



Thinking it through



?

Getting answers to
life's biggest issues

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INTRODUCTION

It was a bright autumnal afternoon. Golden sunlight poured in through large windows. The warmth of the sun on my neck was pleasant. The heat of the questions I was receiving was less so. Also in the room were a group of bright minds wrestling with difficult questions. They wanted to know:

- ‘Why would God create people to damn them?’
- ‘Where does evil come from?’
- ‘What about other religions?’
- ‘What about those who never hear about the Bible?’
- ‘Why would God let babies die?’
- ‘If murder is wrong, why does God commit mass murder in the Old Testament?’
- ‘How do you reconcile a God of love with the idea of hell?’
- ‘Does God hate gay people?’

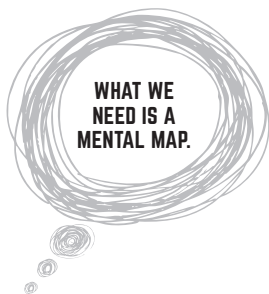
These are undeniably difficult questions. But the absence of easy answers is not the same as the absence of any answers. Furthermore, these aren’t just questions for ‘religious’ people. They are questions for *all* people. We all want to know how to make sense of famine, Ebola, genocide

and human trafficking. How should we think about crime and punishment? Is there life after death? What are we to make of the plurality of religions?

This book will not attempt to answer all of these questions, nor will it offer simple answers. It will attempt something altogether more basic and, at the same time, altogether more difficult. What we need is to be taught is not always

what to think, but *how* to think.

What we need is a mental map for navigating difficult questions.



As one writer has noted, in our culture we are more likely to have an exchange of feelings when we disagree with someone rather than a serious attempt to *think* through issues.¹ Romanticism and postmodernism have made us emotionally richer but intellectually poorer. What we need is to regain a framework for thinking through difficult issues. To be clear, I am not suggesting that feelings are unimportant or irrelevant. And I'm not suggesting that we should be intellectual bulldozers riding roughshod over others' opinions. What I am saying is that to truly love people we need to help one another think clearly through the issues that tug most at our heart strings.

I'm increasingly convinced that many students, from primary school onwards, are taught what to think, but not

how to think. They're bombarded all the time with various 'authorities'. Their pronouncements come at such a pace there is little time to reflect, analyse, and respond to them. Nor does this apply to just children and teens. Our instant information culture means that our moral imagination is formed at breakneck speed, usually on the basis of what others tell us to think or feel. We all too easily follow the crowd without ever questioning whether we've taken a wrong turn somewhere along the way.

Don't believe me? Consider this. If we'd lived in the southern states of America in the eighteenth century could we honestly say we would have seen slavery as wrong?² If we'd lived 200 years ago would we have had a problem with women not being able to vote? You'd have been in the minority if so. A hundred and fifty years ago we wouldn't have thought twice about child labour and working conditions. If we were raised in Germany in the early part of the 21st-century we would have viewed the First World War as a holy war, with God on our side – '*Gott mit uns*' would have been our slogan.³ If you're raised in 21st-century Britain it seems obvious to most that abortion or gay marriage are inalienable rights; that wouldn't have been the case fifty years ago. We are inevitably products of our culture, and our values are caught from, or taught by, those we look up to and respect. So, for the sake of clarity, I'll repeat my aim: I don't so much want to tell you *what* to

think as to open up a discussion on *how* to think.

In chapter one we'll explore some good questions to ask when analysing arguments. In chapter two we'll explore some of the different 'authorities' we appeal to and the ways in which they are both helpful and yet limited. In chapter three we'll think about the various ways in which arguments can go bad. In chapter four we'll explore a way forward in terms of a reliable authority source to which we can appeal in our moral reasoning. Finally, in chapter five, we'll attempt to work through some examples. These examples will not be explored in exhaustive detail. Rather we'll use the tools and framework developed in chapters one to four to begin the exploration of difficult issues.

All of us believe what seems reasonable to us. In that sense we are all 'logicians' (thinkers!). What we are attempting here is to do consciously that which we have done semi-consciously since we were about four.⁴ As Bowell and Kemp note, 'Critical thinking enables us to ensure that we have good reasons to believe or do that which people attempt to persuade us to do or to believe.'⁵ So, with that in mind, let's do some thinking about thinking.⁶

1

SIX HONEST SERVING-MEN

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Independent critical thinking is something of a lost art today. One consequence of a digital age is that we're bombarded with information all the time. 'Headspace' – that is the space to pause, ponder, think, and reflect – is at a premium, and often crowded out by the next blog post, podcast, YouTube video, link from Facebook, Twitter update, or trawl through Instagram or Pinterest. My browser has many of these running all the time, and I'm easily distracted by the newest notification or post. And sadly, all too often, it can lead to lazy, uncritical engagement. While this instant access to so much information is a wonderful gift, it can mean that people form their views at breakneck speed based on the latest social media trends. For example, Facebook invites me to cover my profile picture with a rainbow flag in support of the American Supreme Court's landmark decision to legalise same-sex marriage. Everyone else is

doing it; one click and I'm done! Wait a minute; what am I agreeing to exactly?

