Critical Thinking

Blake McBride

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We all *believe* many things. This is the model we each keep in our mind of the world we live in. Some of these beliefs are true, and some are not. The process of differentiating and evaluating these ideas intelligently and changing our beliefs based on newly discovered facts is called *critical thinking*.

Although some of the things we believe are based on observable facts, most are not. Most of what we believe is based on the culture we grew up in. For example, what were we taught by our parents? Our schools? Our friends? Things we've read? Things we've seen on TV or in the movies? All of these things come together (along with our initial genetic makeup) to form who we are or what we believe.

When we are young, we're unsure about a lot, and we are therefore open to understanding. As we grow older, our views begin to solidify. Although we are surrounded by contradictory views, facts, and ideas, our own views begin to coalesce and solidify, and we become who we are. Once this occurs, most people, to one degree or another, stick with their beliefs in spite of the noise, and even in spite of the facts. Our beliefs have enabled us to get where we are, and many of our relationships and opportunities are based on these beliefs. Thus, we are very reluctant to change our belief system. The noise, and even facts, are ignored. We don't want to question the things that are the foundation of who we are.

You may read or hear one thing from one source and a conflicting thing from another source. All too often, people decide between these competing ideas by:

- Which do I hear the most?

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- Which would I like to believe?

- Which do my community, family, and friends believe?

- Which makes me look and feel like a good or smart person?

Although the above is the way most people evaluate ideas, none of the above reasons is valid. The mind has an incredible ability to justify false beliefs and ignore facts. This single issue is at the core of most wars and suffering throughout mankind's history.

The mind has a tendency to rationalize ideas because of the above reasons, making it often difficult to even see that you're doing it. Critical thinking is the ability to get past this and make evaluations based on the best truth we can determine, completely independent of the above items.

In short, critical thinking is the ability to differentiate between opinion and fact. If high schools and colleges focused on this as their foundation of learning, we would likely not have all the trouble we have in schools today. Given that the output of our schools feeds our government, media, big tech, voters, and society at large, we would likely not have the societal problems we have.

There is a telltale sign that someone is making their judgments based on the above items rather than critical thinking. They will refuse to debate the topic because they are unable to justify their views outside of the above items, or they'll resort to ad hominem or other invalid justifications.

There are three steps to thinking critically as follows:

1. Pay attention to new information. Don't just wait for the other person to stop talking so that you can say your piece.

2. Differentiate between your own opinions (prejudices) and what the facts are.

3. Be prepared to alter your opinions based on new facts. Realize that it is not about proving you're right; it is about discovering the best truth we can find.

Understanding and applying critical thinking, along with understanding how to determine truth[1], are the most important things a person can learn in high school and college. This basic understanding is fundamental and comes prior to understanding things such as language arts and social studies. No student should be allowed to graduate without understanding this fully.

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[1] https://blakemcbride.us/essays/Truth.pdf