

Critical Thinking & Bias

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Introduction

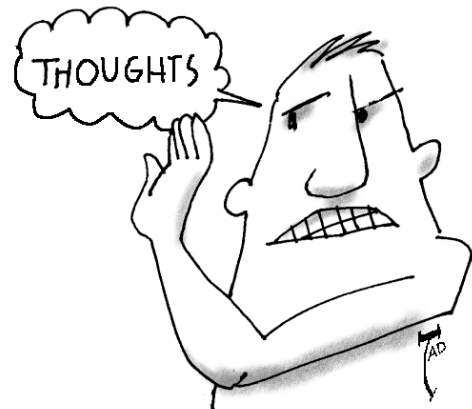
Intro Bias Effects Subjectivity Critical Thinking

You've probably heard about *critical thinking*. Most websites describe it as using all your mental abilities—to notice, to analyze, to compare, to get examples, to point to evidence, and so on. Generally it means being keenly analytical and somewhat suspicious. You'll can find over 10 million websites that tell you how to think critically.

I'll let you explore these on your own. They have good things to say, but, as far as I have found so far, not one of them deals with the Big Problem in thinking:

We don't want to think.

I'm not talking about motivation. Certainly, we need motivation when we're tired or lazy. And I'm not talking about deliberate retreats from thinking when we enjoy our children, listen to a concert, or bask in the sun. Nor am I talking about *preferences*, as in, "I have a bias for chocolate" and "I am really biased against anyone who hates country-western music."



Rather, I'm talking about not wanting to think. And when we don't want to think about certain things, we have to fight against our natural desire to learn. Essentially, learning is asking and answering questions. Since we experience a desire to learn as the emergence of questions in our mind, to avoid thinking, we have to avoid the questions. That is, there are certain questions we simply will not let surface. There are areas in all our lives where we feel some confusion deep down but we won't take a look. We can *feel* that we have some intellectual puzzlements, but we won't let ourselves *think* about them. We are biased against these questions.

Here are five basic types of questions that we refuse to think about: 1

5 Biases

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Obsession

Everyone gets obsessed now and then, but for most of us there are some obsessions that repress the very questions that might heal their obsessions, namely: **We don't want to think about our obsessions.**

For example,

An argumentative man may admit he can be defensive, but prefer not to ask himself what it is that he so compulsively defends. He prides himself in being The Defender. He may go to his grave consoled by having always steadfastly held his ground and remained faithful to principles, but ignorant of having always desperately—but unsuccessfully—wanted his father to respect his opinions.

An anal-retentive mother, always telling everyone what they should be doing, will not wonder why mess and disorder threaten her so. She may laugh at her obsession for order, and even boast of being The Organizer, without ever wondering why she's obsessed. If someone else tries to take over the cleaning, she will feel hurt or frustrated, but not understand why. Perhaps she has a daughter who suffers from unpredictable seizures, or perhaps her parents' main mode of communication was yelling. She doesn't want to take a clear-eyed look at her obsession.

Mr. Milquetoast finds comfort in going with the flow, but he won't hear his inner voices that see bad water ahead. He considers himself The Calmer. It's not that he is too stupid to foresee problems; rather, his obsession with pleasing others and smoothing over relationships diverts his intelligence away from avoidable disasters in the future.

Mrs. Duegooder is always helping others—baking cakes, sending birthday cards, asking, "How *are* you, *really*?" But she simply will not accept help from others, let alone ask for it. She prides herself in being "self-less" — The Helper — when that very pride prevents her from asking the self-ennobling question, "Would it actually be better for me to ask for help?"

Similar examples could be given for The Star, The Artist, The Brain, The Explorer, and The Debunker.² These are genuine strengths; they gained them partly by natural disposition and partly by successful functioning. But they tend to assume that their strengths apply in every circumstance.

It's their All-Purpose Tool. It's their spontaneous reaction to problems. But it is also our nature to seek understanding. For this, we need the habit of noticing when we don't understand and letting our intellectual discomfort play in our subconscious for a while on the chance that an insight may pop up. This habit is rarer than most people realize.

