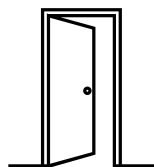


FROM
NARROW-
BLINDED
— TO —
OPEN
MINDED



An Alternative Approach for
Improved Decision-Making

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I'M RIGHT AND YOU'RE WRONG ?

BUT I HAVEN'T SAID ANYTHING...



Introduction

I'm Right and You're Wrong

“Hatred is an affair of the heart; contempt is that of the head.”

—Arthur Schopenhauer

Narrow-Blindedness

In the montage of my Irish experience, from growing up in an Irish Catholic family to summers with family in Ireland, workdays in Cork, and academic pursuits in Dublin, I've come to understand that growing up in an Irish milieu is akin to mastering a unique set of cultural codes. Undoubtedly, this holds true not only for Irish immigrants in Canada but also for those who have traversed the Atlantic to the United States or ventured down under to Australia.

Irrespective of the geographical setting, a consistent thread weaves through the fabric of Irish identity—the art of disagreeing with wit. The skill is not so much rooted in malice but in a playful sharpness that suggests one might be missing something in their thinking. The ability to engage in quick-witted banter is as ingrained in the Irish psyche as the love for Barry's tea, the graceful insertion of swear words mid-conversation, the peculiar practice of unmarried couples sleeping in separate rooms when visiting parents, the sheer delight in England's defeats in any sporting event, the fervor for

hurling (coupled with its inherent violence), the devotion to Taytos and full Irish breakfasts, the pursuit of craic and good-natured slagging, and the fortitude of names with complex pronunciations that leave others flummoxed. In essence, discussion, debate, and disagreement are not just conversational tools in Ireland; they are integral to the Irish way of thinking.

It wasn't until later in life that the true value and wisdom of this constant, thoughtful construction of arguments and the ensuing healthy discussion and debate in the Irish psyche became apparent to me. For some reason I am envisioning a spirited discourse between two old Irish men in a pub right now, puffing on their pipes, passionately debating modern politics and economics.

A fundamental and enduring benefit of this social acceptance of open discussion, debate, and disagreement in Ireland is the fortification against what I term “narrow-blindness.” Throughout this book, you'll frequently encounter this phrase, so let me provide some context. The term “narrow” by itself isn't inherently negative; a narrow or hyper-focused approach often leads to virtuosity in various fields, as evidenced by historical figures like Bach, Mozart, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, and da Vinci. However, when applied to the task of understanding multifaceted matters, an excessively narrow approach can result in severe blindness—a blindness that causes one to miss opportunities. This myopic perspective, which is generally absolute or extreme, hinders perception and judgment, putting the perceiver in a position akin to a hippo traversing a tightrope over a field of nails in pitch-black darkness. It is a perilous and costly endeavor!

Narrow-blindedness, as I see it, distinguishes itself from the more common term “narrow-mindedness.” The latter involves an unwillingness to accept anything unusual or different. However, in my experience, the core of our human disposition lies in our innate eagerness and willingness to draw as close to “the truth” as possible. Fundamentally, I believe we desire knowledge, and most individuals are open to embracing the unusual or different if it propels us toward a deeper

understanding of truth. The difficulty often lies in the lack of a proper toolset or approach to navigate alternative routes. Instead of refining our approaches or toolsets to better manage the barrage of information we receive, we find ourselves paralyzed and often in confrontation with alternative views.

I characterize the term “narrow-blindedness” as the act of forgoing the opportunity to see something unexpected by becoming “lost” in our preexisting perspectives. The analogy extends seamlessly into our daily thinking and logic, a concept I’ve observed and ruminated on for well over a decade.

The root of this tension, in my estimation, stems from an ingrained false belief that we must exude supreme confidence in being “right” in our assessments, and that those who disagree with us must be unequivocally wrong. To explore this dynamic, I’ve embarked on a decade-long social experiment; a form of ethnography, I suppose. The ongoing experiment has been a fascinating exploration. Although, I must admit my wife has caught on to my endeavors, prompting a notice that my line of questioning is off-limits at family events.

A Tipping Point

My fascination with the concept of narrow-blindedness traces back to a convivial gathering of close friends, a genial bunch who possess remarkable senses of humor and do not take themselves too seriously. This eclectic group, with backgrounds spanning engineering, mining, business, science, military defense, and education, never fails to spark thought-provoking conversations. It all began over cocktails with a question that resonates deeply: If you could instantly solve one problem facing humanity, what would it be? So, dear reader, take a moment to set this book aside (but not for too long—we have much ground to cover) and ponder your answer, perhaps envisioning the type of beverage you’d be sipping while thinking about this question. For the record, I was enjoying my favorite—an old-fashioned.

Some might suggest global food security, living wages, human rights, economic poverty, or political governance—all valid perspectives in my mind. But what if a singular, targeted solution could simultaneously impact and maybe even solve multiple challenges? How would we measure such an impact? The cocktail-fueled query got me contemplating the greatest advances in human civilization and the barriers or costs that accompanied such progress. Given my background in accounting and tax, I habitually ponder the costs of our choices.

As I sat engrossed in the insightful responses from people I deeply admire, my good friend Doug, author of two best-selling books, put the spotlight on me, asking what I thought. I responded, “Contempt is the biggest problem facing society.”

Cue a smirk from Doug, followed by, “Typical Ed answer. What do you mean by that?”

My train of thought at that moment was humanity’s inability to veer away from firmly held beliefs to move toward compromise, and that such unwillingness to see an alternative route is the paramount challenge of our time. We spend considerable time committed to a specific stance or direction (potentially spouting nonsense to justify it) because we lack the tools to pause and consider a course correction—an alternative route. Using half-baked logic, we delude ourselves into believing our direction is unequivocally correct, prompting us to dismiss divergent views as worthless.¹ Take a look at modern political discourse—a breeding ground for contempt, where each side sees their views as benevolent and the opposing side as rooted in nonsense, with a dash of evil. This does little to solve grand problems and squanders valuable opportunities for positive change.

Contempt, in simple terms, is the belief that we are categorically right, and those who disagree are categorically wrong and perhaps daft for not seeing it our way. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt links contempt to the enjoyment people derive from scandals—both provide a sense of moral superiority.² It’s almost like pointing out others’ failings helps us bond over shared ground and overlook our own hypocrisy.

