Thinking Critically
About What Matters

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THINKING CRITICALLY About WHAT MATTERS

A Punk Rock Guide

Kevin Klipfel and Lyndsay Klipfel

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INTRODUCTION

Critical Thinking: An Actionable Approach to a Philosophy of Sound Decision-Making

Values-Based Decision-Making: Thinking Critically Defined

Every day, in virtually every way, individuals and groups receive messages from the dominant culture and the broader world about what they "should" be, what they "should" consume, and, ultimately, about what they "should" value. We are even given a predefined standard—reinforced through societal expectations and corporate messaging—of what it means to be a "successful" person or to live a "successful" life, seemingly without having had any say of our own in the matter. To remain true to ourselves and the values that reflect our authentic expression in the world is therefore no easy task. But it is an important one. The cultural inputs that we internalize construct our conception of reality: our beliefs, values, and the entire data set which defines our sense of what matters in life. A person's ability to exercise their own sense of independent judgment on these issues is therefore an essential life skill: for how can we remain true to ourselves if we haven't learned to *think* for ourselves?

This practical ability to "think for yourself" is at the heart of critical thinking. Philosopher David Hunter writes in his book *A Practical Guide to Critical Thinking: Deciding What to Do, Value, and Believe*: "Thinking critically is essential to making up one's own mind, and this is fundamental to being an autonomous person.… Being autonomous means exercising the power to determine one's self, to decide on one's own what to do or what to believe, what kind of life to live."[1] This conceptualization of critical thinking as making up our own minds is central to this book and can be traced back to the origins of the Western philosophical tradition to Socrates' famous claim in Plato's *Apology* that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being."[2] One reason this statement is so memorable is because it is so bold. Notice that Socrates does not claim, as he might have, that examining one's life is a pretty good idea,

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or even something one might want to seriously consider. Rather, Socrates makes a value judgment about the kind of life that is "worth" living, and it's a strong one: critical thinking is so important to the construction of human meaning and purpose that failing to examine dominant cultural values about what matters in life is to waste one's life.

When a thinker as careful and analytical as Socrates chooses to express himself so emphatically it's worth unpacking why they might have done so. What is it about being human that makes leading an "examined life" so important? Why is the ability to make up our own minds so existentially significant? Critical thinking is essential for a flourishing human life because human beings have the ability to choose what has meaning, value, and purpose for us. Through our capacity to choose, we are able to be the authors of our own lives. To choose wisely requires us to exercise our own sense of independent judgement, and this burdens each individual with the responsibility to decide for themselves what values and ways of being in the world have meaning for them and which do not.

The failure to make up our own minds comes at great cost: if we give up our own authority and allow dominant cultural values to influence our beliefs and determine our lives without critically examining this information, our lives may not be "worth living" in the Socratic sense because such a life is not one's *own*. Thinking critically thus has practical consequences and involves both belief and action. We define *thinking critically* as the values based decision-making process of (1) making up our own minds about what matters in life and (2) making choices in the real world based on our own authentic values. In our action-based definition of the term, the critical thinker has learned to pay attention to, and take direct action on, what really matters to them as a means to structure their life. Plato referred to this psychological

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congruence as having integrity. Human meaning is constructed through acting in accordance with our own authentic values. This is something others cannot decide for us. The responsibility is all our own.

Practical Wisdom: A Philosophy of Sound Decision-Making

This book is a philosophy of critical thinking because it takes the history of philosophy itself as its primary source of inspiration. But why philosophy? The word "philosophy" translates from the Greek as "love of wisdom." Thus, a philosopher is simply a person who is interested in the study and acquisition of wisdom. No special qualifications or specific professional credentials are required. Nevertheless, it is conventional to break philosophy down into at least three main branches of inquiry: ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology. Ethics is concerned with the flourishing human life and the nature of right and wrong. Metaphysics examines questions around the nature of reality; for example, existential questions about whether human beings have an objective meaning or purpose fall under this domain. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with questions about knowledge: What are the foundations for human knowledge? How do we know the things we think that we know? Critical thinking cuts across all three. Specifically, "What makes someone wise?" is the kind of knowledge that philosophers are interested in. Philosophers are fundamentally concerned with the kind of information about the world that can help facilitate sound decision-making. "What (kinds of information) do I need to know in order to make wise choices?" might, in fact, be *the* core question of philosophy as traditionally (if not somewhat reductively) understood across multiple traditions.

