

CRITICAL THINKING AS THE ABODE OF HUMAN DIGNITY

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Abstract

Human dignity is often understood as the intrinsic worth that defines and distinguishes human beings. Yet, this dignity is not merely a natural endowment but is sustained and expressed through the capacity for critical thinking. This paper argues that critical thinking provides the foundation for human dignity by enabling individuals to question assumptions, resist manipulation, and make reasoned choices that affirm their autonomy and moral worth. Adopting the method of library research in a textual investigation, through an examination of philosophical perspectives on rationality, freedom, and ethics, the paper explores how critical thinking safeguards human dignity against dehumanising forces such as dogmatism, oppression, and blind conformity. Furthermore, it emphasises the role of critical reasoning in fostering dialogue, justice, and respect in human relations. The paper concludes that to cultivate critical thinking is to protect the very essence of human dignity, affirming the human person as both a rational and moral agent.

Introduction

The two things that mark the human being out from any other being are thought and human dignity. According to Buccola (2015), these are the two things which the human being bears and no other creature bears them at all or in equal degree. These two things are so core to the human person that they could be regarded as the foundation of the human spirit. Human dignity is closely tied to the capacity for rational thought and reflection, and critical thinking plays a central role in nurturing and expressing this capacity. Critical thinking, on the other hand, is often regarded as the abode of human dignity because it empowers individuals to engage with information, ideas, and situations in a thoughtful and discerning manner. Critical thinking encourages individuals to question, analyze, and evaluate information independently. It fosters autonomy by enabling people to make informed decisions based on their own reasoning rather than relying solely on external influences. This autonomy is intrinsic to human dignity as it acknowledges and respects individuals as rational beings capable of self-determination *Stanlick and Strawser (2015)*. Critical thinking involves considering alternative perspectives, understanding different viewpoints, and recognizing the complexity of issues. By engaging in respectful and open dialogue, individuals can appreciate the diversity of human thought and experience. This fosters a sense of respect for others' perspectives, promoting a dignified interaction where people acknowledge the inherent value of each person's reasoning and beliefs.

According to *Stanlick and Strawser (2015: p.6)* Critical thinking is closely linked to ethical reasoning. It enables individuals to assess the ethical implications of their actions and decisions. Upholding human dignity often requires making choices that align with moral principles and respect for the well-being of others. Critical thinking serves as a guide in navigating ethical dilemmas and making choices that reflect a commitment to human dignity. Human dignity is not only about individual autonomy but also about contributing positively to society. Critical thinking facilitates problem-solving and innovation by encouraging individuals to approach challenges with creativity and resourcefulness. Through critical analysis and innovative thinking, individuals can actively contribute to the betterment of their communities and the world at large, promoting the common good and human flourishing. Critical thinking is a dynamic process that involves continuous learning and adaptation. Embracing a mindset of intellectual curiosity and openness to new ideas is integral to human dignity. It reflects a commitment to personal and intellectual growth, acknowledging that individuals have the capacity to evolve and expand their understanding throughout their lives (*Walters, 1994*). Critical thinking could be said to be the abode of human dignity because it not only empowers individuals to think independently and make informed decisions but also encourages respect for others, ethical decision-making, problem-solving, and continuous learning. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that, as drawn from the thoughts of Ejiogu Amaku that, because human beings are inherently rational and capable of engaging with the world in a thoughtful and dignified manner, critical thinking could be said to be the abode of human dignity.

The Human being and His Dignity

The Human being is described as a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, which is the only extant species of the genus *Homo* (*Spamer, 1999*). Humans are said to be characterized by their advanced cognitive abilities, including self-awareness, language, and complex problem-solving skills. Physiologically speaking, humans are bipedal mammals with an erect posture; the brain is highly developed, allowing for advanced cognitive functions; and also, humans have opposable thumbs, which enable fine motor skills. Sociologically, humans are social beings

and often form complex societies. Culture plays a significant role in human societies, encompassing language, customs, art, music, and more. Humans have the ability to transmit knowledge and information across generations. Cognitively, humans have a high level of intelligence, with the ability to think abstractly and solve complex problems. Language is a crucial aspect of human cognition, enabling communication and the transmission of knowledge. Humans experience a wide range of emotions, including joy, sadness, fear, and anger. The capacity for empathy and understanding contributes to complex social relationships (Spamer, 1999). Humans have the ability to create and use tools, which has been a key factor in their ability to adapt to different environments. Technological advancements have played a significant role in shaping human societies and lifestyles.