Unfortunately, many have not taken heed to the insights of Buddha, who so wisely proclaimed, “It is easy to see the faults of others, but difficult to see one’s own faults.”

Contempt isn’t an anomaly; it’s pervasive. It crept into 1980s sitcoms and has firmly embedded itself in our social media accounts. Algorithms in our daily lives fuel this fire, encouraging us to feel contemptuous and morally superior. Social media and news outlets capitalize on these emotions to keep us coming back for more, fostering shock, polarization, and, you guessed it, contempt. Kudos to the marketers for fueling the contempt train!

Fixing everything by waving a wand and saying, “No more contempt!” would be nice, but that is perhaps unrealistic. So, what’s a workable solution? I propose a toolbox, or rather an approach to identify fractures in logic and strategies for course correction—better ways of thinking, talking about ideas, and taking action. Contempt, after all, is the byproduct of sloppy thinking, reluctance to share perspectives, and a lack of proactive measures to course correct. Therefore, at the heart of this book is a mission to extinguish what I term narrow-blinded thinking; and in doing so I hope that we can dial down the associated contempt levels. It’s time for a more thoughtful journey. All aboard!

Unraveling the Costs of Narrow-Blindedness

The crux of the matter is, hastily branding something as categorically wrong, without giving it careful consideration, can lead to significant costs. Pause for a moment and reflect on the harm or hurt you’ve seen stemming from mislabeling and misjudgments in relationships, business dealings, public policy, and contempt in key leadership roles. Chances are, you can recall at least one instance and the associated costs.

Having seen much of the world over the course of many years, I’ve witnessed the profound costs of narrow-blindedness and the extensive

negative impact of its fallout, comparable in size and scale to a global pandemic. Hence, the thesis of this book is: Narrow-blindedness is toxic. It fosters poor decision-making and results in dreadful and costly outcomes on multiple levels.

Think back to those uncomfortable moments you've had with family members, friends, or colleagues, as one of them regaled you with their absolutist perspective. It's as if they were delivering a theatrical monologue, leaving you in a bewildered silence, trying to politely hide your pained expression. The air was quickly sucked out of the room, prompting feeble attempts to shift the discourse to mundane subjects such as the day's weather, because rarely does anyone summon the courage to unravel the tightly wrapped package of biased views presented before them.

The canvas of this scene is painted with the hues of rigid opinions, the brushstrokes of awkward silences, and the splashes of attempts to redirect the conversation. Instead of giving space to a wide palette of diverse ideas, this scene is stifled by the dull shades of narrow-blindedness.

Many of us have witnessed firsthand what happens when contentious topics, such as current politics, government regulation, tax policy, or environmental planning, are injected into a conversation. These exchanges become intensely charged and typically unfold in a predictable, confrontational fashion. They resemble a well-rehearsed theatrical performance of "I'm right and you're wrong." Picture the setting: a conversational stage where the spotlight hones in on a spicy topic, introduced with a metaphorical drumroll. Enter the protagonist, a strong-minded and vocal individual who fearlessly wades into the murky waters of dialogue ready to put on a carefully crafted performance. Their act—a concoction of pseudo-evidence, an abundance of (over)confidence, and skillfully woven rhetoric—sets the stage for what is about to unfold.

As this charismatic orator passionately presents their perspective, the audience has a spectrum of reactions. Some, perhaps out of fear, a

desire to avoid awkwardness, or the inclination toward pseudo-agreement, nod in apparent support. It's a silent ballet of conformity as much of the audience is cowed by this forceful performance.

However, just when the atmosphere seems saturated with consensus, there comes a disruptive chord. Someone in the crowd, with furrowed eyebrows, offers a response laced with hostility followed by a barrage of heated counterarguments. The bottle comes uncorked. In that moment, the dormant tension erupts into a full-fledged confrontation. Contempt, now revved up on both sides, permeates the air like an electric charge of intolerance, crackling with the anticipation of verbal combat.

Let the games begin. The stage transforms into an arena of gladiators, each armed with their arsenal of beliefs and convictions. The conversation, once a calm and respectful sea, is now a tempest of conflicting ideas, where the clash of opinions rings like thunder and the waters roil with high waves of impassioned discourse and mean-spirited words.

In these instances, does anyone's opinion truly change? Probably not. In fact, entrenched views don't merely stand their ground; they fortify themselves, becoming even more impervious. Conversations clouded by contempt make it even less likely that we'll consider alternative routes.

The Rot in the Logic-Carcass Is All around Us

A sizable reduction of narrow-blinded thinking, absolutism, and contempt emerges as a key first step in the broader quest to improve our lives; as well as the broader efforts to alleviate poverty and hunger, enhance health and well-being, provide superior education and clean water, refine energy policies, increase employment, and spur economic growth. It underpins and encompasses comprehensive reforms in industry, education, and infrastructure, the development of sustainable cities, the cultivation of responsible consumption practices,

conflict reduction, and initiatives for positive transformations in climate, water, and land ecosystems—take your pick.

The nefarious and hidden toll of narrow-blinded thinking manifests in a plethora of detrimental ways. Take a moment to think about how narrow-blinded thinking has impacted your life, business, and/or community. Remember what A.A. Milne wrote in his book *Winnie-the-Pooh*: “Did you ever stop to think, and forget to start again?” From time to time, I am guilty as charged. When delving into complex topics like the costs of narrow-blinded thinking, it’s all too easy to lose one’s way and forget to consider the grave costs. Here are a few examples, or rather reflections, on the layers and costs associated with narrow-blindedness. These might motivate us on our journey.

