

Significance

Questions that focus on making thinking more significant include:

- What is the most significant information we need to address this issue?
- How is that fact important in context?
- Which of these questions is the most significant?
- Which of these ideas or concepts is the most important?

When we reason through issues, we want to concentrate on the most important information (relevant to the issue) in our reasoning and take into account the most important ideas or concepts. Too often, we fail in our thinking because we do not recognize that, although many ideas might be relevant to an issue, not all are equally important. In a similar way, we often fail to ask the most important questions and become trapped by thinking only in terms of superficial questions, questions of little weight.

In college, for example, few students focus on important questions such as, *What does it mean to be an educated person? What do I need to do to become educated?* Instead, students tend to ask questions such as, *What do I need to do to get an A in this course? How many pages does this paper have to be? What do I have to do to satisfy this professor?*

5.10 Think for Yourself

FOCUSING ON SIGNIFICANCE IN THINKING

Think about your life, about the way you spend your time, in terms of the amount of time you spend on significant versus trivial things. As you do so, write the answers to these questions:

1. What is the most important goal or purpose you should focus on at this point in your life? Why is this purpose important? How much time do you spend focused on it?
2. What are the most trivial or superficial things you spend time focused on (things such as your appearance, impressing your friends, chatting about insignificant things at parties, and the like)?
3. What can you do to reduce the amount of time you spend on the trivial and increase the amount of time you spend on the significant?

Fairness

Questions that focus on ensuring that thinking is fair include:

- Is my thinking justified given the evidence?
- Am I taking into account the weight of the evidence that others might advance in the situation?

- Are these assumptions justified?
- Is my purpose fair given the implications of my behavior?
- Is the manner in which I am addressing the problem fair—or is my vested interest keeping me from considering the problem from alternative viewpoints?
- Am I using concepts justifiably, or am I using them unfairly to manipulate someone (to selfishly get what I want)?

When we think through problems, we want to make sure that our thinking is justified. To be justified is to think fairly in context and in accord with reason. If you are vigilant in using the other intellectual standards covered thus far in the chapter, you will (by implication) satisfy the standard of justifiability. We include fairness separately because of the powerful nature of self-deception in human thinking. For example, we often deceive ourselves into thinking that we are being fair and justified in our thinking when in fact we are refusing to consider significant relevant information that would cause us to change our view (and therefore not pursue our selfish interest). We pursue unjustified purposes to get what we want even if we have to hurt others to get it; we use concepts in an unjustified way to manipulate people; and we often make unjustified assumptions, unsupported by facts, that then lead to faulty inferences.

Let's focus on an example in which unjustified thinking resulted from ignoring relevant facts. Let's say, for instance, that Kristi and Abby lived together. Kristi was cold-natured, and Abby was warm-natured. During the winter, Abby liked to have the windows in the house open while Kristi liked to keep them closed. However, Abby insisted that it was "extremely uncomfortable" with the windows closed. The information she used in her reasoning all centered on her own point of view—that she was hot, that she couldn't function well if she was hot, and that if Kristi was cold, she could wear a sweater. Abby was not justified in her thinking. She refused to enter Kristi's point of view to consider information supporting Kristi's perspective because to do so would mean that *Abby would have to give up something*. She would have to adopt a more reasonable, or fair, point of view.

People who are manipulative often use concepts in ways that are not justified. Let's imagine that John, for example, is interested in borrowing Jay's portable stereo for a trip. John, therefore, begins to hang out regularly with Jay. When they are with others, John introduces Jay as his "friend," and Jay comes to define John as his friend. So when John asks to borrow Jay's stereo, Jay readily agrees (because John is his friend). However, when John fails to return the stereo, and Jay asks for it back, John lies and says he lost it. The fact is that John never intended to return the stereo—and obviously never considered Jay a friend. John just used the term *friend* to get what he wanted. He said he was a *friend* specifically to manipulate Jay. Thus John's use of the term *friend* was not fair in context.

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