

Clear and Present Thinking

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Chapter Two: Habits of Good and Bad Thinking

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We have seen some of the problems that can arise when different world views and different intellectual environments come into conflict with each other. Now let us look at some of the problems that can arise when a given world view comes into conflict with *itself*. There are various ways that people think, and various ways people pull their world views together, which actually make it harder for people to find the truth about anything, communicate with each other effectively, and solve their problems. And there are other ways people think which make it easier to communicate, solve problems, and discover truths. I shall call these things ‘good and bad thinking habits’.

Note that I call these principles of thinking ‘habits’ rather than rules. This is because there are various exceptions to each of them. There can occasionally be situations in which a good thinking habit might be inappropriate, or in which a bad thinking habit might be very useful. But such exceptions tend to be very rare. You will almost always be thinking rationally and clearly when your thinking follows the good habits and avoids the bad habits.

The bad habits tend to arise in two ways. They arise because of **how we think**: these bad habits are mostly psychological factors such as fears, motivations, and attitudes. Bad habits also arise because of **what we think**: these habits arise when our thinking involves problematic beliefs. Again, thinking in terms of such bad habits are not signs that one’s thinking is *necessarily* or *inevitably* wrong. (In this way, they are different from the fallacies, which we will discuss later on.) They do, however, tend to make one’s thinking very

weak, and very vulnerable to criticism and objection. They also tend to make one’s views and beliefs easily manipulated by other people. When they form a prominent part of one’s intellectual environment, they tend to introduce faults into one’s world view.

2.1.1 Self-Interest

On its own, self interest need not be a bad thing. Most people make decisions at least in part on the basis of what they think will benefit them. Self-interest can be a problem when you advance some argument or defend some world view only because you personally stand to benefit if it’s true, and for no other reason.

The notion of self-interest has an important place in some specialized forms of reasoning, such as game theory and economics. We find it in sources as ancient as Aristotle: his claim that everyone by nature desires happiness was the starting place for his theory of ethics. We find it in the work of John Stuart Mill, who made the pursuit of ‘utility’, meaning pleasure or personal benefit, the basis of his theory of ethics, called Utilitarianism. Adam Smith, widely regarded as ‘the father of modern economics’, also placed self-interest at the centre of his work. To Smith, self-interest was a normal part of rational human behaviour, and often a very self-defeating kind of behaviour. But in a properly functioning economy, Smith reasoned, businesspeople and investors would direct their self-interest toward public goods.

Self-interest also plays an important part in a branch of mathematics called game theory. Without

going into a lot of detail about each of these writers and others who were like them, let it suffice to say that self-interest is a very powerful psychological force in people's minds. All the writers mentioned here are very careful to specify the ways in which self-interest is rational and useful, and the ways in which it is irrational and even damaging. For this reason, some logicians prefer to separate 'intelligent self interest' from ordinary selfishness and egotism. Intelligent self-interest looks for the 'bigger picture', sees the ways in which one's own interests can align with other people's interests, is willing to sacrifice short-term benefits for the sake of longer-term benefits, and recognizes that some kinds of benefits or advantages for the self are not really worth pursuing.

Self-interest tends to get in the way of good reasoning when people have a strong emotional or economic stake in something that looks like it might be under threat from others. In such situations, people tend to get passionate and emotional, and this almost always clouds their judgments. If you secretly want something to be true, and you stand to benefit from it being true (for instance, if you might make money that way), but there's little or no reason for it to be true, you may inadvertently misinterpret the evidence, or discount contradictory evidence, or invent rationalizations that have little or no logical strength. This can lead you to a faulty understanding of your situation, and as a result you are more likely to make bad decisions.

2.1.2 Saving Face

Among the various ways that people are self-interested, most people are also interested in having a good reputation, and being liked or even admired by others around them. No one, or almost no one, enjoys having their faults, weaknesses, harmful actions, or foolish choices pointed out to them by others. Moreover nobody, or almost nobody, likes to be proven wrong by others. And this, by itself, is not a bad thing. But because of this interest, people sometimes cover up their mistakes. Or, if it is shown to them that some of their ideas or beliefs are unworkable or absurd, they might continue to argue in favour of them anyway, in

order to avoid admitting that the other person might be right. When we do this, we are falling into the habit of saving face.

The habit of saving face is in some ways related to a condition described by psychologists called "**cognitive dissonance**". This is what happens when someone is confronted with, or contemplates, two or more beliefs that cannot both be true at the same time. (Especially these two contradictory thoughts: "I am a good person" and "I caused someone harm".) Most people are strongly psychologically disposed to avoid having contradictions like that in their thoughts. And most people don't like to have muddled thoughts like that pointed out to them by others: it makes us look foolish. And so people tend to invent self-interested reasons to reject one or other of the contradicting beliefs, with the real purpose of restoring their sense of self worth. But this can sometimes blind us to the truth, or even prevent people from finding out what the truth really is.

Examples:

"Only six people came to the company picnic. I was on the organizing team. But it wasn't my job to send out the invitations."

