Mercenary Attitudes and Arguing Like Three-Year-Olds: The Insider’s Guide to Disruptive Well-being in the Neoliberal System

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Critical thinking has been enjoying a privileged position in the mission statement of many liberal arts colleges, Agnes Scott College included. By examining how it is measured in higher education, I will argue that Agnes Scott College’s operationalization of critical thinking actually mimics the exploitative neoliberal system, and therefore the college should focus on system-critical thinking instead of self-critical thinking, which would considerably augment students’ well-being. I will use Michael A. Bishop’s Network Theory of well-being to reveal exactly how system-critical thinking will improve not only the students’, but also workers’ well-being, while addressing potential objections. In the end, I will discuss two disruptive attitudes that can be derived from system-critical thinking: “mercenary attitudes” and “arguing like three-year-olds,” assessing both their advantages and the potential disadvantages as well as the system’s response to them. Rather than being specific in these last sections, I kept the subject of the discussion as the student/worker, since it is not only Agnes Scott College that mirrors the neoliberal system, but most schools and workplaces.

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ne of the most hallowed tenets of liberal arts education is critical thinking; it is hailed as the cure-all solution to all problems of our day and age. Supposedly, if all people were critical thinkers, we could live in some sort of utopia without social inequalities, environmental problems, wars, or famine. Critical thinking at Agnes Scott College is arguably the pinnacle of all thinking styles, seeing that other forms[[1]](#footnote-1) did not even get an honorable mention in any of the college’s handbooks. As such, this summit of a mental skill should be expected to contribute to the intellectual flourishing of students, or, more specifically, it should equip students to engage with the intellectual challenges of their times.

Despite all the polysyllabic words in the previous sentence, “should” remains the key word. When it comes to determining the rate of success the college had in improving its students’ lives through teaching critical thinking, the data is somewhat missing. As I will examine later, critical thinking has been operationalized[[2]](#footnote-2) in higher education in a way that shifts the focus to the individual, leaving the larger neoliberal system[[3]](#footnote-3) uninvestigated. In this paper, I will argue that Agnes Scott College does not adequately operationalize critical thinking by ignoring system-critical thinking, which would considerably augment students’ well-being while offering them a wider selection of options than what they otherwise have. I will discuss two main sets of objections to this thesis, one claiming that Agnes Scott College does actually encourage system-critical thinking and one questioning if such thinking would actually lead to any improvement on the student’s well-being. Finally, in response to this second objection, I will discuss two student/worker attitudes in line with system-critical thinking that could effectively promote well-being.

**Operationalizing Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is not as well-defined by Agnes Scott College as one might expect, and the closest definition of it can be found in the SUMMIT General Education Learning Objectives: “critically considering diverse sources of information” and “to probe fundamental questions of meaning and value” (*2015-2016 Catalog* 53) can be roughly equated to the 2014-15 non-SUMMIT number one objective, “think critically” (*2014-2015 Catalog* 51). However, it is unclear if the two half-objectives were even meant to define or operationalize critical thinking, and while certain disciplines have a more exact notion of what critical thinking means for them, the college overall has no stated measure of this skill.

Agnes Scott College is not the only place that seems to struggle with defining and operationalizing critical thinking; governments have also made efforts to operationalize this thinking style in education. The most common way of defining critical thinking is to equate it with student engagement, and in recent decades, the idea has spread to most liberal arts colleges in the world. This definition, as Zepke describes in his article on student engagement surveys in the U.S. and Australia, is problematic not only because it substitutes one murky term—critical thinking—for the even murkier “student engagement” or “participation,” but it also becomes a tool of the neoliberal politico-economic system to produce workers with market-applicable knowledge and not much else (*Zepke* 702). Empirical evidence[[4]](#footnote-4) at Agnes Scott College suggests that student engagement is not actually a measure of critical thinking; indeed, it is entirely possible to engage in discussions without ever furthering or reframing the ideas put forth. Even more importantly, does student engagement do anything at all for the students? In and of itself, it does not equip us with any skill, ability, or competence (not to mention critical thinking), yet from syllabi across the disciplines, it seems like it must be a reliable measure of *something* required of students.

