

**PHI 106 CRITICAL THINKING**

**TOPIC 3:**

“For many reasons, thinking critically isn’t something we generally do.

Partly we can’t—many critical thinking skills need to be learned. And partly we just don’t—it’s hard, it’s not particularly encouraged, and it can be disturbing.

It’s certainly harder than, say, watching television or reading a newspaper. And it’s harder than other kinds of thinking, such as thinking about what you’re going to do today.

So we may simply be unable to do it. It’s not something we can just do; it’s certainly not something we were born able to do.

We have to learn how to think critically, and then we have to practice in order to get good at it—like any skill. Like walking and talking.

And while critical thinking is a skill, it’s a skill that is dependent on knowledge—and often we just don’t know enough to challenge the truth of what we hear or read.

It’s hard enough to think through our own opinions. Yet when we engage in critical thinking, we often have to do other people’s thinking too: we have to fill in the blanks, the gaps, in what they’ve said or written.

As we noted in the first section of this chapter, this is because very few people articulate their thoughts clearly and completely—probably because very few people know their thoughts that well. Remember, if you can’t say, “This is my opinion and these are my reasons . . .,” you probably don’t really know what you think. Not only is it hard to understand the argument someone is making (or whether they’re even making an argument), once we do understand the

argument, it's hard to then evaluate it: it takes a lot of mental energy to weigh every premise, to check every connection, to make sure no errors of reasoning have occurred—in essence, to engage in critical thinking.

Evaluation is made even harder by the loss of diversity mentioned in the previous section. It's easier to evaluate an argument when you're already aware of a counterargument.

For example, suppose you're aware of the argument that global warming is caused by the greenhouse gases produced by burning fossil fuels, and so on. Suppose you're also aware of the argument that global warming is part of a natural cycle. Knowledge of the second argument makes it easier to be critical of—to evaluate—the first argument. If you hadn't been aware of the natural cycle argument, you would have been more likely to have just accepted the greenhouse gases argument—you wouldn't have been aware of any challenges to it.

Of course, you could come up with challenging counterarguments on your own. But that's hard too. It's hard to put all the pieces together. It's even harder when you don't have all the pieces and you have to imagine what evidence would support a certain claim.

And keep in mind that you may have to imagine that evidence if it's not published in any of the mainstream media, or even in the alternative media.

Another reason for our tendency not to engage in critical thinking is that we live in a decidedly anti-intellectual era. It's almost cool to be stupid. It's certainly not cool to be smart. (You might want to think critically about that: what, exactly, is cool about being stupid?)

Much to our detriment, critical thinking is simply not encouraged in our society. You'd think, given its importance and its difficulty, that critical thinking would be taught at elementary and secondary schools.

But, generally, it's not. Perhaps teachers and principals think it would make students more difficult to manage. They're right.

Perhaps that's why critical thinking is not only not encouraged, it's discouraged. It's interesting to note that cults discourage critical thinking. So do large corporations who want loyal employees who don't question the company's goals."

(Compiled from Peg Tittle's Critical Thinking Textbook)