

Broaden Your Perspective

Have you noticed that many of the people who claim to be individuals dress, talk, and act exactly like other people? Is it possible that all the people who shave their heads, sport tattoos, or wear earrings in unusual places were not influenced by others?

In this chapter, we consider what it means to be an individual. We also discuss the habits that will help you reinforce *genuine* individuality and develop your capacities.

Do you know the story of the six blind men and the elephant? Able to rely only on their sense of touch, they reached out and touched an elephant to learn about it. One touched its side and decided that an elephant was like a wall. The second touched its trunk and decided—a snake. The third touched its tail—a rope; the fourth, its ear—a fan; the fifth, its leg—a tree; the last, its tusk—a spear. Now each had a clear picture of the elephant in mind. But because all the pictures were based on a limited perspective, all were wrong.¹

All too often we are like the six blind men in our perspective on the world. We see narrowly, and our thinking suffers as a result. The first and perhaps saddest way we are victimized by narrow perspectives is in our view of our own potential. Most of us never come to know ourselves fully. We see only what we are and never realize the larger part of us: *what we have the capacity to be*. We never appreciate just how much of what we are is the result of accident.

Our development, for example, and our degree of success are strongly influenced by the way others regard us. In one experiment, researchers administered an intelligence test to an entire elementary school. The researchers told the faculty that the test would identify students who were ready to undergo a “learning spurt.” Actually, the test did no such thing: The testers merely selected some students at random and identified them as the ones whose learning would enjoy a spurt. Teachers were subsequently observed using the same materials and methods for these students as for others. Nevertheless, at the end of the year, when

influence over the lives of Americans and should be reduced in size and power. However, many others believe that the present size and scope of government are required to carry out its constitutional mandate and serve the needs of the nation. Research this issue, taking care to consider both viewpoints. Then explain where you stand on the issue.

- 2.9 Turn back to Application 1.1. Select one of the statements there (a-r) and recall your response to it. Examine that response in light of what you learned in this chapter about knowledge and opinion. That is, determine the source(s) of your view and its soundness.

the researchers again tested the student body, they found that the students who had been singled out had gained twice as many IQ points as the other students.

What was responsible for this gain? Obviously, the teachers had formed favorable attitudes toward these students and unconsciously transmitted their attitudes to the students. The students' self-images, in turn, were ultimately changed.²

If that experiment seems surprising, the following one, similar in its design, will seem astounding. Laboratory assistants were assigned the task of teaching rats to run a maze. They were told the rats were in two groups: fast learners and slow learners. Actually, all the rats were identical. After the test period, the rats that had been designated fast learners were found to have learned the maze better than the other rats. Like the schoolteachers, the lab assistants had formed preconceived notions about the rats, and those notions had not only affected the degree of patience and the amount of attention and encouragement the assistants displayed with the rats but also *influenced the rats' performance*.³

Studies show that confused, defeatist, helpless reactions are not inborn in us. They are *learned*. In one study, people were given problems they were told could be solved but that in fact could not be. As their efforts to solve the problems failed, the subjects experienced increasing frustration, until they finally accepted their helplessness and gave up. The real point of the study, though, came later. When the same people were given solvable problems, they continued to act helpless and gave up without really trying.⁴

What do these studies suggest about everyday life? That parents who are inconsistent in their demands and unpredictable in their reactions, teachers who focus on the negative rather than the positive, and coaches and activity leaders who ignore actual performance or contribution can rob us of our confidence, lead us into the habit of failure, and blind us to our real potential.

One of the distinguishing marks of many successful people is their refusal to define themselves by other people's assessments. Winston Churchill was branded a slow learner. Martha Graham was told that she did not have the right kind of body to become a dancer. Thomas Edison was urged to quit school because he was considered hopelessly stupid. Later, on his first job, working for the railroad, he set a train on fire with one of his experiments and was dismissed. And Albert Einstein's early record was even worse. Here are some of the details:

- He was not only an unimpressive student; he was told flatly by one teacher, "You will never amount to anything."
- At age 15 he was asked to leave school.
- When he took his first entrance exam to Zurich Polytechnic School, he failed and was required to spend a year in a Swiss High School before he could be admitted.
- At Zurich, he did mediocre work and was so unimpressive to his professors that he was rejected as a postgraduate assistant and denied a recommendation for employment.
- He eventually obtained a job as a tutor at a boarding school but was soon fired.

