could lead to the optimal reasons for accepting a belief. To depend on or accept without independent questioning and verification, in this sense, is to allow for unjustified overriding of individual's will and not to allow for independent questioning and judgment (even when there may be no obvious cause for questioning); this suggests an element of dogmatism which is antithetical to critical thinking.

The reliance or dependence on others in a community, even when there is indeed justification for it, involves the limitation of the development of an individual's independent judgment and autonomous will. Thus, the argument against epistemic dependence with respect to communitarianism implies that one should constantly and perpetually subject one's beliefs to critical analysis and questioning. Justification in this skeptical sense of critical analysis would imply that if one finds a belief in one's set beliefs which is grounded in the community's belief for which one has independently found a defeater (or if it suggests the unreliability of a process that such plays a role in the sustenance of one's belief), then one should use one's independent rational, logical, and analytical ability to purge oneself of all beliefs in one fell swoop. Otherwise,
one is being dogmatic and allows the community's beliefs to override one's independent judgment. In order to be ideally justified in this sense, one has to be absolutely justified in the chain of beliefs, such that there could be no defeaters to render one's beliefs unjustifiable. This implies that there could not possibly exist any information that any other person in a community could possess—which one does not have—to render one's belief justifiable or unjustifiable, since one should rely solely on one's independent belief and judgment. This stricture is too strong and humanly unrealistic: a reasonable notion of epistemic justification should be contextually defined in relation to others in an epistemic community and the available set of evidence. One can be in error in making a determination with respect to truth and the adequate correlation between one's subjective judgment and objective state of affairs. Hence, no one could justifiably make claims to epistemic autonomy or individualism across the board, since the highest intersubjective court of appeal of rationality and epistemic justification lies outside the individual.

Moreover, one should not question if there is no reason to question. One may only question in a context of substantive anomalies in a community. The mere possibility of defeaters or anomalies which needs to be ruled out in the case of the ideal sense of justification is irrelevant as to whether one is rationally justified or not. The ideal sense of epistemic justification does presuppose the subjective sense because of the primary importance and value that is placed on the individual's will and autonomy with respect to rational independent deliberation. The notion of rationality is embedded in the ideal sense that justification assumes epistemic individualism and autonomy, doxastic voluntarism, and the denial of epistemic dependence. Epistemic individualism and autonomy imply that the individual alone is usually in the best epistemic and rational position to make the best judgment regarding what she should believe given a set of evidence, and thus, should be free to make such an autonomous judgment. If this account is correct, it contradicts the notion of epistemic dependence which underlies communitarianism: that one may rationally depend on another as a basis for justifying some judgments regarding one's knowledge or belief claims. Apparently, the argument against the plausibility of critical thinking in a communitarian system is that it involves, in some sense, the 'involuntary reliance' on others as the basis for our beliefs. Such would vitiate the role of reason and will in making independent judgment and free inquiry. This implies that one cannot and may not rationally depend on, (i) the judgment of others who are epistemic superiors, (ii) the 'accepted' set of beliefs in an epistemic community, and (iii) the hitherto reliable processes for acquiring beliefs without questioning and making personal decisions about them.

If this argument is sound, then it implies that human beings would need to concurrently have more beliefs than they could possibly have. That is, every individual should concurrently have all the beliefs by which he alone (autonomously) can justify, infinitely, all the beliefs he accepts. The underlying assumption here about justification is that it is iterative in nature: if I use x to
justify my belief y, then I need to justify x with z, and z with w and so on. If one is to avoid the epistemic dependence inherent in communitarianism, then everyone should have an infinite number of true beliefs as evidence and possible relevant alternatives. We would also have to be smart enough to reason, know, and make the best judgment at any given time, such that any other belief we are asked to accept can be necessarily deemed to be either unjustified or justified given our prior set of beliefs—by recognizing concurrently the infinite justificatory links between these beliefs. This view is implausible because it is simply impossible to have an infinite number of beliefs and to know concurrently all the possible beliefs that could justify or act as counterevidence for one’s beliefs. Thus, Ernest Sosa argues that we should depart from the traditional analysis of knowledge by placing justification of beliefs in the relative context of an epistemic community. The attempt to do this has culminated in the new trends in epistemology—naturalized and socialized epistemology—which seek to understand the cognitive and social human conditions and how we can bring such understanding to bear on the analysis of knowledge. These human conditions give credence to communitarianism.

