



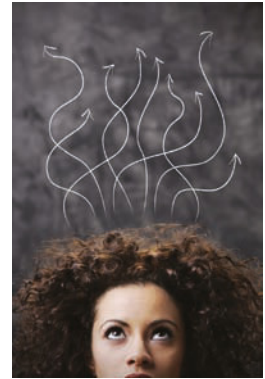
Unit 4: Critical Thinking

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Unit 4: Critical Thinking

1. What is critical thinking?

A person who thinks critically can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, sift through this information to find out the facts, reason correctly from this information, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions about life.



Key idea

Critical thinking means being reasonable and responsible when you are deciding what to believe or do.

Critical thinking enables you to make up your own mind when asked to:

- Choose between the claims of rival political parties.
- Decide whether or not your country needs to change an existing law.
- Serve on a jury in a murder trial.

Critical thinking enables you to be a responsible citizen who can contribute to the society in which you live. It can also give you the detachment and distance needed to **question conventional wisdom** about some issues.



Key idea

To question conventional wisdom means to challenge the generally accepted view.



What follows is an example of this questioning attitude: Many people today think **overpopulation** is one of the greatest dangers facing our planet. But is this true?

In his 1970s bestseller **The Population Bomb**, Paul Ehrlich warned that:

‘The battle to feed all of humanity is over. The world will undergo famines – hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programmes embarked upon now.’

It is easy to see why so many people might agree with this gloomy prediction.

In the following article for **Foreign Affairs**, **Philip Longman** talks about our misconceptions about world population growth.



You awaken to news that the earth's population has passed the 7 billion mark. Leaving home early for a doctor's appointment, you nonetheless arrive too late to find a parking space due to heavy traffic. Then you join the queue of patients, and after waiting an hour you have your ten-minute consultation with the doctor. Afterwards, you have to join the queue in the pharmacists to have your prescription filled. All the while, you worry about the work you've missed because so many other people would happily line up to take your job. Returning home to the evening news, you watch throngs of youths throwing stones somewhere in the Middle East. A telemarketer phones you for the third time this week, asking you to help save the Amazonian rain forest. Finally, as you set your alarm clock for the morning, your next-door neighbour's car alarm goes off.

After a day like that, it is hardly surprising that the average Westerner thinks that overpopulation is one of the world's most pressing problems. Your day-to-day experience, coupled with alarming news stories, frequently suggests that your quality of life is under threat from population growth. You hear about the number of people competing for employment, enrolment in schools and treatment in accident and emergency departments. Televised images of famine, war and environmental degradation reinforce your fears.

No wonder that, when asked how long it will take for world population to double, many people say 20 years or less.

Yet a closer look at demographic trends shows that the rate of world population growth has fallen by more than 40 per cent since the late 1960s. Forecasts by the United Nations Organisation show that, even in the absence of major wars

or pandemics, the number of human beings on this planet could well start to decline within the lifetime of today's children.

Demographers at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis predict that the human population will peak at 9 billion by 2070 and then start to contract. Long before then, many nations will shrink in absolute size, and the average age of the world's citizens will shoot up dramatically. Moreover, the populations that will age fastest are in the Middle East and other underdeveloped regions. During the remainder of this century, even sub-Saharan Africa is likely to grow older than Europe is today.



The root cause of these trends is falling birth rates. Today, the average woman in the world bears half as many children as did her counterpart in 1972. No industrialised country still produces enough children to sustain its population over time, or to prevent rapid population ageing. For instance:

- Russia's population is already contracting by three-quarters of a million per year.
- Japan's population is expected to fall by as much as one-third over the next 50 years.
- About one-third of China's population could be over 60 by the mid-century.

Although many factors are at work, the changing economics of family life is the prime factor. In nations rich and poor, under all forms of government, as more and more of the world's population moves to urban areas in which children offer little or no economic reward to their parents, and as women acquire economic opportunities and reproductive control, the social and financial costs of childbearing continue to

rise. For example: In the United States, the direct cost of raising a middle-class child born in 2004 through to age 18 is put at around \$200,000 – not including the cost of a third-level education.

