

## The Thinker and The Poet: Understanding Drucker's Insights into Critical Thinking

It is midday in the middle of June, and a bright Parisian sun beats down on the hordes of tourists thronging the Rodin Museum, melting many an ice-cream sorbet in its wake. As a gentle breeze blows by, art aficionados and honeymooners alike breathe a sigh of relief, echoing it. The scene is that of a complex dynamic system, of chaotic movement in response to some or any stimuli that should touch it. But one figure remains stolid, immutable, fixed in contemplative focus: It is *The Thinker*, Rodin's giant bronze sculpture of a man sitting upon his stone pedestal in the middle of the courtyard, deep in thought, oblivious in his own formidable magnificence to the many millions that have visited him each year for centuries, only to watch him think. Now a near-universal modern-day symbol for philosophy, learning, and knowledge itself, *The Thinker's* heroic musculature, carved masterfully into his back by Rodin, belies the artist's deep respect for men—human beings—of the mind.

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The sheet music flutters, antsy under the chuck-chuck of the fan. The piano glistens in the light of the proverbial midnight oil. And the little black notes of the Moonlight Sonata stare back at me—intrepid, daring me to sully their melody.

My mind is fixated on just one question: What optimal combination of the three piano pedals makes a critical passage of Beethoven's legendary sonata sing? For centuries, established pianists and an assortment of semi-reliable internet bloggers have contemplated the subject. But I must discover the truth for myself.

The stage is set for the "experiment": I press record, wait for the bleep of my phone, and create multiple "samples," exploring various pedal permutations: just one, one followed by two, one and three simultaneously. I have a "hypothesis" and proceed to examine the data: I play back the samples, evaluating each along multiple acoustic parameters, striving to listen through Beethoven's deaf but infallible ears. Many of the points identified in my "literature review" are corroborated, and to my delight, novel insights also emerge, further enriching the experience. With that, my musical "research" comes to a temporary close, while more tantalizing questions eagerly await.

Now, perhaps this description feels like overkill: Is it really necessary, after all, to spend so much time assessing options and arriving at a resolution that is still not guaranteed to ensure perfect success? What about a "short-cut" instead? Besides the age-old wisdom that there are truly no worthwhile short-cuts in life, Peter Drucker writes in his essay on "The Effective Decision," that effective leaders are "not overly impressed by speed in decision making... [and instead] want impact rather than technique. And they want to be sound rather than clever."<sup>1</sup> Throughout the rest of this seminal work that has inspired generations of leaders in business and society, Drucker provides numerous examples of how a well-considered decision-making process is crucial to isolating the root cause of a challenge and identifying the core aims of a decision, and is consequently essential to arriving at the most reliable, fruitful conclusions for the ideal action-based response to any situation.

And for me, personally, research, and its fundamental twin, critical thinking—considering all possibilities and options objectively based on sound evidence—constitute my way of life. It is how I make decisions, tackle challenges, solve problems—how I do something and everything—from formal academic endeavours to casual musical investigations. This is my vision and hope for critical thinking among tomorrow’s leaders. But it certainly was not always so.

For me, this intellectual journey began just as so many individuals’ transformative experiences begin: during my formative years, at school in India. In fact, I still clearly remember that fateful English exam day in the tenth grade—my ink flowing without contemplative pause, reciting canned character sketches, formulaic debate scripts, and opinions that I wasn’t sure I even agreed with, straight from memory onto the neatly ruled lines that my teachers would grade according to the examination board’s pre-scripted “answer sheets,” which rarely left room for much original thought. Ace these exams as I might, they left me disillusioned with an education system that had its merits—and for which I will always be grateful as a formative part of my upbringing—but that evidently also suffered glaring flaws.

What was missing? What was the remedy? These questions permeated the air like a discordant chord, leaving me anxious for resolution. I could not quite put a finger on it until I received a transformative intellectual shock, thousands of miles away, at a summer research program for high school students from all around the world. There, I was exposed to a new paradigm of education—one that emphasized not only the consumption of knowledge, but also its systematized production: the research method. Admittedly, adapting to the new system was not without its share of struggle and self-doubt, as creation, whether of truth or beauty, is the apex of skill. But in the aftermath, having triumphantly submitted my first real research paper, that struggle paled in the glow of the treasure. I had metamorphosed from a willing sponge for any barrage of information, to a critically-thinking filter attempting to contribute valuably to the academic canon.

