

Towards Wise Decision-Making III: Critical and Creative Thinking

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Tony's girlfriend, Liz, has just told him that she is moving back home, because her job here is not working out and she is a bit homesick. Liz has intimated that she would like Tony to join her. The trouble is that 'home' for Liz is Australia. Tony comes to you, a decision counsellor, for help with the difficult task of deciding whether to uproot from the UK and join her in Australia, or in effect end a promising relationship. How might you help him?

1) Introduction

Our aim in this series of articles is to arrive at a procedure which will help the practical philosopher enable clients like Tony make wise decisions. In the first article we looked at decision analysis, where options presented by the client are assessed in terms of the probability and utility of likely outcomes. Whilst we admired its structured and logical approach, we concluded that it paid too little attention to the need for creativity in order to think up options, and questioned its narrowness in assessing outcomes in terms of utility. (*Practical Philosophy* 3.1, March 2000). In our last article (*Practical Philosophy* 3.3, November 2000) we looked at the role of the emotions in wise decision-making. We argued that at each stage of the decision-making process emotions can either help or hinder, and suggested how the decision counsellor could best work with them. In the present paper we intend to complement these ideas by looking at how *thinking* can help produce wise decisions.

Whilst there has recently been an explosion of work in philosophy on critical thinking, and in management literature on creative thinking, there has been relatively little on how either can be applied specifically to decision-making. Furthermore surprisingly little has been written on how critical and creative thinking can be harnessed *together*. In this paper we aim to take a step towards improving this situation. We will begin by discussing the varieties of critical and creative thinking and their efficacy in producing wise decisions. We will go on to explore how critical and creative thinking can best be used in harness, with reference to the logically desirable stages of decision-making. Whilst we will be making a number of comments about the value of the various approaches, our main aim is the constructive one of developing methods of use to the practical philosopher. In order to ensure that our discussion pays sufficient attention to the concrete, we will use the case vignette of Tony above to illustrate the various approaches. In the final section, we will examine to what extent the discussion has succeeded in providing a framework for wise decision-making.

2) Critical Thinking

Robert Ennis has defined critical thinking as 'a process, the goal of which is to make reasonable decisions about what to believe and what to do.'¹ (Ennis, 1996). However, there are two different ideas about what this process entails, which can be termed the 'fallacies' and the 'good reasons' approach. We will look at each in turn in order to explore the usefulness and limitations of each in helping people make wise decisions.

¹ In practice critical thinking has focused more on what to *believe* than what to do.

2.1 The fallacies approach

The fallacies approach to critical thinking categorises the errors in thinking that lead people to mistaken conclusions. This has resulted in the generation of lists of fallacies and is exemplified in Nigel Warburton's *Thinking From A to Z*.² (Warburton, 1996). Fallacies listed by Warburton include:

Fallacy	Meaning
Ad hominem	Attacking the person rather than the relevant argument
Affirming the consequent	An argument of the form If p then q; q; therefore p
Bad company fallacy	Attacking something because it has been held by someone evil or stupid
Rash generalisation	A statement based on insufficient evidence
Straw man	Caricaturing opponent's view to make it seem more implausible than it really is

Table 1: Some of the fallacies listed in Warburton's *Thinking From A to Z*.

2.2 The fallacies approach and decision-making

Basing wise decision-making on the fallacies approach involves identifying fallacies in the reasoning behind a decision. Let us return to our example of Tony, faced with the decision of whether to emigrate with his girlfriend, Liz, to Australia. A decision counsellor using the fallacies approach would ask Tony to give his reasons for and against going. Suppose he said that he is very wary of going, because his best friend, Pete, had had a similar decision to make with a Canadian, had decided to emigrate, and it had turned out disastrously. The fallacy theorist would point out that Tony was guilty of the fallacy of rash generalisation (not necessarily using this term of course). Just because Pete had had a bad experience emigrating, does not mean all people do, and more to the point does not mean that Tony will.

