Obstacles to Critical Thinking

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Appreciate that there are ways to (1) detect errors in our thinking, (2) restrain the attitudes and feelings that can distort our reasoning, and (3) achieve a level of objectivity that makes critical thinking possible.
- Understand that the most common impediments to critical thinking can be sorted into two categories: (1) those hindrances that arise because of how we think and (2) those that occur because of what we think.

PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSTACLES

- Learn how to detect and overcome self-interested thinking by (1) watching out for instances when your deliberations get personal, (2) being alert to ways that critical thinking can be undermined, and (3) ensuring that no relevant evidence or ideas have been left out.
- Appreciate how group thinking can distort critical thinking.
- Understand the meaning and be able to cite examples of peer pressure, appeal to popularity, appeal to common practice, and stereotyping.

PHILOSOPHICAL OBSTACLES

- Know what a worldview is and how certain pivotal ideas in a worldview can undermine critical thinking.
- Be able to critique the doctrine of subjective relativism.
- Be able to critique the doctrine of social relativism.
- Know the definition of philosophical skepticism and how the view relates to critical thinking.
CRITICAL THINKING DOES NOT HAPPEN IN A VACUUM BUT IN AN “ENVIRONMENT” that’s often hostile to it. It takes place in the real world in the minds of real people who almost always have thoughts and feelings and experiences that, given half a chance, would sabotage critical reasoning at every turn. The sparkling palace of our mind is grand—except for the demons chained in the basement.

Recall our definition of critical thinking: The systematic evaluation or formulation of beliefs, or statements, by rational standards. This means, of course, that several factors must be present for the process of critical thinking to be fully realized. If the process fails to be systematic, or falls short of being a true evaluation or formulation, or ignores rational standards, critical thinking can’t happen. Because we are fallible, there are a thousand ways that this failure of reason could come about. And there is no cure for our fallibility.

We should expect then that thinking critically will often be difficult and even unpleasant (as painful truths sometimes are), and indeed it is. But there are ways to (1) detect errors in our thinking (even subtle ones), (2) restrain the attitudes and feelings that can distort our reasoning, and (3) achieve a level of objectivity that makes critical thinking possible.

Doing all this—and doing it consistently—requires awareness, practice, and motivation. If we are to think critically, we must be aware of not only what good critical thinking involves but also what sloppy thinking entails. Then we must practice avoiding the pitfalls and using the skills and techniques that critical thinking requires. And we must be motivated to do all of this, for it is unlikely that we will use critical thinking very much if we can’t appreciate its value and therefore have little motivation to make the extra effort.

We can sort the most common impediments to critical thinking into two main categories: (1) those hindrances that arise because of how we think and (2) those that occur because of what we think. There is some overlap in these categories; how people think is often a result of what they think and vice versa. But in general, category 1 obstacles are those that come into play because of psychological factors (our fears, attitudes, motivations, and desires), and category 2 impediments are those that arise because of certain philosophical ideas we have (our beliefs about beliefs). For example, a category 1 hindrance is the tendency to conform our opinions to those of our peers. This conformism often grows out of some psychological need that is part of our personality. A common category 2 problem is the belief that objectivity in thinking is impossible or that we really don’t know anything or that we don’t know what we think we know.

In this chapter we review the most common category 1 and 2 barriers to critical thinking and practice uncovering and neutralizing them. The motivation to learn these lessons well is up to you.
Francis Bacon on Critical Thinking

Francis Bacon (1561–1626), the godfather of modern science, articulated basic principles and methods of science and advocated their use in the careful pursuit of reliable knowledge. He also warned about common mistakes in thinking that can doom the scientific enterprise and lead to biased perceptions and serious error. Bacon asserted that preventing these mistakes is possible through scientific, down-to-earth thinking —approximately what we would call critical thinking, a necessary and powerful tool in the search for truth. He termed the mistakes “the idols of the mind” because he thought that people not only commit the errors but revere them as one would revere a false god.

Bacon focused on four kinds of idols that he considered especially prevalent and destructive. The first type is “The Idols of the Tribe”—the problems in thinking that arise from human nature generally. This is the fallacy of presuming that our biased perceptions are automatically a true reflection of the objective world, that knowledge is to be found inside us without any reference to the real world.

The second group consists of “The Idols of the Cave”—the biases that are unique to each individual. These develop from each person’s personality, education, and experiences. Bacon claimed that we each live in our own cave, “which refracts and discolors the light of nature.”

Then there are “The Idols of the Marketplace”—the impediments to clear thinking that develop from our imprecise and careless use of language. As Bacon said “the ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs the understanding.”

Finally are “The Idols of the Theater”—the ideologies or systems of thought that are “but so many stage-plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion.” These barriers to good critical thinking have little or nothing to do with the real world but are nevertheless thought to be accurate and profound.
Psychological Obstacles

No one is immune to category 1 obstacles. We are all heir to psychological tendencies and habits that affect our behavior and channel our thinking. They tend to persist or recur, haunting our minds until we have the awareness and the will to break free of them.

The Almighty Self

As humans we spend a great deal of time protecting, maintaining, and comforting our own mental life, our own selves—a perfectly natural urge that does no harm until we push our self-serving efforts too far. How far is too far? From the standpoint of critical thinking, we have taken things too far when we accept claims for no good reason—when our thinking is no longer systematic and rational. In the service of our almighty selves, we distort our judgment and raise our risk of error, which is ironically a risk to ourselves.

Self-interested thinking takes several forms. We may decide to accept a claim solely on the grounds that it advances, or coincides with, our interests. You may think, “I believe the city should lower the sales tax for convenience stores because I own a convenience store,” or, “I am against all forms of gun control because I am a hunter,” or, “This university should not raise tuition because I am a student, and I don’t want to pay more tuition.” There is nothing inherently wrong with accepting a claim that furthers your own interests. The problem arises when you accept a claim solely because it furthers your interests. Self-interest alone simply cannot establish the truth of a claim. To base your beliefs on self-interest alone is to abandon critical thinking.