**System-Critical Thinking**

This *something* is a largely ignored but rather ominous attitude that I will call system conformity in this paper. While the capitalist system has been criticized for requiring its workers to subjugate every other area of their lives to their job, the neoliberal system of our times asks us the same but with a smile on our face. System conformity is giving the system what it wants by prioritizing productivity over rest, play, or relationships, and doing this enthusiastically. It is the basic difference between an attendance grade and a participation grade; showing up is not enough anymore, the system requires both engagement *and* enthusiasm.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with participation as a general idea. Discussions in the classroom and at the workplace are valuable, and learning about others’ perspectives and thoughts is the basis of community building. But is participation used in this way, or is it yet another hoop we must jump through, now smiling and enthusiastic about hoops? There is a disconcerting disregard for mental illness, disinterest, or simply bad days when it comes to assessing participation. Realistically speaking, not every class, project, or job will be exciting, or come at a time of our lives when we can get excited about things like that. So, why are we asked to pretend otherwise?

These questions remain largely unaddressed inside the classroom and the workplace, and outside of these it is mostly written off as run-of-the-mill complaining. While Agnes Scott College is fairly good at encouraging self-critical thinking, i.e. propelling students to examine their personal beliefs, actions, and attitudes in order to have a more positive, de-stressed, or “healthy” mindset, system-critical thinking directed at the college itself is sorely lacking. In a learning environment where everyone is supposed to know better than to trust statistics or old dead white men, students are not encouraged to inquire about the motives and biases of their own college—including administration and faculty.

System-critical thinking, a concept that, at first, sounds only marginally clearer than critical thinking, is reflecting on the larger social institutions and structures from a denormalized perspective. This implies that system-critical thinking does require a foundation of self-critical thinking and the understanding that the values and beliefs one might have are not necessarily right, correct, or ‘normal,’ but I must emphasize that self-critical thinking by itself is only half of the picture. For the purposes of this essay, the only assumption I will make about any sort of critical thinking is that it has to allow the thinker to discover new options. For self-critical thinking, this mostly means new perspectives. For system-critical thinking, however, it consists of the recognition of anti- or exo-system options, i.e. alternatives not endorsed and normalized by the existing social structures. System-critical thinking, in this sense, is navigating the neoliberal education system while trying to understand as many potential options outside the system as possible, in order to make the best decisions. It is clear that the neoliberal system is only interested in individual well-being insofar as it facilitates and increases production, but I have yet to see a convincing argument that the point of our life is productivity. Well-being, on the other hand, is universally accepted as an essential good in life, and, indeed, an essential component of a good life. Since the neoliberal system clearly needs to sort out its priorities, it is time to look for options outside of the box.

**The Network Theory of Well-being**

If ‘critical thinking’ is a difficult term to define, what about ‘well-being,’ an emotion so coveted yet elusive that humanity has devoted considerable philosophical, artistic, and scientific effort to pin it down? For the purposes of this paper, I will use Michael A. Bishop’s Network Theory to operationalize the term in his book *The Good Life: Unifying the Philosophy and Psychology of Well-being*. As Bishop explains, our well-being depends on the robustness and extent of our positive causal networks (PCN), which can be strengthened or weakened by forces both internally and externally. A PCN consists of interacting nodes that bolster and support each other, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that churns out positive psychological states, states that the individual values, or states that the individual’s culture values.

According to Bishop, PCNs can be evaluated by their extent and robustness. The more extensive the PCN is (i.e. the more positive attitudes, accomplishments, and traits a person possesses as their ‘nodes,’) the stronger the PCN is, since it can both “quantitatively” provide more positive outcomes in the individual’s life, and losing a node would have a less significant effect on these outcomes. Robustness has to do with the resiliency of the PCNs; the harder it is to disrupt one’s PCN, the stronger that PCN is. Since all of the fundamental claims of the Network Theory are intuitive and somewhat commonsensical, I will use it to operationalize well-being and therefore examine the effects system-critical thinking has on student/worker well-being.