1. Cultivating and nurturing meaningful connections is paramount to fostering healthy relationships in all areas of our lives. The costs of adopting a narrow-blinded approach to these connections can be far-reaching, affecting not only our relationships with spouses, friends, children, and spiritual communities, but also contributing to broader societal issues. The detrimental consequences of harboring contemptuous attitudes become glaringly apparent in the alarming rise of divorce rates, heightened family conflicts, and the surge of religious fanaticism. By having a set of tools that guides a more expansive and open-minded perspective, we can actively work toward creating connections to encourage understanding, empathy, and collaboration.
2. Our interaction with and impact on the natural environment is profoundly influenced by the lens through which we perceive the nonhuman world—comprised of water, animals, and plants. Adopting a narrow-blinded stance to this interaction shapes our behaviors in ways that have significant cost implications for environmental well-being. Humans’ disdain for the natural environment manifests in seemingly inconsequential actions such as consumption choices, disposal activities, and how

we engage with and perceive animals and our waterways. An approach that encourages us to examine these decisions more carefully might reveal the profound impact of our cognitive processes on the environment and the intricacies of how our thinking influences choices related to purchasing or abstaining and consuming or avoiding.

3. Business activities shaped by narrow-blinded thinking have a significant impact on many communities. Many commercial entities hold a singular view that stems from a profit motive. In such instances, commercial gain has been the priority, and all other considerations are viewed with contempt, sometimes at the expense of the environment and the community. Even though there is a growing emphasis on holistic corporate evaluations and a broader understanding of the impact of business operations on society, there's greater need still to develop an improved symbiotic relationship between businesses and communities. As stakeholders increasingly demand accountability and transparency, a renewed way of thinking about venturing activities could aid in the trajectory of business operations; one that is regarded as responsible and integrated, and embodies the evolving roles and landscape of businesses within the social fabric of society.
4. The impact of narrow-blinded thinking comes into clear focus when examining how some leaders guide and oversee their communities. Such influence permeates various aspects of governance, ranging from the formulation of policies to critical decisions regarding trade, bank rates, and strategic investments. The costs incurred due to a one-sided perspective can manifest in policies lacking foresight, financial decisions prioritizing short-term gains over long-term stability, and strategic investments neglecting the broader implications for the community and the environment. Offering an approach

for leaders to critically assess their decisions may provide an off-ramp from these sorts of policies and actions that fail to address the complexities of contemporary challenges. It could also help leaders make better trade decisions, where a narrow focus on immediate gains may result in missed opportunities for fostering equitable international relationships and promoting global stability.

The Crazy Professor

The irony of a university professor embarking on a journey to address the cost of narrow-blindedness is not lost on me. Surrounded by scores of studies illustrating the impact of narrow teaching practices on student outcomes, I'm well aware that we professors might have a penchant for peddling nonsense and sprinkling a dash of contempt into the mix. The title of this chapter echoes through the hallowed halls where academics essentially declare from their ivory towers, "I am right, and they are wrong." It's shocking, indeed. Despite their four-to-six-year PhD pilgrimage into a specific niche, some professors seem to believe they hold the keys to the universe—a PhD about everything, anyone?

To set the record straight, this book is no run-of-the-mill professorial pontification. Instead, it is a collection of lighthearted stories and a sprinkle of research findings, all orbiting the nucleus of the book's core idea: We need strategies for tackling the most pressing problem of our generation, the narrow-blinded thinking that only leads to the abyss of contempt. The good news is that I have found another route. And here's the kicker—I've road-tested these tips myself, in my consulting gigs and with my students. Let me tell you, success followed.

Narrow-blindedness and its more serious form, contempt, love to play peek-a-boo in the realms of education, business, politics, and

international work. And let's quash the notion that this is merely an American pastime—it is a global issue. Having traversed through Ireland, Canada, the US, and forty other countries for education and work, I've seen the unmistakable footprints of narrow-blindedness and contempt in Asia, Australasia, Europe, South-Central America—you name it.

But you might wonder, is the outcome of narrow-blinded thinking, which fuels contempt, truly such a colossal problem? According to Arthur Brooks, the virtuoso Harvard social scientist, musician, and columnist, it's grim. In his *New York Times* article from March 2019, he suggested America's biggest woe isn't inclusivity or intolerance but—you guessed it—contempt, and our inability to see alternative perspectives.³ I prefer to see narrow-blindedness and contempt as a tax—an unnecessary burden on our collective intellect and not one that funds particularly good results. Yet, fear not, for this book is your semi-comedic guide to a tax deferral strategy. Follow along to learn how to navigate the maze, dodge the pitfalls, and find the levity in our journey to a world where narrow-blinded thinking and contempt are relics of the past.

Context Before We Set Out

Generally speaking, I don't believe that people inherently resist the idea of embracing an alternative perspective. Instead, I believe this perceived resistance often stems from a lack of understanding about how to process and make sense of the unfamiliar. It's a matter of having the right tools to avoid narrow-blindedness, or not knowing how to respond in a way other than rejection.

Unfortunately, this lack of comprehension sets off a chain reaction. It begins innocuously enough with mere disagreement, visible facial contortions, and disengagement, but swiftly descends into the flurry of finger pointing and ad hominem attacks. The escalation of hostilities continues unabated until an impasse is reached and someone exits the conversation with a few rude parting words—whispers

under the breath about the other person being a total varmint. Does this sort of mudslinging event sound familiar? If it does, rest assured, you're not alone in experiencing this all-too-predictable interaction. The toll it takes, both emotionally and socially, can be quite significant.

Narrow-blinded thinking is not merely a failure to grasp the logic of something different; it is neglecting to judiciously process alternative perspectives. The aftermath of such thinking breeds an unwavering conviction that the perceived "other" is the root of the problem. This mindset has become an escalating pandemic, evident in the growing difficulty of engaging in political discussions, in both familial and social spheres, without seemingly inevitable conflict.

Unfortunately, it feels like the days of civil discourse, healthy debates, and constructive discussions are gone. Instead, expressing a viewpoint divergent from the collective consensus feels akin to inciting a protest or spurring a riot. Metaphorically, if not literally, individuals in conflict engage in acts of looting, vandalism, and, in extreme cases, causing harm to others. All these actions serve as a loud proclamation: "I am right, and you are wrong. And we don't need to work through this together."

Even I must confess to falling into this thinking culvert, albeit without the physical manifestations of protests, graffiti, or riots. Witnessing firsthand the detrimental consequences of this divisive approach to thinking, and grappling with the associated costs, prompted me to embark on the writing of this book.

