

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *Being Logical*

"Given the shortage of logical thinking, And the fact that mankind is adrift, if not sinking, It is vital that all of us learn to think straight. And this small book by D. Q. McNerny is great. It follows, therefore, since we so badly need it, Everybody should not only buy it, but read it."

—CHARLES OSGOOD



would hope that *Being Logical* might to some degree succeed in doing or the cause of good thinking what *The Elements of Style* has done for the cause of good writing. My earnest wish is that this book might succeed in convincing its readers of the intrinsic importance of logic. And may it engender in them an appreciation for the priceless satisfaction which inevitably accompanies that happy state of being logical."

—from *Being Logical*

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BEING LOGICAL



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A Guide to
GOOD THINKING

D. Q. McNerny

PART FOUR

*The Sources of
Illogical Thinking*

Mistakes in reasoning may be merely accidental, or, more seriously, the result of carelessness. More seriously yet, they may proceed from attitudes or set points of view that are themselves conducive to illogical thinking. In this part of the book I survey some of the attitudes and points of view that are consciously to be avoided because they inhibit our ability to think logically.

1. Skepticism

There is a place for skepticism in sound reasoning, but it should be selectively employed. A distinction has to be made between skepticism as a permanent attitude, which is to be avoided at all costs, and skepticism as a fitting, even necessary, response to a particular situation. In genuinely doubtful situations, we should respond with doubt. Selective skepticism is merely a matter of reserving judgment until we have sufficient information at hand to judge responsibly. For example, we should be reluctant to accept the conclusion of an argument whose premises, for one reason or another, are questionable. This kind of healthy skepticism is preserving of sound reasoning.

But skepticism as a permanent attitude, a philosophical point of view, is deadly. It subverts the reasoning process before it even gets started, transforming it into a process of

mis-reasoning. There are two expressions of the skeptical attitude, one more extreme than the other, but both equally damaging. The extreme skeptic proclaims baldly that there is no truth. This is obviously a self-contradictory position, for if there is no truth there is no standard by which that very claim can be assessed, and the skeptic's statement is empty of meaning. The moderate skeptic is prepared to concede that truth may exist, but he maintains that if it does, the human mind is incapable of attaining it. At first, this position might appear less dismissive of truth than that of the extreme skeptic, but it really is not. A truth that is merely theoretical, and to which we do not have access, is, for all practical purposes, nonexistent.

Logic, as we said at the very outset, is essentially about truth. If truth is but a fleeting sprite we can only chase but never catch, logic is not worth bothering about, for in that case human reasoning would amount to little more than an exercise in futility.

2. *Evasive Agnosticism*

An agnostic is someone who maintains that he lacks enough knowledge regarding a particular issue to be able to make a definite judgment about it. The term is usually applied to religious belief. Whereas an atheist states categorically that there is no God, an agnostic says he does not know whether or not there is a God. But an agnostic attitude can be taken toward any subject, not just religion. There is a marked difference between the skeptic and the agnostic. The agnostic, unlike the skeptic, neither denies the existence of truth nor

its attainability. He simply claims ignorance as to the truth of a certain matter. Just as there is a place for skepticism in sound reasoning, so is there also a place for an honest agnosticism. We are being honestly agnostic when we simply admit to an ignorance that is really ours, here and now. If our knowledge of a particular thing is so limited that it does not allow us to take a confident position regarding it, we should refrain from committing ourselves. To do otherwise would be intellectually irresponsible. Evasive agnosticism is the attitude that attempts to pass off vincible ignorance as if it were invincible. It is one thing to say "I don't know" after long and assiduous research into a subject. It is quite another to say "I don't know" when you haven't even bothered to look into the matter. The person who succumbs to evasive agnosticism uses ignorance as an excuse rather than a reason. Such ignorance is the result of indifference or laziness.

3. *Cynicism and Naïve Optimism*

A cynic is someone who makes emphatically negative estimates without sufficient evidence. A naïve optimist is someone who makes emphatically positive estimates without sufficient evidence. Both represent illogical positions. Both the cynic and the naïve optimist act out of prejudice (the word comes from the Latin *praejudicare*, "to judge beforehand"), because they make up their mind about a particular matter before it has been fully encountered and seriously engaged with, not to say intelligently assimilated. A cynic preparing for a debate will assume a) the issues to be debated

are ridiculous, b) his opponent is a fool, and c) no good what-ever will come from the debate itself. The problem with cynicism, apart from its intrinsic illogicality, is that it blinds us to possibilities, and very often transforms our negative estimates and expectations into self-fulfilling prophecies.

A naïve optimist, after spending an hour with a young woman whom he has just met for the first time, is convinced that she has a) the beauty of Helen of Troy, b) the intelligence of Madame Curie, and c) the artistic prowess of Emily Dickinson. Naïve optimism, besides giving us a skewed view of the present, sets us up for future disappointment, for things are rarely as the naïve optimist supposes them to be. Neither the cynic nor the naïve optimist is paying the right kind of attention to the world around himself. Rather than seeing things as they are, he sees them as he is predisposed to see them.

4. *Narrow-Mindedness*

The college president's wife has lost a pearl earring of inestimable value somewhere within the confines of the football field. You are going to search for it. But you have decided beforehand, in a purely arbitrary fashion, that in conducting your search you will limit yourself to a ten-yard-wide strip in the middle of the field. By narrowing the scope of your search in that way, you will be ignoring 90 percent of the area in which the earring might be found. Your chances of ever finding it are reduced accordingly.

