"game" is not for one side to win and one side to lose, but for all participants to find the most effective solution to a problem or the most defensible position on a controversial issue. And that happens when everyone follows the rules of rational discussion that are designed to bring about that end.

MAKING THE CODE A PART OF YOUR INTELLECTUAL STYLE

A "discussion" may involve two or more participants, or it may simply be an internal discussion with oneself. In either case, one who wishes to be a rational or critical thinker—that is, "to make reasonable decisions about what to believe and what to do," and to do one's part in resolving conflicts concerning issues that matter—should make each of the following principles a part of his or her intellectual style.

1. The Fallibility Principle

A rational person should be willing to accept the fact that he or she is fallible, which means that one must acknowledge that one's own position on an issue may not be the most defensible one.

2. The Truth-Seeking Principle

A rational person should be committed to the task of earnestly searching for the truth or at least the most defensible position on the issue at stake. Therefore, one should be willing to examine alternative positions seriously, look for insights in the positions of others, and allow other participants to present arguments for or raise objections to any position held on an issue.

3. The Clarity Principle

The formulations of all one's positions, arguments, and attacks should be free of any kind of linguistic confusion and clearly separated from other positions and issues. It is particularly important to define carefully any key words used in an argument or criticism that may be unclear or misunderstood.

4. The Burden-of-Proof Principle

The burden of proof for any position usually rests on the person who sets forth the position. If and when an opponent asks, one should provide an argument for that position.

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5. The Principle of Charity

If one is reformulating another person's argument, it should be carefully expressed in the strongest possible version that is consistent with what is believed to be the original intention of the arguer. If there is any uncertainty about that intended meaning or about any implicit feature of the argument, the arguer should be given the benefit of any doubt and, if requested, given the opportunity to amend it.

6. The Structural Principle

This first criterion of a good argument requires that one who argues for or against a position should use an argument that meets the fundamental structural requirements of a well-formed argument, which is a conclusion with at least one reason in support of it; and if it is a normative argument, it must have a normative premise. Also, a well-formed argument must use reasons that do not contradict each other, contradict the conclusion, or assume the truth of the conclusion. Neither can it draw any invalid deductive inference.

7. The Relevance Principle

This second criterion of a good argument requires that one who presents an argument for or against a position should set forth only reasons whose truth provides some evidence for the truth of the conclusion.

8. The Acceptability Principle

This third criterion of a good argument requires that one who presents an argument for or against a position should provide reasons that are likely to be accepted by a mature, rational person and that meet standard criteria of acceptability.

9. The Sufficiency Principle

This fourth criterion of a good argument requires that one who presents an argument for or against a position should attempt to provide relevant and acceptable reasons of the right kind, that together are sufficient in number and strength to justify the acceptance of the conclusion.

10. The Rebuttal Principle

This fifth criterion of a good argument requires that one who presents an argument for or against a position should include in the argument an effective rebuttal to all

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anticipated serious criticisms of the argument that may be brought against it or against the position it supports. When criticizing an opponent's argument, one must not fail to give attention to the strongest features of that argument.

11. The Suspension-of-Judgment Principle

If no position is defended by a good argument, or if two or more positions seem to be defended with equal strength, one should, in most cases, suspend judgment about the issue. If the situation seems to require a more immediate decision, one should weigh the practical benefits or harm connected with the consequences of suspending judgment and decide the issue on those grounds.

12. The Resolution Principle

An issue should be considered resolved if the argument for one of the alternative positions is a structurally sound one that uses relevant and acceptable reasons that together provide sufficient grounds to justify the conclusion and that also includes an effective rebuttal to all serious criticisms of the argument and/or the position it supports. Unless one can demonstrate that the argument has not met these criteria more successfully than any argument presented for alternative positions, one is obligated to accept its conclusion and consider the issue to be settled. If the argument is subsequently found to be flawed in a way that raises new doubts about the merit of the position it supports, one is obligated to reopen the issue for further consideration and resolution.

