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CTips, Issue 4: Bias

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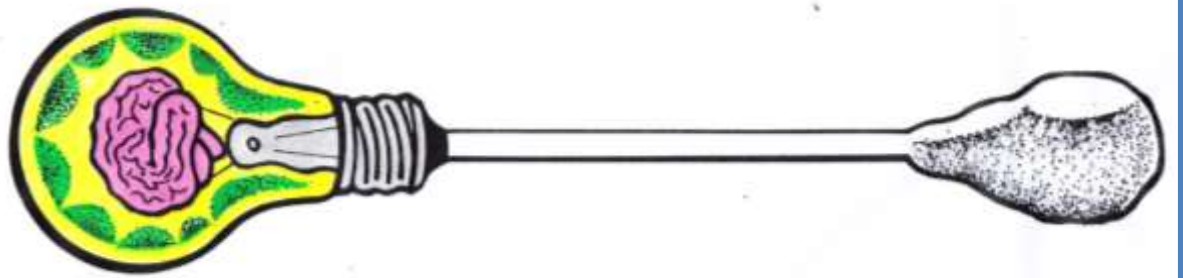
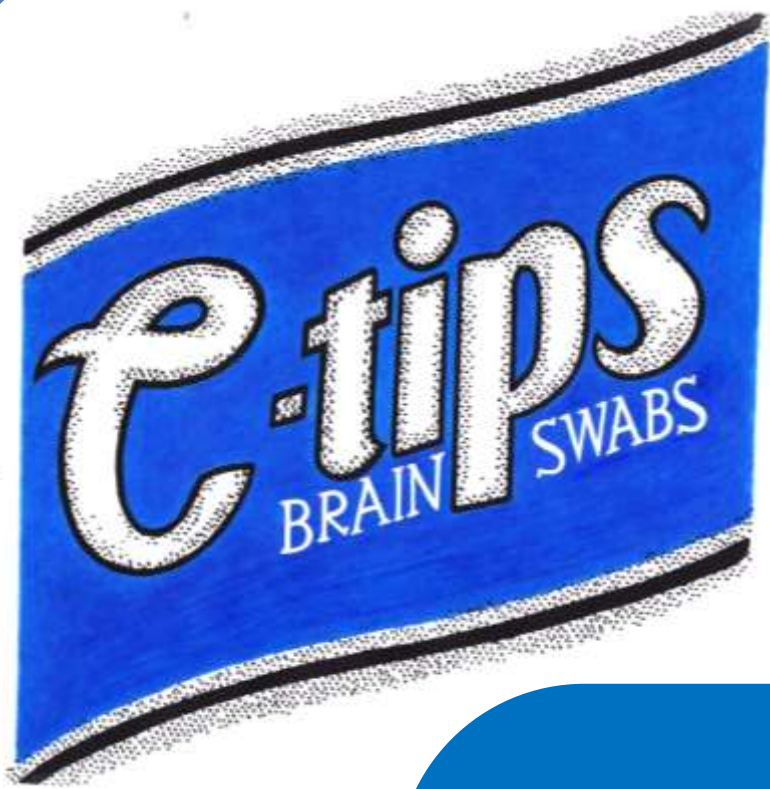
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Issue #4,
Spring 2014

CTips is an e-newsletter, produced by the St. Cloud State University Philosophy Department, focused on sharing resources, ideas, and methods for integrating critical thinking into all courses.

This issue was developed by Carolyn Hartz and Paul Neiman.

“You’re biased!” ...Now What?

Awareness of bias is often treated like an item on a checklist of things we should pay attention to when thinking critically—and that’s the last we hear of it. But awareness of bias isn’t the end of the story; it’s just the beginning.

Manuals claiming to be about Critical Thinking often warn us to beware of bias in the information we’re consuming. We’re rarely told what to do next, however. How ought we to respond with this awareness?

Well, it depends on whether the source is making an argument or a mere assertion.

Claims/Assertions

First, there may be bias in people’s assertions, as when someone of a particular political persuasion comments favorably or unfavorably on some public policy or law. But the fact that this person has some political bias does not show that their comment is unwarranted, unreasonable, or false. The person’s bias is simply irrelevant to the legitimacy or truth of their comment. Their comment must be judged on its own merits.

If the person has given no reason for their assertion, and we are not aware of any independent reasons supporting it but are aware of the person’s bias, we may not be justified in assuming what they’ve said is true.

But even in this case the person’s bias by itself does not provide us with a reason for thinking that what they’re saying false.

Case 1

For example, consider the tobacco companies’ long insistence that smoking was harmless. Greed prevented them from telling the truth, but our rejection of their claim was based on medical evidence to the contrary, not their greed.

Case 2

Consider a parallel case: suppose a teacher tells a class full of students that education is very important and that they should stay in school. A clever student raises their hand and points out that the teacher has a vested interest in students’ remaining in college: if too many of them drop out, the teacher may become unemployed!

Has the student given a good reason to reject the teacher’s claims? Surely not. The teacher’s claims must stand or fall on their own merits; the teacher’s bias in favor of education (even if crassly economic!) is simply irrelevant

Arguments/Inferences

In the case of inferences, similar considerations apply, but with an added dimension.

Case 3

Let’s fill out case 2 above a bit: let’s suppose that the teacher supports their assertion by pointing out to the students that their lives will be enriched by continuing their education, their capacity to appreciate life experiences will be deepened by it, future employment prospects heightened, and so on.

Now consider a student rejecting this argument, not by disputing these supporting reasons, but by again pointing out the teacher’s bias.

It’s important to recognize that the teacher may in fact be biased. But it’s more important to recognize that the teacher’s bias has no bearing on whether her inference follows from the reasons she has given.

The relationship between premises and conclusion is a relationship between statements, so to tell whether the one follows from the others we must look at the *statements*, not at the person making them. The arguer’s bias is simply irrelevant to the legitimacy of the inference.

Case 4

Rejecting arguments based on the arguer’s bias is very common in politics. Note how easily we dismiss a senator’s favorable (or unfavorable) view of a bill by pointing out that they voted along party lines, rather than by examining the reasons they gave for voting that way. It’s a lot easier to reject someone’s arguments for a view by pointing out that it conforms to their party’s views, than to engage in a careful and critical examination of their reasons!

The Take-Away

There are, of course, many types of bias, and often bias can and should make us think twice about whether to accept what someone is saying. But rarely should it decide the issue for us.

Recognition of bias when considering mere assertions or claims should lead us to seek out further relevant information, and it's this further information that we should rely on. Deciding to actually disbelieve someone's claim because they're biased is a form of the **ad hominem** fallacy, i.e., rejecting a view on the basis of who holds it rather than on the basis of the merits of the view itself.

This ad hominem reaction is even more egregious when applied to arguments: although detection of bias might reasonably make us wary of someone's assertions, the inferences drawn from those assertions can and should be assessed independently of the biases of the one drawing the inference. And ignoring the reasoning behind an inference is one of the worst forms of intellectual laziness.