Another way that obsessions show is being addicted to some behavior—like clipping coupons, checking the toilet three times after flushing, or texting ten times a day. In fixations on certain activities, we don't want to ask ourselves, "Is something more important for my life right now?"

These neurotic habits may just irritate others, but they powerfully inhibit the questions that could liberate us from this psychic prison. For convincing evidence on how serious a resistance to thinking about our obsessions can become, we might visit a psychologist's waiting room. The patients there are aware enough to admit they have a problem, but it usually takes a therapist months of tactical talking to slip behind their refusal to think about their obsessions. The reason an obsession is so resistant to healing is that it maintains itself by repressing the very questions that would reveal the absurdity of the obsession itself.

But, more ordinarily, to really learn about how obsession works, there is no better way than to catch ourselves. A "bias" does not mean we have the obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is a serious problem. But it does mean that all of us have a tendency, a leaning, an inclination to **get fixated on certain memories or projects or fears or our own strengths and then not let ourselves wonder if we are fixated.**

Egotism

Where the bias of obsession avoids learning *indeliberately*, through repression, the bias of egotism avoids learning *deliberately*, through suppression. Notice the difference: Repression avoids questions unconsciously, while suppression avoids them consciously and deliberately. Where neurotic obsession tends to equate guilt feelings with actual guilt, egotism tends to dismiss guilt feelings in the first place.

Egotism shows when we earnestly ignore anything that might benefit others at our expense. We aren't stupid. We have the intelligence to make things better all around, but we dedicate our minds to getting whatever we can for ourselves. We suppress our imagination about the well-being of others. In short, the bias of egotism is **a tendency to avoid thinking what benefits other individuals.**

We don't listen much to others because we assume our preoccupations are more important.

We set boundaries to what we'll think about: "I'm not the sort of person who enjoys reading about handicapped people."

We avoid thinking that our job perks may be excessive.

We connive to make comments only when it will advance our reputations, and we spontaneously suppress questions that both reveal our ignorance and give others a chance to look smarter.

We really don't want to get involved with others, so we keep to ourselves, avoiding conflict, but protecting our little patch of turf.

We work hard at our job, even cooperate with others, but mainly for our own benefit. We have no genuine commitment to the goals of our company/agency/institution/religion/family.

We won't dwell on harm we have done to others.

Egotism is powerfully self-sustaining. This is because egotistical impulses set up self-securing defenses that grow stronger over time. The more frequently we obey these impulses, the more habitual our egotism becomes. The more intelligently we pursue this course, the more we rationalize Sinatra's "I did it my way" approach to life. And the more successful we are in getting what we want, the more recognition we receive from others who themselves value strong, self-reliant independence. Conversely, others can mistrust us, but this only gives us more reason to take care of ourselves alone. In any case, the result is that we hardly have to think at all about suppressing selfless questions. We automatically think of "good" as just "good for me."

Sometimes it may be difficult to tell whether a person's dominant bias is a neurotic obsession or a deliberate egotism. One clue is that people dominated by obsession fear they're getting worse, while people dominated by egotism assume they're getting better.

Groupism

Where egotism avoids learning what benefits other individuals, groupism avoids learning what benefits other groups. People in whom groupism is dominant can appear quite selfless. Indeed, the stronger the groupism, the weaker the egotism. They set aside personal interests for the sake of others, but only to a point—the point where another group's interests are at odds with their own group's. Their field of moral vision is wider than personal advantage, but it is still limited by a line that divides "us" from "them." **They don't want to think of what benefits other groups and what may be irrational in their own.**

Groupism can show in groups of any size. For example:

Employees avoid wondering whether their company's usefulness has come to an end—even when it has.

Members of a union or military unit or police department or firefighting team love trashing their counterparts in other units.

Dedicated Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc., spontaneously defend their practices and priorities—often despite concrete evidence that greater spiritual depth is found in other congregations.

Earnest patriots measure their commitment by how effectively their nation dominates other nations.

A manager shows favoritism toward certain employees in a way that creates "sides" in a department.