While there is a common biological framework for humans, there is also considerable diversity in terms of physical characteristics, cultural practices, and belief systems. According to Christopher and Kenneth (2016), humans are highly adaptable to different environments, which has contributed to their widespread distribution across the globe. Humans have a sense of morality and ethics, influencing their behavior and decision-making. Concepts of right and wrong, justice, and fairness are integral to human societies. Humans' sense of morality is considered an inherent disposition to protect human dignity. Human dignity is the quality that reflects the intrinsic value and worth of every individual simply because they are human. According to Kateb (2011), human dignity emphasizes the idea that each person deserves respect and ethical treatment, irrespective of their background, abilities, or circumstances. The notion of human dignity is foundational in various ethical, philosophical, and legal frameworks. Thus, discussions about human dignity often involve ethical and moral considerations. This includes the ethical treatment of individuals, the recognition of their rights, and the promotion of justice and fairness

Human dignity asserts that every person has inherent worth, not contingent on external factors such as wealth, social status, or achievements. According to Onwuatuegwu and Anaelom (2020), the concept of human dignity is considered universal, applying to all individuals regardless of race, gender, religion, nationality, or any other characteristic. It emphasizes equality among all humans. Human dignity implies that certain rights and aspects of individuals are inviolable and should be protected. This includes protection from torture, inhumane treatment, and other forms of abuse. Human dignity recognizes the importance of individual autonomy and agency. It supports the idea that individuals have the right to make choices about their own lives and that their decisions should be respected. Buchanan (2010) writes that human dignity is often enshrined in legal documents and international declarations. Many legal systems recognize the fundamental rights and freedoms that are based on the principle of human dignity. The concept of human dignity is closely tied to social justice. It calls for the elimination of discrimination, poverty, and other social inequalities to ensure that every individual can lead a life of dignity. Also, human dignity is closely linked to the concept of human rights. The idea is that recognizing and upholding the dignity of individuals is essential for the protection of their fundamental human rights.

Richardson and Cragg (2010) state that the notion of human dignity is closely intertwined with the nature of being human. Human dignity asserts that every individual possesses an intrinsic value and worth simply because they are human. Human dignity suggests that each person has inherent value and worth by virtue of being human. This value is not contingent on external factors such as achievements, abilities, or social status. Human beings are seen as autonomous individuals with the capacity for rational thought and decision-making. Rosen (2012) states that dignity acknowledges and respects the autonomy and agency of individuals, recognizing their right to make choices about their own lives. Dignity emphasizes the uniqueness of each human being. It calls for respect for individual differences, recognizing that diversity is an inherent aspect of the human experience. Human dignity is often associated with the recognition of certain inviolable rights for individuals. These rights include the right to life, freedom from torture, and protection from degrading treatment. Treating individuals with dignity involves ethical considerations. It calls for actions and behaviors that respect the moral worth of each person and uphold their rights and well-being.

The concept of human dignity is particularly poignant in adverse circumstances. Even in the face of challenges, individuals are deserving of respect and fair treatment, emphasizing their resilience and strength (Richardson and Cragg, 2010). The recognition of human dignity is foundational to the formulation and protection of human rights. Human rights frameworks are often built upon the principle that every person is entitled to a life of dignity. Acknowledging human dignity implies a responsibility toward others. It involves fostering environments and societies that promote the well-being and dignity of all individuals. Above all, the notion of human dignity is tied to the notion of the true essence of the human being. For many, that which separates the human being from all other animals, or even from all other things that there are is critical thought. Critical thinking could be said to be the true essence of man.

