

All of us hold utterly contradictory ideas to be true. Often these values are applied in different areas of our lives so the contradiction is not readily apparent. Or, we know one thing rationally but our actions take no account of that knowledge because its implications fall in the future.

Separating our own knowledge from the skills of evaluating knowledge is difficult because both our knowledge and the skills we need to evaluate knowledge are in the same place—inside our own heads. However, accepting that one thing we hold to be true has implications for the others, that our own views should not be accorded special status just because we hold them and that we should require the same—or higher—standards of proof for our own values than we do of others, is a foundational part of becoming a clearer and more logical thinker. Accepting our own opinions uncritically is the ultimate example of an “as everyone knows” approach, which, all too often, is simply a cover for “I think.” If you accept your own views as self-evidently true and representative of the opinions of all right-thinking people, you close your mind to the possibility that others may have valid views that you would benefit from considering seriously. The debater who is reluctant to examine her own views but subjects everyone else’s to rigorous and logical scrutiny has somewhat missed the point of thinking critically.

Approach Problems Consistently

Critical thinkers treat the ideas of those they instinctively like or agree with to the same scrutiny as those with whom they are immediately uncomfortable. The odds really are against all of your friends being right all the time and all of the people you dislike being wrong about everything. Critical thinkers can disagree about a subject—indeed it would be extremely unlikely if they didn’t—but they should do so on the basis of honesty and respect for perspectives that are not their own.

Identify the Relevance—or Irrelevance—of Proposed Solutions to Given Problems

Frequently what sounds like a solution to a problem is nothing of the sort. It’s just bluster put in place to give the appearance of activity in the face of a problem that is difficult or complicated. This attitude is often summed up as “There is a problem, something must be done. This is ‘something’, therefore I will do it.” We tend to replace activity with bluster particularly when we view the solutions we propose as “drastic,” “vital,” or “once and for all.” Ask yourself whether any proposed solution actually solves the problem that it purports to address or whether it just makes everybody feel better because they appear to be doing something.