

PHIL 109 Critical Reasoning • Cathal Woods
Spring 2007
Calendar

Fri 26/1 Reason-Giving

1. We are compulsive reason-givers. This desire can be manipulated – as we'll see in an experiment involving line-jumpers, in Cialdini. But not just anything will count as a reason. A refusal to give satisfactory reasons offends us. We'll examine a *Seinfeld* clip in which George requests (good) reasons but is given a conventional reply. We'll also watch Stephen Colbert's introduction of the concept of *Truthiness* which makes the point that some people claim to be giving good reasons, but aren't really.

Our course is called 'Critical Reasoning'. It's mostly about how we typically do *not* reason critically, and how, when we *try* to reason critically, we have a hard time doing so.

Mon 29 Conscious & Unconscious.

2. We often act without thinking at all. This is quite sufficient for getting by in the world a lot of the time, and sometimes absolutely necessary (as when confronted with a lion.) We'll read some material on the evolution of the brain concerning reason and emotion.

Read: pages 9-19 from Haidt on evolution of the brain.

Why are so many of our decisions taken without critical reflection? Some are due to egoistic pressures, some due to social pressures and some are due to how the brain works in evaluating the world.

Wed 31

3. Comparison. Cialdini's book is about 'automatic responses', ways of behaving that are practically hard-wired into us and so are extremely difficult to counter-act. In the first chapter he discusses how we unconsciously compare things and how sales-people can take advantage of this.

Read: Cialdini Ch. 1

Fri 2/2

4. Reciprocation. We have a strong need to work with others in society, but this means that we can be forced to make exchanges that are to our disadvantage.

Read: Cialdini Ch. 2.1

Mon 5

5. Reciprocation continued. A subtle form of the reciprocation impulse is to make a concession when others do so – even when the deal is still not worth our while.

Read: Cialdini Ch. 2.2

Wed 7

6. Commitment and Consistency. If you can just get people to make a commitment, they'll work hard not to look inconsistent. Small initial commitment; large subsequent commitment ...

Read: Cialdini Ch. 3.1

Fri 9

7. Commitment and Consistency continued. In which we learn the tactic of 'lowballing' – the seller makes an initial offer at a low price, the buyer agrees, but then the price must be upped for "unforeseen" reasons. The buyer still buys. Why?

Read: Cialdini Ch. 3.2

Mon 12

8. Social Proof. Often, other people exert psychological pressure just by having a certain belief or deciding to act in a certain way.

Read: Cialdini Ch. 4

Due: 1st 2-pager is due.

Wed 14

9. Social Proof continued. In which we learn that suicide is contagious, and the workings of cults.

Read: Cialdini Ch. 4.2

Fri 16

10. Sometimes we take our beliefs from others, but the desires to be entertained can get in the way, which leads them to exaggerate, omit details, and emphasize the human beings over the circumstances.

Read: Gilovich Ch. 6

Mon 19

11. Continued.

Read: Gilovich Ch. 6, second half

Advertising

Wed 21

12. We'll watch a pretty scary PBS documentary video about how the advertising industry tries to appeal, in particular, to our emotions and our deepest longings.

Fri 23

13. More of the documentary.

Mon 26

14. Advertisement Day. We'll watch a bunch of commercials and think about which buttons they're pushing, and how. Here's a partial list of things that adverts can appeal to: fear, values, pity, pride, patriotism, tradition, and, of course, all kinds of self-interest, such as popularity, cleverness, and community.

Read: No new reading.

Due: 2nd 2-Pager is due.

By this stage, I hope you're convinced that critical reasoning is a good thing. But it's not easy to maintain a critical attitude.

Wed 28

15. Emotional Appeals Made Explicit. In this class we bring out the assumptions

implicit in various emotionally-based arguments.

Read: Epstein Ch. 10

Fri 2

16. Thinking well is hard; it takes focus and concentration. Do you have the discipline to reason critically? It turns out that self-discipline in children is the #1 indicator of academic success. Self-control takes energy, literally: it takes glucose. So we need to ensure a *steady* supply of it.

Read: article from *The Australian*; part of an academic paper by Schmeichel, Baumeister & Vohs; an excerpt from Aron Ralston's book, on resisting the urge to drink water

So far we've been looking at our typical failure to reason critically, and though a little about why critical reasoning is hard for human beings, even when we want to reason. We'll come back more difficulties later, but before we go too far, we should take a look at *good* reasoning.