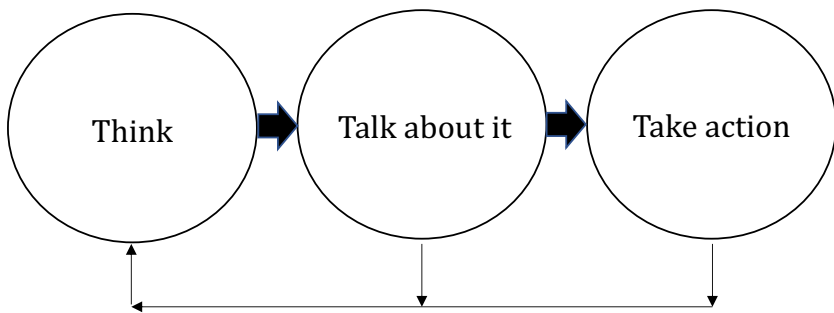
To be clear, my intended audience for this book is not confined solely to traditional students; rather, it is aimed at a diverse array of individuals eager to learn. This includes current or aspiring leaders, educators, business owners, politicians, and even the uncle who is at risk of being disinvited from Thanksgiving dinner. The mission is clear: to dismantle the barriers erected by narrow-blinded thinking by mapping an alternative route of open-minded, constructive, and logical thinking.

A Road Map for the Reader

Narrow-blindedness and its close companion, contempt, are serious issues. Despite the gravity of the subject, I've opted for a somewhat lighthearted and humorous approach. Why? Perhaps it's rooted in my satirical personality, as I view much of life through the lens of comedy—a hat on a hat. I've always found enjoyment in a good comedic piece, recognizing that great comedy often carries a thread of truth. Moreover, I believe comedy serves as a bridge between differing opinions and conflicts, whether it's found in a comic strip or a joke delivered by a stand-up comedian. Even when I'm the target of a joke, I appreciate the inherent truth at the core of comedic expression.

Following Einstein's cue on the importance of simplicity, I present a simple drawing outlining the flow of this book on overcoming narrow-blinded thinking for the purpose of positive impact. As you navigate through the book, keep in mind the overarching framework or route is the 3T model: think, talk about it, and take action. You're free to explore the chapters in any order you prefer, as each section will clarify a specific facet of the 3T model.

Figure 0.1



The 3T model to combat narrow-blindedness and contempt.

While the concept of the 3T may seem straightforward, its implementation can prove remarkably challenging. However, with a bit of guidance, rest assured even you can apply these techniques effectively. The key is to balance and link the three. Often, there's an abundance of talk without corresponding action—a domain where the hypocritical armchair coach thrives. On the other hand, some are eager to expound their views without first engaging in careful analysis or thoughtful consideration. I am arguing for equal parts of all three.

I firmly believe in George Washington Carver's assertion that "Education is the key that unlocks the golden door to freedom." My goal is to provide individuals, including students, politicians, and business leaders, with a framework to reshape their thinking, enabling them to identify, assess, and capitalize on new opportunities. I harbor this goal because I want to see a reduction in this escalating trend of looking down upon and disparaging those with differing views. Narrow-blinded thinking and contempt contributes to increased polarization, rendering compromise as elusive as finding a unicorn in our backyard. While the prospect of discovering a unicorn in my backyard would be welcomed, I'm not holding my breath.

Whether you choose to utilize one, two, or all the tools presented in these chapters is entirely at your discretion. Some may resonate more with you or prove more effective than others.

I now present a new route or path for you. Enjoy.

Chapter One

The Illusion of Knowledge

“You must let go of the illusion . . .”

—The Turtle (from *Kung Fu Panda*)

When Things Don't Go as Expected

When I think of a work-related surprise, I find myself instantly drawn back to a consulting project from earlier in my career. I had been brought in as an external consultant to advise a board of directors that was responsible for steering one of Canada's bigger nonprofit organizations. In some parts of the world, a “nonprofit” is presumed to be a small charity organization, but I can assure you this was a seriously big business enterprise. For a bit of perspective, estimates have charities and nonprofits in Canada contributing around \$200 billion to the economic activity of the country. The industry accounts for approximately 8 to 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product and employs some 2.5 million people.¹

On the first day of my consulting project, I was greeted with a warm reception full of smiles, handshakes, great stories, and excitement. The boardroom was filled with successful business executives who wanted to effect social and economic change. I started off by thanking the group for having me and outlining the brief but focused purpose for

the next few days. The ultimate goal was to develop a pseudo-balanced scorecard for the board of directors to link, measure, and report various key performance variables. At the center of the scorecard—from which everything would stem—was the core ethos of the organization, often referred to in business vernacular as the mission and vision of the nonprofit. I thought it was a relatively innocuous start.

So, I passed out some sticky notes and asked each board member to take a few minutes to write down what they perceived to be the mission and vision of the nonprofit. I think a strategy professional (which I am not) would call the mission the “who we are as an organization” statement and the vision the “where we want to be in the future as an organization” statement.

To my surprise, out of the twelve board members, no two produced even tangentially related statements. These were the helmsmen of the organization, responsible for charting the course, yet their perceptions of the organizational identity and direction were totally different from one another’s. Needless to say, when their interpretations of the mission and vision were posted on the boardroom’s walls for all to see, I only saw shock and horror in their eyes. Which, as you may guess, translated into shock and horror for me. In an instant, these executives realized what they individually thought to be an absolute (the mission and vision) was filled with false assumptions—an illusion, if you will.

As an externally hired consultant, I did what every self-respecting consultant would do and called for a ten-minute break to reflect and pivot from this interesting finding. In those ten minutes, I quickly changed the entire consulting engagement to start at the base of the performance tree, which is to say we spent the remainder of the morning examining each executive’s expectations and goals of the nonprofit, so we could focus in on and build a collective understanding of the mission and vision. This had to be done prior to examining their performance measurement system. Just imagine what would have happened if all of these strong-minded individuals

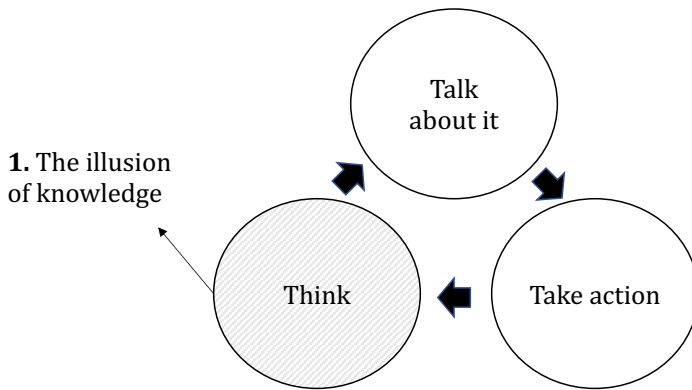
had gone ahead with developing a performance measurement for organizational impact without first addressing the obvious perception misalignments.