As the developing world becomes more urban and industrialised, it is experiencing the same demographic transition, but at a faster pace. Today, when Americans think of Mexico, for example, they think of televised images of desperate, unemployed youths swimming the Rio Grande or slipping through border fences. Yet, because Mexican fertility rates have dropped so dramatically, the country is now ageing five times faster than the United States. It took 50 years for the American median age to rise just five years, from 30 to 35. By contrast, between 2000 and 2050, Mexico's median age, according to UN projections, will increase by 20 years, leaving half the population over 42. Meanwhile, the median American age in 2050 is expected to be 39.7.

Also, those televised images of throngs of youths throwing stones broadcast from the Middle East create a similarly misleading impression. Fertility rates are falling faster in the Middle East than anywhere else on earth, and, as a result, the region's population is ageing at an unprecedented rate. For example, by mid-century Algeria will see its median age increase from 21.7 to 40, according to UN projections. Post-revolutionary Iran has seen its fertility rate plummet by nearly two-thirds and will, accordingly, have more seniors than children by 2030.

All told, some 59 countries, comprising roughly 44 per cent of the world's total population, are currently not producing enough children to avoid population decline, and the phenomenon continues to spread. By 2045, according to the latest United Nations projections, the world's fertility rate as a whole will have fallen below replacement levels.



 **Think about it!**

1. What is **critical thinking**?
2. What does it mean to **question conventional wisdom**?
3. According to **Philip Longman**, what will happen to our planet's population once it peaks at nine billion around the middle of this century?
4. Philip Longman shows that the global birth rate is in decline. The birth rate in more than 70 countries is now below replacement level. Yet, the Earth's population will most likely **rise** to a figure of nine billion within the next fifty years. Commenting on the reason for this, Dr Nicholas Eberstadt has said:

'The reason the world has experienced a population explosion over the past century is not because human beings have started breeding like rabbits. It's that they have stopped dying like flies. What has really driven up human numbers is a health explosion.'

What do you think he means by this?

2. How can we apply critical thinking?

In everyday life we are confronted by people making claims and counter-claims, saying that something is true or false. It is not easy to decide whether or not to believe them. We live in a world of hype and exaggeration. It can sometimes seem that everyone has something to sell. From morning to night we are bombarded by messages telling us to buy this and support that. How can we evaluate these often-conflicting claims?

We need to begin with our understanding of **truth**.

A statement is true if it describes things as they are, and if it gives us accurate information.

A statement is false if it fails to reflect reality.

Truth is something universally applicable. It is not something that depends on one individual's perspective. You know that a claim is true when there is clear and sufficient evidence to support it.

For example:

- You know that **$2 + 2 = 4$** .
- You know that **London is a larger city than Dublin**.
- You know that **love is better than hate**.

However, we live in an era of 24-hour-news channels with their 'breaking news'. Perhaps we should begin by exercising caution before accepting claims made by some media pundits.



Candlelit vigil at Virginia Polytechnic Institute

For instance, on 16 April 2007, some 32 people were shot and killed at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in the USA. In the immediate aftermath, it was claimed that the man responsible for all these deaths, Seung-Hui Cho, had been an enthusiastic player of violent video games. However, a subsequent investigation by the authorities found that he had not played such violent games at all.



Key idea

Truth is knowledge of reality.

Next, we need to remember that all the claims people make are put to us in the form of an **argument**.

Here our everyday language can cause confusion. Usually people think of an argument as a disagreement that spirals down into a bad-tempered shouting-match. This is **not** what it means.



Key idea

An **argument** consists of a series of statements made to convince you to accept or reject the conclusion drawn from them.

An argument can be either **sound** or **unsound**.

An argument is **sound** once both (a) all its statements are true; and (b) the statements are connected in such a way that the conclusion necessarily follows from them.

Example:

Statement 1: **If today is Sunday, the library is closed.**

Statement 2: **Today is Sunday.**

Conclusion: **Therefore the library is closed.**

An argument is **unsound** if either (a) one or more of its statements are false; or (b) the conclusion does not follow from them.