While such an approach is useful to the extent that it really does enable people to recognise and avoid fallacies it also has several limitations. First it is non-exhaustive; there are a potentially unlimited number of ways it is possible to reason wrongly so no list of fallacies will ever catch all these errors. If the counsellor responds by adding more and more fallacies to the list, it will rapidly become unmanageable; it is unreasonable to expect clients to be able to digest too many kinds of fallacies.³ This criticism might not be thought to be too troubling; one tailors the list of fallacies to the cognitive abilities and logical habits of the client, and the amount of time one has. To argue that just because you cannot cover every fallacy to the conclusion that the method is no use may seem itself to be an example of an 'all-or-nothing' fallacy itself. Moreover, it may be possible to focus mainly on the major sources of fallacious reasoning – which, we suggested in our previous article (*Practical Philosophy* 3.1, March 2000) may be vividness and emotional language. In Tony's case, for example, it may be the vividness of his friend Pete's story that leads to his reasoning errors - hence a reminder that 'vividness does not equal importance' could be very helpful.

² Warburton's book is more than just a list of fallacies; it also contains explanations of other philosophical terms such as 'necessary condition' and 'thought experiment'.

³ Unless one devotes a large proportion of session time to teaching fallacies. Raabe (2000) describes how he did precisely this in a group counselling environment with addicts, with considerable success.

But a further limitation of the fallacies approach is much more damaging. This is that the fallacies approach provides no account of what makes for a *wise decision*; it only specifies what a *bad reason* is. This would be all right providing every decision which involves no fallacies is wise and every decision which does involve fallacies is unwise. But neither is the case. For example, suppose Tony says he should not go to Australia because he will have difficulty getting work out there. This reasoning does not involve any fallacies; are we to conclude that it is necessarily a wise decision? No, because we need to assess not only whether reasons are fallacious, we also need to decide whether they are *strong*. Similarly, even if he decides not to go to Australia because of his friend Pete's experience, this does not entail that this is a bad decision; it only means that he is making it for the wrong reason.⁴

2.3 *The good reasoning approach*

Fortunately, the other approach to critical thinking, the good reasoning approach, promises exactly what is required; the capacity not merely to detect fallacious reasons, but to guide us as to how important non-fallacious reasons are. Here the approach is not upon listing fallacies but upon specifying what good reasoning involves.⁵ This consists of an analysis of the formal characteristics of good reasons. For a reason to be a good reason there are three formal characteristics that need to be satisfied. It must be:

- a) Acceptable ⁶ - a conclusion is not supported by a reason that is more doubtful than the conclusion. In Tony's case it might be that, unknown to him, Pete's experience of going to Canada turned out fine in the end. If this were so then 'Pete's emigration to Canada turned out disastrously' is not an acceptable, and therefore not a good, reason for Tony to conclude that his going to Australia will turn out disastrously.
- b) Relevant. It might be that the reason is acceptable but that it is simply irrelevant to the purported conclusion. Suppose on a gloomy day Tony sees a holiday program featuring his favourite presenter having a splendid time in a sunny foreign country. 'My favourite presenter likes being abroad in the sun' is acceptable - it is the case that the presenter likes being abroad in the sun - but is it really relevant to Tony's decision about whether to live in Australia?
- c) Strong. Finally, reasons which are both acceptable and relevant need to be evaluated in terms of their strength - not all acceptable and relevant reasons are equally important. For instance living in a sunny country and having a good career are both relevant and acceptable reasons for choosing where to live but are they both equally important?

2.4 *The good reasoning approach and decision-making*

Applied to decision-making, the good reasoning approach means listing the pros and cons for and against an option and choosing the option with the weightiest ⁷ reasons. Of course, listing the pros and cons is hardly new; a famous example being Charles Darwin's deliberation over whether to get married (LeBon, 2001). What is more novel, and makes the method much more rigorous and attractive, is combining pros and cons with the 'acceptable/relevant/strong' criterion for assessing reasons. In a sense, the good reasoning approach is logically superior to the fallacies approach. If one succeeds in applying the good reasons approach, we arrive at a decision that is not only not fallacious; it is also positively good.

Though clearly helpful, the good reasoning approach can be somewhat limited on three counts.

