

## Chapter 7

# Viewpoints: What's the Filter?



From this ant's viewpoint, people *do* look just like them. Skilled critical thinkers pay attention to viewpoint. They look to find the source of whatever they read or hear, and they assess it for bias. They know that viewpoints filter and frame reality for us.

## DISCOVERY EXERCISES

## Understanding the Term Viewpoint

Using at least two dictionaries, formulate your own definitions of the following words: viewpoint; point of view; perspective; attitude; frame of reference; bias.

## Discussion or Writing Questions

1. Explain how viewpoints can be collective and individual, independent and dependent.
2. Explain why the term *viewpoint* is far more than a synonym for the word *opinion*.

## What Types of Viewpoints Are There?

This is an exercise that will involve the whole class working in small groups. Each group will use brainstorming to construct one cluster or mind map illustrating a viewpoint. The mind maps may be drawn on sections of the blackboard or be drawn with crayons or felt-tip pens on large sheets of paper. Each group will begin by choosing one of the categories or make up one of their own. Each mind map will record all the different viewpoints the group can imagine would fit under the chosen category.

Type of Viewpoint	Examples to Get You Started
Socioeconomic	Homeless, working class.
Ethnic	Native American, Armenian
Religious	Islam, Catholicism
Education	Students, administration
Occupation	Plumber, journalist
Pastimes	Bikers, shopping mall visitors

## Study Questions

1. What did you learn from this exercise?
2. Take any one subgroup within a viewpoint (such as bikers) and describe how its members identify themselves through clothing, symbols, possessions, language, or shared opinions.

exceptional begins to mean anything to anyone they'll change it. Exceptional refers to both ends of the spectrum, so all my life I've been exceptional. (p. 106)

Nov. 21

I don't know why Im dumb agen or what I did rong. Mabye its because I din't try hard enuf or just some body put the evel eye on me. Anyway I bet Im the frist dumb persen in the wrold who found out some thing inportent for sience. I did something but I don't remembir what. (p. 216)

Quotes taken from *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes (New York: Bantam, 1975). © by Daniel Keyes.

### Discussion Break Question

1. Most of you will probably have read this story in middle school or have seen it on film. What did this story teach you about the way in which lives are shaped by awareness and intelligence?
2. Describe some other films and stories that enabled you to enter into unfamiliar viewpoints and thus learn more about yourself and other human beings as a result.

## On Unconscious Viewpoints

Viewpoints, like assumptions, opinions, and evaluations, may or may not be consciously recognized.

In earlier chapters of this text, distinctions were drawn between the conscious and the unconscious uses of assumptions, opinions, and evaluations. To understand assumptions, we have to know that an assumption can be unconscious. To appreciate well-supported opinions, we need to distinguish them from superficial sentiment or unexamined beliefs. In this chapter, as we work with viewpoints, the issue of conscious and unconscious use appears again.

Both conscious and unconscious viewpoints are illustrated in the excerpts from *Flowers for Algernon*. In the first entry, Charlie only identifies himself through his work, his salary, and his age. One might say that he is not even aware that he has a viewpoint, nor at that time would he have been able to grasp the concept of viewpoint. By the time of the second diary entry, he has long since learned that he has a personal viewpoint, that other viewpoints exist beyond his own, and that he can enter into them or step out of them. Nevertheless, learning how “to step into others’ shoes” does not require a genius I.Q.

The psychologist Jean Piaget, who studied learning stages in children, theorized that before the age of seven most young children lack the ability to see the world through any viewpoint other than their own. The ability to move beyond this cognitive limitation varies from one individual to another, depending on a number of educational, cultural, and emotional factors. As we grow out of egocentrism, we also develop the ability to be *exterior* to our own viewpoint—to see and recognize it from the outside, objectively. We learn how to see the world through the eyes of others. Such a capacity enables us to learn the meaning of the word *compassion* as we move from the unconsciousness of egocentrism to the consciousness of objectivity.

Other less conscious viewpoints that share this feature of self-identification include ethnocentrism. *Ethnocentrism*, in its milder forms, is an attitude that judges other people by one's own cultural practices, values, and standards, as though these were the only reasonable norms. The relativity of ethnocentrism becomes clearer to us when we go to live in another country and find that we can adapt to new cultural mores, such as eating with our hands that we might have judged as backwards before. However, ethnocentrism, especially when combined with racism, also has its tragic consequences, as in the cases of Germany's "final solution" and Yugoslavia's "ethnic cleansing." The United States, in turn, can show its ethnocentricity when it justifies morally questionable actions as being "in America's best interests." Thus, ethnocentricity is always easier to see in other nations, especially when considered enemies.

### Discussion Questions

Rate the following statements as either ethnocentric or not. Defend your answer.

1. "What we have to fight for is the freedom and independence of the fatherland, so that our people may be enabled to fulfil the mission assigned to it by the Creator." (Adolph Hitler)
2. "We live in times of tremendous change, but the United Kingdom is still, thankfully, a predominantly white, Christian country." (Ann Winterton, British member of Parliament, 2005)
3. "Take up the White Man's burden—Send forth the best ye breed—Go bind your sons to exile To serve your captives' need; To wait in heavy harness, On fluttered folk and wild—Your new-caught, sullen peoples, Half-devil and half-child." (Rudyard Kipling, "Recessional" written in support of U.S. invasion of the Philippines, 1899.)\*

\*"The White Man's Burden" by Rudyard Kipling, originally published in McClure Magazine, 1899.