Example:

Statement 1: **All basketballs are round.**

Statement 2: **The Earth is round.**

Conclusion: **Therefore, the Earth is a basketball.**



Think about it!

1. What is **truth**?
2. Suppose someone tells you that something will be 'of great benefit'.
What question should you ask? Why should you ask it?
3. Suppose you are told that 'experts say' something is 'good for your health'.
What question should you ask? Why should you ask it?
4. What is an **argument**?
5. Read the following example:
All whales are mammals.
All mammals are warm-blooded.
Therefore, all whales are warm-blooded.
Why is this argument said to be **sound**?
6. Read the following example:
Every squirrel is a mammal.
Every rabbit is a mammal.
Therefore, every rabbit is a squirrel.
Why is this argument said to be **unsound**?
7. The ancient philosopher Protagoras taught that: '**There are two sides to every question.**'
Let us apply his observation to a contemporary moral issue.
The question as to whether or not it is morally justified to **experiment on animals** is a highly controversial one. Read the following arguments for and against testing products on animals before they are declared safe for human use.

For Animal Testing

Animal experiments can be justified because:

1. Animal testing has a proven track record. It has played a part in most major medical advances over the last two centuries.

2. Many mammals have vital organs (e.g. the brain, kidneys and lungs) that are similar to those in humans. These process poisons in a similar way.

Indeed, similarities of physiology are obvious from the way the same drugs are often used to treat diseases in both humans and animals.

3. Animal research is important for judging how diseases and chemicals function when it is too risky to use human subjects. They help us to understand the effects of a drug on the whole body.

For example, in the cases of diseases that attack the brain, primates such as chimpanzees provide the closest possible model on which to test drugs.

4. Despite significant advances in tissue culture and computer modelling, some testing still requires animal subjects.

Against Animal Testing

Animal experiments cannot be justified because:

1. Using animals in medical research is wrong because they suffer pain and distress.

2. Diseases and drugs do not always have the same impact on humans as they have on animals. Sometimes the dangerous side effects of drugs do not surface in animal testing.

For example, **Thalidomide** (an anti-morning-sickness remedy for women during pregnancy) was tested on animals and declared safe. The result was severe physical disability for many thousands of children.

3. Despite claims to the contrary, when researchers artificially induce illnesses such as **Parkinson's disease** in animals as part of their experiments, these do not provide effective working models of the real thing.

4. Scientific progress in the use of human tissue culture and computer modelling makes animal experimentation unnecessary.

- (a) Would you impose restrictions on the kind of experiments that could be conducted on animals? Give at least one example.
- (b) Do you think that certain animals should be protected from ever being used in medical experimentation? Identify one such animal and justify your choice.
- (c) Imagine a situation where someone you loved was seriously ill and in danger of dying. Doctors tell you they can save his/her life. However, the drug they must use was first tested on animals. What would you want them to do? Give a reason for your decision.
- (d) How much do you think our personal circumstances influence our understanding of right and wrong? Explain your answer.

3. What impedes critical thinking?

Unfortunately, as an ancient philosopher once warned:

‘In a heated argument, we are apt to lose sight of the truth.’

Publilius Syrus.

This is because, much as we would like to think of ourselves as rational creatures, we are all susceptible to **bias** and **prejudice**.

In both cases, you close your mind to the merits of an alternative point of view. Neither is fair.

However, when faced with uncomfortable truths, you may try to hide your closed-mindedness by responding with stock responses such as **‘Oh, yeah?’**, **‘Who says?’** and **‘That’s just your opinion!’** Typically, you will refuse to admit that you might reach a conclusion without good reasons to support it. However, any reasonable person can see your reactions for what they are. You are trying to **rationalise** your conclusion.



Or it may be that you are giving in to your **emotional baggage**.



Key ideas

Bias means deliberately taking a one-sided view of a situation.
Prejudice means making up your mind before finding out the facts.



