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What is Critical Thinking?

Establishing Emotional & Intellectual Distance Between You & Your Ideas

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The term “critical thinking” is used, in one form or another, throughout this site — but what does it mean? Some may get the impression that it simply involves finding fault with others and others’ ideas, but that isn’t really the case. As a general rule, critical thinking involves developing some emotional and intellectual distance between yourself and ideas — whether your own or others’ — in order to better evaluate their truth, validity, and reasonableness.

Critical thinking is an effort to develop reliable, rational evaluations about what is reasonable for us to believe and disbelieve. Critical thinking makes use of the tools of logic and science because it values skepticism over gullibility or dogmatism, reason over faith, science of pseudoscience, and [rationality](http://atheism.about.com/od/logicalflawsinreasoning/a/Irrational-Beliefs-Politics-Religion.htm) over wishful thinking. Critical thinking does not guarantee that we will arrive at truth, but it does make it much more likely than any of the alternatives do.

Explaining the concept of critical thinking might be easier if we go through some of the key characteristics which are necessary for thinking critically about something:

**Open-Mindedness**  
A person who wishes to think critically about something like politics or religion must be open-minded. This requires being open to the possibility that not only are others right, but also that you are wrong. Too often people launch into a frenzy of arguments apparently without taking any time to consider that they may be mistaken in something.

Of course, it is also possible to be too “open-minded” because not every idea is equally valid or has an equal chance of being true. Although we should technically allow for the possibility that someone is correct, we must still require that they offer support for their claims — if they cannot or do not, we may be justified in dismissing those claims and acting as if they weren’t true.

**Differentiate Emotion and Reason**  
Even if we have clear logical and empirical reasons for accepting an idea, we also probably have emotional and psychological reasons for accepting it — reasons which we may not be fully aware of. It is important to critical thinking, however, that we learn to separate the two because the latter can easily interfere with the former.

Our emotional reasons for believing something might be quite understandable, but if the logic behind the belief is wrong, then ultimately we should not consider our belief rational. If we really are going to approach our beliefs in a skeptical, fair manner, then we must be willing to set aside our emotions and evaluate the logic and reasoning on their own terms — possibly even rejecting our beliefs if they fail to live up to logical criteria (see Open-Mindedness).

**Argue from Knowledge, not Ignorance**  
Because we often have an emotional or other psychological investment in our beliefs, it isn’t unusual for people to step forward and try to defend those beliefs regardless of whether the logic or evidence for them are weak. Indeed, sometimes people will defend an idea even though they really don’t know a great deal about it — they **think** they do, but they don’t.

A person who tries to practice critical thinking, however, also tries to avoid assuming that they already know everything they need to know. Such a person is willing to allow that someone who disagrees can teach them something relevant and refrains from arguing a position if they are ignorant of important, relevant facts.

**Probability is not Certainty**  
There are ideas that are probably true and ideas that are certainly true, but while it is nice to have an idea that belongs in the latter group, we must understand that the latter group is far, far smaller than the former. However preferable it might be otherwise, we can’t be absolutely certain about quite a lot of matters — especially those matters that are the focus of many debates.

When a person exercises skepticism and critical thinking, they remember that just because they can show a conclusion is **probably** true, that doesn’t mean they have shown or can show that it is **certainly** true. Certain truths require firm conviction, but probable truths require only tentative conviction — that is to say, we should believe them with the same strength as the evidence and reason allow.