System-critical thinking in a positive causal network functions as a powerful promoter. According to the Network Theory, promoters are skills or traits that strengthen an existing PCN or promote the creation of new nodes in various environments (*Bishop* 94). System-critical thinking does this in two different ways. First, recognizing the boundaries and prevalent ideologies of the system one navigates means they can detach themselves from the system—system-critical thinking allows the thinker to differentiate between their personal wants and needs and what the neoliberal system desires them to want and need. This allows the thinker to build positive causal networks catering perfectly to their individual wants which they have control over, making the networks less vulnerable to outside forces. It also alleviates the tension between the goals one wants to pursue and the goals one is coerced to pursue, which usually do not line up, since the individual and the neoliberal system have fundamentally opposing interests: the individual wants to have a life outside work, the neoliberal system wants the individual’s life to be work.

Second, system-critical thinking also allows for a greater variety of lifestyle and ideological options than the system provides—a trait commonly praised as “thinking outside the box” when it solves the efficiency problems of the system and “deviant behavior” when it solves the individual’s issues with the system. System-critical thinking is applicable in virtually any setting to broaden the selection of choices one has. By providing an understanding of the implicit rules and regulations of society, this skill helps the thinker to navigate high-stake social situations that could greatly affect their well-being.

This is not to say that system-critical thinking and willingly participating in the system are incompatible. To imply this would conflict with one of the three main tenets of Network Theory that Bishop highlights early on in his explanation: well-being is a multiply realizable condition (*Bishop* 12). It is entirely possible that some people actually flourish in the environment that higher education institutions, such as Agnes Scott College, foster and that they would, in fact, voluntarily make the informed decision to participate in this productivity-focused education. However, this is besides the point of this paper. The issue I take with the Agnes Scott education here is that the college fails to recognize the severe effect neoliberalism has on how the institution views the intelligence and value of its students. By neglecting to encourage system-critical thinking, the college not only hinders intellectual growth and social innovation, but, more importantly, fails to equip its students with a skill that would improve their well-being immeasurably.

**Objections**

Of course, an objection could be made that the neoliberal education system is actually ethical and maybe even the best possible one we can have, but the morality and value of a productivity-oriented structure that preaches personal fulfillment is somewhat dubious. However, it is entirely possible to argue that the mere fact that papers like this can exist proves that this neoliberal system is not nearly as pervasive in higher education as authors, like Zepke, think. After all, Agnes Scott College must promote system-critical thinking if it is acceptable to write a sixteen-page meditation on the failings of the institution. But this objection assumes that by becoming a student of the college, all intellectual development and written ideas must be attributed to the education the college provides. It would disregard the wealth of ideologies, skills, and attitudes students bring with them or acquire from non-collegiate sources. Expecting people in their late teens or early twenties to be undeveloped thinkers is preposterous, not to mention that it would call into question the necessity of primary and secondary education.

Yet another objection stems from the proper understanding of students as ideologically oriented agents and at least somewhat developed thinkers even before their first day at Agnes Scott. If college students are already critical thinkers, the sinister “system” should not be able to tempt them into its neoliberal hell so easily, in which case the lack of system-critical thinking the college teaches would not be a problem. In claiming that it is a problem, the theory seemingly commits itself to accepting that the students’ critical thinking skills offer no protection from the system, which would lead back to the previous objection, meaning that any system-critical thinking must stem from the system itself.

But system-critical thinking, just like any other skill, is something that improves with practice. Much like being a proficient debater, talent plays a modest role in becoming a system-critical thinker, and even the most gifted students usually only possess about two decades’ worth of practice. Neoliberalism has been in place for longer, and the people propagating it have had more time to craft their defensive arguments and moral justifications. To expect students raised within the neoliberal system to unfailingly recognize its shortcomings is preposterous, even if the student is well-versed in system-critical thinking.