For example, at the beginning of his classic treatise called the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes a wise person as a "good judge" of things, arguing that philosophy involves examining the kinds of knowledge about the world that helps facilitate sound judgment when thinking critically about what matters. Aristotle describes this information as a type of "practical wisdom" and says that "it is the mark of an educated person to look for precision in each kind of inquiry just to the extent that the nature of the subject allows."[3] Consequently, Aristotle suggests that while investigations into the natural sciences, logic, and mathematics might provide rigorous decision procedures that lead to demonstrable truths about the nature of reality, this is not what is to be expected from inquiries into the kinds of actionable information

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involved in critical thinking. The real world is far too messy, and human life too enchantingly complex, to think that we can come up with some specific set of infallible *rules* that will guarantee good judgment for all.

Therefore, unlike other, perhaps more conventional treatments of the topic, *Thinking Critically About What Matters* does not overly concern itself with all the rules of first-order propositional logic, offer explanations of formal or informal fallacies, or extensively outline rigid decision procedures one can use to guarantee logical truth. And we avoid offering reductive or overly simplistic methods that may be familiar to information literacy educators, such as the CRAAP test, for determining whether some particular source of information is "reliable" or "unreliable."[4] The value of philosophy is more nuanced and much deeper. The history of philosophy offers a wealth of commentary on how to make up our own minds; how to acquire practical wisdom; and the epistemological foundations for critically evaluating cultural information with the aim of making sound decisions and values-aligned choices. Additionally, it offers specific, transferrable, and actionable guidance for thinking critically about our own cognitive and cultural biases when interpreting the information that comprises reality.

Taken together, these systematic ways of thinking about knowledge are powerful tools that can help facilitate sound decision-making in a vast sea of information. In fact, as we see it, this ability to think critically about what matters in life is precisely what it means to be information-literate. As Kevin wrote in his previous book, *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice*, "information literacy involves thinking well about what matters."[5] In an increasingly artificial world inviting us to outsource our thinking at every turn, the ability to think for oneself, and the need to develop and cultivate one's capacity for critical judgment, has perhaps never been more necessary. In such a world, educators may be even be finding themselves having to explain more and more why making up our own minds is a worthwhile endeavor in the first place. Philosophy is needed now more than ever.

Critical Thinking: Widening Our Perspective

This book develops a systematic philosophical framework for thinking critically about knowledge, information, and how to make up our own minds about what matters in life. We are particularly interested in what philosophy might contribute to developing an epistemological framework that can contribute to

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widening our worldview. Thinking critically is about the radical open-mindedness of expanding one's perspective rather than a deep conviction in one's own rightness. The question is how to be more limitless in one's awareness. As the legendary music producer Rick Rubin writes in his book *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*: "The universe is only as large as our perception of it. When we cultivate our awareness, we are expanding the universe. This expands the scope not just of the material at our disposal to create from, but of the life we get to live."[6] An open-minded approach does not merely have the capacity to impact the way one thinks. More importantly, our epistemological perspective impacts what we believe and value, which in turn determines the choices we make. Thinking critically to widen our window on ourselves and our world has important consequences for information evaluation *and* practical decision-making. Expanding our minds is a foundational element of practical wisdom.

Thinking Critically About What Matters investigates the process of expanding our knowledge beyond the limitations of our conventional biases, and striving for a wider, less egocentric view of human beings' shared, co-constructed reality. In particular, we are interested in philosophical perspectives from divergent cultural traditions across time and place that share a common theme of liberating us from our own self-centering epistemological biases and limited cultural conventions when interpreting the information that comprises reality. While it is natural to assume that the main impediments to critical thinking are "out there" in some sea of disinformation that prevents us from seeing reality accurately or objectively, this assumption does not tell the whole story. Our minds are often the biggest impediment to actually making up our own minds, since self-centering perspectives tend to tether us to the limited beliefs, values, and even prejudices we inherit from our small corner of the universe in which we experience ourselves as central. The call, from a critical thinking perspective, is also coming from inside the house, in the natural tendency of human beings to interpret information through the narrow lenses and biased filters of our point of view. The inherently limited cognitive capacities of the human species may prevent us from ever truly seeing reality objectively "as it is." Nevertheless, the critical thinker can and should engage in a mindful meta-cognitive process of critical awareness that strives to continuously open our small apertures on the world. In this way, sound decision-making can be engaged in wisely: with true curiosity, open-minded presence, and as much information at one's disposal as possible.

