FREE FIRST CHAPTER

THE SOCRATIC WAY OF QUESTIONING

The Crucial Role Of Critical Thinking

How To Use Socrates' Method To Discover The Truth And Argue Wisely — Chapter One. About a 25-minute read.

Gustave Flaubert wrote, "Let us think of nothing, neither of the future nor of ourselves, for to think is to suffer."

Flaubert is right, but only up to a point and only from a particular point of view. First, we need to try and see what he was going through to cause him suffering and pain when he thought. The quote is from a letter, written at midnight on August 4, 1846, to his mistress, Louise Colet. "Twelve hours ago we were still together, and at this very moment yesterday I was holding you in my arms!" he writes. In this context, the source of his pain is obvious. He is in love and the suffering stems from his thoughts of her.

However, most of us do not see thinking as a cause of suffering. Usually, this is because many people consider thinking to be something that happens when we are not busy and our thoughts flit, like a bee, without pausing or considering deeply. There is no pain here, unless your thoughts touch on a painful memory. But this isn't really thinking. It is daydreaming, simply allowing your mind to wander.

When you need to apply your mind to a specific problem, or to a major decision that may impact on you and/or your family's future, thinking can be painful — particularly to a mind not used to concentrated thought. And it's unlikely that you will go through life without being presented with problems and dilemmas that trouble you. For example:

- You need to decide whether to accept the new job you have been offered in a different city.
- You need to plan for uncertainty because of climate change.
- You need to factor in changes necessary because of the current pandemic.

These are important decisions in your life, but you put off making them because you fear making a decision that you will later regret. You believe in your own abilities, and know you are usually right. After all, you have more experience and are more knowledgeable than most people you know.

But you have deep concerns about the future because of the uncertainty around climate change and the pandemic. You worry about how the 'new normal' might affect your life. How will it be for you financially and health-wise?

At the same time, all the news about disinformation has you distrusting what you read and hear. Yes, there are those you consider to be authorities and still believe them, but the doubts creep in and unsettle you.

However, you can still achieve your goals and realize your dreams despite what the socio-economic outlook might bring. The book you have in your hands will help you resolve all your dilemmas and uncertainty.

Most of you have probably come across the concept of critical thinking. A good proportion of you will have heard about the Socratic Method. But what do these two have in common and how do they relate to each other? Take a short journey into the mindset of Socrates and critical thinking through the pages of this book and discover exactly what it involves.

In it, you will find techniques to help you think rationally, communicate with reason, and ask only meaningful questions to get the answers that you want. You will learn how to 'get to the truth' of matters that concern you, without being influenced by what others think or say. As a result, you will be equipped to reach considered decisions and arrive at sound conclusions in all aspects of your life.

I am a published author and professional writer, with an award-winning short story and a BBC radio play under my belt. A solid background in systems analysis, design and development taught me the power of deep analysis and to look beyond the obvious and expect the unexpected. This is my tenth book, and in a way, a lot of my previous writing, such as my second book, *Systems Analysis and Design*, has led to my writing a book on the Socratic method and critical thinking.

My childhood in various wayside stations in the African bush, and my school years in boarding schools in what was Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) set the tone for my search for answers that neither my parents nor my teachers could provide.

Never mind trying to find the meaning of life, I wanted to know what a communist was and why did the deputy head of the school call me a communist organizer? To put it in context, it was 1965 — the year the government of Rhodesia unilaterally declared independence from Britain. I was 14 years old at the time, and had been partly responsible for a "food riot" at school, a protest over the quality of hostel food. Not much made sense to me in those days. This was my sixth year in boarding school and I felt like an unwanted child, an orphan.

This is no reflection on my parents, who were loving, upright, and well-meaning people. But their world was not my world. It was the decade of anti-Vietnam war protests, of rock 'n' roll, and teenagers around the world were questioning the way things were done and why they had to be this way.

This was an unknown area for me, so I pushed boundaries, got into trouble for it, and have never stopped questioning since then. When I received a request to write this book, it was as if all those years of being an outsider suddenly had a point of focus. All my travels around the world, all my experiences bumping into walls and falling down rabbit holes were prompting me to write this. In some ways, it has answered questions I haven't asked yet. I hope you get as much out of reading it as I got out of writing it.

The Crucial Role Of Critical Thinking

Dave was 27 when he moved to a small city in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. He had enrolled at the local university and was looking forward to student life, leaving the stresses of alternating between being a soldier and a farmer in what had just become Zimbabwe. One Saturday in January, he rode his motorcycle to an out-of-town hotel where a friend worked as a barman. Dave declined Brad's invitation to sleep over. On his way home, as he crested a hill on a curved stretch of road, he saw a car on his side of the road coming straight at him.

Larry's sister got married on the same Saturday in January. As Larry left the wedding reception to drive home, friends and family tried to dissuade him, knowing how much he had drunk. Invitations to stay over with them for the night and leave the next day came from all sides. Larry laughed, said he was fine to drive, that he knew the road and travelled from his smallholding to town hundreds of times. Waving off their protests, he got into his car, and in a few minutes, he was beyond the city limits.

Larry is not sure what happened next. He remembers seeing a single headlamp coming over the hill directly in front of him.

What did Larry think when he got into his car? What were his friends thinking when he left, knowing he was in no state to drive? If they were thinking, they were not thinking clearly.

Dave died that night. What did he think when he declined Brad's suggestion that he sleep over? He lived alone and had no pets needing his attention. If he was thinking at all, it was muddled thinking.

I am fairly certain that none of the role players that fateful night knew anything about critical thinking. And the results were deadly.

Of course, not every event where you fail to think critically will end in tragedy. So, what exactly is critical thinking? And will it make a difference in your life? To answer the second

question first, critical thinking will undoubtedly make a positive difference to you and your worldview.

As for what critical thinking is, it's a way of thinking about the big and small questions you will face for as long as you're alive. Critical thinking is a way of thinking — about events and ideas — instead of simply accepting them at face value. One definition that is all over the internet is that critical thinking is:

> *"Disciplined thinking that is clear, rational, open-minded, and informed by evidence"*[1].

While the above definition is concise, it is also limited. It doesn't mention the important aspect of context or the methods and standards you should apply to the process. The definition below, from Peter Facione and the Delphi Project, is more precise:

> *"Purposeful, reflective judgment which manifests itself in reasoned consideration of the evidence, context, methods, standards, and conceptualization in deciding what to believe or what to do"*[2].

We will open a window onto the elements of critical thinking now, and we will also begin to examine the traits, the mindset, and the standards that you should apply in your considerations and deliberations.

The Elements Of Critical Thinking

The ability to think clearly and logically is at the heart of critical thinking. Fortunately, clear and logical thinking are skills that you can learn.

Critical thinking is far more than a skill. It is a habit and is also called a mindset or a habit of mind. In addition, it is a combination of traits and attitudes. To examine the traits of critical thinkers, the list prepared by Dr. Peter Facione for the executive summary of the Delphi Report is a good place to start:

- Being open-minded, in that you look for new or different perspectives.
- Analytical in your approach to questioning.

- Systematic in building an argument or finding weaknesses in an argument.
- Inquisitive, if not by nature, then by training.
- Judicious in your approach to evaluating the evidence before you reach any conclusions.
- Truth-seeking and ethical and ready to acknowledge being wrong.
- Confidence in reasoning and in examining alternatives.

Critical thinking goes beyond the traits listed above. But before expanding on the traits and attitudes of critical thinkers, think about the number of people you know who think critically. Now think of the number of people you know who might think deeply, even philosophically, but are not critical thinkers. Compare the numbers in those two groups to the total number of people you know. Now ask yourself if you could safely, and truthfully, say, "Many people I know don't think critically." Or "most people I know don't think critically."

It is certainly the case with many people I know. Instead of thinking critically and questioning the status quo, they will excuse the situation by saying things like, "It's the norm," or "It's par for the course" (and please excuse the clichés, but it's how they talk). These are people who are capable of critical thinking, both educationally and intellectually, but have settled into a comfort zone or become complacent about the world around them.

Let's examine those two platitudes and ask: what if nobody had ever questioned the norm? Would we have the science and technology servicing the world that we have today? Would we have the extraordinary artworks of van Gogh, or Picasso, or Dali? Would we have the superlative literary works available in libraries around the world?