We say that the whole purpose of logic, of sound reasoning, is to discover the truth. Because the exact where-

abouts of something is obviously not known until after it is discovered, we have to keep our minds open beforehand to a variety of possibilities. People are not to be considered narrow-minded simply because they limit the scope of their inquiry, for that is a practical necessity which avoids wasted effort. A narrow-minded person refuses to consider certain alternatives only because they do not meet his prejudiced assumptions about what is and is not worth pursuing. The limiting process lacks a rational basis, in other words. Narrow-mindedness is clearly debilitating in its effects, but there is a certain kind of open-mindedness which may be even more so. G. K. Chesterton pointedly observed that an open mind, like an open mouth, should eventually close on something. A healthy open-mindedness does not mean that one is indiscriminately open to everything. To be noncommittal in a situation that demands commitment is no virtue. To be tolerant of everything is to value nothing. And, from a purely practical point of view, the search for truth necessitates our imposing judicious limitations on the area we will investigate, so as not to expend time and energy needlessly.

5. *Emotion and Argument*

There is a basic truth of human psychology that one does not have to learn from a textbook: The more intense our emotional state, the more difficult it is to think clearly and behave temperately. A person in the throes of violent anger is seldom a paragon of rationality. We have to exert conscious effort to keep emotion out of argument. We will never succeed completely at this, and in fact it would not be

a good thing were we to do so, but we need to be constantly aware of the fact that if emotion gains the ascendancy in any situation, clear thinking is going to suffer.

We are by nature emotional creatures, and to imagine that we could completely divest ourselves of our emotions—even temporarily, while we are engaged in argument—would be unrealistic. Though some ancient philosophers looked upon emotion and reason as inhabiting separate realms, with open belligerence between them, in fact the two inhabit the same domain and, ideally at least, should get along harmoniously. An idea, even of the most rarefied sort, is never devoid of emotion, for every idea is the brainchild of that naturally emotional creature who is man.

It is a matter of putting the emphasis on reason, then, and not of attempting to exclude emotion entirely. What should move people in a sound argument is its intellectual substance, the ideas and their interconnections—and not whatever emotional overtones the argument may carry with it. A conclusion should be accepted not because we feel good about it but because we see that it is true and therefore worthy of our acceptance. There is a simple rule of thumb to be followed here: *Never appeal directly to people's emotions.* Devote your efforts to bringing them to the point where they can see for themselves what is the case. The only thing really worth feeling good about is the truth.

6. The Reason for Reasoning

Reasoning can be employed for an unspecifiable number of purposes, both good and bad. Some of history's most notori-

ous criminals have been possessed of finely tuned logical minds, logical in the sense that they reasoned consistently from the presuppositions with which they began.

The problem was that the presuppositions with which they began were false. In this little book we have been advocating a view of logic that regards it as more than mere consistent reasoning. To be consistent in one's thinking if one's thinking is askew (i.e., not consistent with the objective order of things) is not to be logical, in the right understanding of the term, for logic has essentially to do with the truth. To use reasoning for any purpose other than attaining the truth is to misuse it. The ideal implied in that assertion is a very high one, and our record for living up to it is not admirable. But ideals are about the what-should-be.

It is at times too easy to be so governed by our emotions in our reasoning that argument becomes primarily a means of venting our anger, or of vindicating ourselves, or of getting even, or of simply scoring points for the sake of self-aggrandizement. The truth is thus relegated to incidental status. In the ideal debate, the primary purpose of the debaters is not to triumph over each other, but rather by their combined efforts to ferret out the truth as it pertains to the issues being debated. As for winning at all costs? "At all costs" is a price no one can afford.

7. Argumentation Is Not Quarreling

Argument is rational discourse. It is not to be confused with quarreling. The object of argument is to get at the truth. The object of quarreling is to get at other people. There are

any number of folk who, though happy to quarrel with you, are either unwilling or unable to *argue* with you. Do not waste time and energy trying to argue with people who will not or cannot argue.

8. *The Limits of Sincerity*

Sincerity is a necessary condition for sound reasoning but not a sufficient one. If you do not regard a position that you publicly advocate, and are willing to defend in argument, as true, you are abusing reason. Who wants to argue with someone who doesn't really believe in what he is saying? And what is more exasperating, after a long and spirited argument in defense of something you passionately believe in, than to learn that your interlocutor, defending the opposite position, was arguing just for the sake of argument? Only a sentimentalist believes that sincerity alone is enough. In fact, utter sincerity may combine perfectly with undeniable error. I can be utterly sincere and dead wrong. My sincerity cannot transform falsehood into truth. Of course, one *must* be sincere. But one must also be right.

9. *Common Sense*

Logic, though more than common sense, is born out of it. Success in logical thinking, then, and in the avoidance of illogical thinking, is rooted in a respect for common sense. Common sense is that homey everyday-type reasoning which is born out of an alert awareness of, and respect for, the obvious. It is characterized by the unfailing capacity

consistently to distinguish between a cat and a kangaroo. Common sense looks upon language as principally a means of revealing things, not concealing them, and is suspicious of words that dazzle more than denote. Common sense sticks close to the basics and renders to the first principles of reason the reverence they deserve. It is "common" sense in that it is shared by all those animals whom Aristotle defined as rational.