"I got an 'F' on that essay. But I'm getting an 'A' in all my other classes. Clearly, the professor doesn't know what he's doing."

"Jim has been my best friend for ten years and he's always been nice to me. So I just can't believe he is the one who stole the old man's wallet. You must be mistaken."

"Sally has been my best friend for ten years. But tonight she stole my wallet. I guess she was a bad person all along, and she just tricked me into thinking she was a good person."

2.1.3 Peer Pressure

All of us are members of various communities and social groups, as we saw in the discussion of world

views and intellectual environments. Each of those groups tends to have a few prevalent ideas, practices, and beliefs, that form part of the group's identity. Here let us add that most of these groups also exert a bit of psychological pressure on the members to accept the group's prevalent ideas, practices, and beliefs. Sometimes that pressure can be very subtle, and very limited. You might get nothing more than an odd look or a cold shoulder if you say something that doesn't fit with the group's main beliefs. Other times, it might be very overt and unambiguous, and perhaps connected to threats of punishment for non-conformity. You might be shut out of the group's decision-making process, or not invited to the group's events anymore, or (if one's non-conformity is persistent) even targeted with malicious gossip or threats of violence. Thus, people tend to keep their dissenting views to themselves, or they change their views to better fit the group. Now, the ideas shared by the group might be right, or they might be wrong, or they might be somewhere in between. But the number of people who believe those ideas has nothing to do with whether those ideas are any good. Problems almost always arise when someone accepts an idea or a world view *only* because it is an idea or a world view favoured by the group he or she belongs to, and for no other reason.

2.1.4 Stereotyping and Prejudice

Since we are speaking of peer pressure: a community or social group might have a few beliefs about people who belong to other groups. The group might look up to other groups, or down upon them, or attribute some quality or behavioral trait to all of them. This becomes a bad habit when there is little or no real evidence that all members of that other group share that quality. We might build stereotypes of people based on how they are characterised in entertainment media, or on your experiences meeting one or two members of that group. But in terms of the actual evidence to support the stereotype, the 'sample size' is always too small. It's usually based on only a handful of cases, and then generalized to a massively larger group. In this way it is a case of the fallacy of hasty generalization. In fact, the

sample size can be as small as zero: some people develop stereotypes without any evidence at all. They've just been taught to think that way by their intellectual environment. Stereotyping almost always treats people as tokens of a type, almost never as individuals with their own distinct qualities. In this way, it prevents us from knowing the truth about individuals, and can even prevent us from knowing the truth about the various groups that person might belong to.

As stereotyping is the assumption that all members of a given social group are somehow basically the same; so too is prejudice a hostile or harmful judgment about the merit or the worth of people in that group, assigned on the basis of a stereotypical assumption. One of the ideas that a group might pressure its members to believe is the idea that one's own group is better than other groups. This almost always leads people to see the ideas and world views of rival groups in the very worst possible light. And it leads people to treat members of the rival group badly. Racism, sexism, religious discrimination, classism, poor-bashing, and able-ism, are all examples of this. Prejudice is also hurtful when the qualities it assigns are qualities that subordinate people or which deny them full membership in the human race. There might be a spectrum of intensity, which at one end attributes only a few relatively minor bad qualities such as foolishness or uncleanness, and which at the other might incite strong feelings of hate or fear, such as criminality, emotional instability, animalistic physical features, disease, or even a secret conspiratorial agenda. But in any case, stereotyping and prejudice almost always prevents people from seeing things and people as they truly are.

Why do prejudiced beliefs persist? The main reason is because those beliefs are supported by peer pressure. When among prejudiced people, uttering a disparaging remark about the target group might be actually encouraged and rewarded in various ways: smiles, happy laughter, welcoming gestures, and approving words. In this way, prejudiced beliefs persist when people do not think for themselves, but rather when they allow other (prejudiced) people to do their thinking for them.

2.1.5. Excessive Skepticism

It is usually very healthy to be a little bit skeptical of things, and not to take things at face value all the time. Some people, however, believe that we cannot truly know anything unless we can be absolutely certain of it, and that we are beyond any possible doubt about it. That level of skepticism is almost always too much.

Excessive skepticism tends to appear when people try to estimate the riskiness of some activity. The excessively skeptical person tends to make a 'big deal' of the risks involved, and might be unwilling to do anything until he is satisfied that everything is absolutely safe and certain. Or he might be unwilling to do something because 'it's never been tried before.' But it's often the case that we have to act even in situations where success is very uncertain, and there is no way to absolutely guarantee safety. The moon landings from 1969-72 are good examples here. No one really knew whether the missions would succeed, or fail, or even end in total disaster. (At one time, astronomers thought that the dark 'seas' on the moon were made of sand, and they worried that the landing craft would sink!) The excessively skeptical person weighs the risks too heavily, and often ends up unable to act because of that skepticism. He may even try to prevent others from acting, because of his own doubts.