Time to read and reflect is now seen as an unaffordable luxury. As a consequence people who hold differing opinions are often viewed with suspicion or derision. Dismissal (or

even rage) has replaced serious, careful, charitable engagement.¹ And

our greatest fear is that someone might be offended by our opinion.²

It's hard to swim against the current.

We may disagree with those on

the extremes, but we need a better

response than 'Everybody thinks that

... [you fill in the blank]'

John Dewey is regarded by many philosophers as the 'father' of modern thought when it comes to critical thinking.³ Dewey defined critical thinking as follows:

'Active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which

it tends.'⁴ Note some of the elements here: active as opposed to passive; persistent as opposed to lazy; careful as opposed to careless; and grounded as opposed to baseless. Dewey's definition is a helpful starting point for

exploring how we can think actively, persistently, carefully, and reflectively.



So I'd like to introduce you to a little tool that may help us to develop a framework for thinking through difficult questions. Rudyard Kipling once wrote a poem entitled 'Six Honest Serving-Men'. It goes like this:

*I KEEP six honest serving-men
 (They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who.
I send them over land and sea,
 I send them east and west;
But after they have worked for me,
 I give them all a rest.
I let them rest from nine till five,
 For I am busy then,
As well as breakfast, lunch, and tea,
 For they are hungry men.
But different folk have different views;
 I know a person small—
She keeps ten million serving-men,
 Who get no rest at all!
She sends 'em abroad on her own affairs,
 From the second she opens her eyes—
One million Hows, two million Wheres,
 And seven million Whys!*

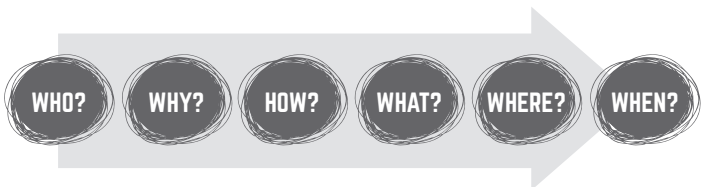
It is said that Kipling wrote the poem about his young daughter. She is the one with 10 million serving-men who

get no rest at all – ‘one million Hows, two million Wheres, and seven million Whys!’ Those of us with kids can easily appreciate the sentiment!

However, Kipling’s ‘Six Honest Serving-Men’ is of real value too in helping us process big questions. It just takes time, careful thought, and a bit of practice. The big questions (slightly reordered) are as follows:

1. **Who** is the authority on the question?
2. **Why** are they the best person to speak to the question?
3. **How** do they come to their conclusions on the question?
4. **What** exactly is the question for consideration?
5. **Where**, geographically and culturally, is the question being discussed?
6. **When**, historically, are we thinking about the question?

Let’s consider these questions as our guides on a journey, helping us to see the issues and think through them more clearly. Here’s a little diagram which may act as an aide-memoire. We’ll take each question in turn, and consider how it is relevant to our thinking.



5. A FEW WORKED EXAMPLES

¹ You can find these stories at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/10717566/Aborted-babies-incinerated-to-heat-UK-hospitals.html> and <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jul/15/planned-parenthood-fetal-tissue-video-republican-reaction>. Cited 6 August 2015.

² For an example of the former see the article on the *New Statesman* website by Sarah Ditum entitled 'My Body, My Choice': <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/11/my-body-my-choice-now-abortion-rights-must-be-fought-first-principles>. For an example of the latter see the quotes within the following brief piece on the *TIME* magazine website: <http://time.com/3854543/abortion-debate/>

³ You can see some examples by running a Google search on 'idscforlife'.

⁴ It should be said that modern palliative care is excellent and as such, in the majority of cases, a slow painful death is not inevitable.

⁵ Since God exists outside of time and space he is able to perceive the totality of our existence from his eternal perspective.

⁶ See <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/05/20/voters-back-same-sex-marriage/>

⁷ See especially Romans 1:25–27.

CONCLUSION

¹ H.L. Mencken, 'The Divine Afflatus' in *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 443.