Key idea

To rationalise means to decide something purely on the basis of an emotional reaction and then try to justify this afterwards.



Key idea

Emotional baggage refers to those past disappointments, hurts and jealousies we all carry within us.

We only need to take an honest look around us to see how bias, prejudice and our emotional baggage leak into the way we perceive the world, how we interpret events and how we judge the rightness or wrongness of our actions. As one psychologist, Professor Maureen Gaffney, warns:

‘We see and selectively remember what we expect or want to see. We pay significantly more attention and assign more weight to any information that conforms to what we already believe, and ignore contradictory evidence or explain it away.’

‘We put disproportionate emphasis on whatever draws our attention; for example,

a particularly lively protest or lobbying campaign. And of course attention is more rapidly and effectively captured by something that arouses strong emotions than by dry facts.’

Even the best and soundest argument will fail if we willingly blind ourselves to the truth or, worse, refuse to listen to rational argument at all. Therefore, in order to make good moral decisions, we need to think clearly, consistently and without prejudice. This is very difficult to do. This is why the great philosophers throughout history have taught that good moral decisions require courage, determination, honesty and humility on our part.

 **Think about it!**

1. Read the following statement:

'Of course I know him. He is a very nice man. He lives in a beautiful house in a very upmarket neighbourhood. He is also a highly respected member of our community. We meet to play golf at least once a month. His wife and my wife are friends. I refuse to believe that he stole all that money from his clients. You must be mistaken. Someone as charming and well-educated as him could never have committed such a crime.'

In what way could this be an example of bias?

2. Read the following examples:

(a) 'I am not going to interview any other applicants for this position. You get the job because your father is a friend of mine.'

(b) 'Oh, I wouldn't pay any attention to him. Just listen to his accent. It's awful!'

(c) 'I wouldn't trust her if I were you, just remember where she comes from!'

(d) 'I believe every word he says because he always sounds like he knows what he is talking about.'

In each case say **why** it is an example of **prejudice**.

3. What is **emotional baggage**? How might it influence your decisions?

4. What is a fallacy?

Sometimes an argument may appear to be sound. However, on closer inspection we can see that it is **unsound**. An argument is unsound when it contains a **fallacy**.



Key idea

A fallacy is an error in reasoning.

These are some of the most common fallacies you are likely to encounter:

1. The scare tactic

Here someone tries to frighten you into agreement.

Example: Flying in an airliner is much too dangerous. There is a risk that it could be hijacked by terrorists or your aircraft might suffer a mechanical failure. Therefore, you should avoid all forms of air travel.

This presents a complicated issue in a most simplistic way. Admittedly, there is a remote possibility of such things happening. However, here you are asked to accept only the most extreme response to such remote risks.



2. The false either/or choice

Here someone deliberately tries to make you think your range of choices is far more limited than it really is.

Example: There are only two sports to play – cricket and rugby. However, you cannot play two sports at the same time. Therefore, you must choose to play either cricket or rugby.

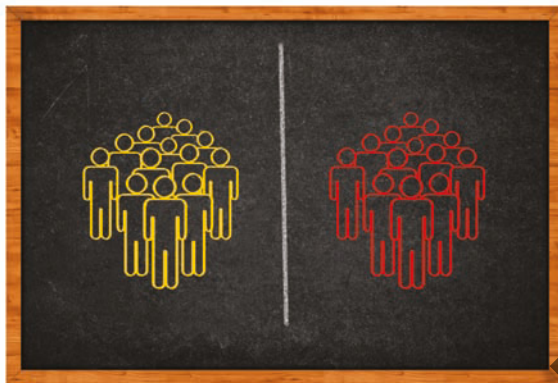
The idea here is to box you in and make you think that your range of choices is limited to these two only. In reality, you have many other sporting options to choose from.

3. Appealing to sentiment

Here someone tries to manipulate your emotions with a heart-warming or a heart-wrenching appeal. The aim is to convince you to accept or reject some idea.

Example: Our transition year group has been visiting sick, elderly people who live alone. The elderly really enjoy our visits. Therefore, these elderly people should leave each transition year student something in their will.