Critical Thinking as the Essence of Man

Critical thinking could be said to be the fundamental and defining characteristic of human beings. It represents the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information, as well as to engage in reasoned and reflective thought. *Walters (1994) states that critical thinking involves the ability to reason logically and analyze information objectively. Humans have a capacity for abstract thought, allowing them to process complex ideas and draw conclusions based on evidence and reasoning. Humans are natural problem solvers. Critical thinking enables individuals to identify, analyze, and solve problems effectively by evaluating different options and making informed decisions. Critical thinking involves introspection and self-awareness. Humans can reflect on their own thoughts, beliefs, and actions, questioning assumptions and considering alternative perspectives. Critical thinking is essential for learning and adaptation. Omenukor (2018) avers that critical thinking allows individuals to acquire new knowledge, evaluate its relevance, and apply it to different situations, fostering intellectual growth and adaptability. The essence of critical thinking lies in the drive for continuous improvement. Humans have the capacity to reflect on their experiences, learn from mistakes, and strive for personal and collective growth.*

Christopher and Kenneth (2016) write that humans are capable of expressing and understanding complex ideas through language. Critical thinking enhances effective communication skills, enabling individuals to articulate their thoughts clearly and engage in meaningful dialogue. Critical thinking is closely tied to ethical reasoning. It enables individuals to consider the moral implications of their decisions, weigh ethical dilemmas, and make choices that align with principles of fairness and justice. Humans possess a natural curiosity and a desire to explore the world. Critical thinking encourages inquiry, pushing individuals to ask questions, seek information, and pursue a deeper understanding of the world around them. Omenukor (2018) maintains that critical thinking is not limited to analytical skills; it also plays a role in creative thinking. Humans can use critical thinking to generate new ideas, think innovatively, and solve problems in novel ways. Critical thinkers are often open-minded and willing to consider alternative viewpoints. This intellectual flexibility allows humans to engage in constructive debates, learn from diverse perspectives, and adapt their beliefs based on new information.

Walters (1994) maintains that critical thinking is closely tied to problem solving because they involve cognitive processes that involve the ability to analyze, evaluate, and respond effectively to challenges and questions. While they are distinct skills, they often work together, with critical thinking providing the foundation for effective problem-solving. Critical thinking in being the process of actively and systematically analyzing and evaluating information or arguments, considering their validity and relevance, beings by breaking down information into its components to understand its structure and meaning. It involves assessing the credibility, accuracy, and reliability of information and arguments; drawing logical conclusions based on available evidence; and Recognizing issues or challenges and framing them in a clear and specific manner. Thus, critical thinking provides the intellectual tools necessary for identifying and understanding problems, as well as for assessing potential solutions. Problem solving involves finding solutions to difficult or complex issues. It involves identifying a problem, generating possible solutions, and choosing the best course of action. Recognizing and defining the nature of a problem or challenge; developing multiple possible solutions or approaches; evaluating and selecting the most appropriate solution based on criteria and constraints; and putting the chosen solution into action and monitoring its effectiveness (Walters, 1994). Effective problem solving typically involves the application of critical thinking skills to analyze information, evaluate options, and make informed decisions. Critical thinking helps in identifying and framing problems accurately, which is crucial for effective problem-solving outcomes. Problem solving, in turn, provides a practical context for applying critical thinking skills, allowing individuals to test the validity of their analyses and decisions.

Critical thinking and ethical decision-making are interconnected processes that involve the thoughtful analysis of information, consideration of moral principles, and the application of reasoning skills to arrive at morally sound choices. Critical thinking involves systematically analyzing information, assessing its credibility, relevance, and accuracy. Ethical decision-making requires a careful examination of the information available, considering its ethical implications and potential consequences (Richardson and Cragg, 2010). Critical thinkers are skilled at recognizing and framing problems. In ethical decision-making, this includes identifying situations with ethical dimensions or dilemmas. The first step in ethical decision-making is often recognizing that a decision involves ethical considerations and understanding the ethical issues at play. Considering diverse ethical perspectives is crucial for making well-informed and fair decisions that take into account the interests and values of various stakeholders. Ethical decision-making involves evaluating the potential impact of decisions on individuals, communities, and society at large. Ethical decision-making involves applying ethical principles and values to guide choices. Common ethical principles include justice, fairness, autonomy, and beneficence. Ethical dilemmas often involve conflicting values or principles. Critical thinking skills are essential for weighing these conflicts and determining the best ethical course of action. Critical thinking is foundational to ethical decision-making (Richardson and Cragg, 2010). The ability to analyze information, consider diverse perspectives, evaluate

consequences, and apply ethical principles are all integral components of both processes. Individuals who engage in ethical decision-making benefit from a strong foundation in critical thinking skills, ensuring that their choices are well-reasoned and ethically sound.

