

How to walk in Peter F. Drucker's footsteps – and still choose your own path

Our world is complex – to the point where the fundamental fabric of truth and shared reality shows signs of tearing. When I searched for books on “fake news” on the website of my local bookstore today, I got over 240 results all on shielding yourself and navigating the (social) media. Central to all: Critical thinking (CT). To survive the constant onslaught of information you have to think independently remaining resilient. All of the courses at my university aim at the ability to reflect critically with the course topic. Over this last year, my encounter with Peter F. Drucker, one of the greatest experts on management and organizations of the 20th century, lastingly shaped my CT-skills. In this essay, I will define critical thinking and show how it can be achieved and trained. Furthermore, I argue for confronting yourself with Drucker to provide footsteps to walk in while still encouraging you to independently choose your own path.

What is critical thinking?

CT as a term seems common knowledge but scientists struggle to agree on a shared definition. They characterise CT as an attitude and logical application skill in problem-solving contexts (Glaser, 1942), a logical and product-oriented process for assessing the correctness of statements (Ennis, 1962), or a process of purposeful reflection (Sternberg, 1986). Definitions such as Brookfield's (1987) “calling into question the assumptions underlying our customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning” (p. 1) highlight the tendency of retaining sceptical perspectives. Others stress the cognitive ability to process and manipulate information, such as Halpern (2001), defining CT as the “abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information as well as the disposition to apply these abilities”.

According to Laub (2018), CT is a higher cognitive function controlling our otherwise lower-stem driven impulses such as fight, flight, or freeze. Accordingly philosophers since ancient Greece and especially during the movement of Enlightenment identified our ability to reason and to control our animalistic urges as what elevated us from the status of *common animal* to a *being caught between the spiritual and animalistic world*. It is the very basis for the assumption of superiority of humankind and any concept of autonomy (Aristotle, Ross, & Brown, 2009; Kant, Wood, & Schneewind, 2002). In our ability to reflect, to question, and to constantly find new solutions they see humankind's potential of growth. Various psychological

theories on the subjective construction of reality build on CT as the ability to process and manipulate information (Epstein, 2003; Kets de Vries, 1984). Looking at the rise of Nazism in Germany, Hannah Arendt (1991) argues Totalitarianism partly succeeded due to the masses being stripped of their ability to think critically, forcing them to follow Nazi-ideology without second thought. Hence CT forms an essential path to every individual's freedom – both internally and externally. It liberates the mind from the doctrine of lower-stem reactions, while also forming the cornerstone of one's ability to navigate an increasingly complex world resilient against external manipulations such as Fake News.

When asking “what is CT?”, the answer to “what is it not?” also holds insight: Despite studies revealing strong correlations between CT and intelligence (as measured by IQ-tests), scientists agree on the distinctiveness of both concepts (Elder, 1996; Niu, Behar-Horenstein, & Garvan, 2013)). Those studies show an individual's CT skills to be independent from their overall cognitive ability. Instead, they portrait CT to be the link between intelligence and emotions, since it correlates highest with Emotional Intelligence being the ability to be aware and manage your emotions (Stedman & Andenoro, 2007). Niu et al. (2013) conclude: “[C]ritical thinking provides people with the mental tools that assist with the functioning of intelligence” (p. 116) .

How to develop and train your CT-skills?

Two prominent views on the origin of individual CT-skills prevail (Niu et al., 2013): The developmental view bases CT firmly in biology and genetic predisposition, postulating that humans undergo developmental stages comparable to Piaget's model of personal development. Hence, an individual's skill is determined by both its genes and the level of developmental progress. The second, being also my own perspective, sees CT as a distinct form of intelligence – teachable and learnable. Ennis (1989) developed four typologies of teaching CT: While the general approach (1) aims at teaching CT as a separate subject; 2) the infusion, immersion and mixed approach (2-4) (co-)subordinate CT implicitly or explicitly to the actual course-topic. Looking at predictors of successful CT-learning, meta-analyses show only two significant predictors: student's discipline and long-term effort (Niu et al., 2013).

Why Drucker?

