

# The Power of Critical Thinking

## Chapter Objectives

- Understand the definition of critical thinking and the importance of the definition terms “*systematic*”, “*evaluation*”, “*formulation*”, and “*rational standards*”.
- Understand how critical thinking relates to *logic*, the *truth or falsity of statements*, *knowledge*, and *personal empowerment*.

## Why it matters

- Appreciate why critical thinking is better than the passive acceptances of beliefs.
- Appreciate the relevance of the claim “The unexamined life is not worth living” to critical thinking.
- Understand why the following claims are dubious: “Critical thinking makes people to critical or cynical”, “Critical thinking makes people cold and unemotional”, and “critical thinking is the enemy of creativity.”
- Appreciate the pervasive use of critical thinking in all human endeavours
- Understand how critical thinking empowers people.

## How it works

- Distinguish between *statements* and *non statements*
- Understand the basic concepts of *reasons*, *argument*, *inference*, *premises*, and *conclusion*.
- Know how to use indicator words to help pinpoint premises and conclusions.
- Be able to distinguish between passages that *do* and *do not contain an argument*.
- Be able to identify arguments in various contexts and distinguish between arguments and superfluous material, arguments and explanations, and premises and conclusions.

## Introduction

- The **quality or value of beliefs**, whether they be true or not, is the **fundamental concern** of critical thinking.
- Determining said quality of your beliefs is a *function of thinking*, best done by critical thinking. It is not about **what** you think, but rather **how** you think.
- The question about the value of beliefs **is not about** what **factors** have **caused** you to have the beliefs you do.
- Critical thinking **does not focus on what causes** a belief, but rather **whether it is worth believing**.
- A belief is **worth believing**, or accepting if we have **good reasons to** accept it.
- The better the reasons, the more likely the belief is to be true.
- Critical thinking is the **systemic evaluation or formulation of beliefs**, or statements, by rational standards.
- Systematic — it involves **distinct procedures** and methods. It entails **evaluation** and **formulation** because it's used to both assesses existing beliefs (yours or someone else's) and devise new ones. And it operates according to **rational standards** in that beliefs are judged by **how well they are supported by reasons**.

It involves logic, the study of good reasoning, and the rules that govern it, but it is broader because it also involves the truth or falsity of statements, the evaluation of arguments and evidence, the use of analysis and investigation, and the application of many other skills that help us decide what to believe or do. It ultimately leads to understanding, knowledge, and empowerment. It enables problem-solving, active learning and intelligent self-improvement.

## Why it matters

- In order to **rise above blind acceptance and arbitrary choices**. If this is done, control over one's own life is forfeited, a loss of personal freedom. These beliefs are **not really one's own**. To forgo such scrutiny is to abandon your chance of making your life deliberately and authentically meaningful. Thus critical thinking is not **only enlightening but also empowering**.
- The empowerment can take several forms: skills for learning and exploring, defence against error, manipulation, and prejudice, and tools for self-discovery.
- Critical thinking applies to your **worldview**, *the vast web of fundamental ideas that help you make sense of the world, what some people call a philosophy of life*. The parts of these webs are desirable when they fit together without internal contradictions.
- It isn't an all-or-nothing decision, it is used by everyone to some degree. Some will have none of this and believe that *critical thinking makes one excessively critical or cynical, emotionally cold, and creatively constrained*. These people take anything logical and think of it as a *negative enterprise* designed to attack someone else's thinking, as *faultfinding* or carping.
- However critical thinking is designed in the sense of *'exercising or involving careful judgement or judicious evaluation.'* Determining what we are justified in believing, openness to other points of view, a tolerance for opposing perspectives, a focus on the issue at hand, and fair assessments of arguments and evidence. Good critical thinking does not make cynics, people make cynics.
- Critical thinking is not cold, it and feelings complement each other. Whilst part of critical thinking is to *make sure emotions don't cloud judgements*, it can also *clarify them* and deal with them more effectively.
- It isn't a sterile and rigid mode of thought that constrains the imagination, hobbles artistic vision, and *prevents 'thinking outside the box'*. Critical thinkers are able to think creatively, they can use it to enhance and assess creation however. It perfects creation.
- When we refuse to consider any alternative explanations or theories, we are deep in the box.
- Our thinking guides our actions, so it should be of high quality.
- If you have never critically examined your beliefs, they are not truly yours.
- To examine your beliefs is to examine your life. *"The unexamined life is not worth living."*
- It involves determining what we're justified in believing, being opening to new perspectives, and fairly assessing the views of others and ourselves.

- It provides skills for learning and exploring; defines against error, manipulation, and prejudice; and tools for self-discovery.
- Critical thinking complements both our emotions and our creativity.
- Critical thinking is thinking outside the box.

