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Introduction

"The unexamined life is not worth living." - Socrates

Critical thinking is much more than learning how to wield the tools of logic. It is much more than crushing your opponent. It is much more than defending your views. In fact, if you limit your critical thinking to those things, then you aren't a critical thinker at all.

We exist in a world of quick communication. Those who wish to persuade us must compete with all the others for our attention. Ours is a world of 30 second sound bites, snappy commercials, and countless slogans. Many of us have no idea just how difficult it can be to arrive at proper conclusions. The persuaders want us to think that it's easy - all we need to do is feel good about the message. If we feel good about the message, then the message must be true, right? Wrong.

In the summer of 1787 it took eighty-five articles totaling almost 600 pages to debate and defend the U. S. Constitution. Does anyone really think that issues today are so much simpler that they can be properly defended in a fifteen second snappy slogan? Of course not.

Being a critical thinker is difficult. First, it goes against the popular culture. Thinking carefully is not admired. Often the conclusions critical thinkers arrive at are not the popular conclusions. Second, it takes time. You need to find evidence, weigh the evidence, and be honest. Third, true critical thinking is threatening to the ego. Critical thinkers must exercise intellectual humility.

In a general sense, people fit into one of the three basic categories. Let's find out what characterizes each, and which category most accurately describes you.

Non-Critical Thinking

Unable or unwilling to consider the value of logic in everyday life, the non-critical thinker becomes a thought follower. Their beliefs are a collection ideas planted in them by others. They tend to be easily manipulated, but are unaware that they are being manipulated. Of course, if one told them they were being manipulated, they would likely deny it. Non-critical thinkers generally accept the beliefs which are easiest to access. For the student, for instance, these are the dominant beliefs and biases presented by their teachers, peers, textbooks, and the popular media.

The non-critical thinker's beliefs usually conform to the group they most strongly identify with and are most comfortable with.

Non-critical thinkers spout slogans which are programmed into them, but they are unable to logically defend these positions. The positions are simply accepted as true. Anyone who challenges the position will likely be considered ignorant or a bigot. Any challenge to the position is responded to with anger rather than intellectual consideration.

Anger (and sometimes violence) is a predictable response. Here's why. First, the belief is part of the person holding it. It feels good to hold the belief. People around the person also accept the belief, so they are comfortable holding it. When the belief is challenged the person feels threatened. It violates their "comfort zone." Second, they are not capable of reasoning properly about the claim. The inability to think logically causes them to feel

inadequate. Operating in a world of emotions, the only response a non-critical thinker can have to opposition is anger.

The only way to change the mind of a non-critical thinker is to expose them to propaganda which enables them to feel more comfortable about a new belief. If a new idea feels better to them than the one they currently hold, they may change their mind. As the group they identify with changes its collective mind, the non-critical thinker will change their mind to conform.

Notice that truth has nothing to do with the non-critical thinker's selection of beliefs. Emotions alone drive their "thinking." It should be quite clear that the non-critical thinker is potentially quite dangerous. Non-critical thinkers are likely to make decisions which are bad for themselves and for those around them. The thinking in their minds is literally disconnected from reality. They can be manipulated by propagandists into voting in blocks large enough to result in bad decisions for society. Ultimately they can be organized into violent mobs or even armies who can harm or kill those who disagree with them.

Why does disagreement ultimately lead to violence? If a person is unwilling or incapable of reasoning, what means do they have for dealing with opposing viewpoints? Remember, they are controlled by emotion, not reason. One can only respond to opposition with an emotion - a feeling, and that feeling will be anger. Reasoning with the opposition is not an option, so the only possible response is violence. This often explains why people beat their wives, riot, and go to war.

Are you a non-critical thinker? Ask yourself these questions.

First, do you find that you generally believe the same things that your peers believe? Think about what you believe about politics, religion, abortion, and other controversial issues. If you find that you are squarely among the majority of your peers, you may be a non-critical thinker.

Second, ask yourself why you believe the things you believe. Can you give a reasoned defense of those positions? Are the reasons actual reasons, or do you find yourself simply repeating things that you've heard other people say? If your "reasons" sound like a tape-recording of someone else, then you are probably a non-critical thinker.

How do you respond to people who disagree with you? Do they irritate you? Do they make you angry? Do you consider them to be "radicals," "bigoted," "hateful," or "ignorant"? If you answer yes to any of these, you are probably a non-critical thinker.

What do you know about views which oppose your own? Pick a topic and try to give sensible reasons which would support your opposition. If you can only think of silly "reasons," then you are probably a non-critical thinker.

Weak Sense Critical Thinking

The weak sense critical thinker has some things in common with the non-critical thinker, and some things in common with the strong sense critical thinker. Critical thinkers in the weak sense differ from the non-critical thinker in that they are not merely driven by emotion. They understand the rules of logic to a degree. They understand that positions must be defended with reasons. Like the non-critical thinker, the weak sense critical thinker is wedded to their world view. Their ego is in the way of good, clear reasoning. To a large extent, they are probably unaware of the role their background beliefs are playing in their reasoning. They are not willing to be objective. Their reasoning is generated from a psychological

need to defend what they already believe. This is called "egocentricity" or "sociocentricity." Egocentric thinking effectively separates people into "me and you." Sociocentric thinking effectively separates people into "us and them." Piaget concluded that children think they are the center of the world. Many adults think in roughly the same way. The beliefs, values, attitudes, and actions of one's group are seen as better than those of other groups. According to Vincent Ruggiero, people who do not acknowledge a world-view become victims of it.

