

# Importance of Critical Thinking in Solving Society's Problems

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**ABSTRACT:** Critical thinking is essential in making a sound judgment and addressing concerns in real life. The importance of this seemingly small sphere hinges on its philosophical aspects and ability to blend one's common sense with reason, intellectual empathy, perseverance, and knowledge. From this perspective, my paper demonstrates how critical thinking can be practically used to solve society's issues. It articulates the best way of changing people's perception of this broad discipline. By examining relevant articles, specifically, *The Bell* by Iris Murdoch, I demonstrate how society can gain a precise sense of reality. Also, I delve on how people can solve their problems without assumptions and clouded misgivings. Fictitious characters are vastly used to illustrate how critical thinkers can design appropriate solutions to overcome society's competitive scenarios through situational analysis and evaluation of the environment. I review Murdoch's symbolism to explain the benefits of using critical thinking in any contemporary society. The article constructs a practical narrative that moral vision is equally or, arguably, more important in any problem-solving or decision-making process. Further, it focuses on the necessary critical thinking steps that can ensure independent thinking without emotional distractions. The steps are essential in guaranteeing that communities make the single best solution to each of their problems. The study relies on the connection between philosophy and fiction to create valid arguments and explore how society can embrace courage, intellectualism, and unbiased judgment to solve most, if not all, of its inherent problems.

**KEYWORDS:** critical thinking, intellectualism, *The Bell*, society, morality

## Introduction and Background

Many industries and workplaces regard critical thinking as an important skill when recruiting employees. 'Critical thinking' refers to an individual's capacity to objectively evaluate information and take the necessary measures to address issues with sound judgment. Critical thinking is essential in many aspects of life, and this paper will outline its importance in solving challenges in society. Technological advancements and changes in environmental conditions have improved ways of thinking and the ways that human beings approach different matters in society (Boltanski and Laurent 2006, 47). Critical thinking is necessary to understand the validity of existing ideas and to generate new ones. Society's tendency to accept unproven ideas or narratives without evaluating them represents a deterioration in critical thinking skills, and measures should be taken to account for the involvement of critical thinking skills in making decisions.

Critical thinking is an essential skill in providing solutions to societal problems. Critical evaluation should be applied to vital issues of concern, and not to the facts that are already endorsed and accepted by society (Latour 2004, 226). Unity among members of the community is essential, and the process of critical thinking should be employed when making decisions on the appropriate measures to take in addressing challenges in society. Critical thinking has a vital role in the growth and development of economies, as well as in the overall well-being of a society, and should not only be a subject of theoretical discussion, but applied practically.

Sociological productivity in terms of critical thinking is considered ineffectual, and therefore, there is a need to search for other relevant techniques that can replace critical sociology, which requires an overall structural review. A focus on the social aspects of critical issues is possibly one of the main reasons for the reduced interest in this form of critique. Members of society must understand the importance of empirical discussions, and the need to include social productivity in the process of obtaining the necessary information, to solve problems in society. Adequate data should be gathered before making a critical judgment on an important issue.

The application of critical thinking and scientific evaluation in society is drastically diminishing, which may be as a result of a focus on the linguistic construction of facts rather than

the actuality of events. This is worrying, as it is the actuality of facts which provide critical information about a subject, and not the linguistic aspects. Latour provides an example of this, when a tragic event, the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers, was reduced to a linguistic construction in the form a book that claims that there was no attack, and that the buildings collapsed after failing to sustain their weight (228). Shockingly, the book was a best-seller because the public allowed themselves to be swayed by the words instead of focusing on the actual event. However, the public may not be entirely at fault, because the linguistic content is created by figures of authority in their respective fields. These people are aware of the power they hold, which makes them a viable channel for propagating conspiracies.