Buccola, (2015) writes that critical thinking is basically the true essence of man in that critical thinking is the distinguishing characteristic of human beings that sets them apart from other animals. While animals exhibit various forms of intelligence, problem-solving, and decision-making, the depth and complexity of critical thinking appear to be unique to humans. Critical thinking involves the ability to engage in complex reasoning and abstract thought. Humans can analyze information, make connections, and draw conclusions at a level of sophistication not observed in other animals. Humans have the capacity for reflective thinking, which involves introspection, self-awareness, and the ability to evaluate one's own thoughts and beliefs. This metacognitive aspect of critical thinking is not commonly observed in animals. Critical thinking often involves the use of language to express ideas, ask questions, and engage in dialogue. While some animals exhibit forms of communication, the complexity and flexibility of human language and symbolic communication set humans apart.

Zuckert (2007) observes that humans engage in intricate problem-solving and planning activities that go beyond basic survival instincts. Critical thinking allows individuals to strategize, consider multiple solutions, and make informed decisions based on evaluation and analysis. Critical thinking involves conceptual thinking, which allows humans to form abstract concepts and categories. This capacity for abstract thought is less evident in the cognitive processes of other animals. Critical thinking enables individuals to predict and anticipate consequences of actions. While some animals exhibit a degree of foresight, the depth of consideration for future outcomes seen in human critical thinking is more advanced. Critical thinking is closely linked to the ability to transmit and build upon knowledge culturally. Humans pass down information, beliefs, and critical thinking skills through language, education, and cultural practices.

Humans not only recognize problems in their environment but can also identify complex and abstract problems that may not have immediate or obvious solutions (*Stanlick and Strawser (2015)*). This ability to recognize and frame intricate problems is a hallmark of critical thinking. Critical thinking often involves ethical decision-making. Humans consider moral principles, values, and the consequences of their actions in ways that extend beyond instinctual behaviors observed in animals. As humans engage in continuous learning and adaptation, demonstrating the ability to modify behaviors, beliefs, and actions based on new information, critical thinking is essential for this adaptive capacity. While animals demonstrate remarkable intelligence, problem-solving abilities, and communication skills, critical thinking represents a unique and advanced cognitive skill that appears to be a defining feature of human cognition. It involves a combination of reasoning, reflection, and complex cognitive processes that contribute to the depth and breadth of human intellectual capabilities. Critical thinking is an integral part of what defines human beings. It is a cognitive skill that enables individuals to navigate the complexities of the world, make informed decisions, and contribute to intellectual, social, and ethical advancements

Critical Thinking and Human dignity

Critical thinking and human dignity are interconnected as both concepts play significant roles in defining who the human being is. Critical thinking encourages individuals to consider and respect diverse perspectives. This inclusivity aligns with the principle of human dignity, acknowledging the inherent worth and value of each individual's unique thoughts, experiences, and perspectives. According to Benjafield (2010), critical thinking emphasizes the importance of individual autonomy and agency, that is, the ability to think independently and make informed decisions. Respecting and promoting these qualities align with the recognition of human dignity, as it acknowledges the right of individuals to shape their own lives. Critical thinking is integral to ethical decision-making, and ethical considerations are often tied to principles of human dignity. When individuals engage in critical thinking to weigh ethical implications, they are also upholding the dignity of those affected by their decisions. Critical thinking helps individuals challenge stereotypes, biases, and discriminatory beliefs. By actively engaging in critical analysis, people can contribute to a more just and equitable society, respecting the inherent dignity of all individuals, regardless of their background or characteristics.