Then, some people say, "It's always been like this," and "what difference can one person make?" Here, we could question what the adverb 'always' means in this context. Does it mean ever since time began, or is it more limited, such as in your father's memory? As for questioning what difference one person can make, consider this story.

A woman who lives in a coastal city goes for long walks on the beach every day. Each time she walks, she always comes back with one piece of rubbish she did not take to the beach, such as a plastic bottle or a crisps wrapper. Friends point out to her the volume of litter on the beach and ask, "Why bother? What difference does it make?" And she would reply,

"Because next time I come here, I will know there is one piece of rubbish less than there would have been if I'd done nothing."

To take this story one step further, what if all her friends started doing the same thing, and if the idea caught on and became a habit of more and more people? Clean beaches, anyone?

Consider also that Socrates was one person. If he had not begun questioning, you would not be reading this book. We would, maybe, still be living in a city like ancient Athens.

You can make a difference, even if you act on your own. Besides, you never know who it might encourage to examine the roadblocks and handbrakes in their thinking.

Critical thinking does not start with analyzing and questioning the major and immediate changes you need to make to the world you live in. It starts with you making small changes in your life — and the first change is to begin thinking critically. Perhaps you can start by interrogating any superstitions you may have learned at the feet of your grandparents or in the lap of your mother.

For example, if you spill salt at the table and throw a pinch over your shoulder, why do you do that? What will happen if you don't throw a pinch over your shoulder? Answering that something terrible will happen is not precise enough. Establish exactly what this terrible thing will be. And ask yourself why you still follow this obscure practice.

Is Friday the 13th an unlucky day in your family or your beliefs? If so, why is that?

Even if walking under a ladder is not considered unlucky, it still makes sense not to do so. If anyone is working up top, there is always the possibility something could fall on you. But even if nobody is up the ladder, it still makes sense not to walk under it. If, for example, someone walking around the outside of the ladder stumbles against the leg or dislodges the ladder, it could fall on you.

Examining your superstitions is a fairly easy way to begin interrogating aspects of your life you have previously accepted without question. If you would like something a bit more

challenging, examine your behavior, your moods, and irritations.

Establish when, and under what circumstances, you are at your worst. Next, analyze what events, words, or actions change your mood and what pushes the buttons that trigger a despicable you. Discover what brings out the worst in you, and go on to question how it makes you feel.

Make notes as you go along to help clarify and review the steps and choices you make. Now, knowing how you feel when your worst self surfaces, ask what it was that brought that aspect of your shadow self to the fore. Then question the shadow as to why it is now front and center.

Skills You Need To Think Critically

Critical thinking requires more than understanding and applying the elements of critical thinking listed earlier. You will also need specific skills. Some of these you may already have, and even if you don't have all of these skills, they can be learned. To think critically, you will need the skills listed below. You will not always apply these skills in the order they appear, but you need to know them and understand how they are applied.

- Observation
- Reflection
- Interpretation
- Problem solving
- Analysis
- Evaluation

Have you ever wondered about how our mind works? For example, can you arrive at a judgment without first understanding the situation? Of course, some people will jump to conclusions without understanding the situation and without even the most elementary reasoning. To understand the logical connection between ideas, you need to be rational and think clearly.

First, you would need to assess if there is any logical connection between the ideas. Just because someone says there is a connection, it doesn't mean it is strong or valid. For example, Alan walked under a ladder on his way to work this morning. At lunchtime, Alan's boss fired him. As a result, Alan now believes walking under ladders is unlucky because he got fired the day he walked under a ladder. There is no valid connection between being fired and walking under a ladder, apart from both happening on the same day.

However, it is common to hear people link two separate events and conclude that the first two events cause the third event. People find it easy to understand simple cause-and-effect stories such as this. Does this mean we naturally look for easy ways to explain the random events we stumble across regularly? Are we on a constant search for meaning?

If that is the case, we are far better off when we think critically. As critical thinkers, we train our minds to question a bit more deeply and are therefore not fooled easily. We examine events, statements, and outcomes to test their validity. We analyze and evaluate.

Before you can reach a reasoned decision, one that is based on evidence and supported by verifiable data, you have to use the skills for critical thinking listed above. These skills do not necessarily define your ability to reason, but your reasoning will be supported, deepened, and strengthened. Let's look at an example of where applying the traits and skills of critical thinking might make a difference.

Claire S. runs a school in the center of a small city. The school is on the 4th and 5th floors of a building across from the municipal building. It is within easy reach of public transport, but it has no playground or sports facilities. An opportunity arises to move the school to the grounds of an old hotel in a rural area 10 miles from the city center. The hotel buildings are in good condition and include a swimming pool and spacious grounds for outdoor activities, all overlooking a dam cradled in the arms of an ancient mountain range.

The rent is lower out of town; the buildings are clustered, making it easy to set up classrooms around an admin building, and no high-rise building in sight. The village

surrounding the hotel is expanding quickly, as a large poultry farm had set up operations a couple of miles away.

In the city, where the school is currently, there is easy access to public transport and shops, with many parents wanting education for their children. Parents can drop their children at school and be at the office minutes later.

Now, let's do some critical thinking about this issue for Claire. And we will do it in an objective way, which means doing it without bringing our biases and prejudices along.

First, we identify the arguments concerning the moving of the school. The current school premises do not have playing fields or sports facilities. Spread over two floors of a multi-story building, there is a constant noise of children or staff clattering up and down stairs from admin offices and staff rooms to classrooms. Rents are high in the city center.

Next, we need to evaluate the two choices — stay in the city or move to the country — and determine how valid or strong the supporting arguments are. On the face of it, there are strong arguments for moving the school. And, at first glance, it would seem that there are no or few arguments against moving the school.

We assess any weaknesses in assumptions or points where assumptions are vague or where little evidence for the argument exists. Let's also examine what implications there are for moving and for staying.

Moving will affect staff, pupils, and parents. Staying in the city means some parents can drop their children at school and be at work in five minutes. Moving means they need to allow for a 20-mile round trip that will take at least 30 minutes in the best traffic conditions.

So Claire must expect to lose some pupils. The question is, how many will leave? The next question is: how long will it be before the school picks up students from the village, the staff at local holiday hotels, and the surrounding farming community? Claire has done no real research. She did not send out any questionnaires, so we have no viable way to assess this. We are in the realm of guesswork. Staff may also leave because:

- They now have to travel further to get to work and back.
- They may have children at another school and usually go home at lunch to feed their children.
- They may have a child at the same school, but they would take the child to their grandmother, then return to work in the city. They can't do that if the school moves.

If we examine the move as a business proposition, we have to ignore the scenic views of the dam and the mountains. They have no commercial or academic value in making the decision. Of course, if you were doing this exercise for a spa offering meditation and reflection, the natural setting will carry more value than a city center setting.

At this point, as an entrepreneur or an investor, you would want to see financial reports, but we do not cover that here. You must decide on the given case study. Claire can replace staff who leave, although it will be disruptive to the students, and if more than two teachers leave, she could struggle for a couple of months.

Parents who still want to keep their children at the school could start lift clubs. The lower rent will help cover gaps left by students who leave, but the question keeps coming back to how many students the school can afford to lose and how quickly a gap can be filled.

Of course, to do any sort of effective analysis and evaluation will require a basic understanding of logic.

The Logic Behind A Critical Mindset

To use our ability to reason effectively, we need to understand the basic principles of logic. Logic is a process for arriving at a conclusion based on given information. As such, it's a tool you should use in your life.

Logic is a fundamental part of philosophy, as well as being an area of mathematics. There are essentially two main branches in the philosophical world of logic — informal logic and formal logic.

Critical thinking has been referred to as "informal" logic, although the structure and discipline required for critical thinking are anything but informal. More accurately, informal logic is seen as the process used for daily reasoning and casual debate. Formal logic, insofar as we are interested in it, is called classical elementary logic or first-order logic.

Before we can move on, you need to understand a few terms. The first is "argument." Most people are already familiar with the other meaning, namely that of a heated quarrel or a shouted dispute. Except, in the logical sense, an argument is one or more statements or propositions supported by one or more premises and claims, leading to one conclusion, either stated or inferred. Thus, we can describe the elements of logic as follows[3]:

Propositions

A statement used as the foundation of a logical argument. The proposition is either accurate (true) or not accurate (false).

Premises

Also called claims, premises are used to build the argument and provide support for it.

Conclusions

The result of the argument is drawn from the premises or is inferred in the premises.
Let's look at an example. The argument is as follows:

- **Proposition:** Every person who lives in Arkansas lives in the USA.
- **Premises:** Every person who lives in the USA lives in North America.
- **Conclusion:** Every person who lives in Arkansas lives in North America.
- **Explanation:** The conclusion is true because the claims and premises are verifiable.

This uses a process called deductive reasoning. Other arguments might use inductive reasoning. In some cases, the argument could use both deductive and inductive reasoning. We look at inductive reasoning later, but for now, here is another example of deductive reasoning.

- **Proposition:** All trees have leaves.

- **Premises:** The trees in my neighborhood lose their leaves in winter.
- **Conclusion:** Trees lose their leaves in winter.
- **Explanation:** Both the proposition and the premise are true, but the conclusion is only true in certain circumstances. If we infer that all trees lose their leaves in winter, then the conclusion is false.

To correct the conclusion, we must add one word to the beginning. Doing so also removes the need to infer anything. The changed conclusion should say: *Deciduous* trees lose their leaves in winter. The sentence is more specific, and the conclusion is now true.

The discussion around the above argument is an example of checking the proof of an argument. In effect, we tested the logical accuracy of the premises and the conclusion. For an argument to be valid, all the premises have to be true, and the conclusion has to be true. If the argument does not meet these conditions, it is an invalid argument.

You might think that commonsense would lead you to the same end as the above discussion. However, if we define commonsense as what you expect every person to have in a given situation, you can see that logic is deeper and more precise. For example, exactly what is meant by "every person" in the above definition? Does it mean every person on the planet, or does it mean only people with a specific educational background? If you analyze this, you will see that commonsense is not so common.

When you analyze and evaluate an argument, you may be suspicious of the evidence presented and want to question it. You may also find inferences that you can draw based on the premises. As soon as you start making inferences, or questioning assumptions, be careful to check if your prejudices or biases affect your objectivity regularly. Be aware that emotions will also play a role, so you need to put emotional distance between yourself and the issue. All too often, emotional or biased stances lead to faulty reasoning, which can affect our judgment.

A big part of approaching statements and questions without bias or emotion is keeping an open mind. An open mind is particularly important when assessing the alternatives, as you need to view the issue from different positions or points of view. In a way, trying to see

things from a new point of view is like exploring boundaries. Imagine that you are part of a small group of blindfolded people led into a darkened room. The room contains an elephant. Each one of you is led to a different part of the room and asked to describe what you feel in front of you. Because you are each feeling a different part of the elephant — this person feels the tusk, that person feels a leg, another person feels the body — you all describe the elephant differently.

It is only when you remove the blindfold that you see the whole picture. Seeing things from an alternative position is like removing the blindfold from the people in the room with the elephant.

Asking questions, the heart of Socratic questioning, is not you trying to be difficult — and there may well be people who accuse you of that. Rather, it's you trying to deepen your understanding of the situation. For example, when you learn that other people have values that significantly differ from yours, you may begin to question their beliefs. Depending on how you go about questioning, their reactions will vary. At the extremes, reactions will range from defensiveness, mocking, and attempts to humiliate you, to anger. However, your questions should also go beyond that. If it is part of your search for truth and honesty in reasoning, you should also be questioning your own beliefs, not only those of other people.

To return to the story about Dave and Larry at the beginning of this chapter, Dave was my brother. It took days for the news of his death to reach me. I was a continent away, camping on the south coast of Portugal.

At the time, I knew nothing of critical thinking. In all my thinking about that event over the decades that followed, I always thought that Dave was an innocent victim of Larry's irresponsible behavior. At least, that was my belief until I examined the events with a critical mind.

Knowing my brother, he probably had a couple of drinks while visiting his friend, the hotel bartender. Did that play a role in how the night ended for those two young men?