Both epistemic individualism and autonomy suggests that for y to epistemically depend on the authority of x is for x to putatively override the will of y, which is ideally unjustified (given the value and primacy of the individual will); thus such dependence involves authoritarianism. According to Hardwig,

Suppose that a person A has good reasons—evidence—for believing that p, but a second person B, does not. In this sense B has no (or insufficient) reasons to believe that p. However, suppose also that B has good reasons to believe that A has good reasons to believe p. Does B then, ipso facto, have good reasons to believe that p? If so, B’s belief is epistemically grounded in an appeal to the authority of A and A’s belief. And if we accept this, we will be able to explain how B’s belief can be more than mere belief; how it can indeed, be rational belief; and how B can be rational in his belief that p.

It is sometimes irrational for someone to make an independent epistemic judgment on his own (if he is epistemically inferior and does not have the requisite background beliefs), such that he would want to claim epistemic autonomy that would not require him to depend on an authority who is epistemically superior. It is reasonable for instance, that a person can be said to have good reasons for accepting a belief if he has good reasons to believe that other people have good reasons to accept it. As a result, he can be said to have a kind of good reason for accepting a belief which does not itself constitute an evidence for the truth of the belief. One of the intuitive arguments that makes the principle of epistemic dependence appealing has to do with the limitation on humans regarding the complexity, unlimited breadth, and infinite amount of available information, knowledge, and evidence, which we all cannot concurrently have and are incapable of comprehending, but which are nonetheless necessary for us to justify our beliefs.
The notion of intersubjective justification, which I think is the plausible account of epistemic justification, is consistent with the relationally absolute (contextual) nature of the notion of knowledge, which Dretske thinks of "as an evidential state in which all relevant alternatives (to what is known) are eliminated. This makes knowledge an absolute concept but the restriction to relevant alternatives makes it ... [relative] and applicable to this epistemically bumpy world we live in." This account states that justification is dependent on evidence, whose appropriateness is considered in relation to the social, pragmatic, and communal context of people in terms of the justified beliefs (evidence) they have. Hence in Harman's view of justification, a person will be unjustified in holding a belief only if there exists contrary evidence (defeater) that it would be possible for a person to obtain for herself or is possessed by other people in the relevant social or epistemic group to which the person belongs. This means that one cannot be justified in a complete absolute sense; one is only justified in a contextual absolute sense—in relation to the context of the available set of evidence. This context determines what is to count as 'relevant alternatives' or counter-evidence, which must be ruled out as possible defeaters for one's evidence, in order for one to be justified.

According to Dretske's account, the concept of epistemically justified belief is, like the terms 'empty' and 'flat,' relationally absolute. "For although nothing can be flat if it has any bumps or irregularities, what counts as a bump or irregularity depends on the type of surface being described. Something is empty ... if it has nothing in it, but this does not mean that an abandoned warehouse is not really empty because it has light bulbs or molecules in it." The idea here is that the subject matter we are talking about and its context will determine what is to count as evidence or a relevant alternative. An epistemic context of evidence is required to circumscribe relevant alternatives because one cannot have absolute standards for each and all cases of justified beliefs, which are not sensitive to contexts. Having such standards without a context to delimit evidence, would imply that one should be an ideal omniscient cognizer and have an infinite set of beliefs. One would need to possess all the possible beliefs in every conceivable circumstance in order to know or be justified. Otherwise, a mere possibility would count as a relevant alternative or counter-evidence that would need to be discounted. But we cannot discount our justification or beliefs on the basis of mere possible counter-evidence. Thus an evidentialist-intersubjective-contextual account of justification is plausible: it lends credence to a liberal community. However, it should be obvious why the subjective account of justification is not plausible.

