

Cultivating Discernment

Wheat from the chaff, in a world of disinformation.

Notes from one session of a course I teach on thinking better. Not a transcript: the argument, the demonstrations you can try on yourself, and the checklists that are easy to use and hard to remember. Free, no strings attached.

It has become common to say it is hard to know what to believe. That is a reasonable response to the environment, not a failure of intelligence. Four obstacles stand in the way, and they compound. As you read, hold in mind someone you have genuinely disagreed with.

The four obstacles

1. We see things differently.

- Perception: young woman or old woman, blue and black dress or white and gold. Neither viewer is lying.
- Standpoint: three blind men, one elephant, three honest reports, no whole animal.
- Engineering: a **filter bubble** is what reaches you. An **echo chamber** is what it becomes once everything you believe is reflected back. We help build it by blocking, unfriending, unsubscribing.

2. We get things wrong and feel completely right.

- Müller-Lyer: two lines, one looks longer, they are identical. Knowing does not change what you see.
- A bat and a ball cost \$1.10, and the bat costs \$1.00 more. Most people say the ball is ten cents, which totals \$1.20. It is five cents. (Cognitive Reflection Test, Shane Frederick, 2005.)
- The mind offers a cheap answer fast, and we take it unchecked.

3. Information is hard to judge.

- Volume: roughly 181 zettabytes generated in 2025. A zettabyte is a trillion gigabytes.
- **Misinformation**: wrong, not deliberate. Errors, stale claims reposted, a study misread in good faith.
- **Disinformation**: deliberate, built to deceive or divide, designed to spread. The more extreme, the faster. Alongside it: clickbait, headlines misleading by omission, synthetic video, unqualified people with large audiences, and lost trust in the institutions that used to sort this for us.

4. We do not want to change our beliefs.

- Some of your identity is factual: age, profession, parenthood. Some is belief: politics, health convictions, how you think the world works.
- Once a belief becomes identity, contrary evidence feels like an attack, and defending the position is defending yourself.
- It is also expensive. Deliberate reasoning is a rider on an elephant, and the elephant is everything fast, emotional, and automatic.

What discernment is

Discernment = critical thinking + moral grounding

- Both halves carry weight. Critical thinking without moral grounding becomes clever rationalization. Moral conviction without critical thinking becomes credulity.
- **Critical thinking**: a self-directed process of analyzing and evaluating information to decide what to believe or how to act. No one assigns it. Skipping it costs you poor decisions, health risks, wasted money, and contention.

The bias amplification cycle

narrative → event that fits it → confirmation bias → slippery slope → overgeneralize → fear amplifies → fight or flight

From the far left

Systemic racism in law enforcement → the killing of George Floyd → attention to fitting cases only → all police are racist → policing is fundamentally corrupt → protests, in some cases violence, calls to defund the police.

From the far right

Widespread fraud in the 2020 election → reports of irregularities → attention to fraud claims only → a coordinated effort → the whole electoral process is corrupt → protests, the January 6 Capitol riot, far more restrictive voting laws.

The two are not equally supported by evidence, and settling that is not the point here. The machinery is identical, and it runs in you too.

A critical thinking strategy

1. Name the cycle while it is running. Recognizing it is most of the defense.

2. Build a deliberate news strategy.

- Move up the information food chain. Leave the chatter: comment sections, message boards, social feeds.
- Do not go looking for news when you are bored. Boredom is a search for dopamine, and the feed will supply one.
- Newspaper mode: a set time, once a day, then done. You are not staffing a 24 hour desk.
- Know where your sources sit. One column of the political map, or one outlet, is an echo chamber. An aggregator showing a story across several outlets helps, as do long-form interviews with people arguing in good faith.
- Expect the **backfire effect**: reading the other side can strengthen your original belief. Read for understanding rather than ammunition.

3. Be skeptical and learn to fact-check. Check credentials. Read the About Us page. Look for bias. Check the date, because old stories get recirculated as new ones. Reverse image search the photo. Go to the original source rather than the outlet reporting on it. Interrogate the URL. Suspect the sensational.

4. Learn the hallmarks of misinformation. Pseudoscience trades on a confusion: science is a process rather than a body of facts, so misuse of the process does not discredit it. Grand conspiracy thinking has a profile: preys on fear; assumes powerful groups secretly control events; keeps supporting evidence and drops contradictions; reads coincidence as design; requires flawless coordination among many people; links unrelated events as cause and effect; generalizes from a few examples; rewards conformity to the group.

5. Question your own assumptions.

- Start with humility. Conceit is a privilege of the ignorant (Isabel Allende).
- Watch for **motivated reasoning**, mostly unconscious: you need a belief to be true, you notice only what supports it, and you fight what does not.
- Run the thought experiment. Born in 1850 Virginia, or in Russia, or on a Texas ranch: what would you be certain of today?
- Refuse to turn a person into an "other." At that point you have stopped thinking about them and started defending against them. Better: keep one real disagreement alive with someone you like. You will not converge, but you will stop seeing an enemy, and you will start seeing the nuance that was there all along.

TRY THIS

- Check yourself for a filter bubble.
- Try a news aggregator for two weeks.
- Find one person you can talk with across a disagreement.
- Question an assumption you have not examined in years.
- Discuss this with your family.

Above all, stop being a passive consumer of the information flow. That is the path to confusion and contention.

Resources

Questions worth having ready

Asking someone else:

- Can you explain what you mean by that?
- How did you come to that conclusion?
- That is interesting. Why do you think it is true?
- I would like to read more about that. Do you have a reference you could send me?

Asking yourself, about something you believe is true:

- How sure am I, from 0 to 100 percent?
- What is the source of this belief?
- What are my reasons for holding it?
- How could I find out whether it is true?
- How would I feel if I were wrong?
- What evidence would change my mind?

Fact-checking

- Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com
- Reverse image search, through Google Images or TinEye
- A news aggregator, any that shows a single story across several outlets

Referenced in this session

- Cognitive Reflection Test, Shane Frederick, 2005. The bat and ball problem.
- Müller-Lyer illusion, 1889. The two lines.
- Isabel Allende, on conceit and humility.

Reading

- *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman. The two systems, and why the fast one keeps embarrassing us.
- *The Scout Mindset*, Julia Galef. Why some people see clearly and others do not.
- *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt. How we reach a conclusion first and find the reasons afterward.

Theme: thinking well. From my course *Think Better*. The companion sessions, on mind traps, mental models, and mindset, are in preparation.

contact@mattmorganmd.com

mattmorganmd.com

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