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Chapter Road Map and the Four "Core Claims" of Critical Thinking

Each chapter of this book presents a lens on critical thinking from philosophers whose goal is to liberate the individual from the narrow confines of their own cultural, cognitive, and even non-cognitive biases, and open our minds to a wider, more expansive point of view. The philosophers we discuss are vastly different, but they share at least four specific theses that we identify as "core claims" of critical thinking. Each chapter is broadly structured around unpacking these claims and explicates how the philosophical tradition discussed in that chapter fills out these general theses in complementary but distinct ways. Specifically, we argue that the philosophers discussed in this book share the following views on critical thinking:

1. They all view the philosophy of critical thinking as a personal endeavor with *therapeutic intent*. These thinkers view philosophy not as a purely abstract inquiry; rather, the critical thinking goal is to offer actionable philosophical insights about how to make up one's own mind about what matters in life when interpreting the world of information. For these philosophical therapists, critical thinking involves deeply personal work that leads to transferable insights that can improve one's lived experience by improving one's ability to make sound decisions in practice. They are interested in the kind of knowledge that leads to practical wisdom.
2. These philosophers all view dominant cultural values about what matters as malleable *conventions* that one can think critically about, and not simply take for granted as unchangeable metaphysical truths, forever set in stone. Uncritically adopting conventional social knowledge about what matters internalized from the culture is not the kind of informational input that leads to sound decision-making or practical wisdom. Critical thinkers must learn to "think for themselves," and an inherent skepticism about conventional wisdom is where this critical thinking process of making up one's own mind begins. These philosophers share an attitude of *irreverence* toward authority as a core epistemological attitude, and view the process of making up one's own mind about what information to believe and what kinds of things to value as a core principle of critical thinking.
3. Furthermore, they consider *self-knowledge*, rather than the dictates or conventional rules of external authority, to be the epistemological foundation for the kind of knowledge and information that leads to sound

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decision-making. This positive conception of practical wisdom involving the acquisition of true self-knowledge—whether of the individual or the group—is an essential element of the lifelong learning process that is key to critical thinking. The philosophers discussed in this book all outline the cultural and epistemological threats to self-knowledge and offer distinctive lenses on the acquisition of self-knowledge as a practical goal of the critical thinker.

4. Lastly, these philosophers emphasize the "intellectual humility" of *not* knowing—of recognizing one's own perspective as an inherently limited point of view on reality "as it is"—to be the supreme virtue of critical thinking about knowledge and information. The moment when someone thinks they see the whole picture is the moment when their critical thinking ability is put on terminal hold. Rather than clinging to their own rigid sense of certainty or the objective "rightness" of their picture of the world, the critical thinker strives for increased awareness of the bigger picture; this is why critical thinking is a process of lifelong learning, one that truly has no end.

Throughout this book, we interpret the philosophers discussed in each chapter from within this practical philosophical framework for critical thinking, and aim to show how particular philosophers' creative expansions of these four core claims of critical thinking apply to making up own our minds and staying true to our own values.

To these ends, chapter 1 introduces the analytical philosophical practice of Socrates in ancient Greece as depicted in the early works of Plato. The chapter outlines how our four core claims of critical thinking emerge from a "Socratic" philosophical approach to thinking critically about what matters. As we show, Socrates was the first thinker in the Western tradition to systematically focus philosophical inquiry on thinking about the meaning and evaluation of our cultural practices and personal values. Socrates' logical methods of philosophical argumentation, which he used to interrogate the values that shaped ancient Athenians' worldviews about what matters in life, still have much to teach us that is relevant to critically evaluating information. This first chapter serves as an introduction and overview of our core claims about critical thinking, with a focus on thinking critically about values.

It also presents a philosophical puzzle about *overcoming bias*; this serves as a foundational challenge to critical thinking that the book spends the next four chapters exploring in a variety of different iterations. As discussed

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in chapter 1, Socrates identifies a critical thinking paradox quite similar to the Dunning-Kruger effect about cognitive bias articulated in contemporary social psychology: the thesis that people with a low competency in a particular domain may lack the skills and information required to understand that they have a low competence in that subject matter. Much to his dismay, Socrates came to believe that most (if not all) people have an extremely limited ability to think critically in the following sense: they think they know what matters in life, but their own arguments demonstrate that their perspectives on this issue are, at best, narrow-minded, limited, and fail to capture the whole story; or at worst, their views make no logical sense and are not even internally consistent with their own beliefs. To make matters worse, their lack of critical thinking ability and unwarranted confidence in their own rightness prevents them from ever developing this ability. It's precisely their lack of critical thinking that precludes them from ever seeking out the kind of information that might actually lead to wisdom and sound decision-making. Indeed, if someone already thinks they know all the answers, why would they remain intellectually curious and continue their search?