This relies entirely on an appeal to your emotions to win your support for it. However, it does not offer any justification for its demand that a good deed should automatically be rewarded in monetary terms.



4. Appealing to the desire to fit in

Here it is suggested that, just because other people are doing something, you should automatically do it too.

Example: Everyone else wants to vote for the Nazi party. If everyone else wants to do so then it must be the right thing to do. Therefore, you should vote for the Nazis too.

This line of reasoning relies heavily on the idea that what the majority wants must always be right. It does not offer any justification for this belief. Blindly trusting others is not a sound basis for accepting something.

5. Appealing to authority

Here you are told that, when making up your mind, you should allow yourself to be influenced by someone's prestige or social status.

Example: My uncle, who is a government minister, tells me that he has a secret plan to solve the economic crisis. However, he says that he will not reveal this plan until after he has won re-election. Since he is my uncle, as well as a minister, and I like and respect him very much, I think that what he says must be true.

It may be true that this government minister has a secret plan to solve the nation's economic crisis. However, there is no evidence presented here to lead you to draw such a conclusion. Just because someone is related to you and liked by you, it is not sufficient reason to accept him/her as a credible and reliable authority. If there is such a plan, why not reveal it to the voters before the election? Surely, if it is as good as the minister claims, it would encourage the electorate to re-elect him. Indeed, not to reveal it only casts doubt on the very existence of such a plan.



6. False moral equivalence

Here it is claimed that, because some important people act a certain way, then everyone else is entitled to do the same.

Example: If one taoiseach is allowed to get away with spying on his opponents while in office, then all subsequent taoisigh should be allowed to do the same.

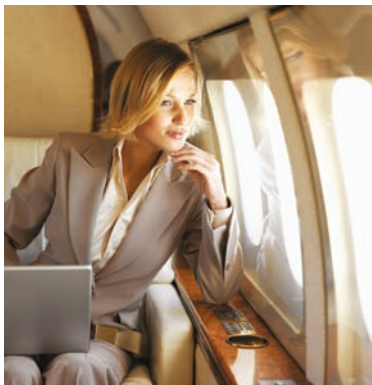
There is no justification offered here for a taoiseach spying on political opponents. Indeed, under our laws, such an action would constitute an abuse of power and, if exposed, would lead to removal from public office. Just because one person has gotten away with doing something wrong, it does not justify others doing the same.

7. Ad hominem

This means ‘against the man’. Here your whole focus is on attacking the character of a person who puts forward an alternative point of view to yours.

Example: Yes, I hear what you are saying. However, I totally disagree with you. Only a complete fool would reach such a conclusion. It is not worth my while responding to your argument. You are just too naïve!

No justification is offered here for rejecting what someone else has to say. There is no attempt made to disprove the evidence offered or to engage with the conclusion drawn from it.



8. Sweeping generalisations

Here you are offered broad statements that ignore the particular facts and over-simplify a situation. The aim is to mislead you and distort your understanding of what is happening.

Example: All important people dress well and speak with a posh accent. This woman dresses well and speaks with a posh accent. Therefore she must be an important person.

Here you are being asked to accept a conclusion where there is not sufficient evidence to support it. The woman in question may be an important person, but you cannot say so based solely on the reasons given here.

9. Begging the question

This is a circular form of reasoning.

Example: How can you accuse me of stealing that money? Everyone knows I’m an honest person. I’m above suspicion!

Here your defence against the accusation of theft is based on the claim that you have a reputation for honesty and so could never have stolen any money. This reasoning is faulty because you start off by assuming as true the very thing that has to be proven!

10. Introducing a ‘red herring’

Here you distract people from the actual issue at hand.

Example: You can’t trust Tom to do a good job as a member of the student council; he has absolutely no sense of style and his taste in music is awful!

Notice how people’s attention is focused on a completely irrelevant issue. This saves you the trouble of having to make a case to support what you are looking for.



11. Asking a loaded question

This is an approach intended either to knock an opponent off-balance or to discredit the value of his/her argument in the eyes of others.