Richard Paul writes that students typically find it very easy to question just, and only, those beliefs, assumptions and inferences that they have already "rejected" and very difficult, in some cases traumatic, to question those in which they have a personal, egocentric investment.

The weak sense critical thinker will use reason in a limited way. They will use it only to defend their position. This is not the same as seeking the truth. The weak sense critical thinker will only look for those reasons which strengthen their position and weaken their opposition. They will systematically ignore any evidence that tends to weaken their position or strengthen their opposition.

They will use argumentation for the purpose of winning, where winning is defined as maintaining the current position and defeating their opposition.

Why is this kind of thinking considered weak? Because this kind of thinking is not concerned with truth or virtue. It has the potential of preventing humane, beneficial, and true propositions from coming to light. Any time a proposition is maintained which is not true, then the world suffers. To the extent that an untrue proposition is accepted because of weak sense critical thinking, that weak sense critical thinker is morally deficient.

Are you a critical thinker in the weak sense? Here are some questions to help you find out:

First, do you tend to start with a position that you already "know" is true and then look for reasons which support it? This is called rationalizing and is backwards from the proper reasoning method.

Second, do you find your reasons by only looking to sources which will agree with you?

Third, do you tend to ignore criticisms of your positions or become very defensive?

Fourth, do you mentally suppress evidence that might make your opposition look good?

Are you unwilling to change your mind about things, even when presented with good evidence?

Strong Sense Critical Thinking

A strong sense critical thinker is similar in some respects to a weak sense critical thinker and different in others. First, strong sense critical thinkers and weak sense critical thinkers know the value of supporting claims with reasons. However, a strong sense critical thinker would see no point in winning an argument if there was reason to believe the position being argued was wrong. The strong sense critical thinker is aware that learning is an interior transformation of a person's mind and character, a transformation which can only occur when thinking is done fairly and properly. A strong sense critical thinker is aware that there are certain irrational pressures which tend to undermine the ability to be fair minded in the assessment of an issue. Like the weak sense critical thinker, the strong sense critical thinker understands logic.

They would be able to find the strong reasons supporting one position and the weaknesses in the other. But unlike the weak sense critical thinker, they would be will to seek out the strong reasons for the opposition and the weaknesses in their current position. A fair minded person must acknowledge their bias and work to overcome it. This means being intellectually humble. In other words, it requires admitting up front the possibility that whatever is currently believed to be true could be false. It requires that one seek out the very best evidence for all sides of an issue. Then it requires accepting the conclusion that is supported best by the evidence. This could mean changing one's mind. Weak sense critical thinkers and even non-critical thinkers might admit that changing one's mind would be necessary given the right evidence. But those people have already stacked the deck in such a way that they will never allow themselves to encounter such compelling evidence. The strong sense critical thinker structures the entire reasoning process in such a way that they will be exposed to the best possible evidence, thereby putting themselves in the best possible position to be able to make the best possible inference.

The strong sense critical thinker is the moral superior of the three groups. Strong sense critical thinkers seek truth and virtue and are willing to accept that they are wrong given the appropriate evidence. What are some other qualities of strong sense critical thinkers?

Intellectual humility: an awareness of the limits of one's knowledge, including the tendency to be self-deceptive and biased.

Intellectual courage: the willingness to face and fairly assess ideas, beliefs, or viewpoints to which they have not given a serious hearing, regardless of one's strong negative reactions to them.

Intellectual empathy: recognizing the need to imaginatively put oneself in the place of others to genuinely understand them.

Intellectual good faith (integrity): recognition of the need to be true to one's own thinking, to be consistent in the intellectual standards one applies, to hold one's self to the same rigorous standard of evidence and proof to which one holds one's antagonists.

Intellectual perseverance: willingness to pursue intellectual insights and truths despite difficulties, obstacles, and frustrations.

Faith in reason: confidence that in the long run one's own higher interests and those of humankind at large will be served best by giving the freest play to reason.

Intellectual sense of justice: Willingness to entertain all viewpoints sympathetically and assess them with the same intellectual standards, without reference to one's own feelings or vested interests, or the feelings or vested interests of one's friends, community, or nation. (Richard Paul; 1 through 7)

Willingness to be decisive when the evidence warrants it. In other words, strong sense critical thinkers are not relativists. They acknowledge that there is an answer, though it may be difficult to find. And when they find that answer, they are willing to accept it.

To determine if you are a strong sense critical thinker:

First, go through the list above. How many of the characteristics describe you?

Can you think of examples where you used to believe one thing, then through your own initiative researched a subject and realized that the only intellectually honest thing to do was

to change your mind? (This does not count if the position was one where you came into conformity with the predominant beliefs of your peers. That could be better explained by the bandwagon effect.)

Can you say you did this when you had a vested interest in holding the first position?

Do you have a genuine sense of curiosity regarding the beliefs of others?