Here’s a classic example of self-interested thinking depicted in the film *Twelve Angry Men*:

Twelve jurors sit in a room deliberating over whether to find the defendant guilty of murder. The accused is a teenage boy who has grown up in the rough and impoverished streets of the inner city. At first, all but one juror (the jury foreman) vote guilty. The foreman convinces the other jurors to examine the evidence once again. Their deliberations go on for hours, and as they do, the prosecution’s case slowly falls apart. Damning evidence that had seemed so strong earlier was now shown to be full of holes. They take another vote, but this time eleven jurors, including the foreman, vote not guilty, while one man (juror number 3) insists that the other jurors are deluded and that the boy is undoubtedly guilty. The jurors ask him to explain his reasons. He angrily insists again that the boy is guilty, but he can’t provide any evidence or reasons that suggest the boy’s guilt. He just rants at the other jurors. Finally the other jurors think they understand what’s behind the seemingly irrational stance of juror number 3: He wants to convict the boy for personal reasons—
perhaps because of a troubled relationship with his own son or because of some other bias that has nothing to do with the guilt or innocence of the defendant.

In this example, the other members of the jury eventually realize that the judgments of juror number 3 are self-serving, linked to his own emotional needs. What gave him away? An obvious clue is his emotional protestations. But an even more telling clue is his rejection of all relevant evidence. The reasons for acquitting are perfectly clear to the other jurors, but he won’t (or can’t) consider them. In everyday life, these two clues often signal the presence of powerful self-interest at work.

The influence of self on your thinking can take another form. You may be tempted to accept claims for no other reason than that they help you save face. We all like to think of ourselves as excelling in various ways. We may believe that we are above average in intelligence, integrity, talent, compassion, physical beauty, sexual prowess, athletic ability, and much more. But we not only like to think such things about ourselves, we want others to think the same about us. The rub comes, however, when we accept or defend claims just to cover up the cracks in our image. You make a mistake, and so you blame it on someone or something else. You behave badly, and you try to justify your behavior. You make a judgment or observation that turns out to be wrong, and you’re too embarrassed or proud to admit it. (In Chapter 4 we’ll learn that sometimes self-interested thinking can even alter our perceptions.)

The consequences of self-centered thinking can be, well, self-destructive. In the realm of critical thinking, this devotion to yourself can prevent careful evaluation of claims, limit critical inquiry, blind you to the facts, provoke self-deception, engender rationalizations, lead you to suppress or ignore evidence, and beget wishful thinking. And these mistakes can decrease your chances of success (however you define success) and hamper your personal growth, maturity, and self-awareness. Such egocentricism can also leave you wide open to propaganda and manipulation by people who appeal to your personal desires and prejudices. How easy would it be for people to control your choices and thoughts if they told you exactly what you wanted to hear? (There are in-depth discussions of these lapses in critical thinking in Chapters 4 and 5.)
Other people (especially those who know you fairly well) may be amused or puzzled by your stubborn adherence to claims that obviously conflict with the evidence. Or they may think it odd that you cling to ideas or behaviors that you loudly condemn in others.

When examining a claim or making a choice, how can you overcome the excessive influence of your own needs? Sometimes you can do it only with great effort, and sometimes the task is much easier, especially if you remember these three guidelines:

- Watch out when things get very personal.
- Be alert to ways that critical thinking can be undermined.
- Ensure that nothing has been left out.
Watch Out When Things Get Very Personal

You are most likely to let your self-interest get in the way of clear thinking when you have a big personal stake in the conclusions you reach. You may be deeply committed to a particular view or belief, or you may want desperately for a particular claim to be false or unjustified, or you may be devoted not to particular claims but to any claims that contradict those of someone you dislike. Such zeal can wreck any attempt at careful, fair evaluation of a claim.

The twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell asserts that the passionate holding of an opinion is a sure sign of a lack of reasons to support the opinion:

When there are rational grounds for an opinion, people are content to set them forth and wait for them to operate. In such cases, people do not hold their opinions with passion; they hold them calmly, and set forth their reasons quietly. The opinions that are held with passion are always those for which no good ground exists; indeed the passion is the measure of the holder’s lack of rational conviction.3

The dead giveaway that you are skewing your thinking is a surge of strong emotions (like the one that gripped juror number 3). If your evaluation or defense of a position evokes anger, passion, or fear, your thinking could be prejudiced or clouded. It is possible, of course, to be emotionally engaged in an issue and still think critically and carefully. But most of the time, getting worked up over a claim or conclusion is reason enough to suspect that your thinking is not as clear as it should be.

The rule of thumb is: If you sense a rush of emotions when you deal with a particular issue, stop. Think about what’s happening and why. Then continue at a slower pace and with greater attention to the basics of critical reasoning,
double-checking to ensure that you are not ignoring or suppressing evidence or getting sloppy in your evaluations.

**Be Alert to Ways That Critical Thinking Can Be Undermined**

If you understand the techniques and principles of critical thinking, and you have practiced applying them in a variety of situations, you are more likely than not to detect your own one-sided self-centered thinking when it occurs. An alarm should go off in your head: “Warning—faulty reasoning.”

When your alarm sounds, double-check your thinking, look for lapses in arguments and claims, and weed them out.

**Ensure That Nothing Has Been Left Out**

A common flaw in reasoning is the failure to consider evidence or arguments that do not support preferred claims or positions. For example, you may secretly want a particular claim to be true, so you knowingly or unknowingly look for evidence in its favor but ignore evidence against it. The chances of making this mistake increase markedly when you are reasoning for the sake of self.

This kind of preferential treatment for some statements and not others is part of a common phenomenon called *selective attention* (see Chapters 4 and 5). In
Are You a Conformist? Take This Test and Find Out

To some extent we all conform our ideas and behavior to group influences, but some people go overboard. Take the following test to find out if you’re one of them. Check off each statement that applies to you, then add up the numbers of each checked statement to get your score. The lower your score, the more conformist you are.