This, however, casts a shadow of doubt on system-critical thinking and its ability to lead to well-being. If the neoliberal system is so pervasive and ubiquitous, then how does recognizing the extent of its foulness help? If anything, it seems like it should paralyze any student, or, indeed, worker, to know that what they are up against is not a harsh boss or a bad company—but an entire system, designed to praise and value productivity above humanity, while preaching the opposite. However, it appears that students have limited options upon realizing this paradox. Likely, they are already thousands of dollars deep in student debt and at least a year or two into their Agnes Scott education. Transferring is an option, but system-critical thinking suggests that other colleges will be just like this one. Dropping out is also an option, but a pricey one—both financially and socially. These two options and the third one, just carrying on with the full understanding of the futility of the task, offer no foreseeable increase in well-being (indeed, they seem to diminish it greatly.) In fact, all options available for students seem to come with great misery.

There is a fourth option that looks slightly more promising: carrying on but disengaging from the system that requires engagement to a level where it could be called loyalty. Disengagement, however, comes with its own sort of misery. Finnish University students who were not associating their academic success with their well-being and a good life, i.e. disengaging from the productivity model of education, made researchers wonder in a series of dire-sounding questions whether this predicted a failing economy (*Mangeloja & Hirvonen* 37). Disengagement of students can lead to frantic steps from the administration, seeing that institutions are measured against each other in national surveys that equate engagement with high performance. This means that a college with low measured student engagement will not get the stamp of approval from the neoliberal system for churning out workers ready to enter the job market (*Zepke* 703). This, in turn, would brand the college as one that offers unmarketable knowledge, lowering its popularity among prospective students who are the source of profit for the institution. Clearly, colleges are compelled to do anything in their power to bolster student engagement, and the least they can do is to stigmatize complete disengagement[[5]](#footnote-5).

This objection appears to devastate my thesis, as it seems like system-critical thinking actually leads to the misery of students through forcing them into disengagement. However, there are at least two attitudes a student or a worker could have in line with system-critical thinking that will promote positive causal networks without having to bear the stigma of disengagement. It might seem intuitive to turn to disengagement and disinterest as a response to an overbearing system that demands engagement and enthusiasm, but expressions of engagement and enthusiasm can also be employed selectively in order to refrain from system conformity. In the following section, I will outline two attitudes that disruptively express either engagement or enthusiasm, but not both. These attitudes alleviate some of the systemic pressure on the student/worker, and thus are important enhancers and promoters of positive causal networks.

**Mercenary Attitudes**

The neoliberal system’s ideal student/worker is both engaged with what they do, aiming for perfection and enthusiastic about it, meaning they are available to work for longer or more demanding hours without complaints. This attitude is hailed as ambitious and commendable, and it serves the system perfectly. On the other hand, engagement without enthusiasm is ultimately frustrating to the system because it allows the student/worker to only do the bare minimum of what is required in order to avoid being penalized. Being interested *only* in grades seems to be just as threatening to neoliberal higher education as not caring at all; colleges do not spend millions of dollars and countless hours carefully designing a unique 24/7 experience for students to be interested only in getting their diploma—preferably pronto and *summa cum laude*.

This “mercenary attitude[[6]](#footnote-6)” might receive initial pushback in the form of ‘inspirational’ mini-speeches, but it is an ultimately rewarding experience for the student/worker. Removing compulsory enthusiasm from the repertory of one’s self-expression leaves resources to express enthusiasm about things one is actually interested in. Aggressively pursuing A’s or only doing work one is actually paid for simultaneously allows the student/worker to detach themselves from the ‘inspirational’ part of the neoliberal ideology and view the institution as the institution views them; a business partner to gain profit from. College becomes a business transaction instead of the compulsory “best years of one’s life” when one is forced to juggle academics, social life, extracurriculars, and probably a job or two. The workplace becomes just that, a place where one works, instead of a “family” and a place where one must make their passion their profession. Ultimately, the mercenary attitude is an effective guard against confusing work with recess.