Excessive skepticism can also appear in matters that are almost purely theoretical. For instance, some people might doubt the reality of the world outside their own minds. It can be fun to speculate about whether or not we are being deceived by Descartes' Evil Genius, or whether we are all living inside a computer-generated virtual reality. Sometimes it can be fun to ask 'How do you know?' in an infinite regress, the way small children sometimes do.

But most of the time, we don't need to have such high standards for certainty. It is enough that one's beliefs are beyond *reasonable* doubt; they do not have to be beyond *all possible* doubt. As a rule of thumb, remember that **doubt based on speculation without evidence is not reasonable doubt**. It's not enough to say that something is doubtful because some alternative explanation might be possible. It's also important

to say something about how probable the alternative explanation really is. If an alternative explanation is possible but very unlikely, and there isn't much evidence for it, then it isn't a good basis for skepticism. So if you dreamed last night that you ran away to a foreign country and married your worst enemy, then that 'might' be because in some parallel universe that's exactly what you did. But there's no evidence to support that possibility, so it's best to discount it as a reasonable explanation for your dream.

We shall see more about skepticism among the good thinking habits, and later on we'll see it again in the discussion of reasonable doubt.

2.1.6 Intellectual Laziness

This is the habit of "giving up too soon," or deliberately avoiding the big questions. This is the habit we indulge when we say things like: "thinking that way is too confusing," or "your questions drive me crazy," or "these questions cannot be answered, you just have to accept it." Laziness also appears when you answer a philosophical question with a witty quotation from a movie or a popular song, as if that's all that needs to be said about the topic. Some people actually go to great efforts to defend their laziness, with complex arguments for why intellectually enquiring or scientifically minded people "can't handle the mystery of things," or why they want to "take away the beauty and the magic of the world."

A variation of intellectual laziness is **willed ignorance**. This is the habit of deliberately preventing oneself from answering hard questions or acknowledging relevant facts. Some people prefer to live in a kind of bubble, where serious challenges to their world views never appear. And while it can be a sign of integrity to preserve the core values of one's world view, it is also the case that deliberately shutting out facts or realities that challenge one's world view can lead one to make poor decisions. Your world view might hold that some questions are unanswerable, or that some questions are not allowed to be asked. Similarly, you might prevent yourself from acknowledging facts or realities that could serve as evidence of the wrongness

of some part of your world view. Willful ignorance actually takes some effort, and perhaps isn't precisely the same as laziness. But it has the same basic effect: it prevents people from learning things that they may need to know, and so makes it more likely that they will make bad decisions, or turn their world views into value programs.

Some people might even argue that there is no such thing as 'Truth', with a big capital T, referring to statements about the ultimate things like God, or justice, or knowledge, or reality. They might believe that it is pointless to claim that any given idea or belief or explanation of such things is true, no matter how well supported it might be by the facts or by logic. There might be an appeal to some kind of relativism as the reason for why there's no such thing as an ultimate truth. And in that sense, this line of thinking is not truly lazy: it goes to some effort to seriously defend the claim that no one can make a serious claim about such things. But the real function of such assertions is to justify a refusal to think deeply and carefully about the things that matter. It may be the case that there are, or that there are not, ultimate truths about such things. But the intellectually lazy or willfully ignorant person does none of the work needed to find out. They actually do not know, and they have made their ignorance into a kind of rule for their thinking.

It might not be polite or kind to name this habit 'laziness', but that's what it really is. Just as one can be lazy at practical tasks like cleaning your house, you can be lazy in your thinking about pressing problems or important questions. And just as laziness in your practical affairs can hurt you eventually, there are times when lazy thinking can cause you great trouble later on, too. Lazy thinking can make it easier for others to manipulate and deceive you, for instance. And it can also paralyze you into doing nothing in situations where decisions must be made.

2.1.7 Relativism

Philosophical arguments are often presented in the form of debates. Sometimes there are two positions that are opposed to each other, and each side presents

arguments that support their position while showing the problems with the opposing position. Consider, as an example, a debate about the moral permissibility of the death penalty. The speakers might take these two positions:

A: The death penalty is morally permissible (for reasons x, y, z).

B: The death penalty is not morally permissible (for reasons a, b, c).

When assessing the evidence for these claims, philosophers are trying to establish whether it is true or false that the death penalty is morally permissible. In this case the moral permissibility of the death penalty is being treated like a fact. Often beginning philosophers are not comfortable with treating moral, epistemic, or aesthetic claims as being either right or wrong. Philosophical claims are not scientific claims for which we can provide empirical evidence, and often both sides provide very compelling arguments. This can make it seem as if both sides are right. Sometimes it makes sense to search for a middle ground, however, it is not always possible or desirable. It is, furthermore, a contradiction to say that the death penalty both is and is not morally permissible. When is it morally permissible? What makes the death penalty morally permissible in some cases but not others? More needs to be said.