Once these ideas of research and critical thinking had pleasantly invaded every aspect of my life, I began to see them in action as crucial not only for individual intellectual growth, but also for the evolution of societies and civilizations. Suddenly, I was privy to the processes that could question the shackles of blind tradition; suddenly, I realized the humanitarian perils of languishing in pre-existing knowledge, and wanted to administer the antidote. Research and critical thinking—the twin arts of renewing knowledge and leveraging it to lead society—have been the key to human progress.

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It was soon after my stint with Western education, too, that I visited Paris, and Rodin’s inimitable sculpture.

But *The Thinker* raises as many questions as it hints at answers for the most fundamental questions that we face today and have always faced: What does it mean to be human, to be an excellent human, or to be a leader? How might we do—*The Thinker* presumably

contemplates—what is right, or just, or ideal, or prudent, or all of those? Moreover, we might even scoff at the idea that *The Thinker* ought to be any sort of role model: Surely we must not just sit—albeit in careful, considered pondering about the heaviest issues of our times—for centuries, without taking any sort of impactful action, arriving at solutions only after the problems that haunt us become obsolete themselves? And finally, what shall we make of the fact that Rodin himself initially named his sculpture *The Poet* (in French) rather than *The Thinker*: How might we balance, choose between or reconcile the logical, objective, data-driven mental processes that we have come to understand as “thinking” with the subjective, emotional and often intuitive process that writing poetry can involve? Are these processes polar opposites or could we possibly strike a happy medium that allows us to meet our personal goals, excel at our arts, crafts and skills, lead organizations, institutions and businesses to their highest potential, and even engender positive social impact?

To begin to answer these questions, let us look for guidance to our mentor Drucker again. For one, in relation to our concern about being planning or thinking-oriented rather than action-oriented, he writes, “Unless a decision has degenerated into work, it is not a decision; it is at best a good intention.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, while Drucker remains a strong proponent of comprehensive, well-thought-out decision-making, he explains that it is futile if we do not put the ideas we produce into action: It is not so much that action is “lesser” than thinking, but that contemplation and action must go hand in hand to generate positive outcomes.

Finally, in a world where polarization across nations and communities only exacerbates the innumerable urgent challenges we face today as a global species—from global warming and climate change to hunger, poverty and discrimination, where social media, rumour and an overabundance of information is all too likely to spread dangerous misinformation, where our “objective,” rational selves and our “subjective,” emotional selves are more at odds than ever, the humanity which they together form perhaps faces its greatest historical test. And this is particularly true for the young leaders of tomorrow who are ultimately most deeply mired in these conversations and socio-political forces, and who will one day inherit the full brunt of these challenges.

Remembering that Drucker was above all a proponent of “human”-centred management, his advice yet again serves as invaluable guidance, inspiration and comfort. For one, his step-by-step method of decision making reminds us to think carefully before we are swayed by the next biased, click-bait headline or even our own biases and prejudices, and to try to be impactful and effective above all. But perhaps most profoundly, Drucker’s explanation of how to classify problems—along the axis of “generic” to “exceptional”—reminds us that most of the challenges we face today or ever are shared ones, which more than one of us may have experienced in our lifetimes and communities, and for which we can look to others if not for a resolution then at least for collaboration and inspiration.

Both *The Thinker* and *The Poet* are solitary, highly individualistic figures. Perhaps what Drucker teaches us above all, is that true critical thinking is in knowing how to balance our individual powers of judgment, tailored to the specific circumstances of our times and situations, with the collective lessons of history—with fact, even if it comes from memory, and with experienced intuition, which comes from evolution. In that sense, critical thinking is

about knowing how, in the absence of data, in challenging moments of competing priorities and difficult trade-offs, we might use our logical, objective, rationality to understand situations and possible responses, and also use our innovative capabilities, creativity and empathetic humanity to ultimately take decisions that benefit us all. As paradigms shift and the world becomes more polarized, we must remember we have more in common than not, and that we can leverage our shared humanity and human history toward meaningful progress.

<sup>1</sup> Drucker, Peter. "The Effective Decision," *The Harvard Business Review*, January 1967. Accessed: <https://hbr.org/1967/01/the-effective-decision>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.