- +100 You usually change your beliefs for good reasons.
- +1 You change your beliefs for good reasons only when money is involved.
- –10 You usually change your beliefs for no reason whatsoever.
- –15 You automatically change your beliefs when your friends ridicule them.
- –30 You automatically change your beliefs when total strangers ridicule them.
- –40 You change your beliefs whenever you see a TV ad.
- –42 You change your beliefs to be accepted into a group.
- –50 You change your clothes to be accepted into a group.
- –50 You would change your car to be accepted into a group.
- –100 You would change your beliefs and your physical features to be accepted into a group.

If your score is below zero, do not drop your course in critical thinking. If it’s way, way below zero, you need more than a course in critical thinking. Is this a bogus test? Yes, totally. If you figured that out by the second statement, give yourself 1000 points.

Avoiding Self-Interested Thinking

- Watch out when things get personal and you become emotionally vested in an issue.
- Beware of the urge to distort your thinking to save face.
- Be alert to ways that critical thinking can be undermined.
- Ensure that nothing has been left out of consideration.
- Avoid selective attention.
- Make a conscious effort to look for opposing evidence.
selective attention, we notice certain things and ignore others—usually without even being aware that we’re doing it. We may ignore facts that contradict our beliefs and search out facts that support them. Scientific research has repeatedly confirmed this behavior. In a typical study, researchers showed subjects both *evidence for* and *evidence against* the reality of extrasensory perception (ESP). Subjects who already doubted the existence of ESP accurately recalled both kinds of evidence. But subjects who already believed in ESP remembered both kinds of evidence as *proving* ESP. They somehow recalled even the disconfirming evidence as supporting their belief in ESP!

The remedy for this problem is to *make a conscious effort to look for opposing evidence*. Don’t consider your evaluation of a statement or argument finished until you’ve carefully considered *all the relevant reasons*. Ask yourself, “What is the evidence or reasons against this statement?”

This approach is at the heart of science. A basic principle of scientific work is not to accept a favored theory until competing (alternative) theories are thoroughly examined. (More on this in Chapter 10.)

**The Power of the Group**

In the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the crew of the starship *Enterprise* encounters an unusual threat: the Borg. The Borg is a collective of individual minds that have been stripped of individuality and merged into a single group-mind with evil intentions. Much of the Borg storyline (which spans several episodes) is about the dignity and importance of individualism as opposed to the conformism of the Borg hive. The thought of losing one’s self in the monolithic Borg is presented as a profound tragedy—a theme that strikes a chord with humans. Individualism, independence, and freedom of thought are what we want, what we must have.

Or so we say. Despite our apparent longings, we humans spend a great deal of our time trying to conform to, or be part of, groups. We want to belong, we want the safety and comfort of numbers, we want the approval of our beloved tribe. All of which is perfectly normal. We are, after all, social creatures. Conformist tendencies are a fact of life. But trouble appears when our conformism hampers—or obliterates—critical thinking.

We all belong to multiple groups—family, employees, gender, church, club, professional society, political party, advocacy group, you name it—and we can be susceptible to pressure from all of them. Much of the time, there is intense pressure to fit into groups and to adopt ideas, attitudes, and goals endorsed by them. Sometimes the influence of the group is subtle but strong and can occur in the most casual, “unofficial” gatherings. The claims and positions adopted by the group can be implicit, never spoken, but well understood. The political chat group online, the group of Christians or Muslims or Jews who happen to meet

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“The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whatever that it is not absurd; indeed in view of the silliness of the majority of mankind, a widespread belief is more likely to be foolish than sensible.”

—Bertrand Russell
on the bus, the collection of peers who support the same political cause—all these can exert a noticeable influence on our beliefs.

Group pressure to accept a statement or act in a certain way has several overlapping subtypes (some of which we’ll cover in more detail in later chapters). When the pressure to conform comes from your peers, it’s called—surprise—peer pressure. When the pressure comes from the mere popularity of a belief, it’s known as—believe it or not—an appeal to popularity (also known as an appeal to the masses). When the pressure comes from what groups of people do or how they behave, it’s called an appeal to common practice. In all cases, the lapse in critical thinking comes from the use of group pressure alone to try to support a claim (see Chapter 5).

Group pressure can happen quickly. For example, if you’re listening to a speech by a member of your own political party, you may immediately find yourself positively disposed toward the speaker—not because you agree with him but because he’s a member of your group.

Group pressure can also take a while. Consider:

Lillian has just become a new member of the Democratic Club on campus, an association of Democrats and political liberals. She has been trying to join the club ever since her freshman year. She likes being in a group that shares most of her beliefs, and she feels that just being a member of the club—whose members include many of the brightest students on campus—boosts her up a notch or two socially. She soon finds out that she agrees with club members on every political and social issue—except one. Everyone else in the group is adamantly opposed to capital punishment. Lillian favors it because she researched all the arguments for and against it and concluded that the pro side was stronger. But she doesn’t want to jeopardize her membership because of her stand on this one issue. So she never mentions it. Whenever she hears arguments against the death penalty, she believes them to be faulty. But after a few months, she learns to ignore the arguments. In fact, she tries not to think about the subject at all. Over time, her views on the subject change, until finally she finds herself being whole-heartedly against the death penalty.

Here, the need to belong slowly usurps critical reasoning in a specific subject area (capital punishment). On other topics, Lillian may be an astute critical thinker.

“Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense.”
—The Buddha
There’s another kind of group influence that we have all fallen prey to: the pressure that comes from presuming that our own group is the best, the right one, the chosen one, and all other groups are, well, not as good. You can see this kind of ethnocentrism in religions, political parties, generations, social classes, and many other groups. The assumption that your group is better than others is at the heart of prejudice.

This we-are-better pressure is probably the most powerful of all. We all have certain beliefs not because we have thought critically about them but because

“A great many people think they are thinking when they are really rearranging their prejudices.”
—William James
Avoiding Group Pressure on Your Thinking

- Group pressure can come in the form of peer pressure, appeals to popularity, and appeals to common practice.
- Group-centered thinking can degenerate into narrow-mindedness, resistance to change, and stereotyping.
- The best way to defend yourself against group thinking is to always proportion your acceptance of a claim according to the strength of reasons.