## How it works.

### Claims and reasons.

- A belief is just another word for statement, or claim. A statement is an assertion that something is or is not the case. The following are statements: a triangle has three sides. I am cold. You are a liar. Etc. They assert whether something is actual or not, a kind of thing that may or may not be true. Whilst nobody might believe it, it is still a statement.
- In critical thinking, one is either evaluating or formulating statements, and how strongly to believe them. The strength of belief depends on the quality of the reasons in favor of the statements. Statements backed by good reasons are worthy of strong acceptance. Statements that fall short are not.

### Reasons and Arguments

- These provide support for a statement. They provide us with grounds for believing that a statement is true. Reasons are expressed as statements. A combination of reasons is known as an argument. This is the most important tool we have for evaluating the truth of statements and for formulating statements that are worthy of acceptance. Arguments are essential for the advance of knowledge in all fields.  
Reasons given in support of a statement are called premises. The statement that the premises are intended to support is called the conclusion.
- An argument is thus a group of statements in which some of them (the premises) are intended to support another of them (the conclusion).

#### Premise indicators

- because
- in view of the fact
- given that
- seeing that
- as
- due to the fact that
- being that
- since
- assuming that
- for the reason that
- since
- assuming that
- for the reason that
- inasmuch as
- as indicated by
- for
- the reason being

#### Conclusion indicators

- therefore
- thus
- which implies that
- consequently
- it follows that we can conclude that
- so
- hence
- it must be that
- as a result
- which means that
- ergo

**Statement (claim):** an assertion that something is or is not the case.

**Premise:** A statement given in support of another statement.

**Conclusion:** A statement that premises are used to support.

**Argument:** A group of statements in which some of them (the premises) are intended to support another of them (the conclusion).

**Explanation:** A statement or statements asserting why or how something is the case.

Indicator words; Words that frequently accompany arguments and signal that a premise or conclusion is present.

#### KEY WORDS

argument	conclusion	critical thinking	explanation	indicator words	inference
logic	premise	statement			

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## A SUMMARY

- Critical thinking is the systematic evaluation or formulation of beliefs, or statements, by rational standards. Critical thinking is *systematic* because it involves distinct procedures and methods. It entails *evaluation* and *formulation* because it's used to both assess existing beliefs (yours or someone else's) and devise new ones. And it operates according to reasonable standards in that beliefs are judged according to the reasons and reasoning that support.

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## WHY IT MATTERS

- Critical thinking matters because our lives are defined by our actions and choices, and our actions and choices are guided by our thinking. Critical thinking helps guide us toward beliefs that are worthy of acceptance, that can help us be successful in life, however we define success.
- A consequence of not thinking critically is a loss of personal freedom. If you passively accept beliefs that have been handed to you by your family and your culture, then those beliefs are not really yours. If they are not really yours, and you let them guide your choices and actions, then they-not you-are in charge of your life. Your beliefs are yours only if you critically examine them for yourself to see if they are supported by good reasons.
- Critical thinking does not necessarily lead to cynicism. It can complement our feelings by helping us sort them out. And it doesn't limit creativity-it helps perfect it.

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## HOW IT WORKS

- Critical thinking is a rational, systematic process that we apply to beliefs of all kinds. Belief is another word for statement, or claim. A statement is an assertion that something is or is not the case. When you're engaged in critical thinking, you are mostly either evaluating a statement or trying to formulate one. In both cases your primary task is to figure out how strongly to believe the statement, based on how likely it is to be true. The strength of your belief will depend on the strength of reasons in favour of the statement.
- In critical thinking an argument is not a feud but a set of statements-statements supposedly providing reasons for accepting another statement. The statements given in support of another statement are called the premises. The statement that the premises are used to support is called the conclusion. An argument then is a group of statements in which some of them (the premises) are intended to support another of them (the conclusion).
- Being able to identify arguments is an important skill on which many other critical thinking skills are based. The task is made easier by indicator words that frequently accompany arguments and signal that a premise or conclusion is present. Premise indicators include for, since, and because. Conclusion indicators include so, therefore, and thus.
- Arguments almost never appear neatly labeled for identification. They usually come imbedded in a lot of statements that are not part of the arguments. Arguments can be complex and lengthy. Your main challenge is to identify the conclusion and premises without getting lost in all the other verbiage.

# 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 (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.

### Key Words

- appeal to common practice
- appeal to popularity (or to the masses)
- peer pressure
- philosophical skepticism
- philosophical skeptics
- social relativism
- stereotyping
- subjective relativism
- subjectivist fallacy
- worldview

## 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**.