Example: Have you stopped taking illegal drugs?

This question is actually several questions blended into one. It is intended to draw you into the trap of a simple **Yes/No** answer. The aim is to get you to confirm something that undermines other people's perception of your character. If you answer 'Yes' you are confirming that you did take illegal drugs in the past but have stopped doing so. If you answer 'No' you are confirming that you are still taking illegal drugs at the moment.

If you fall into this trap, it would serve to distract others from the truthfulness of any evidence offered to support your conclusion.



Think about it!

1. Read the following:

Young children like to go trick-or-treating at Halloween. There is a danger that someone might offer children poisoned sweets. This could make them ill or even kill them. Therefore, the government should ban all trick-or-treating at Halloween.

Why is this an example of using the **scare tactic** in an argument?

2. Read the following:

If you enjoy soccer, you must support either Manchester United or Chelsea.

Why is this an example of the **false either/or choice**?

3. Read the following:

You can't give me a bad grade; it will make my parents very angry with me.

Why is this an example of **appealing to sentiment**?

4. Read the following:

Everyone else is going out and taking ecstasy tonight, so you should too.

Why is this an example of **appealing to the desire to fit in**?

5. Read the following:

A top footballer says that the taoiseach has a great plan for the economy. Therefore I will support the taoiseach because I trust what this footballer has to say.

Why is this an example of **appealing to authority**?

6. Read the following:

The government has banned smoking in public places for health reasons. I think that it should impose the same restrictions on soft drinks to discourage their use.

Why is this an example of **false moral equivalence**?

7. Read the following:

Here's what I think about what you've said: anyone who supports the death penalty is no better than a murderer.

Why is this an example of the use of **ad hominem**?

8. Read the following:

I know someone who comes from there. He's a thief. That just goes to show that you can't trust anyone from that neighbourhood. They are all thieves!

Why is this an example of a **sweeping generalisation**?

9. Read the following:

You can't give me a C; I'm a grade A student.

Why is this an example of **begging the question**?

10. Read the following:

Of course I believe that the doctor knows what he is doing. Isn't he a seventh son of a seventh son? He must have special healing powers!

Why is this an example of **introducing a 'red herring'**?

11. Read the following:

Have you always been so gullible?

Why is this an example of **asking a loaded question**?

5. What is 'groupthink'?

During the 1930s, the world's economy was plunged into **the Great Depression**. There was mass unemployment and terrible poverty. Many people throughout the Western world were desperate to find a solution to the economic crisis that was causing so much misery.

A number of journalists were hopeful that Russia had found a formula for success in **Marxism**.



Key idea

Marxism is a political philosophy named after its founder, a 19th-century thinker named Karl Marx. He said that human history was a long series of struggles between rich and poor. He called for revolutionaries to rise up on behalf of the poor and seize all the means of producing wealth in society (e.g. banks, factories and farms). They should then use their power to create a new social order in which everyone could enjoy equality and freedom.



Marx



Lenin



Stalin

Following the chaos produced by World War I, Russia – or as it became known, **the Soviet Union** – came under the control of Marxists, led first by Lenin and later by Stalin. They took control of all property, but they did not create the ideal society Marx had hoped for. True, many people were employed, housed, clothed and fed. However, they lived constantly under the eye of the secret police. Anyone who disagreed with government policy was arrested and either shot or sent to a labour camp in the icy wastes of Siberia.

However, the rulers of the Soviet Union were experts in the art of **propaganda**.



Key idea

Propaganda is a set of techniques that aims to convince you to accept ideas and news stories. This is achieved, not through argument or debate, but through the manipulation of your emotions.



Any foreign journalists who visited the Soviet Union were taken to specially prepared sites. Everything they saw or heard was performed by specially selected citizens who followed a written script. All of this was overseen by the country's ruthless and ever-watchful secret police.