Good reasoning takes two forms: arguments and, more frequently, searches. An argument is where we try to convince another person of a claim, and try to neutralize any objections. A search, on the other hand, is what we do when we're confronted with a situation *and don't yet know what we think*. For example, next time you're hungry, you'll conduct a search for all the options, and amongst all the options, and come to a decision. (Once you've decided, then you can give an argument.)

Good Reasoning

Mon 5

17. What An Argument Is. Including the sublime Monty Python skit 'The Argument Clinic'.

Read: 109 version of Ch. 1 Roche/Woods

Wed 7

18. In an argument, what does it mean for reasons to *support* a conclusion?

Read: More from Roche/Woods

Fri 9

19. More on premises supporting the conclusion. We'll look for patterns of reasoning in particular arguments: Jones is a human. All mortals are humans. So, Jones is mortal. Or what about this one (with apologies to Pink Floyd): If you don't eat your meat, you can't have any pudding. You eat your meat. So, you can have some pudding.

Mon 12

20. Yet more practice with arguments.

Wed 14

21. What A Search Is.

Read: Woods on Three kinds of Reasoning; Hammond *Smart Decisions* pp. 1-12

Fri 16

22. In a search, what does it mean to say that we have determined which is the best belief to adopt?

Read: Jones *Thinker's Toolkit* Ch. 10

[Spring Break]

Cognitive Biases

Mon 26

23. Randomness

Read: Gilovich Ch. 2

Wed 28

24. Humans often make judgments based on incomplete information. Indeed, we don't even know what information is relevant. In preparation for this class, you will run a simple psychology experiment.

Read: Gilovich Ch. 3

Fri 30

25. Sometimes the evidence we need to contradict our belief is unavailable, which leads to a false sense of security.

Read: Gilovich Ch. 3, second half

Mon 2

26. Seeing What We Expect to See. We often say "I'll believe it when I see it" but we could also say "I'll see it when I believe it."

Read: Gilovich Ch. 4

Due: 3rd 2-Pager is due.

Wed 4

27. Continued.

Read: Gilovich Ch. 4, second half

Fri 6

28. Seeing What We Want To See. We'll watch a piece of the documentary *The Fog of War*.

Read: Gilovich Ch. 5 (except the Epilogue)

[Easter Break]

Wed 11

29. Willful Deception. Put all of these biases and barriers together, and you can begin to understand why people believe in Alternative Medicine, ESP and other weird things.

Read: Gilovich Ch. 8, first half

In the rest of term we look at the practice of reasoning. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to successful reasoning is our desire to be right and to prove the other person wrong.

Fri 13

30. Characteristics of Good Reasoners. We start by surveying the virtues or traits of good reasoners.

Read: Valuable Intellectual Traits; Epilogue to Gilovich Ch.5 (on Abelson)

Mon 16

31. Characteristics of Good Reasoners: Intellectual Autonomy.

Read: Miller 'The Quality of Philosophy Is Not Strained'; Plato 'Allegory of the Cave'

Wed 18

32. Convincing Without (Good) Reasons. (a.k.a. rhetoric devices).

Read: excerpt from Epstein (avoidingargs.pdf) (Also: Dave Barry on 'How To Win Any Argument')

Thinking Together

Fri 20

33. Often we have to decide together. And indeed, even <a

href="<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/04/060420233908.htm>">educated bees do it. But does it work? How does it work?

Read: Plous Ch. 18

Mon 23

34. Group Dynamics: Other people – can't live with 'em, can't shoot 'em. For this class, you'll be performing an experiment involving different styles of group leadership.

Read: Stanford's Medical Discussion Handbook
Wertheim on Effective Communication

Wed 25

35. Discussion & Consensus vs. Roberts' Rules & Voting

Read: <http://www.earlham.edu/%7Econsense/checklist.html>

<http://www.earlham.edu/%7Econsense/rrocomp.shtml>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making

Fri 27

36. *12 Angry Men* demonstrates many of the topics we have been investigating this term.

This is a classic movie starring Henry Fonda and Jack Klugman (ask your parents) about a jury deliberating about a murder case.

Mon 30

37. *12 Angry Men* (2)

Wed 2 May

38. *12 Angry Men* (3)