We have to rely on others within a given community to determine what people can justifiably claim to believe, since we individually cannot concurrently have infinite set of beliefs—which would be necessary to justify each and every one of our belief claims in the ideal sense. Moreover, it is not even necessary for one to fully understand the nature of evidence that an 'authority' (an epistemic superior) may have in order to rely on him as a basis for
justification. As a result of the complexity of some of the beliefs we accept in a given community or the complexity of the justifications of our simple beliefs, we have to accept (and justifiably so) more beliefs in the community (necessary to justify a belief) than anyone alone can actually know—individually and voluntarily. Many beliefs exist that other people have whose justifiability we cannot ascertain or understand such that we have to accept such beliefs on the basis of epistemic trust and the reliability of the ‘expert’ who provides this belief. As such, we all have to accept some degree of epistemic inferiority which would require us to necessarily subordinate our epistemic judgment to, or allow its dependence, on others. Rational people cannot be epistemically self-sufficient unto themselves; hence we have to rationally depend and rely on one another. This is the intuition behind the commonplace idea that two heads are better than one. However, the rationality of such dependence means that we restrict it to an epistemic superior whose views are acceptable based on the evidence in an epistemic community. In David Annis’ view, this contextual model of justified belief has to do with the extent to which a person is able to surmount certain objections that are available in the relevant epistemic community.51

When a belief is well-founded in terms of delimiting the range of relevant alternatives and accepted as the ‘tradition’ or accepted view in an epistemic community, it does exhibit some kind of epistemic authoritarianism. This is similar to what we find in science, to the extent that scientists have to rely on the beliefs of others in the relevant scientific community to delimit the range of relevant alternatives.52 Even the scientific community which is regarded as the paradigm of a community of critical inquirers, is sometimes resistant to beliefs that would broaden or help to question their range of alternatives.53 Doubt, inquiry, or questioning is sometimes considered irrational. However, because of human fallibilism, we are not sure when questioning would be irrational, hence the extreme sense of epistemic authoritarianism in a community is bad in principle. But to deny a reasonable sense of epistemic dependence and communitarianism could lead to iterative and extreme skepticism, to the extent of questioning unnecessarily the most fundamental, obvious, and each and every belief—out of context. The thrust of Hardwig’s argument is that if one were to attempt to pursue epistemic individuality and autonomy across the board without epistemic dependence, one could only succeed in holding and adequately justifying a limited set of beliefs, and for the most part, these beliefs would be relatively uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore irrational.54 So, in order to be fully rational, one has to avoid some sense of epistemic individuality and autonomy in order to accept epistemic dependence on some expert (or his beliefs) since, as a matter of fact, one does have more beliefs than one can be fully informed about regarding adequate justification.
Conclusion

In order for the epistemic notion of critical thinking—the ability of an individual to use his will to critically reflect on, deliberate, and find acceptable reasons that rational people would accept—to make sense, we have to assume some fundamental standards or beliefs regarding what is rational. To the extent that this notion of rationality involves reasoning from available evidence, counter-evidence, and relevant alternatives to acceptable beliefs, it is contextual and it depends on information that others in the community have. Epistemic justification and rationality as a basis for critical thinking seem to assert a synthetic and contextual connection among one's beliefs, evidence, and the community in which the evidence is available. However, one can appreciate how communitarianism, given the questionable non-constitutive and metaphysical sense of a community, could be seen to vitiate the commonplace view of what it takes for a person to be intellectually responsible, logical, and rational in the acquisition and justification of beliefs; thus, communitarianism would be considered epistemically reprehensible. If the commonplace view in philosophy is that "the core of rationality consists in preserving and adhering to one's own independent judgment," and communitarianism contradicts this, then a person's rationality ex hypothesi is questionable.
Endnotes


5 Maclntyre, “The Privatization of Good” op. cit., p. 250 (emphasis is mine to draw attention to the idea of epistemic dependence in a community).