For Buchanan (2010), critical thinking is a tool for promoting social justice and fairness. By critically evaluating societal structures and advocating for change when necessary, individuals contribute to creating environments that uphold human dignity for all. Critical thinking empowers individuals to analyze information, identify misinformation, and resist manipulation. This protection from manipulation is crucial for preserving the autonomy and dignity of individuals who might otherwise be influenced against their own interests. Critical thinking encourages individuals to examine and challenge systemic injustices. Addressing these issues is a crucial step in promoting human dignity, ensuring that all individuals have equal access to rights, resources, and opportunities. Critical thinking involves open-mindedness and a willingness to engage in constructive dialogue. This approach,

according to Onwuatuegwu and Anaelom (2020), fosters an environment where diverse perspectives are heard, contributing to a culture that values and respects the dignity of every individual. Both critical thinking and human dignity support the idea of continuous learning and personal growth. Engaging in critical thinking allows individuals to evolve their perspectives, contributing to their own intellectual development and, in turn, respecting the dignity of others on similar journeys.

Critical thinking and human dignity are intertwined in their commitment to respecting individual autonomy, promoting ethical decision-making, challenging injustices, and creating a society that values the worth of every human being. The cultivation of critical thinking skills contributes to a culture that upholds and enhances human dignity. This may be why the revered scholar, Ejiogu Ethelbert Amaku, in the main thrust of his scholarly work dealt mainly with the two issues of critical thinking and human dignity.

Amaku (2017) avers that critical thinking is the most essential of all of human faculties not just because it is that which distinguishes humans from brutes, but also because it is the source of morality. Copi (1978) agrees when he states that the most valuable thing a student can learn in college is how to think, that is, how to acquire and process new knowledge. Amaku (2017) sees critical thinking as not purely judgmental, but rather, a positive attitude towards confronting an issue, discerning its nature and the exact response it requires. Critical thinking is the human being's greatest tool for facing reality and confronting situations. It calls for a careful judgement regarding a situation in order to clear the negative and positive dimensions and to decide on the best course of action.

Considering that critical thinking is tied to man's ability to confront reality, it follows that critical thinking is also fundamental to man. Woods (2014) agrees when stating that critical thinking is the process of using reason to discern what is true and what is false. Amaku (2017) argues that although humans are moral beings, it is not always easy to determine what is right and what is wrong on the face value, hence critical thinking is indispensable for moral development. In the face of the massacre of humans all over the world in the show of power and superiority, there is a serious need for critical thinking in determining the moral structure of modern scientific advancements in order to preserve human dignity. Citing Aristotle who avers that, with reason, man is the best of all animals, but without reason, is the worst of all creatures, Amaku (2017) maintains that some political pathologies of today are a result of the lack of critical thinking and of sound knowledge of human dignity. Amaku continues that the utter disrespect of human life in contemporary society as is evident in atrocities such as racism, human rights abuses, thingification of the human person, kidnapping, human trafficking and slavery, is an indication of a world bereft of critical thinking and moral philosophy.

Conclusion

Critical thinking can indeed be viewed as a crucial and foundational aspect of human dignity. Human dignity is often associated with the inherent value and worth of each individual, emphasising the idea that every person deserves to be treated with respect and consideration. Critical thinking plays a significant role in upholding and enhancing human dignity in several ways. Critical thinking empowers individuals to think independently and make informed decisions. It allows people to analyze information, evaluate different perspectives, and form their own opinions. This autonomy is essential for human dignity as it acknowledges the capability of individuals to engage in thoughtful and rational decision-making. Critical thinking involves the ability to consider diverse perspectives and ideas. According to Amaku (2017), when individuals engage in critical thinking, they are more likely to appreciate and respect the diversity of thoughts, cultures, and experiences. This promotes an inclusive environment that recognizes and values the uniqueness of each person, contributing to the enhancement of human dignity. Critical thinking encourages individuals to consider ethical implications and consequences of their actions. Making decisions based on careful analysis and ethical considerations aligns with the principles of human dignity, as it reflects a commitment to values such as fairness, justice, and compassion. The ability to think critically is essential for effective problem-solving. When individuals approach challenges with a critical mindset, they are more likely to find creative and fair solutions. This problem-solving capacity contributes to a sense of agency and accomplishment, reinforcing the idea that individuals are capable of addressing complex issues, thereby upholding their dignity.

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