This latter understanding seems to be a minor benefit, but in reality it is the most significant advantage of the attitude. The student/worker is constantly told to “follow their passion” and to do what they believe is the single most important thing to do on this Earth as their job. This conjures up mental images of people laughing at their workplace because they just love it so much, but in reality it probably means unpaid overtime. If I am so invested in my work that it is my greatest passion, should I really care about the clock? Shouldn’t I be happy to work some more, if only to finish this one project? Shouldn’t I *want* to skip lunch, sleep less, do more, since I understand how important my work is?

The mercenary attitude answers a resounding ‘no.’ Working for free is actually called volunteering, and people are not usually coerced into it. Even if the work is something they enjoy, a student/worker with a mercenary attitude will still be mindful of how much work they actually do, what compensation they get for that, and what is the proper place of their job in their lives. Since they are not enthusiastic or emotionally attached to it, a student/worker with a mercenary attitude is mostly immune to the cajoling or emotional blackmailing of their supervisors. If they treat us like machines that must churn out products, let us treat them like machines too, and demand our product—be that money or grades—for the effort we put in.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Arguing Like Three-Year-Olds**

Another effective attitude, enthusiasm without engagement, does not at all focus on grades. By making the college or workplace experience about self-entertainment, this attitude allows the student/worker to stay seemingly engaged through enthusiastic disruption, while immersing themselves in complete intellectual disengagement by ignoring some of the basic rules of student/worker behavior. Through refusing to comply with commonly understood and followed guidelines such as speaking eloquently, respecting the authority of the supervisor, or even just staying quiet, the student/worker denounces the importance of being professional—in other words, they denounce enthusiastic system conformity.

The “enthusiasm without engagement” attitude, of course, runs the risk of public ridiculing for having a style of self-expression that resembles that of a three-year-old child,[[8]](#footnote-8) which is the tradeoff for gaining a greater freedom of said self-expression. This childishness can manifest itself in many ways, depending on the environment, but the starting point is often something like the usage of inappropriate language (either too vulgar or too cutesy), speaking out of turn (without malice), dressing unprofessionally (wearing clashing colors, glitter, etc.), or decorating the office space with garish flamboyance. Being vulgar and childish soon starts to make people expect—and therefore allow—apparently sub-standard and disruptive behaviors that are not meant to be tolerated in a professional setting. Behaving in a childish way also comes with the benefit of being able to engage in and enjoy childish pleasures in these professional settings, such as passing notes, fooling around with a chair, and many more long-forgotten joys of primary and middle school.

This solution also highlights the issues with praising participation as an inherently good thing in the classroom. Professors would mostly agree that having a class clown produce constant comments is not exactly conducive to valuing enthusiastic productivity. It must be mentioned, however, that the three-year-old attitude, enthusiasm without engagement, receives a harsher blowback than the mercenary attitude. Since it is seen as childish, the student/worker adopting the attitude will also be treated as a child—mostly scolded, sometimes ignored. While the mercenary attitude can be misconstrued as cutthroat ambition that would fit the competitive neoliberal system, the three-year-old attitude is impossible to motivate and frustrating to debate with, and there is no way it could be fitted into neoliberalism. Due to this, it presents an almost existential threat to those supervisors who identify with the core tenets of neoliberalism, competitiveness and productivity-based value, and as such, this attitude is met with the most severe of consequences such as firing the worker or publicly humiliating the student.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to expand on how the three-year-old attitude can be presented as non-threatening while still disrupting power structures in the classroom and the workplace, it must be mentioned that the people who can most easily get away with such an attitude are the ones who are otherwise regarded as highly intelligent and competent—students with good grades and eloquent opinions, or workers who are recognized experts of their field (such as star players, famous theorists, etc.) or are the go-to person in the corporation. This perceived intellectual superiority allows supervisors to explain away the disruptive behaviors as eccentricity, yet it corners them into allowing the behaviors to continue, lest they appear to be humorless or unnecessarily harsh bosses.