Relativism is the view that a claim is only true or false relative to some other condition. There are many varieties of relativism: but the two most common kinds are:

- **Subjective relativism**, also known as **Personal Belief relativism**, is the claim that the truth about anything depends on what someone believes. It is the view that all truth is in the 'eye of the beholder'; or that something is true *if (and only if) someone believes it to be true*, and then it is true *for that person*, and perhaps only for that person. In ethics, subjective relativism is the idea that an action is morally right if the person doing that action believes it to be morally right. Nothing makes an action right or wrong except the judgment of the person doing it.

- **Cultural Relativism** is the idea that something is true, or right, etc., because it is generally believed to be so by some culture or society. Further, it is true, or right, etc., for *that* society.

Here we will examine relativism about truth as it pertains to philosophical claims about ethics and knowledge that you are likely to encounter in an introductory class. As relativism is very appealing to beginning philosophers, it is important to look at some different kinds of relativistic arguments, the problems with them, and some of the typical reasons for adopting a relativistic position.

One reason to adopt relativism is that philosophical claims, particularly ethical claims, can seem very subjective. With so much debate it can seem as if there are no correct answers, and that what is right or wrong can be different for different individuals. Alice believes the death penalty is okay and Barbara believes it is wrong, and who are we to tell them what to believe?

The problem with accepting this kind of relativism is that it makes a claim true or false relative to someone's beliefs, and takes beliefs to be above any justification. While it may seem arrogant to challenge other people's beliefs, examining what we take to be true and why is one of the basic components of philosophy. It isn't enough to say "Alice believes that X is okay, so X is right for her," perhaps Alice has never examined her beliefs, or came to hold them because she was given false information. Investigating what we believe and why can help us to have consistent beliefs, and also to be confident and conscientious in our ethical choices.

While it is respectful to consider others' points of view, differences in perspective does not entail that philosophical questions are entirely subjective. Learning how to carefully consider and assess reasons and justifications is part of studying philosophy. In some arguments disagreement between conclusions can mask similarities in underlying beliefs. For instance, two people can agree that murder is unjustified killing and disagree about what deaths count as murder. Alice might believe that the death penalty is state sanctioned murder, and so oppose it. Barbara might believe that a

death that is sanctioned by the state is always justified. Their disagreement over the death penalty is then not only about whether it is right or wrong, but over acceptable justifications for taking someone's life.

Someone else might note that some cultures accept action X while some do not, and argue that X is morally permissible relative to culture. This is known as cultural relativism. Often students accept cultural relativism because they want to be sensitive to cultural differences. Different cultures have different practices, but can we say that a culture allowing the death penalty means it is sometimes morally permissible? There are two problems with this approach. One is that it does not allow people within a culture to disagree with the practice. If someone from culture A wants to argue against the death penalty they could not do so on moral grounds—their culture permitting it makes it a morally acceptable act. Another problem is changes in cultural practices. We want to say that slavery was abolished because people realized that it was wrong to treat people as property, not that it became immoral once the practice stopped.

There is a difference between issues that are moral and those that are social norms or matters of etiquette. In some cases it makes sense to accept cultural relativism about social practices, but in others it might seem as if some other factor, such as human rights, trumps concerns for cultural variation. It can be difficult to determine when we should and when we should not challenge the practices or beliefs of other cultures, but it requires rational inquiry and a sensitive analysis of the arguments that demands more than knee-jerk relativism.

The problems with relativism do not mean that we have to accept the view that ethical or epistemic truths are universal and absolute. There is a great deal of conceptual space between individual relativism and accepting a general moral principle. Likewise, there are ways to be culturally sensitive while challenging the practices of our own and other cultures. Some concepts that seem natural or objectively true to us may turn out to be contingent—if a culture has three rather than two concepts of gender we might reconsider why we think about gender as we do. Being open to other

cultures' beliefs and attitudes can be very important to learning to see things in a different light, but it does not mean that we have to accept them without good reasons.

2.1.8 The Consequences of Bad Habits

The consequences of living with and falling into these bad thinking habits can be very serious. For instance, they can:

- Make you more vulnerable to being intimidated, bullied, or manipulated by others;
- Make you less able to stand up for yourself, or for others in need;
- Make it harder to tell the difference between truth and lies;
- Make you more dogmatic and closed-minded;
- Make you less flexible, less creative, and less ready to handle unpredictable changes in your situation.
- Lead you to justify moral decisions that needlessly harm people, including yourself;
- Lead you to suppress or ignore evidence that goes contrary to your beliefs, even if that evidence is very reliable;
- Provoke confusion or anger when presented with reasons why one's beliefs might be problematic or faulty;
- Prevent serious philosophical thinking about the most important problems in our lives;
- Prevent personal growth, maturity, and self-awareness.

With these observations in mind, let's look at some good habits.

2.2.1 Curiosity

As an intellectual habit, curiosity is the desire for knowledge. To be an intellectually curious person, you have to be the sort of person for whom the usual explanations of things are not enough to satisfy you. The curious person wants to find out more about whatever is new, strange, or interesting in the world. When something different, unusual, unexpected, or even weird and scary appear, the curious person doesn't

hide from them or pretend they are other than what they are. She faces them directly, and makes an honest attempt to investigate them. And she does not settle for things to remain mysterious. Indeed part of the task of the philosopher, as it is with the scientist, is to render things un-mysterious: it is to understand things as completely as possible. Good rational thinkers love mysteries and puzzles: but they don't just stand back and "appreciate" them. They also try to figure them out.