This general lack of intellectual humility about our own knowledge, abilities, and biases—coupled with the attendant (and incorrect) conviction in our own rightness—is of particular interest because recent empirical research has consistently shown, many centuries after Socrates first pointed it out, that not only do people have a general tendency to inflate their own knowledge; they also have a specific tendency to judge their critical thinking and information literacy abilities much higher than they actually are.[7] Socrates' response to this critical thinking paradox consists of a practical recommendation for a kind of *intellectual humility* that scholars have come to identify as "Socratic wisdom."

This intellectual virtue is the embodiment, in practice, of our fourth core claim of critical thinking: a lifelong attitude of open-minded curiosity about what really matters in life, and a skepticism toward the belief that any single perspective represents objective reality or "Capital-T" Truth in its totality. By recognizing the limitations of our own knowledge—including human beings' deep-rooted cognitive, moral, and cultural biases—critical thinkers can seek out relevant information, and expand our awareness accordingly. Opening our minds in this way is, of course, easier said than done. As we see Socrates demonstrate in this first chapter, it is basic human nature to psychologically cling to our own way of seeing things. The challenge posed

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by human beings' epistemological limitations in interpreting information is as much a psychological problem as it is an intellectual or philosophical one. It highlights the fact we need to disrupt the fixed cognitive schemas that entrench our cognitive, moral, and cultural biases. Subsequent chapters in this book discuss further opportunities for the consistent, mindful, lifelong practice of intellectual humility as a core virtue of critical thinking.

Next, we argue in chapter 2 that an intellectually curious approach to thinking critically about what matters also serves as an epistemological foundation in the Eastern philosophical traditions of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. This chapter explores, from a non-Western philosophical perspective, a distinctively Taoist and Zen approach to practical wisdom. This framework—as found in the work of the ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu, and later expanded on in the twentieth century by Zen thinkers such as the Japanese monk Shunryu Suzuki, the British philosopher Alan Watts, and the Chinese-American martial artist and philosopher Bruce Lee—serves as a philosophically therapeutic "Way of Liberation" intended to free us from our biased and inherently limited cognitive schemas, and the disinformation that our own cultural rules, practices, and conventions constitute reality "as-it-is." *All* individual and cultural perspectives, for the Taoist and Zen philosophers, are inherently limited, although cultures, organizations, and individuals have what seems to be a default tendency to construct authoritative rules and practices that tend to be rigidly enforced and purport to hold true for everyone.

We argue that the critical thinking recommendations of Zen involve the recognition that this authoritarian "one right way for all" set of rules is a limited way of viewing reality. It is, in Zen terms, quite literally a "delusion" to think that one's answers are all the answers, or that one's individual or institutional ways of being are exhaustive of the many different and valid ways to be. Instead, we read Zen as advocating an open-minded approach to critical thinking, as embodied in the intellectual humility of "beginner's mind," Shunryu Suzuki's phrase for the flexible epistemological attitude of being comfortable *not* knowing all the answers. This fluid, spontaneous, creative approach to critical thinking is summed up in Bruce Lee's famous aphorism to "Be water, my friend," and is the core metaphor behind his "No Way as Way" Taoist philosophy of situational adaptability. In this approach, sound decision-making is developed through a process of self-trust and self-actualization, rather than through conformity to society's expectations. Lee argues, from a Zen perspective, that individuals and groups have been socialized to

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develop an unnatural attachment to external authority: all the ways that social, religious, class, and political structures dictate how we are "supposed" to be tend to alienate us from our own authenticity and spontaneity.

This cultural indoctrination is deeply problematic from the standpoint of critical thinking because self-knowledge—as understood through Lao Tzu's Taoist philosophical concept of *wu wei*—is precisely what provides us with the fluid, process-oriented information we need for sound decision-making. Zen approaches to critical thinking—as expressed in famous Zen *koans* such as "What was your original face before you were born?"—involve a kind of "unlearning": reducing our epistemological and psychological attachment to authoritative structures of information by developing cognitive strategies for increasing the self-trust that is essential for us to make up our own minds. Rather than uncritical adherence to the rigid, externally imposed institutional, cultural, or professional rules, Zen instead recommends the meta-cognitive awareness practiced in mindfulness meditation as a reliable tool for filtering information and expanding our perspective. In the Zen epistemological picture, individuals, groups, or institutions may never find the one "right" way to understand reality "as it is." But by developing a beginner's mind about accepted rules and practices, we can develop a more nuanced approach to thinking about the world of information while we co-construct a shared reality interconnected with others.