Be careful not to confuse groupism with loyalty. True loyalty to a group will always be open to the possibility of criticizing one's own group for being overly competitive, overly demeaning of other groups, or overly hoarding what other groups genuinely need. Truly loyal members of a group often blow the whistle on dangers to the group's well-being even when the majority find the whistle-blower annoying.

Also, be careful not to confuse groupism with egotism. Egotism may drive company heads to create a great spirit of loyalty, cooperation and dedication to common goals, but if they are using their positions mainly for purposes of career, money and fame, they will find ways to terminate employees who undermine these purposes in any way. Nor will they hesitate to leave the group if some other group offers greater personal payoffs.

Like egotism, groupism is self-sustaining, but even more powerfully. Where egotism thrives on securing strong *personal* habits, groupism thrives on strong *social and cultural* routines. Indeed, in an ironic twist of human affectivity, the very camaraderie that can liberate the victim of egotism will only imprison the victim of groupism. Egoists have only themselves to overcome, and their liberation is usually welcomed by their friends. But people who question the merits of their group would have to overcome the groupism of their friends, who tend to gang up on dissenters.

A bias favoring the well being of one's own group to the exclusion of all others thrives on cultural myths. We speak of these myths as "what we all know": What White People Do. How Muslims Act. What Homosexuals

Are Really After. The simpler the picture, the stronger the myth and the more unrelated to actual lives. Plain experience doesn't undermine the myth for those with unquestioning group allegiance because they already rely on the myth to filter their plain experiences of foreigners, misfits, and eccentrics, letting in only the data that proves the myth to be true.

Commonsensism

By commonsensism I mean our tendency to trust our common sense as sufficient for all problems. It's the bartender doling out advice with the beer; it's the politician promising immediate action to voters' problems. Ironically, common sense commonly lacks the sense to explore the psychological and sociological factors in situations. Nor does common sense scan history at any depth. It hopes to change behaviors without the bother of understanding minds that were shaped by generations of forebears.

Typically, commonsensism shows in the assumption that it's always better to take some action than no action at all. No doubt, tackling immediate problems is often better than sitting around planning global solutions. But is it better in every case? Do we not we make things worse when we tackle immediate problems without some knowledge of the general nature of the problem and its particular history?

Common sense looks to the practical, the interpersonal, the immediate, and the palpable. And these vary widely, place to place, culture to culture. Common sense easily spots the quick and dirty solution but is blind to the slower but cleaner view afforded by wider perspectives. In complicated situations, it doesn't bother to peel back layers of erroneous assumptions among participants. It is chronically vulnerable to the Myth of the Simple—the assumption that progress must be based on simple strategies, simple principles. This is true of anyone who prides themselves in relying on common sense above all. **They don't want to think about the history or the complexity of situations.**

Here are examples of how commonsensism appears in various people's worlds:

Whose World	The Simple Myth	The Complex Reality
Automobile Sales-person	"Our company will simply go out of business if we don't sell more cars!"	The purchase of an automobile is essentially an exchange agreement: The buyer gives the seller money in exchange for a safe and reliable car. What ensures a company's long-term viability is that it effectively and consistently meets the terms of this agreement.
Taxpayer	"Honey, we got a big tax refund!"	The IRS collected interest on their overpayments—money lost to the taxpayer.
Smoker	"Not everyone who smokes gets cancer."	Common sense assumes that statistical odds are abstract. In fact they are concrete and reliable predictors of events which, in this case, will likely bring on a host of avoidable problems, including death.
Anybody	I can predict how well I would perform in any situation.	Most people overestimate their own competence and underestimate the difficulty of complex tasks they face. ³

A more immediate example is your experience of reading this essay. You've made it this far, and it hasn't been a leisurely saunter through a meadow. It's been an uphill climb, and you've often had to rest to get your bearings. You may be impatient to reach the end. All this is your direct experience of the bias of common sense against deep thinking. It infects everyone. It accounts for all kinds of disagreements about what to do, even among people deeply committed to doing what's really better.

Secularism

In Latin, *saeculum* means an *epoch* or a *lifetime*—meaning time-bound human existence. In English, *secular* has come to mean *worldly* or at least *non-religious*. Here, however, I use *secularism* to designate a bias in our intelligence that **avoids thinking about anything that may be beyond or above the world of our experience—something whose**

roots and blossoms are outside of yet encompass space and time.

We can include it as a bias against thinking because it is actually part of our human nature to think about reality beyond the space-time world we immediately experience. For example, consider these questions:

Is **beauty** about anything beyond human life as we know it? We easily appreciate beauty; we can never have enough. Yet we may never have wondered why we, unlike all other animals, have an aesthetic sensibility. Moreover, we can avoid letting beauty ignite any desire in our hearts to see, hear, touch and live within a higher and ultimate harmony in everything. Might there be an Artist behind all this?

Does **understanding** relate to anything beyond human life as we know it? We know what it means to understand. It's figuring how things might work and for what purpose. It's getting a creative insight into better ways of doing things. Yet the universe itself is understandable. It has an order, a complex of laws and probabilities that we can understand. Is our universe itself the *result* of an understanding of a Genius beyond the human?

Does **reality** cover anything beyond what we know of human life? Everything we know began. Each thing we know depended on something else to appear. Everything depends on other things to continue existing. Does reality include something that depends on nothing, and on which everything depends? How else would the universe get its start? Might all created things, all creative activities, be shares in an Uncreated One?

Does **good** refer only to the objects of our making and appreciating, or might our ability to make and appreciate be itself a good—made and appreciated by a Benevolence beyond our human selves?

Is **friendship** restricted to our relations to one another or might the universe be the place made by a Lover for the sake of friendship? More urgently, our failure to achieve global peace prompts questions like these: Are we really self-sufficient or do we need to look beyond the human for help? Are the many disasters we witness in history the result of people assuming that humans are self-sufficient?

To be human is to feel inner desires for beauty, understanding, reality, goodness, and friendship, and to feel them in such a way that we always desire more. As we pursue them, we transcend the selves we are to

become ever more artistic, insightful, creative, caring, and open to being in love. The question lurks in our very desires: Shall I let my self-transcendence go all the way? The prospect is indeed scary; holiness can be feared—which explains the allure of the secularism bias that says, “Well, I just won’t think about all that right now.”

Effects

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Unresolved Questions

A major effect of not wanting to think is an intellectual blind spot. When we don’t ask questions that are relevant, confusing situations continue to confuse us and we don’t ask why. Problems remain unsolved even when everyone agrees that the problems exist. For example, consider the following concerns:

- What’s going on in our schools, hospitals, and law courts?
- What’s going on with my spouse, parents, or child?
- What’s going on in my career, my health, my recreation?
- What’s going on in health care insurance?
- What’s going on in the Middle East?

What these situations *mean* is identical to what *people* mean by them, and what *people* mean by them is often distorted by bias in their intelligence. Meanings can be filtered by obsessions, distorted by egotism or groupism, skimmed over by commonsensism, or assumed to be about human life only. So when we try to make things better but selectively turn our blind eye to certain aspects of things, good will and generosity are not enough. Things usually get worse.

In any discussion about situations like these, we will find people more or less blind in these ways. A few may see clearly the areas where their vision is blurred by bias, and another few may be totally blind to certain issues, but most of us have somewhat fuzzy images of our blind spots. So our deliberations drag on, and our resolutions seem fraught with compromise.

Worse yet, these biases have all the self-propagating features of viruses. Once they settle into a suitable host site, they infect our other intellectual organs. We get used to them. We consider them at first rather trivial, then somewhat benign, then a strength, and eventually a source of pride. Here we spread the virus to others. We brag about being a little compulsive, or “taking care of Number One,” or loyal to the death, or being someone of “total common sense,” or being completely “worldly-

wise." Parents teach these biases to their children; teachers press them on their students.

The presence of intellectual blind spots explains why people with the same natural rights, the same equality of opportunity, the same intellectual potential, even the same commitment to religious values can come to radically different conclusions about what is better.