Left-Wing/Right-Wing Bias

Is there a left-wing bias in the news media? A right-wing bias? Some swear the New York Times and PBS slant the news to the left; others say Fox News tilts it to the right. The charge that the news is politically slanted—left or right—regularly starts arguments (the nasty, pointless kind) and usually lacks supporting evidence. Whether the allegation is true is not an issue we can settle here, and fortunately we need not settle it to apply critical thinking to the news media.

As detailed in Chapter 4, many factors can render news reports unreliable, incomplete, or misleading—even when no political bias is at work. Critical thinking requires that we not assume without good reason that a report gives us an entirely accurate picture. The best way to ensure that we get the whole story is to read a variety of newspapers, newsmagazines, opinion journals, and websites.
The worst approach is to rely only on news sources that reinforce our existing political views. People have a natural tendency to seek out only evidence that supports their treasured beliefs and to resist evidence that contradicts them. They want to watch, hear, and read only what is psychologically comforting—and to avoid what disturbs their worldview. But this strategy undermines serious inquiry and reflection, stunts our understanding, and blights independent thinking.

Do you ever read magazines, newspapers, or websites that run counter to your political beliefs? Do you associate only with people who share your political views? Do you ever seriously consider plausible objections to your positions? Do you think the availability of other points of view online helps open up the debate beyond older media biases? Or does it just reinforce what readers of each blog already think they know?

our parents raised us to believe them or because the conceptual push and pull of our social group has instilled them in us. That is, we may believe what we believe—and assume that our beliefs are better than anyone else’s—because we were born into a family or society that maintains such views. We may be a Catholic or a Democrat or a racist primarily because we were born into a Catholic or Democratic or racist family or society. Like the influence of the self, this endemic pressure can lead to wishful thinking, rationalization, and
self-deception. Group thinking can also easily generate narrow-mindedness, resistance to change, and stereotyping (drawing conclusions about people without sufficient reasons). (Again, more on these problems in Chapters 4 and 5.)

But as comfortable as our inherited beliefs are, when we accept them without good reason, we risk error, failure, and delusion. And as we discussed in Chapter 1, if we have certain beliefs solely because they were given to us, they are not really our beliefs. The sign of a maturing intellect is having the will and the courage to gradually prune beliefs that are groundless.

For critical thinkers, the best way to deal with the power of the group is to proportion your belief to the strength of reasons.

After thinking critically about claims favored by groups, you may find that the claims are actually on solid ground, and you really do have good reason to accept them. Or you may find that there is no good reason for believing them, and so you don’t accept them. Either way, critical thinking will give you a clearer view of the group and yourself.

Critical thinking then is independent thinking. And in the West and many other parts of the world, those who achieve independent thinking—the Aristotles, the Einsteins, the Shakespeares, the Michaelangelos—are revered.

**Philosophical Obstacles**

A **worldview** is a philosophy of life, a set of fundamental ideas that helps us make sense of a wide range of important issues in life. The ideas are fundamental because they help guide us in the evaluation or acceptance of many other less basic ideas. They are answers to the “big questions” of life, such as, What do I know? Is knowledge possible? What is real and what is not? How do I know which actions are morally right?

The interesting thing about worldviews is that we all have one, for we all have adopted (or inherited) certain fundamental ideas about the world. You may have unknowingly absorbed the ideas from your family or society, and you may not have thought much about them, but you have a worldview nonetheless. Even the rejection of all worldviews is a worldview.

In Chapter 11 we discuss how critical thinking can help you construct a worldview that is founded on good reasons. For now, we need to investigate how some elements of a worldview—certain fundamental but problematic ideas—may undermine critical thinking. These notions can give rise to category 2 obstacles to critical reason, for they may affect our thinking through the content of our beliefs.

**Subjective Relativism**

Like science, critical thinking may be underpinned by a number of propositions that few people would think to question. Science, for example, is based on the
proposition that the world is publicly understandable—that it has a certain structure (independent of what anyone thinks), that we can know the structure, and that this knowledge can be acquired by anyone. Critical thinking is based on similar ideas. Among the most basic is the notion that the truth of a claim does not depend on what a person thinks. That is, your believing that something is true does not make it true.

The idea that truth depends on what someone believes is called subjective relativism, and if you accept this notion or use it to try to support a claim, you’re said to commit the subjectivist fallacy. This view says that truth depends not on the way things are but solely on what someone believes. Truth, in other words, is relative to persons. Truth is a matter of what a person believes—not a matter of how the world is. This means that a proposition can be true for one person, but not for another. If you believe that dogs can fly, then it is true (for you) that dogs can fly. If someone else believes that dogs cannot fly, then it is true (for him) that dogs cannot fly.

You’ve probably encountered subjective relativism more often than you realize. You may have heard someone (maybe even yourself!) say, “This is my truth, and that’s your truth,” or, “This statement is true for me.”

Many critics of subjective relativism maintain that it can undermine critical thinking in a fundamental way. In large part, critical thinking is about determining whether statements are true or false. But if we can make a statement true just by believing it to be true, then critical thinking would seem to be unnecessary. The subjectivist fallacy, they say, may be an excuse to forgo the tough job of critical inquiry.

Most philosophers see the situation this way: We use critical thinking to find out whether a statement is true or false—objectively true or false. Objective truth is about the world, about the way the world is regardless of what we may believe about it. To put it differently, there is a way the world is, and our beliefs do not make it. The world is the way it is, regardless of how we feel about it.

These same philosophers would probably be quick to point out that some objective truths are about our subjective states or processes. It might be true, for example, that you’re feeling pain right now. But if so, the claim that you are feeling pain right now is an objective truth about your subjective state.

Also, they would readily admit that there are some things about ourselves that obviously are relative because they are one way for us and another way for someone else. You may like ice cream, but someone else may not. Your liking ice cream is then relative to you. But the truth about these states of affairs is not relative.

Subjective relativism (as well as other forms of relativism) is controversial, and we needn’t spend much time on it here. But you should know at least that many philosophers have (through the use of critical thinking!) uncovered some odd implications that seem to render the view implausible. First, they
point out that if we could make a statement true just by believing it to be true, we would be infallible. We could not possibly be in error about anything that we sincerely believed. We could never be mistaken about where we parked the car or what we said about jelly beans or what some general said about carpet bombing. Personal infallibility is, of course, absurd, and this possibility seems to weigh heavily against subjective relativism.