### **A Synopsis of *The Bell***

Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* is set in Imber Court, a house in rural Gloucestershire which houses Anglican lay members, and is neighbored by Imber Abbey, an enclosed community for nuns. Michael Meade owns the court and is the leader of the community, and Toby Gashe is a young man who visits the court to get exposure to religious life before he goes to university. Catherine and her twin brother Nick are also residents of the court. The story revolves around the ethical responsibility of abiding by community rules and the flawed nature of humans - in this case, the struggles of forbidden love. Michael wants to be a priest, but he is homosexual and had a relationship with Nick while Nick was still in school. He now struggles with his strong attraction to Toby. Catherine intends to become a nun, but she is conflicted because she is attracted to Michael. The concept of abiding by the societal construction of morals, and the ability to challenge and critique the set values, are explored through these characters' stories.

### **Analysis of *The Bell* and Critical Thinking**

The critical thinking process involves the mechanisms of study, assessment, rationality, and reflection (Rodzalan and Saat 2015, 725). It is typical for the reasoning of humans to perceive themselves as being critical thinkers, able to solve problems in their own settings. However, critical thinking is more complex than this. Akin to the great realists James, Eliot and Tolstoy, Murdoch is troubled by the challenges facing the world today. She is particularly concerned about the ethical and moral challenges presented by a global society characterized by declining faith and accelerating change. She studied and published both philosophy and fiction, and her novels tend to investigate the fate of concepts once they become subjected to urgencies of everyday life (Murdoch 2016, 5). In *The Bell*, she blends social satire with a piercingly observant, yet empathetic, perspective of her characters.

Most often, the combination of philosophy and fiction produce a hybrid narrative of concepts, or the highly intricate symbolic narrative, a metaphysical kaleidoscope that generates a *Weltanschauung* (Kaehele and German 1967, 554). In contrast, Murdoch succeeds in creating a legitimate fictional world enriched - but not adulterated - by her philosophical perspectives. In her publication on Sartre, she states that modern philosophy and fiction both fail to establish a sufficient notion of human personality, which also involves critical thinking (Kaehele and German 1967, 555). This mirrors the current situation, where education is facing a dilemma on whether to foster critical thinking or teach an already agreed-upon body of knowledge.

In *The Bell*, Murdoch offers a realistic depiction of society and the environment, and generates characters whose destiny and individuality engage the interest of the reader. For example, after Dora leaves her husband, Paul, she realizes that she is even more afraid of him when they are apart than when they are together, and she goes back to him. Michael also faces a dilemma, as he struggles to reconcile his homosexuality with his intentions to become an ordained priest. Michael, James and Nick are characterized by temperament and negative strength, making them unable to give in to the world entirely, but their desire for the Lord makes them inadequate citizens of ordinary life. They are conflicted between abiding by the rules of the court and being free thinkers.

In blending reality with fiction, Murdoch manages to illuminate aspects of critical thinking in society. The novel starts with a meticulous foretaste of a Murdochian literary motif (Masong 2008, 11) in Dora, a besieged art student and the treacherous spouse of Paul, an art historian. Dora

lives in constant fear, which is the underlying driver for her two focal actions: leaving him and returning to him. These actions remain unchanged throughout the narrative – fleeing and returning to Paul. Although both Paul and Dora are art enthusiasts, they are unable to find common ground to cement their relationship and prevent conflict. Meanwhile, Michael learns that his sexual passions and consecrated calling originate from the same source.

Murdoch presents her message symbolically in the form of two bells, the old, original bell, and the new one set to replace it. Similarly, the Imber Abbey community has two distinct elements: the enclosed nuns, represented by the original bell, and the dwellers of the world (Imber Court), represented by the new bell. The latter group comprises the world of the unhappy souls whose want or desire for the Lord makes them substandard residents of normal life, but whose temperament and resilience makes them unable to give in to the word wholly.

Murdoch's concern for the eccentric or morally complicated has not contributed to a narrative of epic resistance and conflict between the bourgeoisie and the outsiders (Kaehele and German 1967, 555). The tale is set in a community that could represent contemporary society, where judgment is based on absolute principles, as opposed to a careful investigation of intricate and messy particulars. In the same manner, the characters in the narrative who are judged are not incorrigible violators of moral or social codes; instead, they are ordinary individuals, venial violators. The best example of this is the character James, who has little time for a man who deems his life too intricate and unique to align himself with the conventional rules. In contrast to many austere moralists, he is capable of loving and demonstrating empathy, as well as offering rational judgment, and takes no pleasure in meting out judgment. When it comes to working, he appreciates the value of individuality and explains society's desire to recapture some degree of sacramental labor quality. He offers Toby a warning about losing individual vocational sense because he feels ashamed for being referred to as a “crank” (Kaehele and German 1967, 556). His attitude becomes more easily understood when he states his belief that an individual's work represents them.