⁴ Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), although it does not focus specifically on decision-making, is open to similar criticisms since it concentrates on avoiding errors in thinking rather than producing good thinking.

⁵ For examples of books which take the good reasoning approach to critical thinking see Govier, T. (1985) and Thomson, A. (1999).

⁶ The term 'acceptable' is generally used instead of the more obvious 'true' in order to cover moral reasons as well as factual ones. We actually recommend using 'true' with clients as 'acceptable' for the non-philosopher can easily be assumed to imply a severe relativism and preclude critical thinking - of the 'it's acceptable to me' sort.

⁷ Weightiness is an overall measure that takes into account acceptability, relevance and importance.

Limitation 1: the 'good reasoning' approach helps us *assess* the reasons presented for making a particular decision, but it does not help us *perceive* (think up, imagine) what these reasons might be. The decision counsellor can't just rely on the client producing all the reasons but needs to help the client uncover other weighty factors.

Limitation 2: the 'good reasoning' approach allows us to assess reasons for the problem presented but it does not question whether the problem presented is the one that should actually be tackled. The decision counsellor needs to help the client uncover what problem he or she wishes to tackle.

Limitation 3: the 'good reasoning' approach allows us to assess existing options but it doesn't help us generate possible options for solving the problem. The decision counsellor needs to help the client uncover other possible solutions to the problem.

In Tony's case, the good reasoning approach does not help us come up with all the relevant reasons for and against going to Australia (limitation 1); it does not help us think about whether 'Should I go to Australia' is really the question Tony should be asking (limitation 2), and it does not help him think about other options rather than just going to Australia or splitting up (limitation 3). While being able to think critically is important in making wise decisions it is not sufficient. For these reasons, we need to go beyond critical thinking and look to creative thinking to complement it.

3) Creative Thinking

Creative thinking is the generation of thoughts, ideas, decisions and actions, often by novel and unexpected means. Although creative thinking is often said to be an attitude of mind as much as a set of techniques, this has not stopped a large number of writers inventing a vast array of them. Here we select three that are germane to decision-making - namely brainstorming, lateral thinking and win/win thinking⁸.

3.1 Brainstorming

Brainstorming was the invention of Alex Osborn, (Osborn, 1953) and is a technique for problem-solving through the generation of ideas. Rawlinson (1986) identifies the six stages of brainstorming, as follows.

1. State and discuss the problem.
2. Restate the problem in the form 'How to...' to ensure that it is a restatement, not an attempted solution.
3. Select a basic restatement from step 2) and write it down in the form 'In how many ways can we'.
4. Have a warm-up session of about 5 minutes - for example the group might be asked to think of as many uses for a CD as they can.
5. Brainstorm, recording suggested answers to the problem on a flip chart.
6. Ask the group to finish with the wildest idea they can think of (laughter and noise are good!)

These stages should be kept discrete and work best with a group of about 12. Rawlinson suggests four further guidelines which make brainstorming work well, which he recommends be displayed for all to see:

1. Suspend judgement (do not evaluate).
2. Freewheel (don't have any inhibitions).

⁸ Other creative thinking methods include attribute analysis (asking about the attributes of a problem may simplify it), wishful thinking (abstracting back from an ideal solution) and random word stimulation (opening a dictionary at a random page to stimulate ideas). For a good overview see Robert Harris's Creative Thinking Techniques (Harris, 1998) on the world wide web.

3. Value quantity (not quality).
4. Cross-fertilise (let new ideas sprout from old ones).

How might a brainstorming session be applied to Tony's dilemma of whether to stay in the UK or move to Australia? At stage 2 his problem might be restated as 'How can Tony keep his relationship with Liz going?' This would then become 'How many ways can we think of in which Tony can stay with Liz?' After the warm-up stage, the group would freewheel ideas - the sort of things people might come up to start with might include:

'Get her friends and family over here'

'Take a year off work and go to Australia',

'Agree to spend six months in Australia'.