- He submitted a thesis on thermodynamics for a doctoral degree at Zurich. The thesis was rejected.
- Four years later, he submitted his special theory of relativity for a doctoral dissertation at the University at Bern. It was rejected.

“Wait,” you may be saying, “Churchill, Graham, Edison, and Einstein were very special people. The question is whether *the average person* can overcome negative assessments.” The answer is yes. To cite just one example, a teacher noticed that when students saw themselves as stupid in a particular subject, they unconsciously conformed to that image. They believed they were stupid, so they behaved stupidly. He set about changing their self-image. And when that change occurred, they no longer behaved stupidly.⁵

The lesson here is not that legitimate criticism or advice should be ignored nor that one can achieve competency in any field merely by belief. It is that you should not sell yourself short; your potential is undoubtedly much greater than you have ever realized. So when you catch yourself saying, “I’ll never be able to do this” or “I don’t have the talent to do that,” remember that the past does not dictate the future. What people call talent is often nothing more than knowing the knack. And *that* can be learned.

BECOMING AN INDIVIDUAL

All the philosophers and sages tell us that individuals are rare. Yet the curious thing is that virtually all people consider themselves individuals. (Think about it: Have you ever met anyone who admitted, “I am *not* an individual”?) If the philosophers are right, then most people are wrong in their self-assessment. The source of the error lies in the assumption that having unique genes and a unique collection of experiences guarantees individuality. If that were the case, no one could be a conformist. But there *are* conformists. Therefore, the assumption is unwarranted. Individuality is not inborn but acquired.

The key to becoming individuals is to look at ourselves honestly and objectively. This takes courage because it often involves abandoning wishful thinking and destroying cherished illusions about ourselves. How serious is *your* lack of individuality? Let’s see. Ever since you lay helpless and gurgling in your crib, you have been learning. The moment you were able to use your senses, impressions rushed in on you. You received literally millions of impressions before you could interpret them with any sophistication. By the time you were able to interpret effectively, you had long since acquired a large repertoire of actions and reactions—by imitation. You endlessly practiced speaking and walking and, yes, *thinking* as your parents and siblings did.

Later, you attended school, and accepted your teachers’ information and beliefs, often imitating their habits and attitudes. You learned, too, from your friends and classmates, and in time (when peer acceptance became more important), you said and did many things not because they seemed appropriate or mature or because you especially wanted to, but because you believed those

things would gain you the crowd's acceptance. If you are like most people, you are still selecting your words and actions at least in part by what others want or expect from you.

But the greatest shaper of your attitudes, habits, and values has probably not been your parents, siblings, teachers, or friends. It has very likely been popular culture. According to the A. C. Nielsen group, the average child watches about 28 hours of TV a week.⁶ This means that from preschool through high school the average young person spends close to 20,000 hours in front of the TV set, compared to about 11,000 hours in the classroom. And this doesn't take into account the time spent surfing the Internet, playing video games, and listening to music.

How does popular culture affect people? By placing viewers in the role of spectators, television tends to promote passivity. By bombarding people with print advertisements and commercials—an estimated 750,000 by age 18—advertising encourages people to be gullible and to accept biased testimony as fact. By building frequent scene shifts and commercial breaks into programs, television prevents viewers' attention spans from developing. By urging self-indulgence, impulsiveness, and instant gratification, advertising undermines self-discipline. By devoting forests of newspaper and magazine space to entertainers and providing them with talk-show platforms to parade their opinions, the media make it difficult for people to distinguish between excellence and mediocrity.

The process of being exposed to society—home, neighborhood, church, school, and so on—sociologists call *acculturation*. Essentially, it involves settling into our culture. The way we settle in, the way the culture shapes us, can be powerfully affected by our families' socioeconomic condition, their religious and political views, and the quality of the care they give us.

Acculturation can occur subtly, creating the illusion that our values, attitudes, and ideas were formed independently of other people and circumstances. Erich Fromm was referring to this kind of illusion when he noted that much of the time when we say we think something, we really ought to say, "It thinks in me."⁷

It's not hard to understand how we are deceived about our independence. We are much more acutely aware of the fact of having ideas than of the circumstances in which we received them. What we feel and believe are current experiences for us, so we tend to forget their origins. What we think, moreover, seems as much a part of us as the beating of our heart. The idea that our thoughts are borrowed from others is foreign and offensive, so we resist it.

To be an individual means more than claiming independence. It means achieving it. Here are three steps that will help you begin to achieve your individuality:

1. Acknowledge the influences that have shaped your thinking. Say to yourself, "My mind is full of other people's ideas and attitudes, which I received uncritically and accepted because I was young and trusting. Many of those ideas and attitudes are now hardened into principles and convictions. Yet some of them are surely erroneous or unworthy." Identify the people you

have especially admired or been close to: your mother and father, an aunt or uncle, a coach or teacher, a celebrity. Consider each person's convictions and actions. Decide exactly how those convictions and actions have contributed to your ideas and attitudes.

2. Sort out and evaluate your ideas and attitudes, even your most cherished ones. Ask, for example, what your political philosophy is. (That question, of course, means more than "Are you a Democrat or a Republican?" It includes your views on the proper role of government and on citizens' responsibility in a democracy.) Ask, too, about your views on religion, race, nationality, marriage, morality, and law. List your views, compare them with other people's, and test them on the basis of their reasonableness rather than on how comfortable you are with them.
3. When you decide which view of each subject is best (politics, morality, and the rest), accept it. If that means renouncing your previous view, do so willingly. Remember that you are never being more an individual than when you change your mind for a good reason.

Real individuality, of course, cannot be attained in a single sitting, or even in a hundred sittings. It is an ongoing task, the occupation of a lifetime, but one that everyone who wants to be a good thinker must undertake.

HABITS THAT HINDER THINKING

In your effort to become more of an individual, try to identify any habits of mind interfering with clear thinking. Some of these habits will be peculiar to your own situation and depend on your unique background and experience. But there are a number of habits that victimize everyone to some extent. The most significant deserve close attention. They are the *mine-is-better* habit, *face saving*, *resistance to change*, *conformity*, *stereotyping*, and *self-deception*.

The Mine-Is-Better Habit

This habit is natural enough. It begins in early childhood. As children, we all said, "My bike is better than your bike"; "My dad is stronger than your dad"; "My mom is prettier than your mom." We believed what we said, too. Whatever we associated with was an extension of ourselves. Asserting its superiority was an expression of ego.

The habit does not go away easily as we grow up. "In later life," writes Rowland Jepson, "we are apt to think that the world in which we grew up was the best of all possible worlds, and to regard the customs and notions which helped to mold our own selves as the acme of wisdom and sound sense, never reached before or since."⁸ And we tend to regard our present ideas, values, groups, and political and religious affiliations as superior, too.

Mine-is-better is undoubtedly as old as humankind. Primitive societies tend to regard those who are different—foreigners, criminals, the mentally deranged,

the physically or emotionally handicapped, other races, other religions, and other social classes—as lesser beings. “The creature who does not ‘belong’ to the tribe, clan, caste or parish,” they reason, “is not really human; he only aspires or pretends to be ‘like us.’”⁹ From that, it is only a short step to the decision that such “different people,” being subhuman, have no human rights, as some cultures have decided.¹⁰

We are appalled at such a view, yet our mine-is-better habit leads us to similar—if considerably less extreme—thinking and acting. If a friend proposes a change, we call her a reformer; if an enemy proposes a change, we call him a troublemaker or a fanatic. Likewise, the differences between a traitor and a defector, a religious denomination and a cult, a politician and a statesman or stateswoman depend on how close the person or subject is to us and our view.

The mine-is-better habit hinders our thinking. It destroys objectivity and prompts us to prefer self-flattering errors to unpleasant realities. If you wish to be a good thinker, you must learn to control this habit and keep your ego from interfering with your search for truth.

Face Saving

Like the mine-is-better habit, face saving is a natural tendency arising from our ego. Unlike mine-is-better, it occurs *after* we have said or done something that threatens to disturb our self-image or the image others have of us. Psychologists call face saving a *defense mechanism*, meaning it is a strategy we use to protect our image.

One common form of face saving is the excuse most children and many adults employ at one time or another: “It wasn’t my fault—he [or she] made me do it” or “It wasn’t my fault—I had no alternative.” This excuse, though an obstacle to good thinking, at least has the virtue of acknowledging that something wrong or undesirable has occurred. The dishonesty lies in pointing the finger away from oneself.

A more dangerous form of face saving is called *rationalizing*. Rationalizing is a dishonest substitute for reasoning whereby we set out “to defend our ideas rather than to find out the truth about the matters concerned.”¹¹ Let’s say, for example, that you are a heavy smoker. As the evidence linking smoking to serious diseases mounts, you begin to realize that your habit harms you. You feel like a fool. But instead of admitting that smoking is harmful or at least examining the evidence and deciding whether it is valid, you say, “The case against smoking isn’t conclusive” and “The relaxation of tension smoking achieves for me more than balances any minor harm it may cause me.” That’s rationalizing.

Although rationalizing sometimes resembles honest reasoning, there is a simple way to tell the difference between them. You are reasoning if your belief follows the evidence—that is, if you examine the evidence first and then make up your mind. You are rationalizing if the evidence follows your belief—that is, if you first decide what you’ll believe and then select and interpret evidence to justify it.¹²

The process of face saving and its effect on thinking are effectively summed up by Rowland Jepson:

When we have once adopted an opinion, our pride makes us [reluctant] to admit that we are wrong. When objections are made to our views, we are more concerned with discovering how to combat them than how much truth or sound sense there may be in them; we are at pains rather to find fresh support for our own views, than to face frankly any new facts that appear to contradict them. We all know how easy it is to become annoyed at the suggestion that we have made a mistake; that our first feeling is that we would rather do anything than admit it, and our first thought is "How can I explain it away?"¹³

To control your face-saving tendency, be alert for occasions when your ego is threatened; and remember this adage: A person who makes a mistake and refuses to admit it is thereby compounding the mistake.

Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is the tendency to reject new ideas and new ways of seeing or doing without examining them fairly. It has been the recurrent reaction to creativity throughout the ages. Galileo came close to losing his life when he suggested the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system. The inventors of the plow, the umbrella, the automobile, and the airplane were scoffed at, as were the individuals who first advocated using anesthetics during surgery, performing autopsies to determine the cause of death, and extending voting rights to women. Even the ending of child labor, which we now regard as eminently reasonable, was initially scorned: Critics called it a Bolshevik attempt to nationalize children.

One cause of our tendency to resist change is simple laziness. Having got used to things one way, we resent being asked to regard them another way; doing so makes us break our routine. Another reason is excessive regard for tradition. The old ways must be best, we believe, because our parents and grandparents used them. New ideas and approaches seem an affront to our ancestors.

But what is tradition, really? Is it the best way of seeing or doing? In some cases, it certainly is. But in others, it is more like the path in the following verse by Sam Walter Foss:

One day through the primeval wood
A calf walked home as good calves should;
But made a trail all bent askew,
A crooked trail as all calves do.
Since then three hundred years have fled,
And I infer the calf is dead.
But still he left behind his trail,
And thereby hangs my moral tale.
The trail was taken up next day
By a lone dog that passed that way;
And then a wise bellwether sheep

Pursued the trail o'er hill and glade
Through those old woods a path was made.
And many men wound in and out
And dodged and turned and bent about
And uttered words of righteous wrath
Because 'twas such a crooked path;
But still they followed—do not laugh—
The first migrations of that calf,
And through this winding wood-way stalked
Because he wobbled when he walked.
This forest path became a lane
That bent and turned and turned again;
This crooked lane became a road,
Where many a poor horse with his load
Toiled on beneath the burning sun,
And traveled some three miles in one.
And thus a century and a half
They trod the footsteps of that calf.
The years passed on in swiftness fleet,
The road became a village street;
And thus, before men were aware,
A city's crowded thoroughfare.
And soon the central street was this
Of a renowned metropolis;
And men two centuries and a half
Trod in the footsteps of that calf.
Each day a hundred thousand rout
Followed this zigzag calf about
And o'er his crooked journey went
The traffic of a continent.
A hundred thousand men were led
By one calf near three centuries dead.
They followed still his crooked way,
And lost one hundred years a day;
For thus such reverence is lent
To well-established precedent.¹⁴

In situations where tradition is nothing more than “well-established precedent,” or following in the footsteps of those who have gone before, it is more of an insult to our ancestors to follow them than to explore new paths.

Another reason for resisting change is fear. Each of us has developed habits of thinking and acting. These habits, like old shoes, are comfortable. The very idea of trading them for something new is frightening: “How could I ever cope with daily situations?” Our imagination conjures up a hundred apprehensions, all of them intensified by being nameless. So we choose to resist the new rather than welcome it. Sometimes, we avoid feeling ashamed by pretending we are really being honorable and acting on principle.

Unfortunately, if we are resistant to change, we are resistant to discovery, invention, creativity, progress. Each of these, after all, first comes to the world as a new idea. *To resist change is to set our minds against our own best and most worthwhile ideas.*

Being open to change does not mean embracing every new idea uncritically; many new ideas prove, on examination, to be worthless or unworkable. Rather, it means being willing to suspend judgment long enough to give every new idea, no matter how strange it seems, a fair chance to prove itself.

Conformity

Not all conformity is bad. We put our letters in the proper post office slot, say hello instead of good-bye when we answer the phone, try to spell correctly and not violate the rules of grammar, and stop for red lights when driving. Such actions, and thousands of others like them, are a sensible kind of conformity. If we were to try nonconformity in such matters, we would waste valuable time, confuse or annoy those around us, or threaten the safety of ourselves and others.

Harmful conformity is what we do *instead of* thinking in order to belong to a group or to avoid the risk of being different. Such conformity is an act of cowardice, a sacrifice of independence for a lesser good. In time, it makes us more concerned about what others think than about what is right and true and sensible. Once we begin to conform, we quickly find ourselves saying and doing not what we believe is best, but what we believe others want or expect us to say and do. That focus dulls our ability to think creatively and critically.

It's not always easy to avoid conforming. Our friends, families, and associates may exert considerable pressure on us. It takes courage to say, "I disagree" or "That's wrong," when the group is firm in its view. If you've ever tried it, you know how painful that you're-being-a-traitor look can be. That's why so many people give in again and again until they have completely surrendered their individuality. One widely repeated laboratory experiment documented this surrender dramatically. The experiment involved two subjects, who were told they were participating in a memory test. One assumed the role of teacher; the other, the role of student. When the student gave a wrong answer, the teacher was supposed to deliver an electric shock. With each wrong answer, the shock increased.

The situation, of course, was rigged. There was really no electric shock, and the "student" was really an actor instructed to say he had a heart condition, to plead with the "teacher" to stop, and even to claim chest pains. At the highest level of shock, he remained silent, and since he was in another room, the "teacher" must have considered the possibility that the shock had killed him.

The result of the experiment? Fully 65 percent of the "teachers" administered the shocks up to the highest level. Most protested to the experimenter that they didn't want to inflict pain on the student, but when the experimenter insisted, they obeyed.¹⁵

Perhaps we would behave differently in that experiment. Perhaps not. In any case, the effects of conformity are all around us. Abraham Maslow observed:

Too many people do not make up their own minds, but have their minds made up for them by salesmen, advertisers, parents, propagandists, TV,

newspapers and so on. They are pawns to be moved by others rather than self-determining individuals. Therefore they are apt to feel helpless, weak, and totally determined; they are prey for predators, flabby whiners rather than self-determining persons.¹⁶

It would be a mistake to fight conformity by refusing to believe and act as others do, to be different for the sake of being different. That is no more thoughtful than mindless conformity. The right way to fight conformity is to think for yourself and not worry about how many people share your view.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is an extreme form of generalizing. Generalizations classify people, places, and ideas according to their common elements. Thus, we may say that most basketball players are tall, that medical doctors study for years before being licensed to practice, that Honda Civics get better gas mileage than Corvettes. These are fair and reasonable generalizations. Generalizations that go *beyond* the boundaries of reasonableness, however, are called *overgeneralizations*. The beliefs that, for example, city residents are less friendly than rural folk and that athletes don't do well in their studies are overgeneralizations.

Stereotyping is a deeper and more serious problem than overgeneralization. A stereotype is a fixed, unbending generalization, irrationally maintained. As Walter Lippmann explains:

Stereotypes are loaded with preference, suffused with affection or dislike, attached to fears, lusts, strong wishes, pride, hope. Whatever invokes the stereotype is judged with the appropriate sentiment. Except where we deliberately keep prejudice in suspense, we do not study a man and judge him to be bad. We see a bad man. We see a . . . sainted priest, a humorless Englishman, a dangerous [communist], a carefree Bohemian, a lazy Hindu, a wily Oriental, a dreaming Slav, a volatile Irishman, a greedy Jew, a 100% American. . . . Neither justice, nor mercy, nor truth, enters into such a judgment, for the judgment has preceded the evidence.¹⁷

The most common stereotypes are racial, religious, and ethnic. There is the stereotype of the black, the fundamentalist Christian, the Italian. But there are many other types as well, no less firm for being less common—for example, stereotypes of homosexuals, the clergy, college dropouts, feminists, male chauvinists, New York City, singles' bars, motherhood—even God.

Stereotyping sets up a nice, neat mental warehouse for ideas. Everything has its own compartment. There is no comparing, no sorting, weighing, or selecting, just storage. Everything is presorted, predetermined, and prejudged. Thus, stereotyping impedes the mind's dynamic activity, forcing life's infinite variety, the myriad people and circumstances around us, into ready-made categories.

Many people find it difficult to overcome stereotypes because they tend to see them as accurate descriptions of the world, even as insights. Yet it is important to make the effort to expose them, for they distort our view of reality.

Self-Deception

A boy once went fishing with several friends. Someone suggested they all share whatever fish were caught. It seemed a reasonable idea, so the boy agreed. Then, as the day wore on and he caught more fish than his friends, his attitude began to change. By the end of the day, he was violently opposed to sharing and objected loudly, arguing that good anglers shouldn't be penalized for others' incompetence.¹⁸

That boy engaged in one of the many kinds of self-deception that tempt us all. "One of the most disturbing habits of the human mind," Katherine Anne Porter observed, "is its willful and destructive forgetting of whatever in its past does not flatter or confirm its present point of view."¹⁹

One of my colleagues often begins his classes in informal logic by asking students to do this exercise: "Think of the guy or girl you most resented in high school. In a couple of sentences, explain why you resented him or her." He has read hundreds of students' answers and has found that the great majority say, "That guy had the terrible habit of . . ." or "That girl lacked. . ." Only one or two out of ten will say, "I was jealous (or immature or insecure)." In other words, any resentment is clearly the other's fault and not one's own. A similar kind of self-deception occurs when students who get low grades because of missing class, failing to hand in homework, or refusing to prepare for examinations accuse their teachers of favoritism and prejudice.

People with symptoms of serious diseases—cancer, for example—sometimes lie to themselves that the matter is not serious enough for them to see a doctor. Many divorced people deceive themselves about the reasons for the breakup of their marriages. Most alcoholics lie to themselves about their alcohol dependence; "I can stop anytime I want to" is the common lie. And most marijuana or crack smokers deceive themselves that they smoke because they want to, rather than as a means of escape from unpleasant experiences and frustrations. If they smoke heavily, they may also persuade themselves that they are not getting burned out, even when their symptoms—loss of memory, listlessness, and confusion, among others—are obvious to everyone around them.

In addition, many people deceive themselves about their competency, first pretending to others that they are knowledgeable and then coming to believe the pretense themselves. Edwin L. Clarke describes their behavior this way:

Persons who, for instance, would consider it the height of presumption to advise an engineer how to plan a simple culvert, have no hesitation in speaking with an air of authority on far more complex questions such as Portuguese immigration or the nature of a desirable currency, subjects on which their knowledge is very superficial and only too often derived from inaccurate and biased sources.²⁰

To be a good thinker, you must be able to decide honestly what information you need to solve a problem and then, after acquiring that information, to evaluate it fairly. You will be able to do these things only if you have learned to be honest with yourself.

All six of the habits that hinder thinking—the mine-is-better habit, face saving, resistance to change, conformity, stereotyping, and self-deception—can become

deeply ingrained and therefore difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, they can all be overcome with desire and effort. The following section explains how to attack them.

OVERCOMING BAD HABITS

The key to overcoming the bad habits we have been discussing is to examine your first impressions of problems and issues, particularly strong ones prompting you to take a stand immediately without examining the evidence or weighing competing arguments. By closely examining such impressions, you will often be able to determine that a particular bad habit—resistance to change, for example, or stereotyping—is interfering with your thinking.

Marvin and Martha both read the same magazine article, which discusses a scientific book on the subject of life after death.²¹ The article explains that the book is a study of 116 people's near-death experiences and their subsequent memories of floating out of their bodies and, in some cases, traveling down a dark tunnel toward a bright light. It also points out that the author is a medical professor who began his study as a skeptic and conducted his investigations in a thoroughly scientific manner. Finally, it notes that although the author personally believes in life after death, he neither claims that his studies prove that it exists nor offers his findings in support of any particular religious perspective.

As Marvin begins reading the article, a strong feeling rises in him: "Here it is—proof that there's life after death—just what we need to show the skeptics, the doubters, those of little faith." Because he merely yields to the feeling without examining it, Marvin fails to realize that it masks mine-is-better thinking, stereotyping, and conformity. Later that day, he may be heard in the snack bar proclaiming that the book's author is a champion of Marvin's own religion and that the "entire scientific community" has now "conceded" that Marvin's view of an afterlife is "unquestionably true."

A very different, but equally strong, feeling rises in Martha as she reads the article: "More nonsense from mindless religious quacks who can't face the reality of oblivion." She, too, yields to the feeling unquestioningly and so fails to realize that it is a mixture of the same errors: mine-is-better thinking, stereotyping, and conformity. At lunch the next day, she tells her friends that the book says nothing of value, calling it a "pathetic attempt" to brainwash people.

Marvin's and Martha's self-deception may seem laughable, but it is really sad. Without realizing it, each has read without profit, remaining in a state of self-flattering ignorance instead of learning and growing. Each has substituted what Henshaw Ward termed *thobbing* for considering and evaluating ideas. The term combines the *th* from *thinking*, the *o* from *opinion*, and the *b* from *believing*. Whenever people think the opinion that pleases them and then believe it, they are thobbing.²²

Your best protection against thobbing is to develop the habit of *thinking about your thinking*. (The technical name for this activity is *metacognition*.) More specifically, be aware of your initial impressions of problems and issues, particularly those impressions that prompt you to take a stand immediately without examining the evidence or weighing competing views. When such feelings arise, control them instead of yielding to them, and force yourself to be objective.

WARM-UP EXERCISES

Remember that unlike the applications, the warm-up exercises have no special relation to the chapter contents. They may demand creative thinking, critical thinking, or both.

- 3.1. As soon as you enter the room, your roommate challenges you. “You’re taking a course in thinking, so answer this: If perfection in anything is beyond human attainment, what’s the point in striving to be better in anything?” What do you reply?
- 3.2. Your little niece looks puzzled. You ask her what’s wrong, and she says, “It doesn’t make sense: We blow on our hands to warm them when they’re cold, but we blow on our food to cool it when it’s hot. How can blowing make things both hot and cold?” Construct a clear and meaningful reply.
- 3.3. In a dorm gripe session, Bertram advances the following argument. Decide whether it is a reasonable one and explain your view thoroughly.

“I could understand the teacher’s failing me in the course if I hadn’t handed in my homework. But I did hand it in, faithfully. Therefore, I didn’t deserve to fail.”

APPLICATIONS

- 3.1. Read the following dialogue carefully, looking for flaws in thinking. If you find one, identify it and explain what is wrong with it in sufficient detail to persuade someone who has read the passage but sees no flaw. If you find two or more flaws, identify and explain your thinking about each.

EDNA: Professor, I don’t like to complain, but I don’t feel I’m getting as much out of this composition course as I should be getting.

PROF.: Really? Where do you think the problem lies?

EDNA: Well, you’ve got us writing just about every other day if we include the brief responses to the readings as well as the longer compositions. Yet so much of the writing seems wasted: You only correct about half the assignments.
- 3.2. Reread the paragraph beginning “How does popular culture affect people?” (page 51). Then examine some television programs, commercials and print advertisements, and some popular Internet sites to determine the kinds of influences people are being exposed to today. Be prepared to share your findings with the class.

Note: In doing the following applications, your first objective should be to examine the ideas that occur to you and to decide whether they are the most reasonable responses to the problem or issue. Modify flawed ideas; where appropriate, change your mind completely. The more carefully you conduct this examination process, the more impressive your written and spoken contributions will be.

- 3.3. When a Jewish couple were divorced, the mother won custody of their eight-year-old son. The boy's observance of Jewish dietary laws was one provision of the divorce agreement. After the mother admittedly failed to honor that provision for a period of five years, a New York Supreme Court justice ruled that she had to surrender custody of the boy to his father. Do you agree with the judge's ruling? Explain your position.
- 3.4. An 18-year-old San Francisco resident sued the high school from which he graduated, contending that the faculty were responsible for his inability to read and write adequately.²³ Do you think such a suit is reasonable? What factors would you consider if you were responsible for judging its merits?
- 3.5. It is common for high school coaches to forbid their players to drink alcohol. If a coach has such a rule and catches a player drinking, is it reasonable for the coach to dismiss the player from the team for the rest of the season? Should the coach treat the team's star player differently from a benchwarmer?
- 3.6. Apparently, a sizable number of Americans believe in astrology and think the stars govern their lives. How reasonable is this view? Explain your thinking.
- 3.7. A minister in Pontiac, Michigan, was arrested and charged with practicing medicine without a license—a felony—after he sprinkled blood from a freshly killed rooster on an ailing person. The minister said the authorities were stifling his constitutional rights. Do you agree with him? Explain your position.
- 3.8. Many Hollywood celebrities hold views that differ with those of most Americans and they are not shy about expressing them. One explanation for this fact was offered by TV host Pat Sajak. He says that celebrities are out of touch with the values, ideals, concerns, and beliefs of most Americans because they live apart from the masses in a tightly knit group of like-minded individuals. Also, that celebrities are quick to express their opinions because they are so often given a platform and asked for their views that they come to see them as having special value.²⁴ Comment on the reasonableness of Sajak's explanation, citing examples of celebrity views you have heard expressed.
- 3.9. "Outsourcing" means exporting jobs overseas. The best-known instances of outsourcing are in the manufacturing sector—for example, most athletic shoes and many articles of clothing are made

in third-world or developing countries. Less well-known instances are in the technical and professional sectors—for example, computer technical support is done largely in India; X-rays and MRIs are often read by radiologists in Japan or the Philippines. Critics of outsourcing believe that it not only cheats American workers of jobs but in many cases also takes advantage of workers in poor countries by paying them meager wages. Supporters argue that the cost of labor in the United States has become prohibitive for many companies and claim that the wages paid to foreign workers, though low by Western standards, are far above the local standard. What is the most reasonable view of outsourcing? (Before reaching your conclusion, be sure you understand *both* views of the issue, and the arguments offered for them, and not just the view that you are more familiar with.)

3.10. Some time ago a North Dakota woman married *herself*! Having been divorced six years earlier and being unable to find a suitable mate, she took the unusual step of marrying her “inner husband” in a ceremony attended by friends. Some consider her action a perfectly acceptable, if unusual, way of expressing her individuality. Others consider it a narcissistic mockery of the institution of marriage.²⁵ What is your opinion?

3.11. Look back at the exercises for Chapters 1 and 2. Recall your responses. Decide whether those responses were influenced by any of the bad habits discussed in this chapter. Discuss your findings. (*Note:* In doing this assignment, you should expect yourself to resist admitting such influences. Overcoming that resistance is a mark of thinking effectively.)