A few years ago, my sister was in a queue for some official business in which she had to give her maiden name. The woman behind her in the queue said, "I know that name from a long time ago. Did you have a brother who died in a motorcycle accident outside Grahamstown?" It turns out she was Larry's sister, the one who got married the night Larry and Dave met head-on. Apparently, Larry has never been able to settle down, stay in any job for long, or maintain any relationship since that night.

Hearing how Larry was struggling with his life brought home to me, in a forcible way, how seemingly small decisions can have a significant impact on your future. Of course, this is an extreme example of the results of an unthinking or badly informed decision. But, if you apply any critical thinking to the event, you need to pay as much attention to analyzing the possible outcomes as you pay to your analysis of the probable outcomes.

This event, and my subsequent evaluation of it many years later, also brought home how easy it is to make judgments without applying critical thinking processes. For example, because this accident involved my brother, for decades I brought to my thinking all the biases and prejudices that close family ties carry, and blamed Larry for the accident. But the truth is, nobody will ever really know what happened on that road that night. We only know the outcome, and carry our wounds, and bear the scars.

Exercises And Tasks

Any exercises, tasks, or challenges are entirely optional. We include them to help focus your attention on important aspects of your journey through the Socratic thinking and questioning processes.

Exercise on received wisdom

Read the following discussion on received wisdom, then answer the questions below it.

The term "received wisdom" has been used for decades without any real agreement about its meaning. One definition is: "The usual way of doing things, the normal procedures to

follow." But this is too limited and more closely resembles definitions for common practice or the status quo.

Another definition is: "common knowledge that is held to be true, but may not be"[4]. This is closer to a fuller definition because it expresses some doubt. Then there is this definition, paraphrased from a discussion group:

> *Received wisdom is opposable to (but does not necessarily oppose) knowledge and scientific reason*[5].

In other words, it could be a block to personal growth, to being objective, to an inquisitive mind. As things stand today, received wisdom appears exempt from questioning. But it shouldn't be. It should be the starting point for any argument you analyze.

Conventional wisdom is commonly used interchangeably with received wisdom, but they are not the same — although they both impose unhelpful restrictions and limitations on your rights to ask questions. Conventional wisdom, first used by John Kenneth Galbraith in *The Affluent Society*[6], described a set of beliefs and thought patterns that society finds comfortable and acceptable. It is, in essence, a widely held belief on which most people act. However, all too frequently, the result of what is "comfortable and acceptable" for society leads to opposition to new ideas or barriers and hurdles to progress.

Given that "Wisdom is the ability to use your experience and knowledge to make sensible decisions or judgments"[7], it's time to start questioning your received wisdom. You have two tasks.

1. Think back to your childhood or your school days, and look for received wisdom that you can question. The aim is not to prove received wisdom wrong but rather to question the validity of old beliefs and whether they still have value in the light of the 21st century. These could be from a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, your college professor, or a mentor at college or at work. The received wisdom could be in the form of value systems or beliefs, such as a handshake is all you need to seal a deal. You pick the received wisdom for yourself. Ask if you still live by the handed-down values, or do you make adjustments in how you see the world?

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at questioning superstitions, and this exercise is part of a similar process. It questions beliefs handed down through the generations.

2. Read the discussion on received wisdom again, except this time, you are to examine it with a questioning mind. Apply what you have learned about critical thinking to the reasoning process, break it into bite-sized chunks, and analyze each part of it. Question the meaning of each definition and whether it adds value and weight to the argument.

Critical thinking is vital to the Socratic method of questioning and thinking. The systematic application of logic supported by evaluation and analysis, the courage to question deeply, confidence in your thinking, and the humility to admit you were wrong, all embody the spirit of Socratic dialogue. In the next chapter, we will cover who Socrates was, and how he became known for his method of thinking and questioning. We will work through the methods developed to gain insight and find the truth.

By exploring the boundaries of an issue and questioning assumptions, the Socratic ways have led to discovering universal definitions and inductive arguments. These have come to be regarded as the essence of the scientific method of inquiry.

You will learn to first understand an issue, then look for any weaknesses in an argument. In the process, you learn to reflect on alternatives and acknowledge limitations.

The Socratic method is effective and beneficial because:

- It starts with an initial definition or opinion about a subject.
- Then it asks a question that raises an exception to that definition or opinion.
- The resulting dialogue yields a better definition or alternate opinion.

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