The facilitator would then encourage the group to cross-fertilise these ideas - which might lead to ideas like 'Agree to spend six months in Australia, then spend six months here being visited by some of her friends you've met over there'. Then they would be asked to forget inhibitions and come up with really wild ideas. These might include 'Steal her passport', 'Have an affair with someone else to make her jealous so she changes her mind', 'Threaten to kill himself', 'Get her pregnant' and 'Propose marriage'. In terms of the three limitations of critical thinking (need to generate reasons, need to generate options, need to reframe problem), brainstorming clearly helps most with generating options. It also, to a limited extent, helps with reframing the problem (for example from 'Should I' to 'How to').

3.2 Lateral Thinking

Lateral thinking is Edward de Bono's name for a special type of creative thinking which involves 'pattern-switching within a patterning system' (de Bono, 1982, p.55). It may be that a problem results from us being stuck in a certain way of looking at things, and lateral thinking advocates looking sideways at it to get a fresh perspective. One of de Bono's own examples is as follows: Grandma is knitting and young Susie is disturbing her playing with the wool. The father suggests putting Susie into the playpen. The mother suggests it might be a better idea to put Grandma in the playpen.

One of De Bono's techniques to help lateral thinking is to provocatively say something which may be a stepping stone to a good idea, on the grounds that something may not be realised to be worth saying, until it has been said. De Bono invented the word 'po', derived from 'hypothesis', 'suppose' and 'possible', to indicate that one is provocatively saying something to spark new ideas. For example, faced with an urban traffic parking problem, de Bono proposed 'Po cars would limit their own parking'. This led to the idea of cars being able to park wherever they like, as long as they leave their lights on. Applying lateral thinking via 'po' to Tony's problem, we could state that 'Po the world is round'. This may suggest all sorts of ideas - for example thinking of a third place they could live, thinking of interesting places he could visit when visiting Liz, planning a round the world trip with Liz.⁹

Lateral thinking can clearly help us come up with new options; it can also help us 'find the best problem'.¹⁰ We should not necessarily accept a problem at face value. Anthony Weston shows how this can be applied to classic dilemmas, like that of Heinz and Sartre's student. Sartre's student's problem is posed as an ultimate choice between helping his mother and fighting for the Free French; why, asks Weston, should we be restricted to these two choices? Is the mother really as helpless as the student thinks? If not, the answer may lie in helping her realise her own resources.¹¹

Can Tony's problem be reframed? We might ask whether Tony should take Liz's words at face value. Perhaps she is bluffing, or pleading for more say in the relationship or more commitment. Maybe the real problem facing Tony is the relationship, and the job and homesickness are pretexts.

⁹ The 'Po' sentence does not need to have any connection with the problem.

¹⁰ The expression is Anthony Weston's (Weston, 1997).

¹¹ If the problem cannot be reframed in quite such a dramatic way, lateral thinking encourages the restating of the problem in terms of 'how to' rather than 'whether' in a similar way to stages 2 and 3 of brainstorming.

3.3 *Win/Win Thinking*

According to Stephen Covey, one of the seven habits of highly effective people is to 'think win/win'. As Covey says, 'Win/Win means that agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial, mutually satisfying' (1992, p.207). Covey argues that 'win/win' is a superior paradigm to aiming for 'win/lose'. This may be obvious in cases when one cares about the other person (as Tony surely does), but Covey points out that even in purely business deals 'win/win' provides a more secure, lasting foundation. 'Win/win' is also to be distinguished from mere compromise; win/win means giving the other person what they want without having to compromise.¹²

At this point many critics accuse advocates of 'win/win' as mere idealists, but in doing so they neglect the creative technique which it is claimed allows everyone to win. The trick is to move away from specific, concrete objectives to the abstract values that lie behind them. For whilst we may not be able to secure the very specific targets we have in mind, because they might conflict with other people's specific wishes, we have a much better chance of mutual success if we think instead about the reasons why we want these things, and how else they might be accomplished. The classic example is where the husband wants the window open (say) and the wife wants it shut. How can win/win be possible here when their wishes are diametrically opposed? A compromise would be to have the window half-shut, but this would make no-one happy. Win/win asks both parties to give the reason why they want the window open or shut. Suppose the husband says he wants some fresh air in the room, whilst the wife says she does not want a draught. Now a win/win solution is apparent - open a window in a nearby room, giving fresh air without a draught.¹³

Win/win thinking might well appeal to Tony. Whilst they cannot both be in the UK and Australia at the same time, we need to step back and ask 'For what reasons do you, Tony, want to be in the UK and for what reasons do you, Liz, want to be in Australia'. We would then build up a list of 'what matters' to each party which would be a stepping stone to finding a solution acceptable to both.