6 ibid p.249.


9 Ibid., p. 80.


11 Daniel Bell, op. cit., p. 141.


14 Ibid., p. 64.

15 Hardwig, op. cit.

16 Siegel, op. cit., p. 145n.

17 ibid., p. 144n.

18 See Bertrand Russell, The Problems of Philosophy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). He argues that most of our beliefs are based on induction, and we accept them because of the probability of their being true. This probability may be close certainty, but we can never reach certainty because there is always the possibility of error. He concludes that probability is all we ought to seek.


20 ibid.

It is pertinent to distinguish between extreme skepticism and fallibilism (moderate skepticism). The former says we do not and perhaps cannot have knowledge. This position is incoherent and self-defeating because to say that we do not or cannot have knowledge is to imply that we do in fact have some knowledge, which is that we cannot have knowledge. The latter only says that we could be mistaken but is willing to grant that we do in fact know some things. The implication of this view for inquiry, which is what motivates critical thinking, is that we should adopt stringent methods, whereas the implication of the former for inquiry is that we should not even try.

In making the connection between critical thinking and the content of education, Siegel uses Gilbert Ryle's distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' to argue, that critical thinking involves 'knowing that' with respect to the principles of critical inquiry, and 'knowing how' with respect to the abilities and skills to engage in such inquiry. See Harvey Siegel, Educating Reason, (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 42.

Edward D'Angelo, The Teaching of Critical Thinking, (Amsterdam: B.R. Gruner, 1971), pp. 7-8. For instance, D'Angelo lists the following attitudes (which are sometimes couched in terms of principles) as the necessary conditions for developing critical thinking skills: intellectual curiosity, objectivity, open-mindedness, flexibility, intellectual skepticism, intellectual honesty, being systematic, persistence, decisiveness, and respect for other viewpoints.


Ennis, "A Concept of Critical Thinking," op. cit. He lists the aspects of critical thinking as follows: (i) grasping the meaning of a statement; (ii) judging whether there is ambiguity in a line of reasoning; (iii) judging whether certain statements contradict each other; (iv) judging whether a conclusion follows necessarily; (v) judging whether a statement is specific enough; (vi) judging whether a statement is actually the application of a certain principle; (vii) judging whether an observation statement is reliable; (viii) judging whether an inductive conclusion is warranted; (ix) judging whether the problem has been identified; (x) judging whether something is an assumption; (xi) judging whether a definition is adequate; (xii) judging whether a statement made by an alleged authority is acceptable.

Siegel, op. cit., Chap. 2 "Reason Conception," pp. 32-42.

He makes this point in his criticism of the view of Paul that critical thinking (in the 'strong sense') has been done in the context of one's world-view. He argues that this context and the general criteria that we use in assessing the appropriateness of our beliefs also have to be subject to critical thinking, since we can be in error about our beliefs, and they hence should be subject to revision. See Siegel, op. cit., pp. 14-15 & 144-145n.
31 D'Angelo, op. cit., pp. 7-8.
33 Siegel, op. cit., p. 43.
36 Siegel, op. cit., footnote 61 on p. 25, (Notes, pp. 147-8).
37 Goldman, op. cit., p. 278.
42 Kwame Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 117. The emphasis on ‘reasonable’ and ‘reasonableness’ is mine to draw attention to his subjective sense of justification.)
46 ibid., pp. 336-337.
47 ibid, p. 336.
48 Dretske, op. cit., p. 367.
50 Dretske, op. cit., p. 366.
53 A quick example that comes to mind is when the Australian, Dr. Marshall discovered that H-pylori bacteria is responsible for peptic ulcer. The medical and scientific community ridiculed him for the idea because it was pretty much accepted within the scientific community that peptic ulcer was caused by stomach acid.
54 Hardwig, op. cit., p. 340
55 ibid., p. 340.