Chapter 3 expands on Zen ideas, and opens with an examination of the distinctively Buddhist (as opposed to Taoist) elements of Zen. Buddhist philosophical insights into the nature of the self and its impermanent nature have important critical thinking implications. The chapter discusses a central epistemological paradox highlighted in Bruce Lee's analysis of the so-called "Rashomon effect" and the philosophical issues that arise from each individual's natural tendency to interpret information about reality through a self-centering lens. This tendency poses a natural threat to critical thinking because, once again, the problem is coming from inside the house: it is not out there in the world of (dis)information, but in human beings' natural and biased tendency to interpret information in favor of their own limited, self-centering perspective. Consequently, in order to combat the disinformation that our own minds disseminate, Buddhist philosophy sets itself the therapeutic task of "liberating" individuals from viewing themselves as the center of the universe. We argue that human beings can begin to mindfully move away from these cognitive biases by using Zen Buddhist meta-cognitive

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strategies to develop a more expansive view of ourselves and our place in the universe. Buddhist philosophy is of particular interest for critical thinking because it offers concrete strategies for "quieting one's ego" and decentering our cognitively biased default setting which asserts that "I am the center of the universe." More accurately, the Buddhist argues, each individual is just one part of a larger whole who is important—but no *more* important—than anyone else.

The development of this enlarged point of view on the world—which the chapter refers to as an "existential perspective"—is a critical thinking goal because this broader, intellectually humble attitude can help individuals reduce their self-centered biases. Just by being aware of the Rashomon effect and the light it sheds on the biases in their own thinking, individuals should be able to develop a better sense of existential perspective. Individuals with a developed sense of this perspective—and importantly, a consistent, mindful practice of awareness accompanying it—may not have the whole picture on reality as it is. Nevertheless, their interpretations of the world should lead to less biased points of view than individuals who view the world less humbly—and are unaware of the Rashomon effect as the explanation for their unbounded confidence in their own point of view as the most correct or important one. Ironically, individuals might be better at accessing the information they need to make up their own minds if they become more aware of how limited their thinking is precisely because of their inability to get out of their own heads.

Chapter 4 builds on previous chapters by focusing on the bad boy of German philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the distinctive contributions his work makes to critical thinking. The chapter unpacks Nietzsche's "perspectival" theory of knowledge—his formal statement of the epistemological thesis many Buddhist thinkers have implicitly suggested: that all knowing and interpretations of information are essentially confined to *someone's* particular point of view—and the implications this epistemological perspectivism has for viewing the objectivity of information more broadly. Compellingly, Nietzsche thinks that our conceptions of objectivity are not just theoretically false; they also have pernicious practical consequences. For example, believing that knowledge about what matters is objectively true—and therefore unbiased—often serves to reinforce a single point of view held by the dominant culture, without most people even being aware of it. Nietzschean perspectivism demonstrates that this hegemonic view of knowledge marginalizes alternative voices, groups,

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and individual ways of being that do not fit conveniently within conventional cultural norms. Nietzsche—despite many popular misconceptions about his work that we address in the chapter—actually believed, quite vehemently, in an "enchanting wealth of types" and diverse ways of being in the world. That is why he reacts so strongly, and even sometimes quite emotionally, against those who filter information through objectivist epistemologies: he believes that this way of interpreting reality can and often does lead, in practice, to divergent points of view becoming marginalized and even silenced by social conventions that purport to maintain the truth, and the whole truth, on a subject.

The chapter concludes on a positive note, with what we refer to as Nietzsche's "bespoke" theory of practical wisdom: his alternative critical thinking lens that is designed to respect and preserve the unique nature of individual (and group) identity. Nietzsche frames his perspectival theory of knowledge in terms of cause and effect: what kinds of practices, beliefs, and values contribute to our mental health, psychological well-being, and flourishing, rather than simply reinforcing dominant cultural values and biases? Nietzsche sets forth practical examples of sound decision-making from his own experiences in the late nineteenth century to help facilitate the transfer of these critical thinking principles for those looking to give "style" to their own character by applying concepts of Nietzschean wisdom to the world of information in the here and now.

The book concludes, in chapter 5, by applying the perspectival theory of knowledge systematically built up in each of the previous four chapters to (1) group decision-making in organizations, with a focus on the workplace; and (2) the critical evaluation of information source-types. Given the theory set forth in this book that no one individual or group has some unique access to all the answers—and in fact, is biased in their own perspective—how can leaders facilitate sound decision-making in their organizations? How can those decisions be as wise—and "unbiased"—as possible, given the inherent epistemological limitations of the human mind discussed in the previous chapters? In the absence of epistemological objectivity or some notion of capital-T Truth, how can we effectively evaluate the credibility of particular sources of information? Is it still possible to think about information literacy in a structural way?

