Tuning Up Your Baloney Detector

Critical thinking skills are necessary for thinking biblically and in a way that glorifies God. Sue Bohlin explores some of the ways to develop those skills.

This article is also available in Spanish.

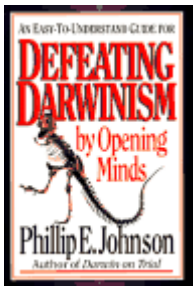
The Need to Think Critically

One of our main objectives here at Probe Ministries is to help people learn to love God with their minds. You really can't do that without learning to think biblically, and think critically. In our television-saturated culture, we have discovered that more Christians are conformed to the philosophies and deceptions of the world than the teachings and truths of the Bible. So in this essay I offer some suggestions on how to sharpen our thinking skills. The apostle Paul exhorts us in Colossians 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." The way to prevent ourselves from being taken captive to unbiblical, ungodly thinking is to build a kind of mental grid through which we filter what we see, hear, and read.

The first element of the grid is to know what the Bible says, so we can compare the ideas that permeate our culture to the absolute truth of what God has revealed. There is no room for shortcuts here; it takes time in God's Word, reading and meditating on what we read. And in order to understand the context for what we read, we need to work our way through the Bible one book at a time rather than opening it up at random and reading in a hit-or-miss fashion. We know that not everyone is a reader; God made some people auditory learners,

and they need to hear the Word rather than read it. That is fine—the Scripture says, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). It doesn't say "reading"! It is now possible to hear the Bible on cassette or CD or even on the Internet.{1} Whatever it takes for you, get the Bible into your head and heart.

As you learn what the Bible says, you will be able to recognize counterfeits to God's truth. For instance, over the past several years the definition of truth has shifted. It used to be that everyone assumed that there was such a thing as absolute truth: things which are true for all people, at all times, in all places. Today, many people believe that contradictory beliefs, such as the different world religions, can all be true at the same time and that murder, lying, and adultery can be acceptable under certain conditions. The belief that truth is relative is a worldly philosophy that has taken many captive, and Christians should filter this out of our thinking because God has revealed unchanging truth to us in His Word.



In his book *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds,* Phillip Johnson has a great chapter called "Tuning Up Your Baloney Detector." He lists a number of critical thinking tools that originally came from Carl Sagan, the late astronomer who made science understandable to us lay people. (Unfortunately, Dr. Sagan failed to point his baloney detector at himself as he ferociously insisted that true science was the same as a purely naturalistic worldview.)

A well-tuned baloney detector will be able to filter out several kinds of baloney that would take Christians captive when we swallow the thinking that comes from the surrounding culture.

Vague Terms and Shifting Definitions

One kind of baloney we need to be alert for is the use of vague terms. People with a non-Christian worldview can start off using language that we think we understand and then suddenly veer off into a new meaning. Once when I was a brand-new believer, people collecting money to care for underprivileged kids approached me on the street. I asked, "Do you teach them about Jesus?" and they said, "Yes. . . ." After I gave them money and took their brochure, I discovered that they taught that Jesus and Satan were brothers! We also see this deliberate vagueness happening in the abortion debate. It is much easier to justify getting rid of a glob of unwanted cells if you do not call it "shredding and mutilating an unborn baby."

We also need to be on the lookout for shifting definitions. In the evolution debate, many people will start out defining evolution as "change over time." Who can argue with that? But then we find out that the true working definition of evolution is unguided, purposeless change.

Believing What We Want to Believe

We also need to be on the lookout for what Phillip Johnson calls the "original sin" of believing what we want to believe, even if there is evidence to the contrary. It is intellectually dishonest to deny facts that contradict our pet beliefs so that we can stay in our comfort zone. We get critical e-mail at Probe complaining about the fact that we do not take a position on the age of the earth. It comes from people who believe what they want to believe regardless of the fact that there is good evidence for another position. One of the wisest prayers we can pray is "Lord, show me where I'm being deceived." Whether we are talking about our emotional, spiritual, or intellectual life, we need to move from the darkness of believing what we want to believe, into the light

of truth as God shows it to us.

Selective Use of Evidence

Another critical thinking skill is to be watchful of the selective use of evidence. We need to be careful not to jump on bandwagons of all kinds before checking out any evidence that would provide a different conclusion. The creation-evolution debate is a great example of this principle, because it's awfully hard to find any biology textbooks that provide students with the evidence against evolution. They do not learn that evolutionists cannot account for things like flight, or the eye, or the explosion of fully formed animals in the Cambrian layers of rock.

I know of several women who deeply regret having had abortions based on the selective use of evidence. They were told that this would solve their problem, that it was simply removing unwanted fetal tissue, that it was really no big deal. They were not given a sonogram where they could have seen their babies moving around inside them, or told about how the Bible declares the personhood of even the tiniest unborn human being. They also weren't told about the horrendous burden of guilt and shame they would carry for years afterwards. We need to know both sides of an argument in order to avoid being held in captivity to the world's philosophies.

Appeal to Authority

Another critical thinking skill is to be wary of is the appeal to authority. "Nothing is true just because some big shot says it is true."{2} In our culture, we practically worship experts (especially scientific experts), and willingly set aside our own beliefs and instincts if somebody with a white lab coat or letters after their name tells us something is true or right or good. That is how we got millions of students who are poor readers in the U.S.: educational experts decided to throw out

phonics, which works very well, and substitute the whole-word approach to reading, which fails miserably.

But it's not just white lab coats; the appeal to authority exploits the way our culture values celebrity. Michael Jordan may be the world's best basketball player, but does that mean he is an authority on underwear too? We need to be skeptical of anybody who says, "Believe it because I say so."

Ad Hominem and Straw Man Arguments

Two kinds of communication that ought to set our internal alarms off are the ad hominem argument and the straw man argument.

Ad hominem is Latin for "to the man." When people use this kind of argument, they are attacking the person instead of what he is saying. My son experienced this on one occasion in his college class where he got into a spirited discussion with a girl who was not being too logical. She could not counter his arguments, got frustrated, and dismissed him with, "Oh, you're just too pretty to be a boy anyway." That's an *ad hominem* argument. It means someone is out of ammunition and defenses for their argument, so they attack the other person or the other side instead.

Now, there is a value to pointing out that someone has a bias, because it is going to impact their conclusions. That is not the same as attacking the person. When people e-mail us here at Probe and accuse us of being biased about Christianity, we freely admit we are very biased. But that does not change whether it is true or not. On the other hand, if a tobacco company releases a study showing that secondhand smoke is not dangerous, one can legitimately question the inherent bias without attacking the people making the argument.

Another critical thinking tool is to watch out for straw man arguments. This is where an opponent distorts someone's

position to make it easier to attack. Recently I participated in a panel discussion on therapies and organizations that help people leave homosexuality. One of the students in the class pointed at me and said, “I just think you shouldn’t try to make gays change against their will. That’s not right.” Well, I agree, and I do not know anyone who tries to change homosexuals against their will. He was using a straw man argument, because the truth is, I work with a ministry that offers help only to those who want it.{3} We do not even let anyone in the door unless they are willing to consider that change is possible, and they are the ones seeking us out. This student twisted my position to make it easier to attack.

Of course, nobody announces that they are using a straw man or ad hominem argument when they do it! But when you recognize it and call it what it is, you are thinking critically about what you are hearing.

Untestable Theories

When I was a young girl, my mind was a sponge—an avid learner, I soaked up everything with a total lack of discernment. There was a time when I was confused about whether the gods of Greek and Roman mythology were real or not!

In this article we have been looking at loving God with our minds by building a mental filter through which we examine what we see, hear, and read. A mental filter consisting of a Christian worldview allows us to keep what is true and right and good, and not swallow the rest like I did! One final baloney detector involves recognizing theories and ideas that cannot be proven either true or false. Many people believe things simply because they sound good, even though there is no way to find out if they are right or not. For example, Carl Sagan opened his famous Cosmos series with the worldview statement that “The Cosmos is all there is, or ever was, or ever will be.” How do you test such a statement to see if it

is true or not? At Probe we get e-mail from people who have accepted such untestable theories. What test is there to prove or disprove reincarnation or the existence of the Goddess? How do you run an experiment to prove whether people who have died are sending messages to us when we come across pennies on the pavement?

On the other hand, testability is one of the things that makes Christianity so robust. If someone were able to come up with the bones of Jesus Christ, it would prove Christianity wrong and the millions of believers deluded. It's a testable idea, not an unprovable, pie-in-the-sky concept. Remember what Paul says in Colossians 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." In order to do that, we need to work to build a strong mental filter that constantly compares what we see and hear and read to the truth of God's word. We need to interact with TV, movies, newspapers, and magazines, identifying those things that contradict the truth God has already given us. We should feel free to jot comments in the margins of books, especially when we find baloney in them. We need to remember that the world system and our adversary, the devil, are both continually working to tear down what is good and true, and erect false arguments and pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God. So we can take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

To mix metaphors, we need to tune up our baloney detectors so we will not be sponges.

Notes

1. bible.gospelcom.net

2. Phillip Johnson, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997], 39.

3. Living Hope Ministries. For more information, please see www.livehope.org.

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