It is precisely by being intellectually curious that good reasoning helps prevent closed minded dogmatism. Curiosity leads to discovery, invention, expanded awareness of the world, and of the self. Sometimes it leads to beauty; sometimes it leads to power. Most of all, it leads to, just as it depends on, a sense of wonder. Those who think that rationality is a set of rules for thinking which limit or constrain your experiences, or who think that rationality kills the sense of creativity and imagination, are simply wrong – and there's no polite way to say it. And it's probable that such people have actually limited their own experiences by excluding from their minds the most powerful, most inquisitive, and most successful way of knowing the world ever devised.

2.2.2 Self-Awareness

Above the entrance to the famous Oracle of Delphi, the religious centre of the classical Greek world, was written the phrase γνῶθι σεαυτόν. In English, this means 'know yourself'. The idea was that people who wanted to enter the temple should have done a sustained exercise in personal soul-searching, to be fully honest about their own individual character and habits, and also to be honest about human nature (especially human mortality).

Self-awareness involves knowing your own presuppositions, desires, biases, world views, and so on. It involves knowing your habits, faults, desires, powers, and talents. And it involves knowing something about what it means to be a thinking human being. This is a more difficult prospect than it appears to be. Some people do not find out what their own world view is until someone else says or does something which

challenges it. But it is an essential quality: those who do not know themselves tend to make poor decisions, and are easily manipulated by others.

2.2.3 Health

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As unrelated as it may seem, taking care of your physical health is actually a good thinking habit. If you are feeling unwell, or sleep-deprived, or under stress, or for whatever reason physically uncomfortable, then it will be harder for you to observe and understand your situation, and harder to reason about it clearly. Good health, as a thinking habit, involves getting enough exercise, eating healthy real food and avoiding junk food, bathing regularly, and getting enough sleep. It also involves taking care of your mental health: and one of the simplest ways to do that is to take time every day for leisure activities that are restful.

A study conducted by psychologists in Japan found that people who gazed on forest scenery for twenty minutes produced 13.4% less salivary cortisol, a stress hormone. Walking in forests and natural settings also helped reduce high blood pressure, and reduce heart rate fluctuations. As these effects became more known, some municipalities in Japan created “forest therapy” programs for stressed-out factory workers.⁷ High-stimulation activities like video games, action films, intensely athletic sports, and anything that gets your adrenaline rushing, can be a lot of fun, but they’re not restful. I’m not saying you should avoid such things altogether. But good critical thinking requires calm, and peace, and quiet. To be better able to calm yourself when you need to think, give around twenty minutes or more, every day, to something genuinely relaxing, such as walking in a forest, or meditating, or reading, or cooking and eating a proper meal. Don’t be multitasking at the same time. If you are experiencing a lot of frustration dealing with a certain problem, you will probably have an easier time of it after a shower, a healthy dinner, a walk in the park with a friend and a dog, and a good night’s sleep.

2.2.4 Courage

Sometimes, your process of thinking about things will lead you to possibilities or conclusions that you won’t like, or which your friends or associates won’t like. Sometimes, you might reach a conclusion about something that might land you in trouble with your boss at work, or your teacher, your priest, your government, or anyone who has some kind of power, authority, or influence in your life. Expressing that conclusion or that thought might land you in some amount of danger: you might risk being fired from your job, or ostracized from your community. Depending on the situation, and the idea you are expressing, you might find yourself excluded, angrily criticized, ignored, arrested, imprisoned, or even killed. Even in countries where the freedom of speech and of expression and of the press is guaranteed by constitutional law, people can still run great risks by speaking their minds, even when their words are true.

Courageous thinking means thinking and expressing the dangerous thought anyway. It means **thinking and speaking without fear**. It means committing yourself to what you rationally judge to be the best conclusion, whether you like it or not, and whether your friends or your ‘betters’ like it or not. And this is a lot harder to do than it sounds. Strong social forces like the desire to be welcomed and included and loved, or strong institutional forces like laws or corporate policies, can lead people to keep quiet about ideas that might be controversial.

Questions and arguments can require personal courage when they challenge a very important part of one’s world view. Consider the following examples:

- What if there is no god?
- What if there is no objective moral right or wrong?
- What if a very popular or charismatic person is telling half-truths or lies?
- At my workplace, am I participating in or benefitting from something unjust, or evil?
- What if life has no purpose or meaning?

⁷ Akemi Nakamura, “‘Forest Therapy’ taking root” The Japan Times Online, 2 May 2008

People who take such questions seriously, and who consider answers that are radically different from the answers provided by their world views, may experience a lot of self-doubt or even despair. They may find that they have to change their lives. Even the mere act of posing the questions, aside from the attempt to answer them, can land people in trouble with their friends and families. Strong social forces might pressure the questioner to not ask certain questions, or to answer them only in acceptable ways. In such situations, it can take great courage to ask such questions, and to do one's own thinking in search of a decent answer.