Any theory of critical thinking is only beneficial if it can ease the process of actual critical and everyday thinking. Any justifiable essential notion of thinking must construe the thought in such a manner that it captures most of what individuals already have in their minds when they hypothesize that developing the concept is an essential aspect of learning (Boltanski and Thévenot 72). In other words, the outcome of the thinking must be in alignment with the central meaning of the learners' or educators' logic of critical thinking. Responsible citizenship and moral integrity lie at the heart of all critical thinking. Theorists and educators tend to view the ethical and affective dimensions of education as they see all other learning dimensions: a compilation of learning more distinct, or separate from other forms, of learning or compartmentalized spheres. However, it is essential to acknowledge that individuals' basic approaches towards knowledge are inseparable from their simple ways of being or surviving (Honig 2013, 70; Honneth 2010, 380). The way people think mirrors their moral and intellectual values and similarly, their limitations in this field become evident in the decisions they make.

To foster the form of intellectual autonomy implicit in the logic of a robust critical thinking concept, it is imperative to state that there is the inherent essence to cultivate epistemological humility, integrity, perseverance, and credibility. Intellectual humility describes how an individual is aware of the restrictions of their knowledge, including the sensitivity to prejudice, bias, and inadequacies of individual perspectives (Toharudin 2017, 340). In *The Bell*, Murdoch is able to demonstrate how individuals can apply moral vision above moral understanding, taking into consideration the elements mentioned above. For example, in the first chapter, Dora is travelling to Gloucester in a packed train (Masong 2008, 13). She is on her way to visit Paul, who lives in the Anglican Benedictine abbey to study an antique manuscript. At some point during the journey, an old lady comes into the carriage and strikes up a conversation with another aged lady seated next to Dora. Dora listens to the conversation but stops when an appalling thought strikes her: should she have given up her seat? However, she rejects the idea, but it keeps coming back to haunt her. The lady appears to be very weak, and it would have been appropriate for Dora to relinquish her seat, since Dora is young and healthy. She ultimately decides to sit still and contemplate the issue, instead of moving.

Consequently, Dora experiences a series of thoughts, including the possibility that the gentleman seated on her other side could have given up his seat, the contemplation of her desired reward for arriving early enough, the position in question, and the pondering of other passengers within the carriage, who appeared uneasy with the situation (Masong 2008, 14). The other passengers were also hanging their heads in shame, implying that they knew they had not made the right decisions themselves. Ultimately, Dora's moral vision prevails over her ethical understanding and she stands up and gives her seat to the old lady, telling her that her destination is close and that she prefers to stand anyway. This illustrates the application of critical thinking in practical situations that require intellectual intelligence to come up with a resolution.

Such moral contemplations, which Murdoch uses throughout the novel, reflect her skillful style of operating the psychosomatic scalpel into the finer points of moral consciousness. Here, it is imperative to point out that Dora was not unpredictable or indecisive. Regardless of the care she took to reflect on the ethical responsibilities of civility, empathy and compassion are not derived, but innate and different in each individual. These attributes help guide the direction of people's critical thinking and the outcomes of different situations.

Another aspect that is of importance when discussing critical thinking is intellectual courage. This is when an individual becomes aware of the necessity to face and address beliefs, perspectives, and concepts, which are usually the subject of intense emotions. If an individual does this with ideas that they have not seriously considered themselves, it can be regarded as intellectual courage (Rodzalan and Saat 2015, 728). This critical component is presented multiple times in *The Bell*, in which Murdoch reacts to the existing philosophic predisposition in the United Kingdom during her era (Masong 2008, 15). Her perspective is that the principal cause of contemporary society's dilemma is that individuals have been left with an idea of a human persona that is far too insubstantial and shallow (Masong 2008, 14). This is most manifested in ethical philosophy contexts, where the opulence of human experience is toned down to mere public expression, behavior and expressions. Considering Mill's utilitarianism, human beings have learned a lot through experience. An action like a government provoking another country through threats, as was the case with North Korea when 'testing' their nuclear weapons, is known to have resulted in war. It then follows that the public's concern about the possibility of a war erupting should not be dismissed on the grounds of it being mere public opinion.