What I learned from these highly intelligent, passionate, and successful businesspeople was that anyone can be wedded to and simultaneously deceived by their beliefs and perceptions. And much worse, there are the occasions where these illusions of knowledge form the hull of the ship we are steering. As most sailing enthusiasts know, a weak hull can take on water, ending in a sunk ship. This is why having systematic mechanisms to dispel such illusions and misapprehensions is one way to avoid sinking and/or hitting the iceberg of narrow-blinded thinking and contempt.

The Beauty of Magic

Have you ever watched David Blaine perform? David is an illusionist who has been in the magic industry for nearly three decades (perhaps even longer, because I have no idea what he did in his formative years). As a professional magician and a street performer, he has been buried alive, frozen, drowned, and shocked. Breaking Guinness World Records seems like a walk in the park for him. I personally enjoyed it when he ate a wine glass at a party with Arnold Schwarzenegger and regurgitated frogs into a wine glass at a party with Drake. I suppose you could say that I am drawn to wine and magic.

Despite my admiration for David as a craftsman, I am constantly wondering how he does what he does because it is, after all, an illusion. The point is this: I am not inclined to accept magic as something supernatural because there must indeed be something behind the curtain, just like in *The Wizard of Oz*. I just have to *think* about it for a while! It's very much the same with narrow-blinded thinking . . . it requires time to think. So, what do I mean when I say, "Think about it"? How do we do that? One way is to unpack illusions of knowledge by understanding overconfidence and how it works.

Figure 1.1

Combating narrow-blinded thinking by overcoming the illusions of knowledge.

We Overestimate What We Know

What do I mean by illusion of knowledge? Well, from time to time, what we think we know is greater than what we actually know. We believe that what we personally perceive is neither an illusion nor magic, and indeed we have discovered the singular truth. (Yes, I am being sarcastic right now.) In this way, we are essentially overestimating what we know. Perhaps a friend of yours says they don't need a map because their sense of direction is really good. Yet, they still get lost, and despite being lost, they wouldn't be caught dead asking for directions. (Is this really a male-related phenomena?) They may even know they are going in the wrong direction but continue along the road, because they cannot bring themselves to admit they are wrong. This is called overcommitment. Or perhaps you know a colleague who is convinced they are smarter than everyone else, despite the absence of any facts to support their genius. Or maybe you have a religious neighbor who claims with absolute conviction and confidence that their theological beliefs are the one and only truth. In these instances, you might even get a side of authoritarian contempt for alternative views.

Many researchers have studied overestimates and overconfidence in different settings, and found relatively similar results. Nobel prizes have been awarded for this domain of research. The evidence from these studies demonstrates we all do this to some extent or another (some more than others). Overconfidence is a real phenomenon, and it is a person's *subjective confidence* in the conclusions they draw (also called judgments). It comes to life in different day-to-day scenarios, such as overestimation of personal performance, overplacement of ourselves relative to others, or overestimation of the accuracy of our opinions and knowledge. As illustrated in the comic at the beginning of this chapter, individuals frequently think they are more correct and more knowledgeable than they actually are. Is there something to the old adage that says, "93 percent of drivers are certain they are above-average drivers"? It seems so, and it likely finds its foundation in overconfidence. The fallacy of our overestimation is comically articulated in the movie *Anchorman* when Brian Fantana says to Ron Burgundy, "They've done studies, you know. Sixty percent of the time, it works every time." But thankfully Ron doesn't succumb to Brian Fantana's overconfidence and responds, "Brian, I'm gonna be honest with you, that smells like pure gasoline." *The Legend of Ron Burgundy* continues.

Try to think of all the times you have witnessed others (or yourself) poorly assess and misalign *subjective* probabilities, whether it was in an estimation, precision, and/or overplacement. It happens when people think they have control when they really don't, or when people underestimate how long it will take to do something. Perhaps it is because we believe a low-probability event will happen simply because it is desirable—"I'll definitely get that job! Who cares that two thousand other people have applied?" Or in the case of our driver example, they are certain they are above average or hold an overly positive belief about themselves. Don't get me wrong, I am generally an optimist, but I must frequently let go of how precise I think my knowledge is on a range of topics.

A Response to Overestimation

It may initially come across as a little depressing that overestimation and overconfidence run rampant and lead to poor judgment and decision-making. Overestimation and overconfidence contribute to narrow-blinded thinking and contempt too. Perhaps we should accept this illusion, bury our heads in the sand, and carry on with the status quo? No way. There are simple and subtle ways to challenge and counteract our tendency toward overestimation and overconfidence.

Early in my career, I was granted a golden opportunity to immerse myself in the realm of economics at an institute in Germany. Despite the pervasive notion that economics is the “dismal science” (a term coined by historian Thomas Carlyle based on Malthus’s grim predictions), I’ve always seen it as a guiding light. This experience, set against the backdrop of Germany’s rich cultural history and punctuated by the joyous exploration of its culinary offerings, was transformative for a directionless young academic.

During my time at the institute, the invaluable lesson of “define and defend” became ingrained in my approach to discussions, presentations, and debates. This simple yet powerful concept demands that, at the outset, participants articulate precisely what they are talking about before delving into their supporting evidence. Despite its apparent straightforwardness, close scrutiny of conversations often reveals what I term “logic fractures”—misalignments or uncertainties about the fundamental aspects of what individuals are trying to convey. Just the other day, my friends Rick and Kate asked me to define what I meant by the word “altruism” during a conversation we were having.