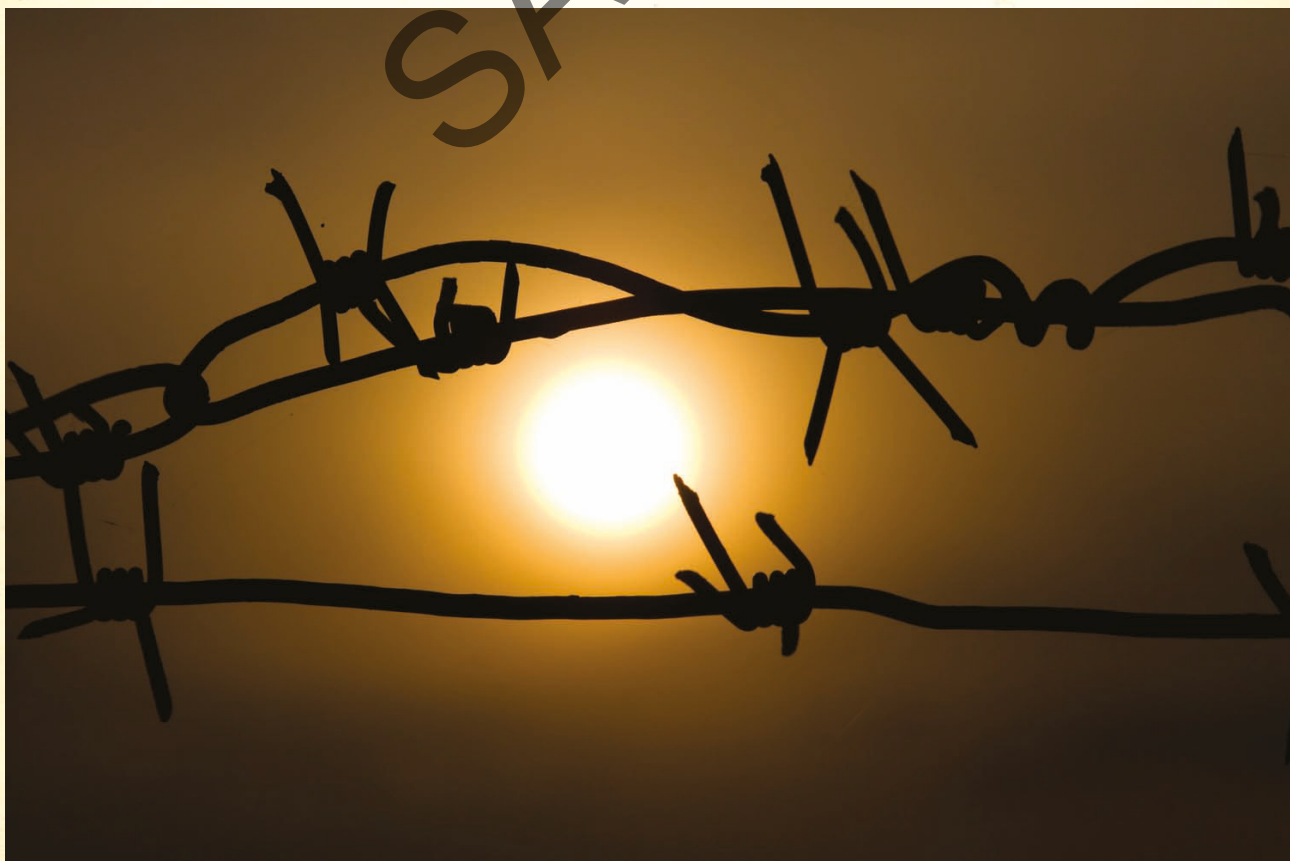
Few foreign visitors realised they were being misled. However, what they were allowed to see delighted them. They saw happy and healthy people doing productive work. It seemed like a workers' paradise. This was exactly what they were meant to see. Very few ever caught sight of the labour camps or the mass execution of those labelled 'enemies of the people'.

Then rumours began to circulate in the West that Stalin had allowed millions of his people to die from famine. *The New York Times* correspondent in Moscow, Walter Duranty, won a Pulitzer Prize for telling many people in the

West what they wanted to hear: that the claims of starvation were false.