Many critics think that subjective relativism’s biggest problem is that it’s self-defeating. It defeats itself because its truth implies its falsity. The relativist says, “All truth is relative.” If this statement is objectively true, then it refutes itself because if it is objectively true that “All truth is relative,” then the statement itself is an example of an objective truth. So if “All truth is relative” is objectively true, it is objectively false.

Social Relativism

To escape the difficulties of subjective relativism, some people posit social relativism, the view that truth is relative to societies. The claim is that truth depends not on an individual’s beliefs, but on society’s beliefs. So a claim can be true for the Chinese but false for Americans, true for college students but false for public officials, true for Baptists but false for atheists. To many, this kind of relativism, like the subjective kind, also seems to render critical thinking superfluous.

Social relativism is attractive to many because it seems to imply an admirable egalitarianism—the notion that the beliefs of different societies are all equal. But a lot of philosophers maintain that it has most of the same defects that subjective relativism has. For example, according to social relativism, individuals aren’t infallible, but societies are. The beliefs of whole societies cannot be mistaken. But this notion of societal infallibility is no more plausible than the idea of individual infallibility. Is it plausible that no society has ever been wrong about anything—never been wrong about the causes of disease, the best form of government, the number of planets in our solar system, the burning of witches, the Nazi policy of killing six million Jews?
Critics like to point out that just as subjective relativism is self-defeating, so is social relativism. The claim that “All truth is relative to societies” is self-defeating because if it is objectively true, then it is an example of an objective truth—and that means that the claim is objectively false.

If you accept relativism, you may be tempted to care very little about critical thinking, and that would be your loss. Fortunately, there is no good reason why you should neglect critical thinking in the name of relativism.5

skepticism

If knowledge were impossible, critical thinking—as a way of coming to know the truth or falsity of claims—would seem to be out of a job. Most of us, though, believe that we can acquire knowledge. We think that we know a great many things—that we are alive, that our shoes are a certain color, that there is a tree on the lawn, that the Earth is not flat, that rabbits cannot fly, that \(2 + 2 = 4\). But not everyone would agree. There are some who believe that we know much less than we think we do or nothing at all. This view is known as philosophical skepticism, and thinkers who raise doubts about how much we know are known as philosophical skeptics.

This is no place to dive into a debate on skepticism, but we can take a quick look at the most important type of philosophical skepticism and see what, if anything, it has to do with critical thinking. This form of skepticism says that knowledge requires certainty—if we are to know anything, we must be certain of it. This means that our knowledge isn’t knowledge unless it is beyond any possibility of doubt. If knowledge requires certainty, however, there is very little that we know because there are always considerations that can undermine our certainty.

But it seems that our knowledge does not require certainty. All of us can cite many situations in which we do seem to have knowledge—even though we do not have absolutely conclusive reasons. We usually would claim to know, for example, that it is raining, that our dog has spots, that we were born, that the moon is not made of green cheese—even though we are not absolutely certain of any of these. These situations suggest that we do know many things. We know them not because they are beyond all possible doubt, but because they are beyond all reasonable doubt. Doubt is always possible, but it is not always reasonable. Rejecting a reasonable claim to knowledge just because of the bare possibility that you may be wrong is neither reasonable nor necessary.

Critical thinking does have a job to do in our efforts to acquire knowledge. Its task, however, is not to help us find claims that we cannot possibly doubt but to help us evaluate claims that vary in degrees of reasonable doubt—that is, from weak reasons (or no reasons) to very strong reasons.
Summary

- Critical thinking takes place in a mental environment consisting of our experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Some elements in this inner environment can sabotage our efforts to think critically or at least make critical thinking more difficult. Fortunately, we can exert some control over these elements. With practice, we can detect errors in our thinking, restrain attitudes and feelings that can disrupt our reasoning, and achieve enough objectivity to make critical thinking possible.
- The most common of these hindrances to critical thinking fall into two main categories: (1) Those obstacles that crop up because of how we think and (2) those that occur because of what we think. The first category is comprised of psychological factors such as our fears, attitudes, motivations, and desires. The second category is made up of certain philosophical beliefs.

Psychological Obstacles

- None of us is immune to the psychological obstacles. Among them are the products of egocentric thinking. We may accept a claim solely because it advances our interests or just because it helps us save face. To overcome these pressures, we must (1) be aware of strong emotions that can warp our thinking, (2) be alert to ways that critical thinking can be undermined, and (3) ensure that we take into account all relevant factors when we evaluate a claim.
- The first category of hindrances also includes those that arise because of group pressure. These obstacles include conformist pressures from groups that we belong to and ethnocentric urges to think that our group is superior to others. The best defense against group pressure is to proportion our beliefs according to the strength of reasons.
Philosophical Obstacles

- We may also have certain core beliefs that can undermine critical thinking (the second category of hindrances). Subjective relativism is the view that truth depends solely on what someone believes—a notion that may make critical thinking look superfluous. But subjective relativism leads to some strange consequences. For example, if the doctrine were true, each of us would be infallible. Also, subjective relativism has a logical problem—it’s self-defeating. Its truth implies its falsity. There are no good reasons to accept this form of relativism.
- Social relativism is the view that truth is relative to societies—a claim that would also seem to make critical thinking unnecessary. But this notion is undermined by the same kinds of problems that plague subjective relativism.
- Philosophical skepticism is the doctrine that we know much less than we think we do. One form of philosophical skepticism says that we cannot know anything unless the belief is beyond all possible doubt. But this is not a plausible criterion for knowledge. To be knowledge, claims need not be beyond all possible doubt, but beyond all reasonable doubt.

EXERCISES

Exercises marked with * have answers in “Answers to Exercises” (Appendix B). Quizzes, integrative exercises, and writing assignments are not supplied with answers.