Consider a quick experiment. In your next conversation, inquire, “What do you mean by that word or topic?” or “Can you provide more insight into this specific topic, as I’m not entirely clear about it?” or “How does that process happen?” Intentionally asking for definitions signals a genuine interest in learning and engaging with someone’s perspective.

Define and Defend: The Big Version

Over the years, the impact of the “define and defend” principle on my graduate students’ growth has been nothing short of remarkable. How did this unfold? Through one-on-one academic debates—a distinctive twist on traditional discussions. These debates, while slightly more structured with time constraints and a specific format, share a fundamental premise with traditional group discussions. Importantly, the structured nature of one-on-one debates has the added advantage of tempering the overpowering influence of the loudest voices in the room—those who believe confident rambling is the key to winning.

In the case of my graduate students, the purpose of these academic debates is twofold: to provide them with a platform to practice and build confidence in presenting and arguing in front of an audience—an essential life skill—and to share with their peers the knowledge and perspectives they’ve acquired while researching contentious topics. The core of these debates revolves around the “define and defend” ethos.

Here’s how it works: Students receive a predetermined topic in advance and are assigned opposing sides. For example, one student might be assigned to argue that social and environmental reporting should be mandatory for all publicly accountable enterprises (Side A), while another is set to argue against it (Side B). Each student then prepares their arguments within the defined parameters of the debate.

The showdown unfolds with a head-to-head debate in front of the class. There are distinct stages: opening arguments, where students present their case based on research; cross-examination, an opportunity to question the opposing side and expose weaknesses in their argument; rebuttals, to clarify points or highlight flaws raised during the cross-examination; and closing statements, a response to the debate’s trajectory and an overall summary of their position. It is a giant define and defend fest!

One might think academic debates could be stress-inducing, especially for newcomers. Initially, perhaps it is. However, as my students engaged in more debates, they not only became remarkably composed and thoughtful but also transformed the debates into dynamic discussions of differing viewpoints. Most notably, they grew more confident and articulate in their views, all while embracing alternative perspectives and, surprisingly, having a lot of fun.

While not every conversation needs to adopt the rigor of these debates, applying similar principles to everyday discussions can be enlightening. Imagine asking questions like: Can you define that particular topic for me? What evidence led you to your position? Where did you get your supporting evidence? Would you mind if I asked a few questions to understand and perhaps challenge your perspective further? Could I share my perspective and evidence with you?

Define and Defend: Alternative Perspectives

Here is another example of the define and defend idea. Consider the 1978 Ford Pinto recall, where approximately 1.5 million cars out of 12.5 million were recalled due to a design flaw making them susceptible to fire in collisions.² Evidence indicated Ford's awareness of the issue, leading many to condemn such duplicitous behavior as unconscionable, seemingly beyond debate.

Enter Michael Sandel, a Harvard Law School professor who turns this grotesque Ford situation into a platform for thoughtful debate and dialogue, employing Jeremy Bentham's logic. Bentham suggests the measure of right and wrong should prioritize the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Sandel challenges his students to explore and define what maximizing happiness truly means, delving into the merits and shortcomings of cost-benefit calculations, a nuanced understanding of happiness over suffering, and the potentially incommensurable aspects of human life. This approach aims to foster thought-provoking dialogue enriched with socially desirable

and undesirable contentions, encouraging active listening and reflection on diverse perspectives.

The essence of this example serves three purposes. First, it underscores that respectful debate is not synonymous with contempt, emphasizing the importance of maintaining civility in discussions (just like the two old Irish guys at the pub). Second, it highlights the potential consequences if narrow-blindedness and contempt were granted entry at the onset of the debate—insights would be lost, and the conversation could spiral downward. Third, while not excusing Ford's actions, it demonstrates the power of dialogue and debate, when grounded in a particular definition (e.g., Jeremy Bentham's measure of right and wrong), to offer a potent strategy for new perspectives.

Try it. In your next “spicy” conversation with someone who is exhibiting contempt, ask: (1) “Could you elaborate on your perspective? Can you define what you're talking about?” (Feel free to seek more clarity through examples.) (2) “Where did you find the supporting evidence for your viewpoint?”

Approach it with genuine care and sincerity, not to prove them wrong. Take a page from Theodore Roosevelt: “Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Dialing It Down a Few Notches

In 2013 Philip Fernbach and his colleagues at the University of Colorado conducted a fascinating study.³ They were interested in reducing extreme political attitudes about particularly complex policies. The crux of Fernbach and his colleagues' research paper was a gallant one. Their starting point was the view that we generally don't know as much as we think we do, but they were particularly interested in the question of how we get people to see the flaws in their logic and dial down their strong viewpoints on such matters.

So, Fernbach and his colleagues ran a few different and really

cool experiments to see if individuals were near delusional about their level of knowledge around a topic they hold dear. What they found was something rather interesting. Over the course of three separate experiments, they asked people to explain the detailed mechanics behind the policy they felt so strongly about (e.g., how it worked and what the process was). By asking for a written mechanistic explanation, they found the individuals in the experiments significantly reduced their overall compunction that they knew everything about a policy and moved toward more moderate views. As the old *Saturday Night Live* skit goes, it got them to “simmer down now.” Fernbach and his colleagues called this illusion of knowledge “explanatory depth,” as it took being asked to explain something for these individuals to realize their own limited understanding.

These researchers also found that simply asking people in the experiment to give their reasons (instead of the mechanistic logic) for their views on the policy resulted in no significant change in their attitude toward the topic. Said another way, asking for reasons why someone supports or believes in something is way less powerful than asking people to explain how something works or what the processes are.

I can think of two ways to interpret these findings. The first is that people’s illusions of knowledge about the processes underlying certain policies become a barrier to seeing alternatives and likely an impediment to compromise. The second is that asking people to explain what they understand, namely the mechanism or process behind their view (e.g., A causes B, B causes C, and C causes D), opens the door to alternatives because after realizing their knowledge is not as complete as they thought, they may be willing to step out of their entrenched views. Perhaps this is a mechanism that encourages people to dial it down a few notches, thereby reducing narrow-blinded thinking and in turn contempt.