4. "... The Chinese people, who used to call their country the Middle Kingdom for they thought it was the center of the world, are very ethnocentric. Their neighbors, the Koreans and the Japanese, imported Chinese culture wholesale, including ethnocentrism, of course." (Editorial, *The China Post* News Staff, "Ethnocentrism ironically spreads throughout cultures," *The China Post*. 17 June, 2010.Web)

### Discussion Questions

1. What are the advantages of ethnocentric thinking?
2. What do the terms *androcentric*, *anthropocentric*, *Eurocentric*, *biocentric*, and *religiocentric* mean?

## DISCOVERY EXERCISE

### Recognizing Political Points of View

Read the following passages and notice how they express very different viewpoints based on different concerns, values, and priorities. See if you can assign each a political label, such as *conservative*, *liberal*, *libertarian*, *etc.* on the basis of the clues given.

1. "We are independent, rugged individuals who believe the 'American Dream' is achieved through hard work, sacrifice and an unrelenting commitment to excellence. . . . We detest able-bodied bloodsuckers who live off the sweat equity of others by refusing to be equal to those who try harder. . . ."
2. "The federal government is spending too much, running large deficits, and heading toward a financial crisis . . . Those increases have come just as the baby boomers begin to retire and the costs of federal entitlement programs are beginning to balloon. Spending on the three main entitlement programs Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid is expected to roughly double from \$1.27 trillion in FY08 to \$2.42 trillion by FY18. We must also eliminate pork barrel legislation. No more bridges to nowhere!"
3. "America needs to print its own debt-free money and not get it from the FED or some other banking institution."
4. "Today, the Occupy Wall Street crew and many progressive Americans believe that I am a greedhead, even though they have no idea what I do with my money. Just the fact that I have it gives them license

to brand me as a dreadful “one-percenter.” . . . So I’ve decided that those demanding more of my money for “social justice” are really attacking freedom. In this country, it is not wrong to prosper. You should not be demeaned for “having.”

5. “We all know what all this money buys. Americans have learned the hard way that when rich organizations and wealthy individuals shower Washington with millions in campaign contributions, they get what they want. They know that if you don’t contribute to their campaigns or spend generously on lobbying, you pick up a disproportionate share of America’s tax bill . . .”
6. “Corporations are people, my friend!”
7. “Unlike the U.S. Supreme Court, [Vermont] Town Meeting Day voters understood that corporations are not people,” declared U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders, I-Vermont, a champion of his state’s uprising against corporate personhood. “The resounding results will send a strong message that corporations and billionaires should not be allowed to buy candidates and elections with unlimited, undisclosed spending on political campaigns.”

### Answers

1. **Conservative.** (Ted Nugent, Opinion page, February 10, 2008, *WacoTrib.com*)
2. **Conservative.** (*The Club of Growth*. “Fiscally Conservative Spending,” [www.clubforgrowth.org](http://www.clubforgrowth.org). Licensed under the Creative Commons.)
3. **Libertarian.** (Ron Paul)
4. **Conservative.** (Bill O’Reilly for *BillOReilly.com*, 19 January 2012)
5. **Liberal.** (Bill Moyers, “Public Citizen Anniversary,” November 1, 2011, *Billmoyers.com*).
6. **Conservative.** (Mitt Romney, Iowa State Fair, August 2012)
7. **Liberal.** (John Nichols, “The Great Vermont Uprising Against Corporate Personhood.” *The Nation*. 8 March, 2012. Web. Quote from Independent Senator Bernie Sanders.)

### Discuss these questions in writing or in class

1. What were the clues that helped you decide how to label the viewpoint?
2. Were any difficult for you to identify?

## Recognizing Viewpoints: Left and Right

Even though their meanings keep shifting, the terms *liberal* and *conservative*, *left* and *right* are still used as yardsticks to describe political viewpoints.

Today's students can find it both frustrating and confusing to apply the labels *left* and *right* to the shifting world patterns of political ideas. Left and right are polar ideas about how governments should best govern in order to assure the survival and prosperity of their nations; they are based on different clusters of political, social, economic, cultural and religious values.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the left-to-right political spectrum as displayed in Figure 7.1 seemed easy enough to understand: all one had to do was draw a scale with radicals placed on each end and moderates in the middle. Anarchism and communism found their position at the far left end, fascism on the far right.

In the past sixty years, this spectrum has contracted in the U.S. to reflect a two-party system rooted in the old liberalism and conservatism. In the absence of a third party, a growing number of voters now register as Independents who mix and match their values from the two other parties. In 2011 the Pew Research Center found 40% of Americans registered as Democrats, 25% as Republicans, and 35% as Independents. ("Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology" 4 May 2011).

Table 7.1 offers some observations about traditional liberal and conservative values. However, in order to identify the viewpoints currently shaping American political debate, both time and study are needed to examine the current definitions of such words as *liberal*, *conservative*, *neoconservative*, *The Tea Party*, *right wing*, *the religious right*, *libertarian*, *progressive*, *populist*, *green*, *independent*. A good place to begin is with an online encyclopedia where you can find lists of each group's characteristic issues of concern as well as lists of their publications, think tanks, and chief commentators. The next discovery exercise will assist you in arriving at your own conclusions about their characteristic political ideologies, issues of concern, cultural values, and rhetoric. An additional exercise will show you something about the diverse range of opinion not fully reflected in the U.S. city newspapers and corporate network radio and television stations.

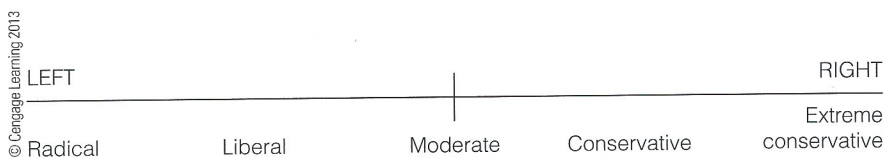


FIGURE 7.1 The Left-to-Right Political Spectrum