The first three of these principles, which will be addressed more fully in this chapter, are commonly regarded as standard principles of intellectual inquiry. They are almost universally understood as underlying our participation in rational thought about any issue.

1. The Fallibility Principle

A rational person should be willing to accept the fact that he or she is fallible, which means that one must acknowledge that one's own position on an issue may not be the most defensible one.

To employ the fallibility principle in intellectual inquiry is consciously to accept the fact that you are fallible, that is, that your present view may be wrong or not the most defensible position on a matter in dispute. If you refuse to accept your own fallibility, you are, in effect, saying that you are not willing to change your mind, even if you hear a better argument. This is pretty strong evidence that you do not intend to play fairly, and there is no real point in further inquiry and/or continuing a discussion of the matter. An admission of fallibility, however, is a positive sign that you are genuinely interested in the kind of honest inquiry that may lead to a fair resolution of the issue.

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The assumption of mutual fallibility is a crucial first step for serious truth-seekers to take. Unfortunately, this move is rarely made in discussions of religion and politics, which is probably the reason that so little progress is made in these important areas of dispute. A discussion between religious fundamentalists who hold to different "fundamentals" is not likely to end in any changed minds, since the very definition of fundamentalism excludes the possibility that any fundamentalist may be wrong. The fallibility principle, however, is the standard principle of inquiry among scientists, philosophers, and most other academics, who would probably argue that it is a *necessary* condition of intellectual progress.

If there is any doubt about the appropriateness of accepting the fallibility principle, choose an issue about which people hold a number of alternative and conflicting opinions. For example, consider your own religious position. Since each of the hundreds of conflicting theological positions is different *in some respect* from all the others, we know before we begin any examination of those positions that only one of them has the possibility of being true, and even that one may be flawed. So it turns out that not only is it *possible* that your own religious position is false or indefensible, it is *probable* that it is.

It is possible, of course, that one's own theological position is in some cases more defensible than many of the others, especially if one has spent time developing and refining it in accordance with the available evidence and the tools of rational inquiry. Nevertheless, out of all the conflicting religious positions currently held, many of which are vigorously defended by good minds, it is *unlikely* that only one's own position will be the correct one. Although we may *believe* that our own view is the most defensible one, we must keep in mind that others believe the same thing about their views—and only one of us, at best, can be right.

The most convincing evidence of the fallibility of most human opinions comes from the history of science. We are told by some of science's historians that virtually every knowledge claim in the history of science has been shown by subsequent inquiry to be either false or at least flawed. And if this is true of the past, it is probably true of present and future claims of science, even in spite of the more sophisticated techniques of inquiry used by modern science. Moreover, if such observations can be made about an area of inquiry with well-developed evidential requirements, it seems reasonable to assume that nonscientific claims would suffer an even worse fate. In the face of such findings, we should at least be intellectually humbled enough to be willing to question our own claims to truth.

The important point here is that an admission of fallibility is a clear indication that we are consciously prepared to listen to the arguments of others. Although it is not easy to admit honestly that a firmly held position may not be true, it is a discussion-starter unlike any other. It not only calms the emotional waters surrounding the treatment of issues about which we feel deeply, it has the potential for opening our ears to different and better arguments.

If you are skeptical about how effectively the fallibility principle works, the next time you find yourself in a heated discussion with others, be the first to confess your own fallibility. At least make it clear that you are willing to change your mind. Your opponents will surely enter the confessional right behind you, if only to escape intellectual embarrassment. If they refuse to do so, you will at least know the futility of any further conversation about the matter at issue.

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Several years ago, while serving on a panel on the definition of a "critical thinker," a fellow panelist defined a critical thinker as "a person who by force of argument had changed his or her mind about an important issue at least once during the past year." He went on to say that it is highly unlikely that any person would just happen to be correct on every position held on important matters. On the contrary, given the great number of issues that divide us and the large number of different positions on each of those issues, it is more likely that a person would turn out to be wrong on more issues than right.

2. The Truth-Seeking Principle

A rational person should be committed to the task of earnestly searching for the truth or at least the most defensible position on the issue at stake. Therefore, one should be willing to examine alternative positions seriously, look for insights in the positions of others, and allow other participants to present arguments for or raise objections to any position held on an issue.