Exercise 2.1

REVIEW QUESTIONS

* 1. According to the text’s definition of critical thinking, what factors must be present for critical thinking to be realized?
2. What are the two main categories of common obstacles to critical thinking?
3. What did W. K. Clifford say about the morality of believing claims?
4. What is stereotyping?
* 5. From the standpoint of critical thinking, what event signals that we have allowed our bias in favor of our selves go too far?
6. According to the text, what effect can our urge to save face have on our thinking?
7. When are you most likely to let your self-interest get in the way of clear thinking?

8. According to the text, what should you do if you sense a rush of emotion when you think about a particular issue?

9. What is selective attention?

10. According to the text, how might selective attention affect your thinking when you are examining evidence for or against a claim?

11. How might the influence of a group that you belong to affect your attempts to think critically?

12. According to the text, what is the most powerful group pressure of all?

13. What is the appeal to popularity?

14. What is a worldview?

15. What is subjective relativism?

16. According to the text, how could subjective relativism make critical thinking unnecessary?

17. Is critical thinking concerned with the objective or the subjective truth of claims?

18. What is social relativism?

19. What is philosophical skepticism?

20. Does our knowledge require certainty?

21. What kind of doubt is involved in the acquisition of knowledge?

**Exercise 2.2**

For each of the following passages, indicate whether it contains examples of self-interested thinking, face-saving, or group pressure. Some of these are really tough.

1. Mary: Animals have the same rights as humans.
   Jenna: What makes you think that?
   Mary: I love animals, and there are so many that are treated horribly all over the world. It’s heartbreaking.

2. Jonathan: My essay is better than Julio’s.
   Betty: Why do you think that yours is better than all the others? Do you agree that the content and writing of all the essays are similar?
   Jonathan: Well, yes.
   Betty: Do you agree that all the other benchmarks of quality are nearly identical?
   Jonathan: Yes, but mine is still better.

3. Dear friends, as your state senator I will continue my tireless work on your behalf. I will continue to use my considerable talents to make this
district even better. I will continue to let my integrity be the guide for all my actions.

4. We cannot allow those people to move into this neighborhood. They’re not like us.

5. I oppose women becoming members of this club. If I endorsed their claims, every friend I’ve got in the club would turn his back on me.

6. His statements about the West Bank are all false, of course. He’s an Israeli.

7. Christianity is superior to all other religions. I was raised Christian, and all my relatives are Christians. This is the only religion I’ve known, and the only one I need.

8. I’m due for tenure next year, so I am in favor of continuing the tradition of tenure at this university.

9. The United States is the greatest nation on the face of the earth. I don’t know anything about other countries, and I don’t want to know.

10. If Joan is appointed to the committee, I am guaranteed to have a job for the rest of my life. I wholeheartedly favor Joan’s appointment.

11. Free speech should not extend to pornographers. Right now they are allowed to espouse their smut on the Internet and many other places. That’s just not how I was raised.

**Exercise 2.3**

Read each of the following claims. Then select from the list any statements that, if true, would constitute good reasons for accepting the claim. Be careful: In some questions, none of the choices is correct.

1. John: The newspaper account of the charges of pedophilia lodged against Father J. Miller, a Catholic priest in our town, should never have been printed.
   a. The charges are false.
   b. John is a Catholic.
   c. Important evidence that would exonerate Father Miller was not mentioned in the newspaper account.
   d. The town is predominately Catholic.

2. Alice: The speed limit on I-95 should be 70 mph.
   a. Raising the speed limit to 70 mph would result in faster and safer traffic.
   b. The state commission on highways did a study showing that I-95 should have a limit of 70 mph.
   c. Alice travels I-95 every day and needs to drive 70 mph to get to work on time.
   d. Alice drives I-95 every day.
3. Janette: Women are less violent and less emotional than men.
   a. A study from Harvard shows that women are less violent and less emotional than men.
   b. Janette is a woman.
   c. Janette is a member of a group of women who are fighting for the rights of women.
   d. Janette and all her friends are women.

4. Brie: People should buy stock in IBM, an action that will push the price per share higher.
   a. Brie owns a large proportion of IBM stock.
   b. Brie is chair of the board at IBM.
   c. The stock market is weak.
   d. Brie has a large family to support.

5. Colonel Stockton: The United States should attack the terrorists in Iran, even at the risk of a full-scale war with Arab states.
   a. The terrorists have humiliated Colonel Stockton’s forces.
   b. The terrorists have humiliated the United States.
   c. Colonel Stockton is loyal to his troops, all of whom want to attack the terrorists in Iran.
   d. Attacking the terrorists in Iran would cause no casualties and would result in world peace.

6. Morgan: Capital punishment is always wrong.
   a. All of Morgan’s friends agree that capital punishment is wrong.
   b. If Morgan favored capital punishment, her friends would abandon her.
   c. Morgan is president of the Anti-Capital Punishment League.
   d. Morgan has already made her views known and cannot change her mind without seeming to be inconsistent.

7. Angelo: Marijuana should be legalized.
   a. All of Angelo’s friends smoke marijuana.
   b. Legalizing marijuana would reduce the consumption of marijuana and save lives, money, and resources.
   c. Angelo has already said on television that marijuana should be legalized.
   d. Angelo likes to smoke marijuana.

Exercise 2.4
Read each of the following passages. Indicate whether it contains examples of the kind of group pressure that encourages people to conform (peer pressure or appeal to popularity) or the type that urges people to think that one’s own group
is better than others. For each example of group pressure, specify the possible negative consequences. A couple of these are very difficult to classify.

1. Ortega is deeply religious, attending church regularly and trying to abide by church law and the Scriptures. He has never considered any other path. He believes that laws should be passed that forbid people to shop on Sunday and that designate Easter as a national holiday.

2. John goes to a prestigious college where many students use illegal drugs. Nearly everyone in John’s frat house uses them. So far, he hasn’t tried any, but his frat brothers frequently ask if he wants some. And he has noticed that he is rarely invited to any frat parties.

3. A northeast college has invited a famous writer to be a guest speaker in the campuswide distinguished speaker series. She is an accomplished poet and essayist. She is also a Marxist and favors more socialism in the United States. During her speech she is shouted down by a small group of conservative students and faculty.

4. Yang Lei is a conservative columnist for one of the best conservative journals in the country. But she yearns for greener pastures—namely, a regular column for a weekly news magazine. She gets her dream job, though the magazine does have liberal leanings. The first few columns she writes for the magazine are a shock to her friends. Politically they are middle-of-the-road or even suspiciously liberal.

5. Alex is a fourth-grade teacher at a suburban elementary school in Tennessee. He is liked by students and teachers alike, and he has superior teaching skills. He is also a homosexual. When a group of fundamentalist Christians learn that Alex is gay, they pressure the school board to fire him.

6. Sylvia writes a column for the university newspaper. In her last installment, she argues that in a time of national crisis, the U.S. justice department should have the power to arrest and detain literally anyone suspected of terrorism. Her arguments are well supported and presented with a tone of tolerance for those who disagree with her. And most students do disagree—vehemently. Hundreds of letters to the editor arrive at the newspaper, each one denouncing Sylvia and calling her a fascist and a few names that could not be published. In Sylvia’s next column, she apologizes for her statements, says that she made serious errors, and declares that her statements should be viewed as hypothetical.


Exercise 2.5

Read each of the following scenarios. Indicate whether it contains examples of self-interested thinking or face-saving and, for each instance, specify the possible negative consequences.
• 1. Barbara thinks that she is a superior student with excellent writing and math skills. She frequently says so to her friends and sometimes ridicules other people’s grades and test scores. She predicts that her SAT scores will be in the 1400s. When she finally takes the test, she’s calm, alert, and eager to get a fantastic score. Afterwards she says that she feels great. Her scores come back in the 800s. She explains that the test doesn’t count because it’s obviously scored wrong and, besides, she’s not a good test taker.

• 2. City assemblyman Jackson is in a position to cast the deciding vote on two proposals for the development of a new city park. Proposal 1 offers a parcel of land near the assemblyman’s house, which affords him a beautiful view. Its drawbacks are that it costs twice as much as proposal 2 and cannot be easily accessed by most of the public. Proposal 2 suggests a parcel of land near the center of town. It is convenient to the public, has a more beautiful setting, and will raise property values in the area. Assemblyman Jackson says that the obvious best choice is proposal 1.

3. Antonio is a college student who responds predictably to his scores on tests. If the score is high, he remarks that he hardly studied at all and that his score ranks among the highest in the class. If the scores are low, he says that the instructor grades unfairly, that the test was flawed, and that he intends to protest his grade to the grade-review committee.

4. Sheila is a bright medical scientist. For years she has been working on a series of clinical studies that could establish her favorite medical hypothesis—that high doses of vitamin E can cure skin cancer. Each study in the series has added more evidence suggesting that the hypothesis is probably true. The last study in the series is crucial. It is a much larger study than the others, and it will confirm or invalidate the usefulness of vitamin E for skin cancer. When the study is completed, she examines the data. Instead of confirming her hypothesis, the study suggests not only that her pet idea is unfounded but also that the doses of vitamin E used are toxic, causing terrible side effects in patients. She concludes, though, that the study results do not disconfirm her hypothesis but are merely inconclusive.

5. David and Max are in a heated debate about the theory of biological evolution. David rejects the theory in favor of creationism, which says that life on earth was created or facilitated by a supreme intelligence. Max rejects creationism in favor of evolution. David marshals an abundance of facts that seem to prove his case. In addition, he alleges that evolution is false because there are huge gaps in the fossil record suggesting that there has never been a smooth, tidy progression of species from earlier forms to later forms. Max has no answer for this fossil-record gap argument and looks exasperated. David is about to declare victory when Max suddenly begins to quote the research findings of reputable biologists showing that there really are no gaps. After the debate some of Max’s friends quietly congratulate him for being clever enough to quote research findings that are fictitious.
Field Problems

1. Recall a situation in your past in which your beliefs were skewed by self-interest, face-saving, or group pressure. Think about (1) how one or more of these three factors affected your beliefs, (2) what consequences (negative or positive) resulted from the event, and (3) what beliefs you might have acquired if you had used critical thinking. Take notes to help you remember the facts and be prepared to present your story in class.

2. Recall a situation in which the beliefs of someone you know were skewed by self-interest, face-saving, or group pressure to conform. Identify the three factors mentioned in the preceding question.

Self-Assessment Quiz

Answers appear in “Answers to Self-Assessment Quizzes” (Appendix C).

1. According to the definition of critical thinking given in the text, what factors must be present for critical thinking to be realized?

2. From the standpoint of critical thinking, what event signals that we have allowed our bias in favor of our selves to go too far?

3. According to the text, how might selective attention affect your thinking when you are examining evidence for or against a claim?

4. According to the text, what is probably the most powerful group pressure of all?

5. According to the text, what is a worldview?

6. What kind of doubt is involved in the acquisition of knowledge?

7. According to the text, why is it important to look for opposing evidence when evaluating claims?

Read each of the following scenarios. Indicate whether it contains examples of self-interested thinking, face-saving, or both.

8. Edgar predicts that Horace Windblower will win the 2008 presidential election. In fact, he bets money on it and brags that he always predicts the winners. Windblower loses by the widest margin in U.S. history. At first, Edgar refuses to pay the bet but finally relents. He claims that the election was rigged from the very beginning.

9. Lois strongly believes in UFO abductions—people being kidnapped by space aliens. She says that she has absolute proof: a small piece of metal that she says is “not of this earth” and a cut on her shin that she says came from alien probes. However, several metallurgists in the area say that the piece of metal is ordinary aluminum. And her daughter reminds her that she got the cut on her shin when she ran into a desk drawer.
Lois doesn’t say anything else about her “evidence,” and she asserts that the real proof is in the skies in the form of alien spacecraft.

10. One day Julie and Jill hear their instructor read a list of arguments for and against abortion. Half the arguments are pro, and half con. Julie is in on the pro side, Jill on the con side. Later when they discuss the abortion arguments, they recall the facts differently. Julie remembers that most of the arguments were for abortion rights. Jill remembers only the arguments against abortion and can’t recall any pro arguments.

Specify whether the following passages are examples of face-saving, self-serving, or group-pressure thinking, or a combination of these.

11. The world would be better off if everything were run by Republicans.
12. Everyone believes in affirmative action. That fact alone ought to convince you to do the same.
13. Look, every student I know cheats on exams once in a while. So why not you? Why do you have to be such a Boy Scout?
14. People should do whatever makes them happy.
15. Congressman Hornblower: Anyone who doesn’t believe in God shouldn’t have a say in how this nation is run. I don’t think that atheists should even be citizens.
16. Yes, I smoked marijuana in college, but I didn’t inhale.
17. In the United States about 90 percent of the population has some kind of religious belief or denominational affiliation. In light of this, how can you say you’re an unbeliever? If you’re an unbeliever, you’re un-American.

Read each of the following passages and indicate whether it is an example of the subjectivist fallacy or social relativism.

18. This may not be your truth, but it’s my truth.
19. It’s true for me that killing innocent civilians is morally wrong. It may not be true for you.
20. Chinese diplomat: My country cannot be judged by some universal standard. It must be judged by its own unique criteria and norms.

Integrative Exercises

These exercises pertain to material in Chapters 1 and 2.

1. What is an argument?
2. What is a statement, or claim? (Give an example of a statement and an example of a sentence that is not a statement.)
3. In what ways can a group that you belong to affect your evaluation of a claim?
4. According to the text, what critical thinking principle should you invoke when you’re trying to think clearly under group pressure?

For each of the following passages, indicate whether it contains an argument. For each argument, specify what the conclusion is and whether the passage contains an appeal to popularity or peer pressure.

5. You can never escape your past because your memory will always remind you of it.

6. Cloning any biological entity (including humans) is not worth the risk involved. Scientists have already reported some unexpected, dangerous side effects in the cloning of plants, and the clone of the famous Dolly the sheep has exhibited some cellular abnormalities.

7. Cloning is perfectly safe. It’s only religious nuts and conservative politicians who are making a big fuss about it.

8. It will be a great day when the Pentagon has to have a bake sale to raise money for bombs and guns and education gets billions of dollars.

9. Capitalism is an immoral, oppressive system. That’s just the way I was raised.

10. If you burn the American flag, you are guilty of treason. The flag is our country, and harming our flag is harming our country. Harming our country is treason.

11. Most Canadians believe that the prime minister is doing a great job. You can’t argue with the people. Therefore, he is doing a great job.

12. All your friends think your views on abortion are ridiculous. That should be proof enough that you’re wrong.

Read each of the following claims. Then select from the list any statements that, if true, would constitute good reasons for accepting the claim. Some statements may have no good reasons listed.

13. Corporation executives who cook the books should be imprisoned.
   a. Everyone in the business world believes that cooking the books should be punished by imprisonment.
   b. Polls show that most Americans are in favor of imprisoning executives who cook the books.
   c. In Russia it is common practice to imprison executives who cook the books.
   d. Imprisoning executives who cook the books is the only way to save American business from disaster and the only morally correct course of action.

14. Psychic predictions in tabloid newspapers are almost always accurate.
   a. This claim is true for me, even if it isn’t true for you.
b. It is impossible to know anything, so there is no way that anyone can legitimately claim that tabloid psychics are almost always right.
c. Massive amounts of research into psychic phenomena prove that tabloid psychics are usually correct in their predictions.
d. Believing that psychics cannot predict anything accurately is close-minded and petty. I refuse to be that way.

15. There is an afterlife. After you die, your essence lives on.

a. I have to believe in an afterlife. The alternative is too terrible to contemplate.
b. Over 80 percent of Americans believe in an afterlife.
c. This society believes that there is an afterlife.
d. On the radio I told two million people that there is an afterlife. So I have to believe in it. Otherwise, I’ll look like a fool.

For each of the following passages, determine whether an argument is present and whether peer pressure or an appeal to popularity is being used. Some passages may not contain arguments, and some may not contain examples of group pressure.

16. “Barbara Ehrenreich wrote tongue-in-cheek in her June column, ‘First, challenge anyone to find in the Bible . . . a single phrase or sentence forbidding the fondling or sodomizing of altar boys.’ . . . In fact, the Bible does have at least a single phrase or sentence forbidding just such a thing. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 (New International Version), Paul has a list of those who will not inherit the Kingdom. Although far from settled, one of the words in the list suggests that men in a mentoring relationship with young boys are ‘wicked’ if they engage in sexual acts with the boys.” [Letter to the editor, The Progressive, July 2002]

17. “[A] political scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology says, ‘I expect robust Internet voting by 2010.’ He may be right, but would this be a good thing? Remote voting by way of the Internet would privatize one of our few remaining civic rituals. Balloting technology is not politically neutral. The history of elections administration in this country shows that different ways of voting allocate political values differently.” [Letter to the editor, New York Times]

18. You must reject the proposition that violence in this country proves we need stronger gun-control laws. First, there is no documented connection between violence and the availability of guns. Second, if you accept the proposition, you will be the laughingstock of all of your fellow conservatives.

19. To teens, getting fake IDs to sneak into clubs and taverns may seem like a good idea, but it’s not. I think every teenager who tries it should be arrested.

20. Every thinking person in this country would disagree with you.
Writing Assignments

1. Read Essay 3 ("A Feminist Defense of Pornography") in Appendix A and write a summary of the essay in 75 to 100 words, specifying the premises, conclusion, and supporting evidence.

2. Study the argument presented in Essay 4 ("A Defense of Homosexuality"). Write a three-page assessment of the argument, touching on the truth of the premises and conclusion and the logic of the argument as a whole.

3. Select an issue from the following list and write a three-page paper defending a statement pertaining to the issue. Follow the procedure discussed in Appendix D for identifying a thesis and an appropriate argument to defend it.

   - Are the media biased?
   - Should a single corporation be allowed to own as many media outlets (newspapers, radio and TV stations, publishers, etc.) as it wants?
   - Should the U.S. government be allowed to arrest and indefinitely imprison without trial any American citizen who is suspected of terrorism?
   - Should racial profiling be used to do security screening of airline passengers?