However, one young British journalist named Malcolm Muggeridge managed to travel into rural areas of the Soviet Union. What he saw horrified him. He reported the truth about the horrors the Soviet state was inflicting on its own citizens. We now know that about six million people died from starvation.

However, when Muggeridge returned to Britain, he found himself deeply unpopular. He had dared to tell a different story. He had refused to 'run with the pack'. He had told the truth. As a result, he was ostracised by many of his fellow journalists. For some time he was unable to get a job as a reporter. Many publishers did not want to offend the Soviet government. Malcolm Muggeridge was a victim of **groupthink**.



The term ‘groupthink’ was first coined in 1972 by a social psychologist named Irving L. Janis at Yale University.

Key idea

Groupthink means that you choose to set aside your own personal opinion and adopt the opinion of the rest of the group in order to gain acceptance.

We can often experience considerable pressure **to conform**, i.e. remain silent and accept the dominant idea or attitude in order to ‘keep the peace’.

The indicators and symptoms of groupthink are:

- Deriving a false self-confidence from group membership. There is a blind belief in the group’s rightness. This encourages you to engage in very risky behaviour that you would never contemplate if you were on your own.
- The illusion of invulnerability due to the mistaken belief that there is ‘safety in numbers’.
- A refusal to allow constructive criticism or to reconsider anything once the group has reached a decision, no matter how strong the evidence against it is.
- Labelling anyone who disagrees with the group consensus as ‘an enemy’ not to be trusted.

One clinical psychologist, Dr Marie Murphy, warns that when groupthink dominates any situation:

‘Groups often make catastrophic decisions that fly in the face of evidence, morality or common sense – and we’ve seen a fair few of those decisions in Ireland already. This is because, once “groupthink” sets in, warning signs are ignored.

‘Loyalty to the group is everything in groupthink, even when a plan is not working. Those asking awkward questions are ridiculed, excluded, threatened, silenced or dismissed. If you are not “in”, you’re “out”. There is no mercy for dissenters.’

Clearly, groupthink is very powerful. However, as she explains, it is possible to resist it and overcome it. She goes on to say:



‘There’s a real problem with groupthink being hailed out as explanation for every organisational failure.

‘Groupthink has become a convenient explanation for disastrous decisions when things go wrong. It’s the new excuse, as if – just because you are a member of a group – you have no personal culpability. It’s up there with “systemic failure”, another responsibility-avoiding synonym.

‘Groupthink is not some unavoidable psychological syndrome. Rather it is a description of individuals who often lack the courage to take personal responsibility for their actions, to stand up for their convictions and make unpopular decisions.

‘It’s a useful way of washing hands and sanitising oneself from personal accountability. It’s used to lend respectability to old-

fashioned cowardice. It's the adult version of the childhood whine, "It's not my fault. It was their idea."

'It's just too easy to say that groupthink has brought us to where we are, when what separates the men from the boys, or the women from the girls, is being man or woman enough not to agree if you disagree, and to take the consequences.

'Despite all the research on groupthink, there are people who do not get caught in

its trap and we need them – the mavericks, the whistleblowers, the non-conformers, the independent thinkers, the questioners.

'Give me the person who rocks the boat any day over the blind allegiance of those who are determined that nobody will touch the tiller and alter their view – not with facts or feelings, scientific evidence, conscience, compassion or care.

'We need dissenters to keep democracy safe.'



Think about it!

1. Who first coined the term **groupthink**?
2. What are the symptoms of groupthink?
3. Identify one danger with groupthink.
4. How important is **loyalty** in groupthink?
5. How do organisations dominated by groupthink treat those who dissent?
6. In what way has groupthink become a convenient explanation for disastrous decisions when things go wrong?
7. What truth about ourselves do we use groupthink to avoid facing?
8. What can be the consequences for someone who decides to be a **whistleblower** and reveal something that powerful people want to remain hidden?
9. Do you agree that our society needs such 'whistleblowers' in order for our democratic system of government to continue? Explain your answer.