Imagine what might happen if you ask and give time, listen carefully, and repeat back what people say as they explain how they think something works. I have seen a wonderful tempering of beliefs

when this is done. Recently my wife asked me to explain the mechanisms behind the statistical results of a study from the perspective of the results table. She asked, “What is this saying? What does this mean? How does this work?” I tried to explain, only to realize I took many of the statistical mechanisms for granted. We went back and looked at them together. Who would have thought statistics could be so much fun!

Mechanistic logic can also be called A-B-C-D logic. The premise is that A causes B, which causes C, which causes D. How about an example in practice? In a large research study conducted within the US, two friends and I were examining the impacts of tax policy on the purchase of electric vehicles. We set up an experiment whereby people were asked about a vehicle purchase. Including sales tax, the estimated total price of the new gas-powered car would be \$25,000 and the total price of the new electric-powered car would be \$34,000. We checked to ensure these costs were possible with a non-luxury electric car.

Some of our test subjects were assessed a tax penalty of \$3,000 (a new state tax surcharge on gas-powered cars to encourage individuals to reduce carbon dioxide emissions) and others were given a tax incentive of \$3,000 (a new state tax incentive on electric-powered cars to encourage individuals to reduce carbon dioxide emissions).

We were particularly interested in whether or not providing an A-B-C-D logic explanation, when paired with the tax penalty or tax incentive, would motivate purchase decisions. Here is an example of a mechanistic argument from our study:

Scientific studies have established that since 1900, the air temperature on Earth has risen almost 2 degrees. A large part of the temperature increase on Earth is caused by humans burning fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels produces carbon dioxide, a heat trapping gas, that when released into the atmosphere increases Earth’s air temperature. One of the biggest causes of

carbon dioxide is gas-powered vehicles. Carbon dioxide from gas-powered vehicle emissions increases the Earth's air temperature, which leads to global changes in precipitation, snow and ice melt, and extreme weather, such as heavy rains, heat waves, and severe storms. But the good news is that we can change these environmental impacts with our purchase decisions. Increasing the number of electric vehicles will slow the warming of the Earth, caused largely by carbon dioxide being released from gas-powered vehicles. Therefore, I support the \$3,000 sales tax incentive that individuals will receive on the purchase of electric-powered vehicles because it will decrease the cost of electric cars and encourage more individuals to purchase electric-powered vehicles.⁴

The point here was whether or not study participants agreed with the logic presented in this statement. I also understand behavioral research has shortcomings too. Recent empirical evidence—in combination with other similar studies examining this topic—suggest there might be something to the benefits of utilizing mechanistic logic. In our study, providing individuals with A-B-C-D logic did seem to impact people's behavior, when compared to the control group that received no such prompts. Perhaps this provides some evidence that explanations may help to minimize overconfidence and overcommitment to a particular position.

Sinek and *Hot Ones*

Okay, so how do you avoid the awkwardness that ensues if you ask someone to write out their logic? As much as I would like to do the paper and pencil test, I can't imagine being in the middle of a heated family debate on politics, slapping down a pencil and notebook, and asking my family members to write out their causal understandings of foreign policy. Hilarious, but weird. There is another way to elucidate

causal mechanism knowledge: ask first-rate questions about the how and why of things.

Asking revealing questions (of the how and why sort) probes logic in subtle ways and may be another avenue toward achieving the outcomes described by Fernbach and colleagues. I admire Simon Sinek's ability to ask amazing questions from a corporate strategy standpoint. In his book *Start with Why*, he asks a simple but necessary question: "Why do only a few companies and leaders really change the world while the others exist?" The answer, he says, is that they inspire action by asking a critically important evaluative question to find the *why* behind all their efforts. What is the logic or mechanism of their efforts? Sinek's ability to distill the *why* question has implications for how we communicate the relationships between things to our teams, customers, and external world. He terms this the *why* of enduring enterprises.

Sinek takes another formidable angle on probing questions about the rules of the game (how things work, a.k.a. the mechanism). He explains this in terms of finite games and infinite games. Finite games being defined by getting to the end of the game and winning with static rules, as opposed to infinite games, where the goal is to keep going rather than winning, to expand horizons and inspire conversation and resiliency. In a lot of ways, Sinek focuses on the mindset of questioning how something works.

Another entrepreneur who changes the dynamic of interactions through great questions is Sean Evans. Sean is the creator and host of the TV series *Hot Ones*. This show is hilarious because Sean invites big-name celebrities onto his set to eat progressively hotter chicken wings that are off the chart insane, all while interviewing these persons of interest. I like making hot sauce, so I am naturally drawn to the premise of this show. If you listen closely, he also garners amazing insights because of his outstanding questions. I'll never forget the episode where Dr. Ken Jeong came on the show. It is a must-watch. Dr. Ken actually complimented Sean for the quality

and thoughtfulness of his questions because it provided him with an on-ramp to explain how something worked and to highlight the big inflection points in the trajectory of his career. I still laugh when I see the blend of hot-wing-eating pain, superb questions, and Dr. Ken saying, “Fuck you, Sean, you warm me up [with great questions], I really thought we were about to be friends, and now I am back in the gutter of my hatred for Sean Evans.” Not only have I been in tears laughing from this show, I have learned a lot about the quality of questions from Sean. His poise under the extreme duress of crazy hot chicken wings while asking thoughtful questions to get a deeper understanding of his guests is true artistry. His line of questioning, under any conditions but especially these, takes practice and is also a good yet unconventional model for others to follow. I wonder what would happen if Sinek and Evans worked together on a hot wings for business leaders podcast . . .

Causal Loops

There is an alternative approach to shed light on the idea of A-B-C-D logic in a business setting. A-B-C-D logic (or mechanistic logic) is sometimes referred to as causal logic—it traces how one thing impacts another thing, which impacts another thing. I remember working on a causal project with a large nonprofit healthcare provider out West. The findings ended up getting published in an academic journal because they were novel in this particular setting. Interestingly the genesis of the project was more about asking questions (hopefully like Sean’s) to get at senior management’s logic of how their business worked. My co-researchers and I were working with a community health business, a rather large operation, incorporating medical, dental, mental health, and a litany of other health-related services. The organization was stacked with an impressive group of people and led by a savvy and thoughtful CEO. However, many members of the management team held different beliefs about how their organization functioned (how it

worked) to achieve its ultimate goals. I also don't believe they shared the same set of organizational goals, which is not uncommon in big businesses.