**Conclusion**

Individually or combined, these two attitudes have the potential to increase the student/worker’s well-being by making a spirited attempt to disengage from the system without the repercussions of actual disengagement. But just like well-being, disruptive attitudes are also multiply realizable. As long as an attitude recognizes the system’s structure and reacts to it in a manner that does not let the system exploit the student/worker, the attitude should count as disruptive. These attitudes devalue the neoliberal system that sets inhuman standards for the student/worker, allowing them a more energetic pursuit of their passions, which then adds new nodes to their positive causal networks, thus strengthening it. Disruptive attitudes stemming from system-critical thinking also empower the student/worker to seek independence from the system itself, be that on an ideological, emotional, or financial level, which severely diminishes the power the system has over the individual’s PCN. This makes the PCN more robust, as it will now withstand events—a bad grade, being overlooked for a promotion, negative feedback—that would have damaged it before. Therefore, system-critical thinking and its derived disruptive attitudes strengthen the student/worker’s well-being in many ways.

Nevertheless, one might say that a problematic system is necessary for system-critical thinking to appear, and as such, the neoliberal system itself catalyzes the well-being of its student/worker. This is a preposterous idea, on par with infecting people with a virus so that they can appreciate what it would be like to be healthy. System-critical thinking works in spite of the system, not because of it, and it needs fostering—especially in institutions that prize themselves on teaching students how to examine perspectives. Critical thinking is, well, critical, and if colleges like Agnes Scott want their students to successfully engage the intellectual and social challenges of their time, they should focus on the greatest challenge—neoliberalism and the misery it makes out of our understanding of value and well-being.

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1. If forms other than critical and non-critical exist at all - Agnes Scott College makes no public statement on this issue, likely because it is so terribly besides the point that even I would relegate it to a footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I.e. measured in research and incorporated into syllabi [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Since the meaning of neoliberalism has changed significantly over the years and it carries different connotations across the globe and in various disciplines, what I refer to as ‘neoliberalism’ in this paper is the sociopolitical ideology centered around the economy which values profit and productivity, submitting all other values to these. While this might seem like a crude and rudimentary definition, a detailed discussion of what the term should be defined as is beyond the scope of this paper. For this reason, I do not discuss any of the existing sociological, political, or economic literature that already exists on the subject, and trust that the reader will agree with the existence of a profit-oriented system, regardless of what they might call it (e.g. capitalism, free market democracy, etc.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. By “empirical evidence” I mean that one classmate/colleague we all have encountered at one point in our academic/work career, who loves to talk, but sometimes runs out of relevant points to talk about. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It cannot be ignored that professors play a crucial role in upholding the neoliberal ideology of the college. While administrators can and do put some pressure on both faculty and students, it is ultimately the professors who make a decision about what standards they will hold their students to. Some faculty, notably in the Education department, grapple with the system, trying to hand more power over to the students as well as increasing our autonomy in our education. These individual efforts, while morally good on the part of the professors, do barely anything in terms of systematic changes, as they are limited by a greater environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sadly, I can’t claim to have invented this term, but I am proud to say that I have inspired it. I have chosen not to disclose the identity of the professor who uttered these words in his frustration. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I don’t deny that some collectives do actually manage to work in a way that doesn’t grossly under-benefit the workers. What I am claiming, however, is that it is not the norm in this system. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. While there are no studies on this, empirical evidence shows that having a brain-to-mouth filter and yet filling the neoliberal college classroom with what *sounds* like every single thought that popped into one’s head is actually not something children excel at. For several reasons. Nonetheless, my professor and I clearly disagree on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)