**Instructor’s Manual**

*The Power of Critical Thinking*, Seventh Edition

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Chapter 2: Obstacles to Critical Thinking

As every instructor knows, it’s tough to teach the basics of critical thinking to students who have never before been exposed to the subject. But their lack of previous experience is only part of the challenge of urging them to understand and appreciate critical thinking. Students are often not merely clueless about critical thinking; they may be at a disadvantage at the outset, often harboring assumptions, prejudices, and habits of mind that impede clear thinking. (The impediments thrown up by logical fallacies are mostly a separate matter, taken up in Chapter 6.) The purpose of this chapter, then, is to address some of these hindrances—to help students become aware of common ways in which their thinking can run off the tracks. Awareness is half the battle.

Almost all of the exercises included here are meant to raise awareness. The Field Problems—and your own similar projects or group discussions—should be extremely useful in encouraging student introspection. They suggest some ways that students can critique their own thinking or that of others without feeling self-conscious or making others uncomfortable. Writing assignments can also be put to work for the same reasons.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

* The most common impediments to critical thinking are psychological in nature, arising from our fears, attitudes, motivations, desires, and cognitive dispositions. These factors can skew judgment, twist reason, and lead smart people to bad judgments. Moreover, many of them seem tailor-made for sabotaging our thinking online, especially on social media. Impediments can also arise when our philosophical worldview contains elements that undermine critical thinking.

**All Hail the Self**

* Sometimes we may accept a claim solely on the grounds that it advances our interests or helps us save face. To overcome this kind of self-centered or egocentric thinking, 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 evaluating a claim.

**All Hail My Group**

* Obstacles to critical thinking also arise from the pressures of group membership. These pressures can manifest themselves in appeals to popularity, appeals to common practice, prejudice, stereotyping, tribalism, and even racism. The only way to counter the outsize influence of the group is to achieve an impartial stance and proportion your belief to the strength of reasons.

**The Toughest Mental Obstacles**

* The most common psychological impediments to critical thinking—and the hardest to overcome—include denying contrary evidence, looking for confirming evidence, motivated reasoning, and preferring available evidence. These hindrances affect every human endeavor, from personal judgments to high-stakes decision-making in business, government, politics, social networks, and even scientific research.

**Your Brain on Social Media**

* Psychological obstacles to critical thinking are especially widespread on social media. For example, people are more likely to believe a claim if it comes from a friend, a phenomenon called homophily. Other cognitive biases prevalent online include the mere exposure effect, illusion-of-truth effect, false consensus effect, and the Dunning-Kruger effect.

**Philosophical Obstacles**

* Elements of a person’s worldview may create obstacles to critical thinking as well. For example, if a person accepts subjective relativism—the view that truth depends solely on what someone believes⎯then critical thinking may appear superfluous. But subjective relativism leads to some strange consequences. For example, if the doctrine were true, each of us would be infallible. Also, subjective relativism has a logical problem⎯it’s self-defeating. Its truth implies its falsity.
* Social relativism is the view that truth is relative to societies⎯a claim that would also seem to make critical thinking unnecessary. But this notion is undermined by the same kinds of problems that plague subjective relativism.
* Philosophical skepticism is the doctrine that we know much less than we think we do or nothing at all. One form of philosophical skepticism says that we cannot know anything unless some of our beliefs are beyond all possible doubt. But this is not a plausible criterion for knowledge. To be knowledge, claims need not be beyond all possible doubt, but beyond all reasonable doubt.

**WEB LINKS**

[“A Brief History of Groupthink,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*](https://yalealumnimagazine.com/articles/1947-a-brief-history-of-groupthink)

[“Motivated Reasoning: A Philosopher on Confirmation Bias,” NPR.org](https://www.npr.org/2017/01/28/512199352/confirmation-bias)

[“6 Ways Your Brian Twists Your Social Media Feed to Reinforce Your Beliefs,” *Observer*](https://observer.com/2017/11/6-ways-your-mind-makes-you-biased-towards-what-you-see-on-social-media/)

[“We Are All Confident Idiots,” *Pacific Standard*](https://psmag.com/social-justice/confident-idiots-92793)

[“Relativism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/)

**KEY WORDS**

**appeal to common practice** The fallacy of accepting or rejecting a claim based solely on how groups of people generally act or behave (when group actions or behaviors are irrelevant to the truth of the claim).

**appeal to popularity (or to the masses)** The fallacy of arguing that a claim must be true merely because a substantial number of people believe it.

**availability error** Relying on evidence not because it's trustworthy but because it's memorable or striking.

**Dunning-Kruger effect** The phenomenon of being ignorant of how ignorant we are.

**evidence** Something that makes a statement more likely to be true.

**false consensus effect** The tendency to overestimate the degree to which other people share our opinions, attitudes, and preferences.

**illusion-of-truth effect** A phenomenon in which you come to believe that a false claim is actually true simply because it is familiar.

**mere exposure effect** The idea that just being exposed repeatedly to words or images can induce a favorable or comfortable feeling toward them, whether or not there is any good reason for doing so.

**motivated reasoning** Reasoning for the purpose of supporting a predetermined conclusion, not to uncover the truth.

**peer pressure** Group pressure to accept or reject a claim based solely on what one’s peers think or do.

**philosophical skepticism** The view that we know much less than we think we do or nothing at all.

**philosophical skeptics** Those thinkers who embrace philosophical skepticism.

**prejudice** A negative or adverse belief about others without sufficient reasons.

**social relativism** The view that truth is relative to societies.

**stereotyping** Drawing an unwarranted conclusion or generalization about an entire group of people.

**subjectivist fallacy** Accepting the notion of subjective relativism or using it to try to support a claim.

**subjective relativism** The idea that truth depends on what a person believes.

**worldview** A philosophy of life; a set of beliefs and theories that helps us make sense of a wide range of issues in life.