To address these questions, chapter 5 turns to perhaps the ultimate unconventional source: the anarchist philosophical tradition. This is found in the

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work of such thinkers as the anarchist activist Emma Goldman, the philosopher-linguist Noam Chomsky, and in the pioneering "anarchisms otherwise" school of thought—which includes the anarcho-feminist philosophy of Peggy Kornegger, recent work by Indigenous anarchist thinkers such as Macarena Gómez-Barris, and the "anarcho-blackness" philosophy of Marquis Bey. These intersectional anarchisms, which are deeply influenced by Karl Marx's philosophical discussions on the nature of creativity and meaningful work, provide multiple perspectival lenses on how to structure group decision-making and critical thinking in organizations that take into account divergent viewpoints. These "anti-authoritarian" anarchist philosophers advocate for organizational and leadership approaches that facilitate egalitarian, democratic decision-making procedures that allow room for all voices whom a decision will impact to be directly heard within an organization.

Critical thinking involves making up one's own mind and putting our values into practice in the real world; within organizations, this is accomplished by applying Emma Goldman's anarchist principle of "direct action." Through group self-determination processes applying non-hierarchical, horizontally structured, democratic decision-making—as distinct from those organizations where decisions are made through hierarchical leadership structures based in top-down, vertical control—workers and teams can have a meaningful, rather than performative, say in the decision-making processes of the organization. This directly democratic leadership style opens and even welcomes the inclusion of all voices when making decisions about what matters to the group, thus preserving workers' collective autonomy and ability to make up their own minds, while avoiding the epistemological biases that are inherent in top-down decision-making structures.

With these critical thinking foundations of the anarchist philosophical tradition in place—and applied to thinking critically about meaningful work and collective decision-making within organizations—the chapter turns to articulating an anarchist philosophy of information. To this end, we address the following philosophical question: What would it mean to *anarchize information*? Philosophical anarchism is concerned in some fundamental way with authority: who has the power to make decisions about a particular issue? Since, as we have argued throughout this book, information tends to reflect the perspective of the source of that information, anarchizing information naturally begins with an inquiry into the nature of who controls, or has the power to determine, the nature of information being disseminated to

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the culture. Who has the authority to decide the types of information most people consume? Whose perspective does that information reflect? Does it tend to represent one dominant perspective? This determines who will have power *over* information and whose perspectives and (conventional) biases that information will reflect. Moreover, belief in that information will further serve to entrench those who already hold structural power over information. The owners of information sources thus significantly impact the nature and content of the generally accepted conventional knowledge about what matters in a given society. As such, who controls information is of enormous importance for critical thinking in general, and, perhaps, for information literacy education in particular.

Since the mass media tend to be the information source-types consumed by most people, the chapter analyzes systemic media bias in depth, investigating this culturally dominant, corporate perspective through an anarchist philosophical lens. Specifically, it outlines concrete critical thinking strategies for identifying the perspectival biases in information, and discusses the "Chomsky-Herman Propaganda Model," a detailed, sophisticated, and transferable critical thinking framework grounded in anarchist philosophical concepts that is useful for evaluating the systematic biases found in information sources in the mass media and beyond. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of our concept of "anarchizing information" for various types of information and library science professionals, emphasizing the unique importance of the accessibility of independent media voices, open access to scholarly information, and librarians' potentially unique role in offering widespread access to alternative perspectives on the dominant culture of the mass media and its corporate control of information. This concept of democratizing information is presented as a core historical value of librarianship that the anarchist philosophy of critical thinking can help librarians re-conceptualize and put into practice in the contemporary moment.

The Critical Thinker Must Rebel: Punk Approaches to Anarchizing Our Thinking

We began this introduction by outlining the idea that thinking critically involves making up our own minds. This book might then be read as a philosophical thought experiment: What would it look like if we took the idea of making up our own minds to its logical conclusion? What are the implications,

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both theoretically and in practice, for critical thinking and information literacy, of taking the importance of thinking for ourselves seriously? As it turns out, this conception is deeply skeptical about the wisdom of relying on external authority as a basis for sound decision-making, whether for individuals or groups, personally or politically. But philosophy has from its very conception and across multiple traditions been characterized by an attitude of irreverence toward authority and is quite comfortable with this conclusion.

It may not come as too much of a surprise, then, that a book on the philosophy of critical thinking would take seriously an anarchist philosophical perspective rejecting all forms of hierarchical authority, and even conclude with the recommendation that *anarchizing our thinking* is the ultimate goal of the critical thinker. When Johnny Rotten sang on the Sex Pistols' song "Anarchy in the U.K." that he wanted to "*be* anarchy"—to *embody* anarchy in spirit—it might be read as a call to maintain a radically open mind about the world, and an invitation to make up our own minds by deconstructing our belief in the inherent rightness of hierarchical, authoritarian structures of control as our default cognitive schema for filtering information about sociopolitical reality.[8] Critical thinking is subversive, particularly toward authoritarian power structures themselves, rather than simply toward the individuals who may happen to be occupying authoritarian decision-making structures at a particular time and place. As a bit of deeply engrained conventional wisdom, many, perhaps even most people, take authoritarian structures for granted as being beyond critique, but we argue that rejecting these hierarchies is core to critical thinking.

This DIY, "do-it-yourself" premise that we don't *need* authority figures to tell us what do is a core element of the punk ethos and is central to this book. Jesse Prinz, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at CUNY Graduate Center in New York, has emphatically declared that "Philosophers should listen to punk rock."[9] We agree, in no small part because practical wisdom requires trusting our own authority instead of handing over our decision-making power to others. In the article "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock" Prinz identifies the same irreverent attitude found in the philosophical tradition as a defining value of the punk rock subculture. He states that "punk irreverence manifests itself in many ways" but at its core "punk aims to challenge prevailing social norms."[10] Specifically, Prinz argues that punk is anti-authoritarian and even "associated with anarchy."[11] Philosophically, punk irreverence rejects the respect for authority normally taken seriously by the dominant cultural

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status quo. Instead, punk embraces "a broader do-it-yourself (or DIY) ethic"[12] of "amateurism."[13] Punks (at least in theory) think for themselves and take direct action on their values without requiring or even seeking permission from professional gatekeepers. Self-trust and authentic freedom of expression are defining features of punk rock values. Punks live by their own rules.

This DIY attitude appears not only in the academic literature on punk rock, but as a foundational ethos of seminal punk figures. For example, Richard Hell—the CBGB's legend responsible for the classic 1977 punk album *Blank Generation* often credited as the true originator of the safety-pinned, spiky-haired aesthetic considered by many a core element of the punk style—writes in his autobiography *I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp*: "I remember making some promises to my adult self when I was a kid—or extracting some promises from my adult self. I promised not to forget how arbitrary and unfair adult rules are. I promised to remain true to the principles I grasped that adults sometimes pretended to know but hardly ever behaved in accordance with.... I didn't want anybody telling me what to do. I knew that this was the most important thing and that all would be lost if I pretended otherwise like grown-ups did."[14]

Interestingly, Hell claims that making up one's own mind is *the* most important thing, echoing Socrates' bold proclamation, and deeply held existential conviction, that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being." Indeed, Hell emphasizes that "all would be lost" by giving away our capacity to choose by outsourcing the ability to be the authors of our own lives to others. Critical thinking is the values based decision-making process of making up our own minds about what matters in life and making choices in the real world based on our own authentically chosen values. This is the psychological congruence Plato referred to in the *Republic* as having integrity—quite literally, an integrated *psyche*. The Greek term *psyche* is most commonly translated into English as "soul." Thus, by implication, Hell is suggesting that by giving our decision-making power over to others what is "lost" is quite literally our own souls. The close connection between punk and philosophy is here readily apparent. In Plato's *Apology* Socrates framed his philosophical practice encouraging Athenians to think critically about the impact of conventional values on the well-being of their *psyche* as the driving force behind his philosophical practice: "I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of

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your soul."[15] Socrates and Richard Hell, and critical thinking and punk rock, have much more in common than we might think.

Categorial admonitions to think for yourself and be true to your authentic values are also a core feature of punk rock music. Lou Reed, a founding member of the Velvet Underground described by many as the "Godfather of Punk," sings on his 1978 solo album *Street Hassle*:

> "Everybody gonna try to tell you what to do, and
> Never never never never let it be said that it's true."[16]

Reed's desire not to be "told what to do" echoes Richard Hell's personal commitment "to never forget how arbitrary and unfair adult rules are." These punk values may sound like petulant cries of teen angst from maladjusted rebels until you remember that Aristotle cautioned his readers over two thousand years ago not to fall into the common trap of thinking that practical wisdom is about following *rules*. But we live in a society full of them. The critical thinker *must* rebel. As philosopher David Hunter stresses, thinking critically involves "exercising the power to determine one's self, to decide on one's own what to do or what to believe, what kind of life to live." Hunter's choice to describe critical thinking as a kind of *power* is an interesting one. Giving up the ability to think for ourselves gives others power *over* us. This is the exact kind of hierarchical authority that punks rebel against. Critical thinking involves making up our own mind. This requires reclaiming our own power.