Questions and arguments can require public or political courage when they challenge some arrangement in your social world. It could be something as simple as choosing to support a different professional sports team other than the one based in your home city, or the one supported by all your friends and family. Or, it could be something as complex and dangerous as opposing a policy of a large corporation that you work for, or which has a significant presence in the area where you live. It can take a lot of courage to criticize the actions of some entity with political power, especially when that entity can threaten people who disagree with it. If you criticize your employer, you might lose your job. If you criticize your government, you might be arrested. If you criticize your church leaders, you might be shamed, denounced, or dismissed from the church. As the philosopher Voltaire wrote, "It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authority is wrong."

The classical Greek language gives us a word for statements that require this kind of courage: **parrhesia**, which roughly translates as 'bold speech'. The person who makes such a bold statement is called a *parrhesiastes*. Two qualities are necessary for a proposition to count as parrhesia. One is that the speaker incurs some personal risk from various social or political forces. The second is that the speaker's words must be true. (Thus, a person who creates controversy for the sake of creating controversy is not a parrhesiastes.) Today we might call such people '**whistle-blowers**': individuals who act like referees in a game who stops some player who breaks the rules. Whistle-blowers

are people who draw public attention to some act or policy of moral wrongdoing in their workplaces, their governments, or in any other social group to which they belong. Whistleblowers often face all kinds of problems: harassment, defamation of their reputations, job losses, lawsuits, vandalism of their homes and vehicles, and in some cases death threats. But no public cause has ever succeeded "by itself", without courageous people willing to speak out in favour of it. To be a courageous thinker means to care more for the truth than for one's personal interests (and sometimes, more than for one's safety). But it also means to be an agent for necessary changes.

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2.2.5 Healthy Skepticism

Earlier, we characterized 'excessive skepticism' as a bad habit. But there is another side of skepticism that is very healthy. Healthy skepticism is **the general unwillingness to accept that things are always what they appear to be**. It is the unwillingness to take things for granted, or to accept that things are as you have been told they are by anyone else, no matter who they are, or what their relation is to you.

This does not mean we have to doubt absolutely everything, nor does it mean we cannot trust anyone. It does, however, mean that we do not jump to conclusions. Healthy skepticism is to be slow to accept the popular explanations for things. It prefers to investigate many possibilities before settling on the best available explanation.

Healthy skepticism is also known as 'reasonable doubt'. We'll see more of that in a later chapter.

2.2.6. Autonomy

To think with autonomy simply means to think for yourself, and not to let other people do your thinking for you. Autonomous thinking is thinking that does not blindly accept what you have been told by parents, friends, role models of every kind, governments, newspaper columnists, or anyone who could have an influence on your thinking.

No one else can do your thinking for you. And

you are under no obligation to follow anybody's party line. Your only obligation for thinking, if it is an 'obligation' at all, is to think clearly, consistently, rationally, and (where necessary) courageously.

At the end of some curious, courageous, and skeptical soul-searching, you might decide that your world view should be more or less the same as that which is held by your family, friends, role models, and other influences. That is okay – the point is that the world view is now yours, and not handed to you by others.

2.2.8 Precision

There are a lot of words in every language that have more than one meaning. This is a good thing: it allows us more flexibility of expression; it is part of what makes poetry possible; and so on. But for the purpose of reasoning as clearly and as systematically as possible, it is important to use our words very carefully. This usually means avoiding metaphors, symbols, rhetorical questions, weasel words, euphemisms, tangents, equivocations, and 'double speak'. When building a case for why something is true, or something else is not true, and so on, it is important to say exactly what one means, and to eliminate ambiguities as much as possible.

The simplest way to do this is to craft good definitions. A definition can be imprecise in several ways; here are some of them.

- *Too broad*: it covers more things than it should.
- *Too narrow*: it covers too few things.
- *Circular*: the word being defined, or one of its closest synonyms, appears in the definition itself.
- *Too vague*: The definition doesn't really say much at all about what is being defined, even though it looks like it does.

Example of a broad definition: "All dogs are four-legged animals." (Does that mean that all four-legged animals are dogs?)

Example of a narrow definition: "All tables are furniture pieces placed in the dining rooms of houses and used for serving meals." (Does that mean that tables in other rooms used for other purposes are not 'true' tables?)

Example of a Circular definition: "Beauty is that which a given individual finds beautiful." (This actually tells us nothing about what beauty is.)

Example of a vague definition: "Yellowism is not art or anti-art. Examples of Yellowism can look like works of art but are not works of art. We believe that the context for works of art is already art."⁹ (And I don't know what this means at all.)

42 2.2.7 Simplicity

Sometimes you may find that things are more complex or more elaborate than they appear to be at first.

