

# Three Categories of Questions: Crucial Distinctions

Many pseudo critical thinking approaches present all judgments as falling into two exclusive and exhaustive categories: fact and opinion. Actually, the kind of judgment most important to educated people and the kind we most want to foster falls into a third, very important, and now almost totally ignored category, that of reasoned judgment.

A judge in a court of law is expected to engage in reasoned judgment; that is, the judge is expected not only to render a judgment, but also to base that judgment on sound, relevant evidence and valid legal reasoning.

A judge is not expected to base his judgments on his subjective preferences, on his personal opinions, as such. You might put it this way, judgment based on sound reasoning goes beyond, and is never to be equated with, fact alone or mere opinion alone. Facts are typically used in reasoning, but good reasoning does more than state facts. Furthermore, a position that is well-reasoned is not to be described as simply "opinion." Of course, we sometimes call the judge's judgment an "opinion," but we not only expect, we demand that it be based on relevant and sound reasoning.

Here's a somewhat different way to put this same point. It is essential when thinking critically to clearly distinguish three different kinds of questions:

- Those with one right answer (factual questions fall into this category). What is the boiling point of lead?
- Those with better or worse answers (well-reasoned or poorly reasoned answers). How can we best address the most basic and significant economic problems of the nation today?
- Those with as many answers as there are different human preferences (a category in which mere opinion does rule). Which would you prefer, a vacation in the mountains or one at the seashore?

Only the third kind of question is a matter of sheer opinion. The second kind is a matter of reasoned judgment — we can rationally evaluate answers to the question (using universal intellectual standards such as clarity, depth, consistency and so forth).

When questions that require better or worse answers are treated as matters of opinion, pseudo critical thinking occurs. Students come, then, to uncritically assume that everyone's "opinion" is of equal value. Their capacity to appreciate the

importance of intellectual standards diminishes, and we can expect to hear questions such as these: What if I don't like these standards? Why shouldn't I use my own standards? Don't I have a right to my own opinion? What if I'm just an emotional person? What if I like to follow my intuition? What if I don't believe in being "rational?" They then fail to see the difference between offering legitimate reasons and evidence in support of a view and simply asserting the view as true. The failure to teach students to recognize, value, and respect good reasoning is one of the most significant failings of education today.

(Paul, R. and Elder, L. (October 1996). Foundation for Critical Thinking)