

# Distinguishing Between Inert Information, Activated Ignorance, Activated Knowledge

It is impossible to reason without using some set of facts, data, or experiences as a constituent part of one's thinking. Finding trustworthy sources of information and refining one's own experience critically are important goals of critical thinkers. We must be vigilant about the sources of information we use. We must be analytically critical of the use we make of our own experience. Experience may be the best teacher, but biased experience supports bias, distorted experience supports distortion, self-deluded experience supports self-delusion. We, therefore, must not think of our experience as sacred in any way but, instead, as one important dimension of thought that must, like all others, be critically analyzed and assessed.

The mind can take in information in three distinctive ways: (1) by internalizing inert information, (2) by forming activated ignorance, and (3) by achieving activated knowledge.

## Inert Information

By inert information, we mean taking into the mind information that, though memorized, we do not understand-despite the fact that we think we do. For example, many people have taken in, during their schooling, a lot of information about democracy that leads them to believe they understand the concept. Often, a good part of the information they have internalized consists of empty verbal rituals in their mind. For example, many children learn in school that "democracy is government of the people, by the people, for the people." This catchy phrase often sticks in their mind. It leads them to think they understand what it means, though most of them do not translate it into any practical criteria for assessing the extent to which democracy does or does not exist in any given country. Most people, to be explicit, could not intelligibly answer any of the following questions:

1. What is the difference between a government of the people and a government for the people?
2. What is the difference between a government for the people and a government by the people?
3. What is the difference between a government by the people and a government of the people?
4. What exactly is meant by "the people?"

To generalize, students often do not sufficiently think about information they memorize in school sufficient to transform it into something meaningful in their mind. Much human information is, in the mind of the humans who possess it, merely empty words (inert or dead in the mind). Critical thinkers try to clear the mind of inert information by recognizing it as such and transforming it, through analysis, into something meaningful.

### **Activated Ignorance**

By activated ignorance, we mean taking into the mind, and actively using, information that is false, though we mistakenly think it to be true. The philosopher Rene Descartes came to confidently believe that animals have no actual feelings but are simply robotic machines. Based on this activated ignorance, he performed painful experiments on animals and interpreted their cries of pain as mere noises.

Some people believe, through activated ignorance, that they understand things, events, people, and situations that they do not. They act upon their false ideas, illusions, and misconceptions, often leading to needless waste, pain, and suffering. Sometimes activated ignorance is the basis for massive actions involving millions of people (think of the consequences of the Nazi idea that Germans were the master race and Jews an inferior race). Sometimes it is an individual misconception that is acted on only by one person in a limited number of settings. Wherever activated ignorance exists, it is dangerous.

It is essential, therefore, that we question our beliefs, especially when acting upon them has significant potential implications for the harm, injury, or suffering of others. It is reasonable to suppose that everyone has some beliefs that are, in fact, a form of activated ignorance. Eliminating as many such beliefs as we can is a responsibility we all have. Consider automobile drivers who are confident they can drive safely while they are intoxicated. Consider the belief that smoking does not have any significant negative health effects.

It is not always easy to identify what is and is not activated ignorance. The concept of activated ignorance is important regardless of whether we can determine whether particular information we come across is false or misleading. What we need to keep in mind are clear-cut cases of activated ignorance so we have a clear idea of it, and personal vigilance with respect to the information we come across that is potentially false. Most people who have acted harmfully as a result of their activated ignorance have probably not realized that they were the agent of the suffering of others. Ignorance treated as the truth is no trivial matter.

### **Activated Knowledge**

By activated knowledge, we mean taking into the mind, and actively using, information that is not only true but that, when insightfully understood, leads us by implication to more and more knowledge.

Consider the study of history, for example. Many students do no more than memorize isolated statements in the history textbook so as to pass exams. Some of these statements—the ones they don't understand and could not explain—become part of the students' battery of inert information. Other statements—the ones they misunderstand and wrongly explain—become part of the students' battery of activated ignorance. Much of the information, of course, is simply forgotten shortly after the exam.

What is importantly powerful, from a critical thinking perspective, is understanding the logic of historical thinking as a way of understanding the logic of history. When we understand history this way, our knowledge is activated. It enables us to build on historical knowledge by thinking through previous historical knowledge.

For example, we might begin by understanding the basic agenda of historical thinking: to construct a story or account of the past that enables us to better understand our present and make rational plans for the future. Once we have this basic knowledge of the logic of history, we are driven to recognize that we already engage in historical thinking in our daily life. We begin to see the connection between thinking within the subject and thinking in everyday life situations. For example, as a result of this provisional characterization of the logic of historical thinking, it is clear that all humans create our own story in the privacy of our mind. We use this story to make sense of our present, in the light of our conception of our past, and make plans for the future, given our understanding of our present and past. Most of us do not think of ourselves as doing this, however.

If we further reflect on our knowledge of the logic of history, and think through some of its implications, we become aware that there is a logical similarity, for example, between historical thinking and ordinary, everyday “gossip.” In gossip, we create a story about events in someone's recent past and pass on our story to others. If we reflect further on the logic of history, we also recognize that every issue of a daily newspaper is produced by a kind of thinking analogous to historical thinking. In both cases someone is constructing accounts of the past presented as making sense of some set of events in time.

Further reflection on the logic of history should lead us to ask ourselves questions such as, “In creating an account of some time period, approximately what percentage of what actually took place finds its way into any given historical account?” This should lead us to discover that for any given historical period, even one as short as a day, countless events take place, with the implication that no historical account contains more than a tiny percentage of the total events within any given historical period. This should lead us to discover that historians must regularly make value judgments to decide what to include in, and what to exclude from, their accounts.

Upon further reflection, it should become apparent to us that there are different possible stories and accounts that highlight different patterns in the events themselves—for example, accounts that highlight “high-level” decision-makers (great-person accounts), in contrast to accounts that highlight different social and economic classes (social and

economic histories). It then should be apparent to us that the specific questions that any given historical thinker asks depend on the specific agenda or goal of that thinker.

**It also should be apparent that:**

- the historical questions asked are what determine which data or events are relevant;
- one and the same event can be illuminated by different conceptualizations (for example, different political, social, and economic theories about people and social change);
- different historians make different assumptions (each influencing the way they put their questions and the data that seem most important to them);
- when a given historian identifies with a given group of people and writes his or her history, it often highlights the positive characteristics of those people and the negative characteristics of those with whom they are or were in conflict.

It is in virtue of “discoveries” and insights such as these — which we must think through for ourselves to truly grasp them as knowledge — that our view of history is transformed. They enable us to begin to “see through” historical texts. They lead us to value historical thinking, as its significance in everyday life becomes clear to us. They make more and more transparent to us our history, our use of history, and the effect of our use of history on the world and human welfare.

Activated knowledge, then, is knowledge born of dynamic seminal ideas that, when applied systematically to common experience, enable us to infer, by implication, further and further knowledge. Activated knowledge is potential in every legitimate human discipline. We begin with basic information about the most basic ideas and goals of a field. Grounded in basic concepts and first principles, we are able to experience the power of thought, knowledge, and experience working in unison. A habit of studying to learn to seek the logic of things is one of the most powerful ways to begin to discover activated knowledge. It is one of the most important keys to making lifelong learning an essential ingredient in one’s life.

This article was adapted from the book, *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder.