

Critical Thinking and Decision Making

What is Necessary to Make Good Decisions in the Social Realm?

The Media and Voters Must Stop Treating Politics as a Game

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Currently the worldwide challenges that humans are facing are many and complex and escalating geometrically in intensity [excessive population, limited natural resources, climate change/global warming, excessive competitive ideology/failure to cooperate/potential catastrophic conflict]. If we are to meet these challenges within the window of opportunity before us, we need a reasonably educated populace and leaders who propose projects and provide direction from a truly well-educated awareness. Presently, we have neither, and the focus of humans on the political and economic necessities of the present moment detracts from our ability to attend to these longer-term challenges in any systematic and efficient way.

So, how do we get to a world, or at least a country, where our social decisions are the consequence of true critical thinking, which is the foundation skill underlying well-educated awareness? In the development of human societies, humans have achieved on a universal basis the primary condition for critical thinking – symbolic language. And among the more advanced societies, humans have learned to foster critical thinking abilities in some of their citizens and to make the use of these skills mandatory in select areas of their cultures – science, technology, the law, etc. But in key domains, even in advanced cultures, we continue to allow our leaders to promote their views to and to gain support from the public by offering what amount to impressionistic and emotional sound bites. We must do better if we are to meet our challenges and advance and progress as a species. I suggest that the following 6 criteria are essential if our major societal decisions are to meet the high standards of critical thinking:

Command of Oral Symbolic Language

In growing up in all societies, virtually all modern humans achieve verbal language capability, which is essential for effective communication. Oral language forms the basis for thought and sharing thoughts socially, and it greatly facilitates retention of information from the past as well as planning for the future. It is not clear just when in the distant past this capability arose and reached a mature level of development among humans, but it lies at the root of humans being able to create complex social organizations beyond simple family based bands of hunter-gathers reacting mostly in the moment.

Basic Command of Written Symbolic Language – Reading and Writing

Written fully symbolic language is only a few thousand years old, and it is only in the last 500 years that a basic command of this written form of language began to spread to the common person – mostly as a result of a commitment to universal primary education in many societies in the last 200 years. Basic literacy is still a challenge among some human groups, and expository writing remains a skill rather minimally developed for the great majority of humans. Written language and the basic skills of reading and writing are important because they greatly facilitate broad based communication in and among complex groups. They lead to permanent records and the systematic retention of much more knowledge from the past, and they allow for planning to be much more comprehensive and detailed.

Sophisticated Command of Symbolic Language – Critical Thinking

Command of sophisticated reading and writing skills – at least among the leadership of all societies – is fundamental for human progress in nearly all dimensions. Rational thought is honed in and tested through the expository writing process. And as fixed documents/reports, the thoughts we commit to writing can be shared with others, who in turn can devote the time and attention to evaluate our thoughts and offer carefully considered written responses/critiques. Oral discussion and debate is never so penetrating, detailed or systematic. Good quality expository writing requires thought to be systematized, and it invites criteria being developed to evaluate the quality of that thought in terms of its logical and factual bases. Critical thinking is the ability to both develop and evaluate systematized thought, and this ability rarely exists apart from sophisticated writing capability. The written language of mathematics is a fully symbolic system and qualifies in all respects as a tool promoting critical thinking. It may even be the most exemplary form of sophisticated written language with the highest demands for logical, precise, and detailed thought. So, the written, expository forms of Mathematics and Verbal language can promote and express critical and logical thought.

A key problem for humanity is that few adults, even in what pass for educated populations in “developed” countries, possess either expository reading or writing capabilities at the sophisticated level required by critical thought. The unfortunate result is that many citizens rely on oral statements, oral reports by others of information in written materials, and quickly produced journalistic materials that do not pass the basic tests for completeness or accuracy. Because so many citizens are not trained to distinguish reliable and factual oral or written communications from partial and biased communications, the views of these citizens can be rather easily manipulated. Through selection of the facts cited, deflection of attention to secondary issues, and emotional

appeals [all characteristic of “spin”], citizens can be encouraged to adopt positions/opinions that have little basis either in logic or the full consideration of the facts. These same citizens can even be convinced to vote against their own self-interests through such rhetorical manipulations.

Since it is essential that the human community be guided by the results of quality critical thinking, and since it is not reasonable to assume that we can train all citizens to be sophisticated critical thinkers, we have to look for the best alternative. This alternative is to require our leaders to be educated critical thinkers and to justify their policies and proposals by offering critically derived written materials to other critical thinkers and the public for thorough evaluation in light of logic and the full evidentiary record. If humankind is to make the real progress that needs to be made in addressing the complex of important issues that it confronts, calculated efforts to manipulate public opinion [propaganda] is no longer acceptable. Political decision making cannot be treated as if it is a game pitting the half truths and lies of one party against the half truths and lies of other parties. We can no longer afford to allow the right to free speech to excuse the propagation of intentional misinformation to the public.

What is the current role of Media in this situation? In a word, Pathetic! Unfortunately most of the media, and especially talk shows and network news casts, focus on the political shenanigans of the moment as if their role in reporting the “news” is to virtually participate in an hourly or daily political gossip network. The news media seem to think that their task in reporting is satisfied by allowing representatives of the different views to come on their “shows” and continue the process of delivering their unexamined talking points. So, what the public gets is just opinion versus opinion with a few facts thrown in to suggest substance. Where is the expert in-depth analysis? Why are media specialists not examining in detail the white papers/platforms that some politicians and parties do produce? We should not have to go to academic journals long after the significant events have concluded to find such analyses. The media need to expose the inadequacies of the statements of the political blathers by offering substantive and timely critiques by real experts. Print media especially can do this, and for those who want just an overview, the print media can offer a brief summary of the key facts and conclusions. We will probably never stop the role of hyperbolic speech and irresponsible spin in the political process, but by regularly exposing its superficiality we can push the entire decision making process in a more substantive direction. We need a lot more evidence of critical thinking in and from the media.

Consideration of Multiple Perspectives – the Broad View

An educated person and populace are aware that any issue of socio-economic importance is likely to be approached and assessed from many different perspectives. No one of these perspectives is likely to capture the

whole truth. All must be given a fair viewing, and all must be evaluated for the truth they do contain in bringing benefits to the public. Generally speaking, the narrower the perspective informing a proposal, the fewer are those who will benefit. A truly educated person is always looking for the self-interested motive and the narrow ideological perspective. And it is no secret that the influence of money and power can easily corrupt decision making and lead to benefits mainly for the privileged few – a growing problem in America. An inclusive point of view combined with critical evaluation skills are the best guarantors that positions on important issues will be evaluated appropriately and that the greater good will be served.

Consideration of the Long as Well as the Short Term View

A proposal can benefit many in the short term, but be detrimental to the public good in the long term. Excessive exploitation of natural resources is a very good example, and many societies have undermined their long-term well-being by grabbing for all they can get today and ignoring the consequences for tomorrow. Considering the potential consequences of any proposal over the full period of its implementation is essential. In this regard, we need to be very cautious about making open-ended commitments!! Special interests at both the individual and group levels feed on such “timeless” commitments whether in the form of on-going support/subsidies or special tax breaks. Situations change and an activity that was worthy of support at one time can be counter-productive or completely unnecessary at another time. Apart from full support for the totally incapable, virtually all public assistance should be partial and temporary in behalf of easing transition for carefully screened individuals, groups, and corporations to a more fully productive situation. Ongoing tax breaks for Gallo and funding for 50 million dollar airplanes that the Air Force does not even want qualify for full-on absurdity.

Application of Critical Awareness to All Aspects of Life and Society

Some people and even populations can be very skillful in evaluating and planning for the broadest public good in certain areas and not applying these same capabilities to other areas. A good example are scientists who are experts in their specialties where their demands for rigorous proof/argument are stringent, but who uncritically allow themselves to hold and express opinions about other people or other activities just because these views were pervasive during their upbringing [custom and culture]. A truly educated person applies the sophisticated skills and awareness he or she has developed across all domains of his or her life. There are no sacrosanct zones that are off-limits, and the truly educated person is always reassessing as the situation changes and new information becomes available. Such a person is aware that the only constant is Change and that change is everywhere, all the time. So,

subscribing to fixed or absolute or unexamined views in any domain of life or society should be regarded as a significant indicator of a less capable leader or citizen.

Of course individuals, much less whole societies, with all 6 of the above cited qualities will be a rarity. But we must know the goal in order to strive for it. And we can insist that at least our leaders exhibit most of these capabilities and that they relate to us in terms of these high standards for quality communication before we even consider them for leadership positions. It follows that to meet these standards, candidates for public office must be required to fully spell out and provide the justification for their policy positions IN WRITING so these positions can be carefully scrutinized for their veracity. Speeches, and political ads, and talk shows, and internet blogs, and daily half hour news programs, and superficial debates are totally inadequate to provide citizens with what they need to make informed decisions. Appearances can be deceiving, and a pretty face, a clever wit, a folksy style, and charisma in general are no substitute for real substance.

We need to stop allowing communication gamesmanship to determine the course of our country's and the world's future. Do "Show me reviews by independent experts of a full set of policy White Papers." Don't "Show me ad nauseam a tabloid quality attack ad funded by some billionaire's special interest PAC."