Strategies for Decision Making – Week 1 Lecture

**Introduction to Critical Thinking**

*Before you begin, it’s important to note that these weekly lectures do not substitute for the reading. These are only meant to give a broad overview the lesson topics.****It is important that you do the assigned readings.***

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle famously defined human beings as rational animals. By that, he meant that what is distinctive about human beings is the capacity to think, reflect, and conceptualize about our own nature. Whether or not Aristotle was right in saying this is what defines us, he was certainly correct in noting that reason plays a pre-eminent role in our lives. To that end, the use of logic and critical thinking is unavoidable for anyone who considers himself to be a rational person. It is therefore necessary that we master the art of thinking well. Good reasoning skills are crucial to navigating the world’s complexities and problems. It is through reasoning and critical thinking that we evaluate problems both mundane and significant. Making good decisions on topics ranging from what we will eat to the shape of acceptable social and economic policy all depend on our grasp of principles of good thinking.

The goal of all reasoning is to persuade. This is done by means of rational **arguments**. You might be familiar with the term in the context of a physical or verbal dispute, but that’s not how we’ll be using the term in this class. For our purposes, an argument is not a verbal altercation or disagreement. Rather, an argument is a collected series of statements (called premises) that lend support to a conclusion.

Notice that an argument isn’t simply a series of statements strung together. Arguments consist of statements that are put together so as to make another statement – called the conclusion – more plausible. In other words, arguments work by means of rational inference from premises to conclusions.

Thus, to “win” an argument is to persuade on the basis of reason. It doesn’t mean dominating a verbal dispute, making a witty remark, or getting in the last word. It is chiefly a matter of whether an argument is in fact persuasive because it is rational to accept the inferences that are made.

Reasoning can be good or bad. Good reasoning is cogent, while bad reasoning is fallacious. According to the book, cogent arguments must (1) start with justified premises, (2) include all likely relevant information, and (3) be valid.

Arguments can be either deductive or inductive. Deductive arguments are those in which the truth of the premises guarantee the truth of the conclusion. Inductive arguments (which are sometimes called “ampliative arguments”) are those in which the truth of the premises makes the conclusion more probably true. You’ll learn more about the various kinds of argument next week.

Reasoning doesn’t occur in a vacuum. Arguments are formed on the basis of beliefs we hold, and beliefs are shaped by a myriad of factors around us. We all have background beliefs about the world. These background beliefs can be about a wide range of issues and play an important role in determining our outlook on life. The most important of these background beliefs forms our **worldview**, which consists of the interpretive framework through which we approach the complexities of the world. As you complete this week’s reading, keep in mind the various ways in which our beliefs can affect the way in which we form and interpret arguments.

Our background beliefs are formed in a variety of ways. We may inherit beliefs from our friends and family, or we may form our own beliefs as we go through life. Regardless of how we form our beliefs, it is important that our worldview is based on reliable information. No matter how right we think we are, we all have false beliefs, and as such we should always be open to revising our core background beliefs. The goal of critical thinking is to help weed out false beliefs from our worldviews. Indeed, the goal of all reasoning, logic, and argumentation is to arrive at the truth. But truth is a tricky thing, and finding out just what is true and what is false requires a lot of work. Critical thinking, therefore, requires effort, but the end result is a sharper, clearer, and more accurate vision of the world. By the time you are finished with this course, you will be equipped with the necessary resources to form a comprehensive and well-evidenced worldview.

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