So how to develop CT if all you can really do is train diligently? You might start becoming aware of the subconscious biases that deny objective judgement as brilliantly presented in

Kahneman's (2012) book "thinking fast and slow". Bias-awareness increases the chance to realize its effect in real-life situations allowing for conscious countermeasures. Alternatively, you might wander the cosmos of written thought that constitutes humankind's search for universally guiding principles on right and wrong behaviour. Confronting yourself with philosophy provides the humbling experience of being caught up in arguments held by titans of past ages such as Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith or Aristoteles, hence sharpening your ability to integrate different sources and perspectives into your own construct of reality and its underlying mechanisms.

From the perspective of Ennis typology, both approaches can be representative of types 2 – 4. In this essay, I argue that reading Drucker's work is representative of type 1. It signifies confrontation with someone applying an unwavering CT-logic to an array of topics building upon a foundation of well-read knowledge seeking its equal. As Kantrow (1980) put it: "One can learn more—and more deeply—from watching him think than from studying the content of his thought" (p. 76). Well I have been watching, and for me, what makes "watching Drucker think" so extraordinary is him applying his "unwavering CT-formula":

$$\frac{\sum_{\text{morals \& ethics}}^{\text{faith}}(\text{human existence in tension})}{(\text{normative assumptions} \times \text{positive analysis})}$$



$$\frac{\text{values (core topics)}}{(\text{epistemology})}$$

Figure 1: Drucker's CT-Formula; Source: Own illustration

Drucker's core topic(s)

Considering that Drucker's bibliography amounts to 41 books and several hundred articles, nearly all of which focus on organizations, society and management, it might come as a surprise that Drucker himself said: "[M]anagement was neither my first nor has it been my foremost concern" (Drucker, 2003). When asked about his most significant work, Drucker replied:

"I knew at once, in those far-back days of 1928, that [...] my work has been totally in society – except for this essay on Kierkegaard." (Drucker, 1993a, p. 425)

In “the unfashionable Kierkegaard” (1949), Drucker elaborates on 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s view on human’s existence in tension between an individual existence in eternity and a societal existence in time. Existence in society refers to one’s life on earth working, contributing to society’s progress. Existence as an individual on the other hand refers to one’s eternal soul in the face of God and unbound from life on earth.

Impressive to Drucker was Kierkegaard’s focus: While philosophers of the enlightenment-movement such as Rousseau asked: “How is life in society possible?” Kierkegaard took a step back and asked: “How is human existence possible?”. He was aware of the problems that would arise from only focusing on human existence in society, as it is limited by death. Dying without having found meaningfulness in eternity causes immeasurable despair. Having experienced one world war and watching Nazism rise in Germany, Drucker identified an additional cause for Totalitarian success to Arendt’s: Post-Enlightenment optimism. Enlightenment operated under the assumption, that by pure reason and focus on existence in society, humankind could achieve perfection autonomously. Focusing solely on existence in society amplifies despair and fear of death. By devaluating life itself, Totalitarianism succeeds by alleviating pain and making death bearable. “How to make life bearable?” became central to Drucker. By stating his work “*has been totally in society – except for this essay*”, Drucker is saying: *All my work was to contribute to humankind’s development but in this essay on Kierkegaard, I achieved self-actualization of my innermost and eternal soul.*

Yet the tragedy of humanity’s existence in tension also exists within societal existence in the tension between continuity and change (Drucker, 2002, p. 56). Drucker concludes that change in itself is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong. The only meaningful constant in society worth conserving is the higher order structure ensuring bearable dualities of human existence.

But how did Drucker end up as possibly *the* father of modern management? The decisive link between human existence and a focus on organizations is Max Weber, whom Drucker described as one of “only two pure scholars” (Drucker, 1979, p. 475). Accordingly, Protestantism allows Christians economic success and fulfilment of both their existences with God and in society. Drucker identified organizations as the “main stage [...] [for work in society and therefore] personal freedom and [...] assumption of responsibility through self-control” (Kantrow, 1980, p. 81). While management might not have been his foremost concern, Drucker also foresaw society collapsing should organizations fail with “nothing stand[ing]

between any of us and the forces of chaos and terror” (Kantrow, 1980, p. 81). Management becomes a social function directly aimed at making human existence in life bearable.