Win/win thinking helps with the generation of reasons. Since brainstorming and lateral thinking cover generating options and reframing the problem this means that we now have methods to deal with all the limitations of critical thinking.

4. *Critical and Creative Thinking*

Is creative thinking on its own the answer then? Clearly not. Brainstorming generates many, many options, but we need to separate the wheat from the chaff. Lateral thinking (and, to some extent, brainstorming) may give us a new way of looking at the problem, but how then do we decide whether the solutions to that problem are any good? Win/win thinking facilitates a way of thinking that may suggest mutually acceptable solutions; again, however, we need to think about not only whether they are acceptable, but also whether they are wise. Creative thinking helps us generate ideas but we also need critical thinking skills to evaluate them.

We now need to use our creative and critical thinking skills at a meta level to work out a process which combines the best of each.¹⁴

¹² Covey focuses on the interpersonal aspects of 'win/win thinking'. Actually win/win has both an intra personal dimension as well as the inter-personal one alluded to by Covey. If we have many conflicting objectives, win-win thinking asks us to think of ways that they can all be satisfied.

¹³ This example derives from Mary Parker Follett writing early in the twentieth century - though she called it 'integration' rather than 'win/win'.

¹⁴ Such a process would be in the spirit of de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* (2000) where he recognises the need for both creative (Green Hat) and critical (Black Hat) thinking. We should also note that de Bono values information (white hat), red hat (emotions and intuitions) and blue hat (process). It differs in that we are doing our 'blue hat' thinking up front to try to say which type of thinking is required at which

First, you need to understand the situation and find the best problem; there's not much point generating or evaluating options to the wrong problem! Lateral thinking and critical thinking are vital tools here. Next, in order to facilitate win/win thinking and the evaluation of options, we should identify the elements of a good solution. This will involve critical thinking to decide whether these really are elements of a good solution. Now we are in a position to combine brainstorming and win/win thinking to generate likely options. Finally, we can assess these options in terms of the objectives identified at stage two.

4.1 Applying critical and creative thinking to Tony's dilemma

We have already suggested a lot of possible insights into Tony's dilemma, but without a structure they might appear more like confusing alternatives. We will now see how the framework above might help Tony make a wise decision.

1. Understanding the situation and the finding the best problem

Critical thinking can help with understanding the situation. Tony should avoid the fallacy of assuming that his situation is the same as his friend's Pete - the fallacy here may be as much confusing vividness with importance as well as over-generalisation. Creative thinking may make a big difference in finding the best problem. As discussed, the real problem may well be Tony's relationship with Liz. If this is true, it will be a very valuable insight, and point the way towards Tony having a discussion with Liz, or possibly Liz and Tony coming together for counselling.

2. Identify the elements of a good solution ('what matters')

Obviously this would depend on whether Tony was having decision counselling on his own or had asked Liz to come along too. Assuming the latter, we might draw up two lists, of what matters to Liz and what matters to Tony.

Current Concern	Underlying concern(s)	Strength
Going to Australia	1) Having a good career	3
	2) Keeping in touch with friends and family	4
	3) There being justice in the relationship	4
Being with Tony	Being with Tony	5

Table 2: What Matters to Liz

Current Concern	Underlying concern(s)	Strength
Staying in the UK	1) Keeping in touch with his friends and family	3
	2) Having a good career	3
Being with Liz	Being with Liz	5

stage. We have left out red hat thinking in this article as we covered it previously. White hat thinking is included under critical thinking.

