

BIAS AND CRITICAL THINKING

Point: there is an alternative to

- being “biased” (one-sided, closed-minded, etc.)
- simply having an “opinion” (by which I mean a viewpoint that has subjective value only: “everyone has their own opinions”)
- being neutral and not taking a position

In thinking about bias, it is important to **distinguish between four things:**

1. *a particular position taken on an issue*
2. *the source of that position (its support and basis)*
3. *the resistance or openness to other positions*
4. *the impact that position has on other positions and viewpoints taken by the person*

Too often, people confuse these four. One result is that people sometimes assume that taking any position on an issue (#1) is an indication of bias. If this were true, then the only way to avoid bias would be to not take a position but rather simply present what are considered to be facts. In this way one is supposedly “objective” and “neutral.” However, it is highly debatable whether one can really be objective and neutral or whether one can present objective facts in a completely neutral way.

More importantly, there are two troublesome implications of such a viewpoint on bias:

- *the ideal would seem to be not taking a position (but to really deal with issues we have to take a position)*
- *all positions are biased and therefore it is difficult if not impossible to judge one position superior to another.*

It is far better to reject the idea that taking any position always implies bias. Rather, bias is a function either of the **source** of that position, or the **resistance** one has to other positions, or the **impact** that position has on other positions and viewpoints taken. In other words, a position may be a **result** of bias (#2), or be **entrenched** (#3), or may **bias other positions** and viewpoints (#4).

The notion of bias is often associated with the idea of being “**one-sided**.” But taking a position does not necessarily mean you are being one-sided. It can be one-sided if the other sides and their arguments are not seriously considered. If someone simply reacts to an issue based on a preconceived perspective and ideology, without seriously considering other views, the result will be one-sided.

An argument or position is one-sided if

- *you do not really consider opposing positions, including their support, basis, and implications of those positions (and thus relative validity);*
- *you do not take seriously the potential problems and limitations of your own view;*
- *you do not remain open to correcting or refining your view based on further evidence, argument, and authority*

What is **the alternative to being biased** and one-sided? CRITICAL THINKING. Critical thinking involves:

- Recognition of the **complexity** of the issues and the possibility of multiple valid positions.
- Full openness to and knowledge of **facts**, including facts that might go against your own view.
- An awareness of the possible **limitations of facts**: there could be contrary facts, the facts could be only partially or tentatively known, the facts may need to be related to other information in order to get a complete picture.
- An awareness of the **different positions** that could reasonably be taken, given the facts.
- An understanding of the **support** for those positions: evidence, logic, and authority.
- An understanding of the **basis** for those positions: assumptions, implicit values and philosophies, definitions, categories, etc.
- An understanding of the **theoretical implications** of those positions.
- An understanding of the **practical implications** of those positions.
 - How difficult would it be to put the position into practice?
 - What problems might arise if the position was put into practice? What would be the cost?
- Taking **your own position**
 - based on an awareness of the **support** for that position, including
 - evidence
 - logical reasoning
 - authoritative positions taken by experts
 - a knowledge of the **bases** for that position
 - assumptions
 - implicit values and philosophies
 - definitions
 - categories
 - a knowledge of the **theoretical implications** of that position
 - an awareness of the **practical implications** of enacting position
- An awareness of the possible problems and **limitations of your view**: its support, basis, and implications
- An **openness** to developing, refining, or changing your view based on new understanding and dialogues with others.

You also avoid bias if you do not simply use the position taken on one issue to determine your position on another issue (#4 above). **Each position you take should be the result of critical thinking.**