And it is often the job of reason to uncover layers of complexity behind appearances. Still, if you have two or more explanations for something, all of which are about as good as each other, the explanation you should prefer is the simplest one.

This principle of simplicity in good reasoning is sometimes called **Ockham's Razor**. It was first articulated by a Franciscan monk named Brother William of Ockham, who lived from 1288 to 1348. His actual words were "Entia non sunt multiplicanda sine necessitate."⁸ In English, this means 'No unnecessary repetition of identicals.' This is a fancy way of saying, 'Well it's possible that there are twenty-three absolutely identical tables occupying exactly the same position in space and time, but it's much simpler to believe that there's just one table here. So let's go with the simpler explanation.' Ockham's original point was theological: he wanted to explain why monotheism is better than polytheism. It's simpler to assume there's one infinite God, than it is to assume there are a dozen or more.

Ockham's idea has also been applied to numerous other matters, from devising scientific theories to interpreting poetry, film, and literature. Other ways to express this idea go like this: "All other things being equal, the simplest explanation tends to be the truth," and "The best explanation is the one which makes the fewest assumptions."

⁸ William of Occam, Sentences of Peter Lombard, (ed. Lugd., 1495), i, dist. 27, qu. 2, K.

⁹ Marcin Lodyga and Vladimir Umanets, "Manifesto of Yellowism", retrieved from www.thisisyellowism.com, 8 July 2010 / 17 February 2012.

2.2.9 Patience

Good philosophical thinking takes time. Progress in good critical thinking is often very slow. The process of critical thinking can't be called successful if it efficiently maximizes its inputs and outputs in the shortest measure of time: we do not produce thoughts in the mind like widgets in a factory.

The reason for this is because good critical thinking often needs to uncover that which subtle, hard to discern at first, and easy to overlook. I define subtlety as 'a small difference or a delicate detail which takes on greater importance the more it is contemplated.' As a demonstration, think of how many ways you can utter the word 'Yes', and mean something different every time. This also underlines the importance of precision, as a good thinking habit. As another example: think of how the colour planes in a painting by Piet Mondrian, such as his 'Composition with Yellow, Blue, and Red' have squares of white framed by black lines, but none of the white squares are exactly the same shade of white. You won't notice this if you look at the painting for only a few seconds, or if you view a photo of the painting on your computer screen, and your monitor's resolution isn't precise enough to render the subtle differences. But it is the job of reason to uncover those subtleties and lay them out to be examined directly. And the search for those subtleties cannot be rushed.

2.2.10 Consistency

When we looked at what a world view is, we defined it as 'the sum of a set of related answers to the most important questions in life.' It's important that one's world view be consistent: that your answers to the big questions generally cohere well together, and do not obviously contradict each other. Inconsistent thinking usually leads to mistakes, and can produce the uncomfortable feeling of cognitive dissonance. And it can be embarrassing, too. If you are more consistent, you might still make mistakes in your thinking. But it will be a lot easier for you to identify those mistakes, and fix them.

Consistency also means staying on topic, sticking

to the facts, and following an argument to its conclusion. Obviously it can be fun to explore ideas in a random, wandering fashion. But as one's problems grow more serious, it becomes more important to stay the course. Moreover, digressing too far from the topic can also lead you to commit logical fallacies such as Straw Man, and Red Herring.

2.2.11 Open-ness and open-mindedness

Being open-minded means listening to others, taking their views seriously, and treating their ideas with respect even while critically examining them (a difficult thing to do, but not impossible). It also means not resorting to fear and force when promoting one's own views, but rather presenting them in a way that leaves them open to the critical scrutiny of others. In philosophy this is sometimes called "**the principle of charity**". The Principle of Charity requires speakers and listeners to interpret and understand each other's ideas in the very best possible light. Listeners must assume that other speakers are rational (unless you have good reasons to assume otherwise), and that what they say is rational, even if that rationality is not immediately obvious. Philosophers do this partially as a kind of professional courtesy to each other. Open-ness and open-mindedness does not, however, mean that we have to accept everyone's ideas as equally valid. Open mindedness is not the same as assuming that all things are true; it is also not the same as relativism. Rather, the open-minded person looks for the best explanation for things, whether he or she personally likes that explanation or not, and whether it fits with his or her world view or not. She is open to the idea that she might be wrong about something, or that her world view might be partially faulty, or that her thinking about something that matters to her may have to change. But she does not change her thinking at random: she is interested in the truth, whatever it might be.

An open-minded person may still find that some ideas, arguments, and explanations are better than others. But if we are open-minded, then we can be more confident that we have understood other

people's views properly: we will not fall into the logical trap of the straw man (see the chapter on Fallacies).

It is also much easier to find common ground with others, which is an essential step in quelling conflict. And if we reject some idea, we will have rejected it for the right reasons. Open-mindedness also helps prevent intellectual or ideological differences from descending into personal grudges.