Still, there is a lack of scientific inquiry and certainty when it comes to decision-making and problem-solving in contemporary society. There is disproportionate confidence in believing ideological arguments that are postured as realities (Honig 2013, 62). Scholars have learned to separate facts from fiction, but the public is more prone to distrusting or disapproving good ideas that are disguised as inadequate or biased ideologies. For most problems, there is not one single best solution or answer and there may always be the feeling that another option could have been equally good, or even better. Murdoch captures this concept in *The Bell*, and her concern with questions regarding reality and existence are explored throughout the narrative.

Similarly, she makes clear her belief that the most vital and permanent sense of being is experienced by people who share in James' conviction, that reality refers to something beyond individuals (Masong 2008, 15). Any action, like love or work, which compels individuals to deal with issues beyond themselves, is conducive to the realization of exterior reality, and therefore, to the sense of being. As opposed to what the philosopher Kant envisioned, nature has an unspeakable particularity, not formlessness. The link between an individual's logic and his or her notion of reality is depicted vividly by Dora's experiences. While she might not be as adept at self-analysis as Sartre's protagonists, she shares their solipsistic outlook of the world. She does not possess any of the tastes or concerns that generally develop a person's awareness of external reality: she no longer writes, she has poor memory, the past means nothing to her, and she does not go to work. Similarly, her prejudices towards religion are driven by superstition, and her thoughts concerning others are too shallow to offer her a true discernment of their being or identity. Her efforts to achieve the feeling of true being, through creating and enacting individual roles for herself, have accomplished

nothing, since her vision exceeds her capacity. Despite this, she takes time to think before performing certain acts. For example, when she feels the need to act, she ponders for a while and concludes that only one decision suits her: to board the train to London (Masong 2008, 16). This decision makes her feel free to make decisions without informing Paul, who, naturally, would be extremely upset. Again, it is critical to point out the psychological objective of critical thinking. In this case, Dora hopes that her decision to leave for London would be punishment for Paul. She believes that by acting independently, she can demonstrate to her husband that she is not his slave and can still make autonomous decisions. Dora here tries to employ critical thinking to overcome her situation with Paul, and this enables her to live most appropriately with people. Dora does not allow her emotions to distort her thinking, as this could lead to making the wrong decision.

As mentioned earlier, it is not enough to cite moral understanding and obligations when discussing the role of critical thinking in solving societal problems. This is evident when it comes to the sphere of ‘public things’ (Honig 2013, 59). In this context, neoliberals attempt to privatize public amenities by alleging wastage due to bureaucracy, and that civil servants are unreliable as a result of a lack of motivation. It is further suggested that private markets do not suffer in the same way. Lobbyists and empirical investigators can argue about whether the private or public sector produces more waste, but, as Bonnie Honig argues, there are usually other reasons apart from efficiency that lead to the need for embracing public amenities.

In the same way, critical thinking is influenced by factors besides economic or social values. For example, a fair-minded individual might view one perspective of an action as being more vital than others would. In *The Bell*, James appears to be rational in his thinking and does not seem to follow the precedents or general rules set by society. With the character of James, it is possible to view Murdoch's thinking and her perspective on how the community ought to embrace intellectualism and intellectual courage.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, critical thinking is a seemingly small - yet wide - sphere that should be explored in greater detail. Iris Murdoch's novel, *The Bell*, is an excellent example of how fiction can meet philosophy in explaining critical thinking in contemporary society. Critical thinking is not only an aspect of philosophy, but also a process that blends common sense with intellectual empathy, knowledge, perseverance, and reason. This process is not entirely based on moral understanding, but also moral vision, which is where an individual ponders the consequences of his or her actions following a decision. Murdoch uses the characters in her narrative to offer a fictitious, yet practical, analysis of the use of critical thinking in solving society's issues.

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