In one of her best-known singles, "Godmother of Punk" Patti Smith once sang that "*People* have the power," emphasizing the anarchistic spirit and DIY ethos shared by both punks and critical thinkers.[17] Like punks, critical thinkers may find themselves "outside society," to borrow another phrase from Patti Smith, precisely due to their commitment to living in accordance with their own authentically chosen values without conforming to societal expectations of what they "should" be.[18] Critical thinkers, like punks, may indeed be misfits, but they are not rebels without a cause. The goal is not so much to break the rules as to live by our own. Taking back our collective power requires the self-trust at the heart of the DIY punk ethos.

As the philosophers discussed in this book all argue, self-knowledge is the information required for sound decision-making. This is why our philosophy of critical thinking is focused on how to acquire this essential knowledge for practical wisdom. Lou Reed poetically expressed these ideas in a song on his 1990 *New York* album as follows:

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"Self-knowledge is a dangerous thing
The freedom of who you are."[19]

Here Reed draws the listener's attention to how dangerous free-thinking people may be, particularly to authority figures seeking to entrench their power over people. Historically, meaningful change is the result of the direct actions of courageous individuals and groups who stand up for what they believe in, almost always without the external permission to do so. In this way, critical thinking is revolutionary. It is the call to "live dangerously," as Nietzsche once challenged his readers.[20] If we give decision-making power back to ourselves, those in charge may have a much more difficult time exercising power over us. The most dangerous thing about critical thinking may very well be that developing this capacity leads us to the realization that people have the power. We can make up our own minds and take direct action on the things that matter. Together.

NOTES

1. D. A. Hunter, *A Practical Guide to Critical Thinking: Deciding What to Do and Believe*, 2nd ed. (Wiley, 2014), 28–29. For cross-cultural perspectives on autonomy, see, for example, V. I. Chirkov, R. Ryan, and K. M. Sheldon, eds., *Human Autonomy in Cross-Cultural Context: Perspectives on the Psychology of Agency, Freedom, and Well-Being*, vol. 1 (Springer Science & Business Media, 2010); C. C. Helwig, "The Development of Personal Autonomy Throughout Cultures," *Cognitive Development* 21, no. 4 (2006): 458–73; S. S. Wichmann, "Self-Determination Theory: The Importance of Autonomy to Well-Being Across Cultures," *Journal of Humanistic Counseling* 50, no. 1 (2011): 16–26; V. Chirkov, "The Universality of Psychological Autonomy Across Cultures: Arguments from Developmental and Social Psychology," in *Human Motivation and Interpersonal Relationships: Theory, Research, and Applications* (Springer, 2014), 27–51; S. Yu, C. Levesque-Bristol, and Y. Maeda, "General Need for Autonomy and Subjective Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis of Studies in the US and East Asia," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 19 (2018): 1863–82; and M. J. N. Nalipay, R. B. King, and Y. Cai, "Autonomy Is Equally Important Across East and West: Testing the Cross-Cultural Universality of Self-Determination Theory," *Journal of Adolescence* 78 (2020): 67–72.
2. Plato, *Apology*, 38b.
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. S. Broadie (Oxford University Press, 2002), 96.

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4. "Evaluating Information—Applying the CRAAP Test," Meriam Library, California State University, Chico, https://guides.lib.uchicago.edu/ld.php?content_id=77584250.
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7. P. A. Kirschner and J. J. van Merriënboer, "Do Learners Really Know Best? Urban Legends in Education," *Educational Psychologist* 48, no. 3 (2013): 169–83.
8. Sex Pistols, "Anarchy in the U.K.," https://genius.com/Sex-pistols-anarchy-in-the-uk-lyrics.
9. J. Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock," *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 9 (2014): 583.
10. Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock," 584.
11. Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock," 585.
12. Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock," 587.
13. Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock," 586.
14. R. Hell, *I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp: An Autobiography,* (Ecco, 2013), 18.
15. Plato, *Apology,* 29d-e.
16. L. Reed, *I'll Be Your Mirror: Collected Lyrics* (Hachette, 2020), 222.
17. Patti Smith, "People Have the Power," https://genius.com/Patti-smith-people-have-the-power-lyrics.
18. "Outside Society," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outside_Society.
19. Reed, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 360.
20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* ed. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage, 1974), para. 283.

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