Labeling

A major clue that people may be biased in some way or another is the phenomenon of labeling. When a man refers to others as *savages*, *idiots*, or *screwballs*, he is generalizing, which is perfectly acceptable in many situations. But if he then dismisses any further questions for deeper understanding, he is also biased. Similarly, when a woman refers to others as *geniuses*, *stars*, or *saints*, she too is generalizing. But if she too dismisses any further questions that would lead to deeper understanding, she is also biased. Of course, generalizing is part of the mind's natural curiosity to notice commonalities among individuals. But bias is a dysfunction. When our labels block further relevant questions, then no matter how high our IQs, we are functionally stupid for the simple reason that we do not let our mind's natural desire to understand pursue the matter further. In other words, labeling is often a cheap substitute for understanding.

Subjectivity

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To think critically about bias solves an age-old problem about whether objectivity is better than subjectivity. We often hear people say, "That's just your subjective opinion; you need to be objective." The assumption here is that subjectivity is bad and objectivity is good.

But there's a bug in the butter. Wouldn't you trust a woman of intelligence and character? Wouldn't you sit up and listen closely to a man who has written beautiful poetry? Wouldn't you take seriously the reflections of people who won the Noble Peace Prize? This is because we trust the subjectivity of people who are unbiased—whose attention doesn't get fixated on petty things, whose concerns are as much for others as for themselves, who dig deeply into complex problems so as to heal them at their roots, who are aware of a desire for holiness. Wouldn't you be inclined to think of them as objective persons?

The point is simple: Objectivity is not the opposite of subjectivity. It is the opposite of *biased* subjectivity. Therefore objectivity is the *result* of *unbiased* subjectivity. So when people tell you, "You're just being

subjective," you could say, "Actually, what I worry about is being biased. Do you think I am?"

Critical Thinking *Intro Bias Effects Subjectivity Critical Thinking*

So, to come back to the topic of *critical thinking*, how might we ensure that our thinking be truly "critical?" Mainly by being self-critical. That is, the more we notice how obsession, egotism, groupism, commonsensism, and secularism infect our natural thinking processes, the better able we are to face important questions ourselves. To think critically means monitoring our own thinking first to see if there are questions we won't ask.

The more aware we are of these biases in our own lives, the more quickly we will spot them in others. When people say or write things we find odd, or exaggerated, or self-serving, or overly dramatic, we can more quickly ask ourselves how they may be biased in their thinking.

So whenever you hear, "Think Outside the Box," translate this mentally as "Think Outside the Bias." That is, liberate your mental creativity by unveiling questions that you habitually cover over; aim to liberate the creativity of others by helping them bring their deeply buried questions up into the light.

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¹ I take material on the first four biases from Bernard Lonergan's *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, v. 3. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. It originally appeared in 1957 (London: Longmans, Green & Todd). See "Dramatic Bias," ch. 6, sec. 2.7, "Individual Bias," "Group Bias," and "General Bias," ch. 7, secs. 6-8, pp. 214-26, 244-56. In later works, he refers to them variously as (1) "the neurotic," (2) "the individual egotist," (3) "group egoism," and (4) "the overconfident shortsightedness of common sense." See "Healing and Creating in History," and "Mission and the Spirit," in *A Third Collection*, (New York: Paulist Press. 1985. Pages 100-09, 23-34). For brevity, I have named them obsession, egotism, group bias, and commonsensism, respectively. I added my own reflections on the bias of secularism that avoids thinking about human origins, motives, and destinies rooted in a possibly super-natural order.

² The Enneatype system identifies these nine types of fixations as forming a basic set of biases in self-image. For details, see Tad Dunne, *Enneatypes: Method and Spirit*. Universal Publishers / uPublish.com, 1999.

³ This has recently been called the Dunning-Kruger effect, named after David Dunning and Justin Kruger who conducted a study on this phenomenon at Cornell University in 1999. People who don't know much usually don't know how ignorant they are. Most lack the habit of facing the questions that might reveal their own ignorance to themselves. As a result, they make decisions without first seeking information.