Open-mindedness is also helpful in other ways. Suppose that some friends of mine and I went on a picnic in the park, but soon after we got to our picnic site it started to rain. One member of the party might say the rain was caused by ghosts or supernatural creatures who live in the park and who don't want us to picnic there. Another might say that the rain was caused by air pressure changes in the upper atmosphere. Now the open-minded person is not necessarily the one who accepts that both explanations are equally possible, and leaves it at that. The open-minded person is the one who goes looking for the evidence for each explanation. If he doesn't find the evidence for one of those explanations, he rejects it and goes in search of the evidence for another one. The closed-minded person, by contrast, is the one who picks the explanation he likes best, whether or not there's any evidence for it, and then refuses to consider any alternative explanation. Closed-mindedness is one of the signs that someone's mind is occupied by a value program. As a rule of thumb, the closed-minded person is usually the one who is quickest to accuse other people of being closed-minded, especially when his own ideas are criticized.

The point of that example is to show how open-mindedness helps people arrive at good explanations for things that happen. It does not mean that all explanations for things are equally 'valid'. We do not have to put unlikely or weird explanations on the same footing as those with verifiable evidence or a consistent logical structure. But it can mean that every explanation or idea which appears to be sound, at least at first glance, is given a fair examination, no matter where that explanation came from, or who thought of it first.

2.2.12 Asking for help

So far, I have been stressing good thinking habits that one can practice on one's own. Good thinking tends to require independence and autonomy. And problems often arise when we allow other people to have too much influence over one's own thinking, such as when we allow ourselves to be influenced by peer pressure. However, it can also be helpful to ask others who you respect and admire, or who you believe may have relevant knowledge, to help you. And while it is important to make your own decisions about your own life, there's nothing wrong with asking others who you trust to offer you advice and guidance. And even if you do not ask anyone to offer suggestions, it can sometimes be helpful to hear a different point of view, or just to talk things over with someone who can be both critical and appreciative. The shared wisdom and experience of one's friends, elders, and associates can often lead to different perspectives and better decisions. Others people, for instance, can offer possibilities that you might not have thought of. Or they might know things that you didn't know, and thus point you in new directions. Or they might have faced a similar problem or situation in the past, and their description of their experience might help clarify something about your own situation. As an example, here's the Roman philosopher Seneca describing how some kind of social interaction is important for one's personal intellectual growth: "Skilled wrestlers are kept up to the mark by practice; a musician is stirred to action by one of equal proficiency. The wise man also needs to have his virtues kept in action; and as he prompts himself to do things, so he is prompted by another wise man."¹⁰

A lot may depend on who you choose to ask for advice, how much you trust them, and how often you go to them. But the overall point here is that knotty and complicated problems need not always be handled alone. A habit of asking one's elders, peers, colleagues, and friends for help can often help clarify one's thinking, and lead to better solutions.

2.3 A few summary remarks for Chapter Two

None of the bad habits of thinking *necessarily* or *inevitably* lead to unsound arguments, false beliefs, or faulty world views. They are not the same as *fallacies* (to be discussed in chapter 5.) An argument can be strong and sound even if its conclusion coincides with the speaker's personal interests, or even if it coincides with the presuppositions of the speaker's culture, etc. The bad habits are, however, **signs that one's thinking is probably not fully clear, critical, and rational**. It may even mean that one has given up the search for the truth of the matter too soon.

Similarly, the good habits, by themselves, do not guarantee that one's thinking will always be perfectly rational, but they do make one's thinking *very much more likely* to be rational.

2.4 Exercises for Chapter Two.

Consider the following situations, and ask yourself which of the good thinking habits should be applied here, and what might happen if some of the bad habits are applied instead.

- You come home at the end of the day and someone sitting on the ground near your door appears to be crying. Perhaps he is injured, or emotionally distraught. Other people passing by seem to be taking no notice, and may even be crossing the street to avoid him.
- Someone who you are fairly close to, such as a member of your family, or a colleague at your workplace, or someone you count as a good friend, unexpectedly utters a nasty racist or sexist or politically prejudiced joke. By his tone of voice and body language, you can tell that he expects you to agree with him or to go along with it.
- Someone you are fairly close to tells you that he has just been diagnosed with a medical condition that carries a strong social stigma, such as cancer, or AIDS. Or, he says he is coming "out of the closet" about his sexual preferences, or that he is changing his religion. He tells you that most of his other friends have stopped associating with him because of this situation.
- Someone who you counted on to do something for you,

for instance someone with whom you have a contract, fails to uphold his promises. This person has failed you numerous times before, but you're fairly sure that confronting this person might have bad consequences for you. For instance, it might result in a lost friendship, or a malicious gossip campaign against you, a loss of money spent on the arrangement, etc.

- A friend of yours at your school, your workplace, or a social club you belong to, has been accused of a crime. The police haven't been called because all the evidence against that person is circumstantial, and it's mostly a matter of one person's word against another's. But around half of your friends are gossiping about that person as if he's obviously guilty, and the other half of your friends are certain he's innocent.
- Have you ever been in a similar situation? What were your thoughts about it? And what did you do?