Drucker’s values

Drucker embedded his lifelong search for a bearable society (Drucker, 1993b, p. 99) deeply into an all-permeating value-driven framework (Linkletter & Maciarelo, 2009; Starbuck, 2009). He sees social sciences as a “moral science”, not excluding values as noise or premature theory (Meynhardt, 2010). “Only Christian man can make the modern world rational and sensible and can endure its reality” (Drucker, 1942, pp. 90–91). Only in God can the tension between existences in eternity and time be solved, can conservation and change become one. Following Dostoevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor” (1990), freedom can only be achieved through individual responsibility – which to Drucker is bestowed on humanity by awareness of being created in God’s likeness.

But why does Drucker explicitly view Christianity as the *only* possible framework for society? As Drucker pointed out in his essay on Kierkegaard: “to establish man-made ethical absolutes must end in the complete denial of the possibility of a truly ethical position. This way there is no escape from despair” (Drucker, 1949, p. 6). Accordingly one of the main functions of accepting a higher order being as humanity’s guide is to ensure stability and universality of the ethical set of values imposed by this God as it is not upon any human to question them. Moral-philosophy seems doomed to remain stuck between opposing positions represented by equals.

This still does not establish *Christian* primacy. Only human need to be guided by a greater force is established. I would also argue, that both religion and ethics are man-made. To me, the difference mainly lies in the respective narrative implementing a higher being as both “legislative” and “executive” institutions or placing these in humanity. Later in life, Drucker explicitly acknowledged both the existence and legitimacy of other religious orientations and value-based frameworks as to compete and interact in a global market, one had to find common ground (Drucker, 1993b). In the end, he still referred to himself as a “conservative Christian anarchist” (Drucker, 2004, p. 227).

Drucker’s epistemology

The undeniable pull of Drucker's work, as I experience it, originates in the beautiful "simplicity" of his logic and use of language. All who come into contact with his work cannot help gravitating relentlessly towards his process of thought. For me, this pull stems from two trade-mark characteristics: the nature of an idea and of his epistemology.

An idea, as understood by Drucker, consists of context and its inner logic (Kantrow, 1980, p. 78). The context places it firmly in time, determining both its vocabulary and underlying assumptions. The inner logic ensures an idea's longevity and persuasive prowess. An idea integrates relational and generalizable aspects. This duality directly translates into Drucker's argumentative style. He usually opens with a real-world example to be boiled down to its essential aspects. These aspects are checked for their internal logic and finally elevated into the realm of generalizability. If the example's inner logic holds, the reader is left with a precise take-away message counting in limitations to its generalizability.

Drucker's mind at work is nowhere as impressively clear to me as in his dissertation (Drucker, 1932). Here, he introduces his epistemological base: Empirical conclusions only hold truth for sensual experiences. Only logic and definition hold truth for all abstract constructs, as they exist primarily as thought put into word aiming at eliciting the same thought in someone else. This not only underscores the significance of honing one's logic reasoning, but also brings to mind the importance of active and conscious use of language (Paschek, 2008). I deeply identify with both these messages.

Why aim to walk in Drucker's steps and still choose my own path?

Writing this essay, I realize that every person applies their individual formula. We all have a core topic that we are deeply invested in. We all are shaped by values colouring our views on certain topics. We all have a system of constructing our own truths. What Drucker provides is a transparent and uncompromising application of his formula. Understanding his topics, values and epistemology is paramount to me for grasping the depth of his work. When Drucker says about an effective decision, that the "executive has to start out with what is "right"" (Drucker, 1967, p. 9), the full gravity only becomes graspable after applying his formula. Only then becomes the greater meaning in Drucker's normative postulations of "right" and "wrong" apparent. For me, being aware of his formula helps both in applying mine and reflecting on my own biases. It helps me asking what I actually can be certain of in complex situations; it helps me to realign my actions with my values. This does not mean, that I need to be solely

invested in human existence on earth – which I still am. It does not mean that I need to adopt a firm Christian belief – which I actually do not. In the end Drucker shows me how rewarding the application of a thought process stripped of all unnecessities can be. To that extent I will always try to walk in his steps, applying my own formula retaining a critical-thinking view of the world – in all of critical thinking's definitions.

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