The truth-seeking principle has gone hand in hand with the fallibility principle since the time of Socrates, who taught that we come to true knowledge only by first recognizing our own ignorance or lack of knowledge. The search for truth, then, becomes a lifelong endeavor, which principally takes the form of discussion, wherein we systematically entertain the ideas and arguments of fellow seekers after truth, while at the same time thoughtfully considering criticisms of all views—including our own.

Since, as we have seen, it is not likely that the truth is now in our custody, all of our intellectual energies expended in discussion should be directed toward finding it or at least finding the most defensible position possible for the present time. That position, of course, is one that is supported by the strongest or best available argument.

If we already hold the truth, there would obviously be no use in any further discussion. To those who might claim that a discussion could at least be used to persuade others of what *we* already know to be the truth, it should be pointed out that the "others" are probably making the same assumptions about the views that *they* now hold. Hence, it is unlikely that any "truth" will be changing hands. If we really are interested in finding the truth, it is imperative not only that we assume that we may not now have it, but that we listen to the arguments for alternative positions and encourage criticism of our own arguments.

There are some issues, of course, about which we have already done the hard work of investigation. For example, we may have thoroughly examined an issue, listened to and found seriously wanting the arguments on the other side, and entertained and found weak and nondamaging the criticisms of our position. In such a situation, we should not give the impression that we have an open mind about the issue. Neither should we carry on a pseudo-discussion. We have two other alternatives. If we really are tired of the issue and anticipate little or no possible evidence that might change our mind, we should explain that to our opponent and perhaps skip the discussion. But if we genuinely believe that we might have missed

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something that could cause us to alter our position, then, by all means, we should enter the debate as an honest seeker. The outcome may be that we convince our opponent of our position, but we should enter the debate only if we ourselves are willing to be turned around by the force of a better argument.

In our better moments we probably all want to hold only those opinions that really are true, but the satisfaction of that interest comes at a price—a willingness to look at all available options and the arguments in support of them. Otherwise, we might miss the truth completely. The problem, of course, is that most of us want the truth to be what we now hold to be the truth. We want to win, even if we have to cheat to do it. For example, one may sincerely believe that Toyota trucks are the best trucks on the market, but to make that claim before objectively examining the performance and repair records of other comparable makes of trucks is simply dishonest.

Real truth-seekers do not try to win by ignoring or denying the counterevidence against their positions. A genuine win is finding the position that results from playing the game in accordance with the intellectual rules. To pronounce yourself the winner before the game starts or by refusing to play by the rules fails to advance the search for truth and is in the end self-defeating.

3. The Clarity Principle

The formulations of all one's positions, arguments, and attacks should be free of any kind of linguistic confusion and clearly separated from other positions and issues. It is particularly important to define carefully any key words used in an argument or criticism that may be unclear or misunderstood.

Any successful discussion of an issue must be carried on in language that all the parties involved can understand. Even if what we have to say is perfectly clear to ourselves, others may not be able to understand us. A position or a criticism of it that is expressed in confusing, vague, ambiguous, or contradictory language will not reach those toward whom it is directed, and it will contribute little to resolving the issue at hand.

Many arguments and criticisms fail to be effective because undefined key concepts mean different things to different people. Hence, it is better to risk being perceived as "picky" or even pedantic than to lose the opportunity to effectively resolve an issue or to make (or help others to make) a reasoned decision about what to believe or do. We don't want others to agree with our position if they are agreeing to a position that we are not actually defending. If so, our inquiry has made no progress. For example, if we are trying to determine whether God exists, and it does not occur to anyone that we first need to come to some understanding and agreement about what we mean by the word "God," it is not likely that we will find an answer to our question. We cannot construct an argument for the existence of something that we have not defined.

Perhaps the most difficult problem in achieving clarity is being able to focus clearly on the main issue at stake. In informal discussion, this is not always easy to do. Controversial issues usually have many related features, and all of them

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