Our research team used a method called causal modeling, which is a fancy way of saying we got the entire executive team in a room (over multiple sessions) to map out and agree on the logic of how their critical performance variables dynamically and recursively affected each other. It was, as Fernbach and colleagues would say, the development of a mechanistic explanation (A causes B, B causes C, C causes D)—or, as I say, how one thing impacts another thing, which impacts another thing.

We did this to offer the team at the healthcare facility a path to identify key points of leverage for organizational action. It was very successful because, to the surprise of the executives, it challenged their logic, clarified causal relationships, and identified new pathways for organizational action. What was cool about the process was it revealed assumptions, choices, and complexities and so helped the healthcare organization recognize possible strategic opportunities. Here are a few comments from the executives who participated in the study:

“The representation also showed causal relations depicting that serving more patients with adequate insurance could increase revenue, decreasing CHP's dependence on grants, and possibly leading to increased compensation for healthcare providers (the lower left of the causal diagram).”

“This [our current business model] is not a sustainable business model. We try to solve everything but [don't] get paid for it.”

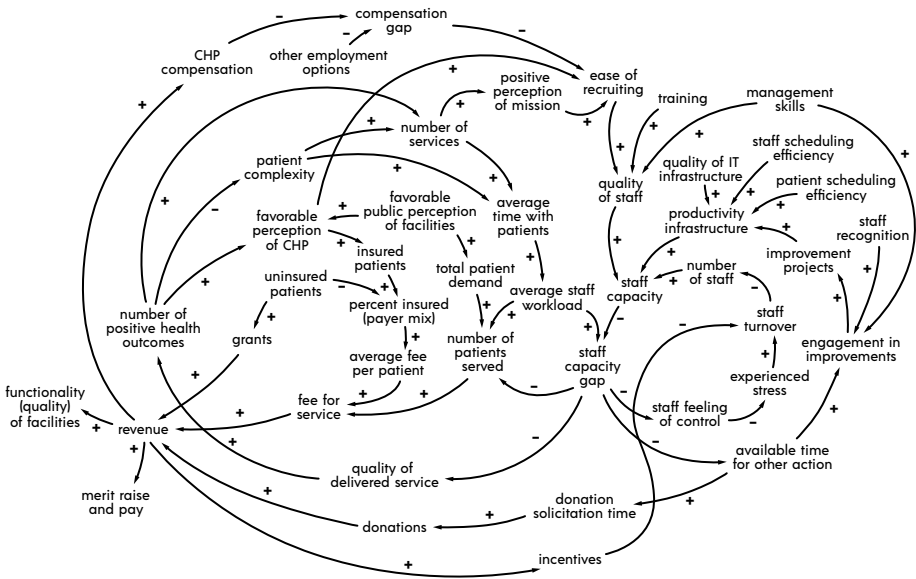
“Our current model is hopeless when we look at the causal loops.”

“We will always have less [revenue available] than we want.”

“Increasing pay [for example] may put pressure on these other things.”

The end causal map is presented in Figure 1.2.⁵ The executives made some important changes to their logic and business model because they better understood how things worked (the mechanistic logic). What was uniquely interesting to me was how the process of drawing out the relationships converted the implicit assumptions and estimations into clear, explicit events. After we collectively agreed on the causal model, I heard great dialogue about assumptions, estimations, and renewed perspectives. I am not saying one has to get into this level of granular causal details in all discussions of all topics, but the options are limitless and very helpful if the goal is to counteract narrow-blindedness.

Figure 1.2



Causal logic at work.

Asking Questions about How Something Works

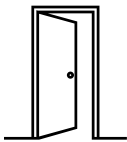
How can you engage in debate in a non-polarizing way? Take a news reporter approach. In my mind, a key attribute that differentiates award-winning news reporters from mediocre or terrible news reporters is how they go about their reporting assignment—their questions, their energy for inquisition, and the depths they go to in an effort to understand how something works. Journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell is a genius at this approach. His research savvy is next level! He is uber inquisitive, he digs until he understands how things work, and he seeks knowledge on the ground level from people who live the experience. During his entire research journey, he continues to refine his questions. He is a total master at the process.

I tried this approach when I became interested in the tax exemptions given to nonprofits. Motivated by a news story about the abuse of tax-exempt status by registered nonprofits, a close friend and I asked a simple question: When do tax-exempt nonprofits detract value from society? We surveyed fifteen years of tax-exempt nonprofit scholarships spanning across nine disciplines. It was a collection of mechanistic logics (A causes B) from multiple perspectives. As a result, we found and showed a long history of collective mechanistic arguments, which we funneled into three buckets: policy-making and regulation intemperance, nonprofit management and governance distraction, and detection and prosecution inconsistencies. Our logic and evidence explained when and why tax-exempt nonprofits can detract value from society. Can this logic be challenged? Absolutely. But the mechanistic logic is written for others to read and discuss, rather than as a mere pontification of views.⁶

Imagine you were given a chance to report on something that was really exciting and interesting to you. What topic or questions would you research and write about? What experts would you interview? What questions would you ask? What do you think you currently know on the topic, and what is unclear to you? How and why did this event (or events) happen? How would you go about formulating the

story arc of this major event? My guess is a reporter like Gladwell would start by asking a simple and interesting question to which he does not know the answer, then he would ask the experts and interviewees to define and defend what they believe.

Combating narrow-blinded thinking by overcoming the illusions of knowledge is the point of this chapter. The Mexican poet, essayist, novelist, and short story writer José Emilio Pacheco said it well when he once commented, “We are all hypocrites. We cannot see ourselves or judge ourselves the way we see and judge others.” Unfortunately, this type of hypocrisy sneaks into assessments of our knowledge and closes the door to new perspectives and opportunities. The good news is we can combat the illusion of knowledge that leads to narrow-blinded thinking. Asking questions with clinical precision and genuinely listening as others explain their mechanistic logic is a measured beginning that can pull back the big red curtain of the illusion.



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