Table 3: What Matters to Tony

Tables 2 and 3 summarise the possible results of this stage of decision counselling with Liz and Tony. The first column shows their current concern; this is what they come into the session thinking. The next column 'underlying concern', is the result of having probed more deeply into *why* it matters. So, for example, 'Staying in the UK' is not an end in itself for Tony; he wants to stay here in order to keep in touch with friends and family and have a good career. The final column is a rough indicator of the strength (out of five) of each underlying concern. Tables 2 and 3 suggest that Liz and Tony have a common concern in being with each other, but need to generate options which allow them have a good career and stay in touch with friends and a sense of justice in the relationship.

3. Generate possible options

The decision counsellor might well ask Tony and Liz to brainstorm, replacing the original problem 'Should Tony move to Australia or stay in the UK' with 'How many ways can we think of in which Liz and Tony both have a good job, keep in touch with friends and family, and be with each other?' They might come up with the following ideas:

- Pay at least yearly visits to their place of birth
- Arrange for visits of friends and family
- Explore career opportunities for Tony in Australia
- Explore career opportunities for Liz in England

The advice to cross-fertilise these options might produce an option combining several of these ideas: combined option might in fact decide that the best option combines all four of these ideas, namely:

- Explore career opportunities for each. Then make decision about emigration, and agree to pay yearly visits and arrange for friends to come as an option to compete with Liz going to Australia by herself or with Tony.

4. Evaluating Options

Tony and Liz are now in a good position to evaluate the possible alternatives (which for the sake of exposition we will limit to being the original two options plus the option which combines a number of the ideas reaped from brainstorming).

We can assess each of the three alternative options in terms of how far they meet Liz and Tony's ultimate concerns. In effect, we are judging them by reasons we have already determined to be acceptable and relevant and strong. The best option is the one that satisfies as much as possible of the strongest concerns. The results are summarised in table 4, below. The two columns list the objectives (what matters) and their strength which have just been arrived at (in stage 3) Note this works on the underlying concerns and the strengths arrived at after some critical thinking. So Tony being with Liz has a strength of 5 (the maximum). The next three columns list each option (generated at stage 3) and assess each option in terms of what matters.

The bottom row ('Conclusion') gives an overall assessment of whether each option should be accepted or rejected. It can readily be seen that the third option is the best; it satisfies both their sense of justice, and gives them the best chance of each finding a satisfying career and keeping in touch with friends and family.

Option

Objective (what matters)	Strength	<i>Liz goes to Australia on her own</i>	<i>Liz and Tony emigrate to Australia together</i>	<i>Explore career opportunities for each. Then make decision about emigration, and agree to pay yearly visits and arrange for friends to come.</i>
Tony being with Liz	5	No	Yes	Yes
Tony keeping in touch with his friends and family	3	Yes	No	Yes/ to some extent
Tony having a satisfying career	4	Yes	Maybe	Probably
Liz being with Tony	5	No	Yes	Yes
Liz keeping in touch with his friends and family	4	Yes	Yes	To some extent/Yes
Liz having a satisfying career	4	Yes	Yes	Probably
Liz feeling a sense of justice in the relationship	4	No	Yes	Yes
Conclusion		REJECT	REJECT	ACCEPT

Table 4: Evaluating options according to Liz and Tony's objectives

5. Conclusion

Readers of our last paper will comment that emotions have been left out of the equation. This was done purely for the sake of exposition. In the full model they would appear at stage 1 (were their emotions distorting their view of the situation?) and stage 2 (what do the appropriate emotions tell us about what matters?).

Some may also voice concern about stage 2 (what matters). We are assessing what matters in terms of acceptability, relevance and strength, but on what basis? Is it just the client's subjective preference? Or is there some more objective base for deciding what really matters? We will leave such considerations for a future paper.

We began by suggesting the need to harness critical and creative thinking together to help with wise decision-making. We believe the framework proposed does exactly this. It uses each of three creative methods (lateral thinking, brainstorming and win/win thinking) at the most appropriate stage of the decision-making process; namely framing the problem, generating reasons and generating options. Critical thinking skills are used to complement these, using the fallacies approach to help understand the situation and asking whether the reasons generated concerning what matters in a solution are acceptable, relevant and strong. We believe that such a marriage of critical and creative thinking does indeed constitute significant progress towards wise decision-making.

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