



# The “Environment” of Critical Thinking

## Chapter Objectives

- To 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 effective.
- To understand that the most common barriers 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*.

### Category 1: How We Think

You will be able to

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

### Category 2: What We Think

- understand what a world view is and how certain specific ideas in a world view can undermine critical thinking.
- critique the notion of subjective relativism.
- critique the notion of social relativism.
- define *philosophical skepticism* and explain how it relates to critical thinking.

## Chapter 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 can 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. Those barriers that crop up because of *how* we think, and those obstacles 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.

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 or **peer 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.

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 pointless. However, subjective relativism leads to some strange consequences. For example, if the doctrine were true, each of us would be infallible. In addition, subjective relativism has a logical problem—it is 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. However, 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. One could possibly doubt that one has a mother and a father, for example, but this doubt would be unreasonable. To count as knowledge, claims need not be beyond all possible doubt, but beyond all *reasonable* doubt. Put another way, we can say that we know something only if there are no good reasons to doubt it.

## Answers to Select Textbook Exercises

Please note: These answers are for some of the questions that were not answered in Appendix B of *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Fifth Canadian Edition.

### Exercise 2.1

- Peer pressure is a kind of group pressure to accept a statement or act in a certain way. Specifically, such group pressure is called ‘peer pressure’ when the pressure to conform comes from one’s peers.

13. The fallacy of arguing that a claim must be true merely because a substantial number of people believe it.
18. Subjective relativism is the view that truth depends solely on what some individual believes, whereas philosophical skepticism is the view that we know much less than we think we do, or perhaps nothing at all.

#### Exercise 2.2

2. Face-saving
6. Group pressure

#### Exercise 2.3

6. B

#### Exercise 2.4

6. Appeal to popularity. Possible negative consequence: Damage to the politician's reputation as a decisive decision-maker; establishment of a precedent in which politicians caved in to pressure.

#### Exercise 2.5

5. Face-saving; possible negative consequences: Dishonesty, which misleads people and sets Justin up for self-deception or future dishonesty

## Study Questions

1. What does it mean to say that critical thinking takes place in an environment that is often hostile to it?
2. What does it mean to say that good critical thinking requires awareness, practice, and motivation?
3. What are the most common impediments to critical thinking?
  - a) What are Category 1 obstacles?
  - b) What are Category 2 obstacles?
4. Is there anything inherently wrong with accepting a claim that furthers your own interests? Is there anything wrong with accepting a claim solely because it furthers your own interests?
5. How can our need to save face interfere with critical thinking?
6. In the sphere of critical thinking, what are some of the consequences of self-interested thinking?
7. What can getting emotionally worked up about a claim or conclusion indicate about your thinking?
8. Why is it important to be alert to ways that critical thinking can be undermined?
9. What is the phenomenon of selective attention?

10. What are some of the dangers of group thinking?
  - a) What is peer pressure?
  - b) What is the appeal to popularity?
  - c) What is stereotyping?
11. What is the best way to defend yourself against group thinking?
12. What is a world view and how can it be “haunted”?
13. What is subjective relativism?
  - a) What is the subjectivist fallacy?
  - b) Are there some things about us that are relative?
  - c) What are the implications of subjective relativism that seem to undermine it?
  - d) What does it mean to say that subjective relativism is self-defeating?
14. What is social relativism?
  - a) What are some implications of social relativism that seem to undermine it?
  - b) How is social relativism self-defeating?
15. What is philosophical skepticism?
  - a) According to the text, does knowledge require certainty?
  - b) What kind of doubt does critical thinking require?
16. What is the difference between subjective relativism and social relativism?
17. What is the difference between reasonable doubt and possible doubt? Provide examples to illustrate.
18. Provide an example of the sort of possible doubt which might be entertained by a philosophical skeptic. Why does their willingness to entertain such possible doubts make some people philosophical skeptics?
19. Why does thinking critically require awareness, motivation, and practice?

## Self-Assessment Quiz

*Scroll down for answers.*

### Passages for Classification

For each of the following passages, indicate whether it contains examples of self-interested thinking, face-saving, group pressure, subjective relativism, social relativism, or philosophical skepticism. Briefly justify your response.

1. Economists predict that the price of oil will fall even further, but we can safely ignore them—no one knows anything about what the future will hold.

2. It is true that female genital mutilation is considered wrong in Canada, but we should not object to the practice in other countries. After all, whether an action is wrong is determined by one's culture.
3. A candidate in the student pub said, "If you elect me student society president, then I will immediately lower the price of beer in the student pub!"
4. The Canadiens are better than the Leafs! That is my opinion and you can't say anything to make me think otherwise.
5. There is no point in arguing about religious claims. Everything in religion is a matter of personal opinion.
6. I scored very poorly on my essay, but the professor doesn't like me because I'm an atheist. He always marks non-believers harder!
7. I'm voting for the party that supports legalizing marijuana. I want to be able to smoke weed without fear of arrest.
8. I'm not against gay people myself, but I wouldn't invite a gay person to my house for a dinner party. Some of my friends are very uncomfortable around gays.
9. I didn't get an athletic scholarship for the University of Waterloo. But, it's okay—I didn't want to go to that university anyway.
10. Adele must be the best singer in the world. She's the most popular!
11. I am going to attend the University of Regina. My grandfather went there, as did my mother and my father.
12. Of course there is a God. A majority of people in this country believe in the existence of God.
13. We should outlaw guns. I've always believed that.
14. The best way to reduce crime is to increase the minimum wage. Everyone knows that urban poverty is the biggest cause of crime.
15. To do business in other countries, businesspeople sometimes pay bribes to foreign governments. I feel that this is a systemic distortion of a business practice that is destructive in the long run. So, it must be a destructive practice.
16. How can I know for certain that the sun will rise tomorrow? After all, things don't always happen in the future as they have in the past!
17. Whether a Halloween costume counts as "cultural appropriation" is up to each individual to decide for themselves! So, you are simply wrong to believe that wearing an indigenous headdress counts as "cultural appropriation."

18. I am not biased against Muslims! I just happen to believe that the vast majority of terrorists come from Muslim majority nations, and I don't want to die!
19. Taylor got a better grade than I did on our philosophy assignment, but that's only because she's the teacher's pet.
20. Premier Ford should cut a deal with GM. That's the only way I'll get to keep my job.
21. Come outside for a smoke. All of us cool kids do!
22. Connor McDavid must be the best hockey player on Earth. After all, he plays for my favourite team, the Oilers!
23. You should subscribe to Rogers' "Home Phone" plan. Everybody is doing it!
24. Einstein flunked out of high school math. Just ask anybody!
25. Premier Notley should cut oil production. Otherwise, I'll be out of a job by Christmas.

## Answers to Self-Assessment Quiz

### Passages for Classification

1. **Philosophical skepticism** (Sometimes economic or other predictions about the future can be known.)
2. **Social relativism** (Just because a society believes or practices X, it does not follow that it is right to do so.)
3. **Self-interested thinking** (The candidate is pandering to the beer-drinking students. To see why this is objectionable, consider that the candidate might have other ideas that would hurt the students.)
4. **Subjective relativism** (The speaker seems to be saying that his belief is right just because it is his belief.)
5. **Subjective relativism** (Perhaps there are good reasons for accepting or rejecting specific religious claims.)
6. **Face-saving** (The student is covering up possible defects in his own work.)
7. **Self-interested thinking** (Perhaps marijuana ought to be legalized, but there is more at issue than the interests of this individual.)
8. **Group pressure** (The speaker seems to be willing to discriminate against gays just to fit in with his peers.)
9. **Face-saving** (The speaker is using a “sour-grapes” tact to cover up his lack of success.)
10. **Group pressure** (The fact that she is hugely popular is not in itself grounds to believe that she is a great singer.)
11. **Group pressure** (of the “my group is best” sort)
12. **Group pressure** (“appeal to popularity”)
13. **Subjective relativism**
14. **Group pressure** (“appeal to popularity”)
15. **Subjective relativism** (the speaker is arguing that her opinions constitute good reasons for believing that bribes are destructive.)
16. **Philosophical skepticism** (it is possible, though not reasonable, to doubt whether the sun will rise tomorrow)
17. **Subjective relativism** (if whether a costume counts as cultural appropriation is up to each individual to decide for themselves, then no one can be wrong about whether that costume counts as cultural appropriation or not.)
18. **Face-saving** (the arguer is attempting to save face, by reframing their prejudicial attitude toward Muslims as an objective, detached, neutral concern about personal safety.)
19. **Face-saving** (the arguer attempts to explain away Taylor’s superior performance on the philosophy assignment, in a way that is not unflattering to their own self-image.)
20. **Self-interested Thinking** (the arguer accepts the claim about what Premier Ford should do, solely because it coincides with their own interests.)
21. **Peer pressure** (the arguer is pressuring one of his peers to smoke a cigarette)
22. **Self-Interested Thinking** (the arguer believes that Connor McDavid is the best, because he plays for the team he is personally, most emotionally invested in: the Edmonton Oilers)
23. **Group pressure** (the arguer makes an appeal to popularity)
24. **Group Pressure** (the arguer appeals to a popular belief in a common misconception)
25. **Self-interested thinking** (the arguer endorses a claim because it coincides with their own economic self-interest)