CHAPTER 3

Ways of Reasoning

People in other countries who want to study in the United States must obtain a student visa from a U.S. embassy or consulate before they can enter the States. Sometimes obtaining a student visa is difficult or even impossible, as hundreds of young Chinese learned in the late 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century, when American consular officials frequently denied their applications.

To many prospective students, for whom the opportunity to study in the United States was a long-cherished dream, the denial of a student visa was devastating. In many cases they applied and reapplied, trying to figure out what to say that might persuade the consular officer to grant the visa.

Sometimes prospective students sought help from the international student adviser at the U.S. school they wanted to attend. One such person e-mailed me with a list of questions she thought the consular officer might ask her, along with her proposed answers. She asked me, "Can you tell me whether [my proposed answers are] convincing from a Western man's view?"

This prospective student realized that what might be convincing to a Chinese person might not have the same effect on a Westerner or, more

specifically, a Western man. She understood that culture and gender influence the way people think about things—what they consider relevant, true, accurate, important, believable, reliable, or persuasive. How we reach conclusions varies according to many factors, including our cultural background and our gender.

The subject of cultural differences in reasoning is complex and difficult to address. Scholars writing on the topic use such terms as *Aristotelian logic, epistemology, cognitive processes, metacognition,* and *deductive inference.*

In this chapter we will avoid such complex terminology, at the risk of oversimplifying the topic. We will look at American ways of reasoning under five headings: The Context, The Point, The Organization, The Evidence, and The Cause. Readers will see considerable overlap in the material under these headings because, of course, the ideas under each heading reinforce each other.

First, a reminder: in the introduction we said the dominant U.S. American culture is based on the assumptions of European American males, the category of people most influential in the country's early history and development. Recently, some social scientists have argued that the idealized thinking patterns described in this chapter have been over-generalized, and that they fail to account for the differing ways that women might think about things. A book called *Women's Ways of Knowing*, by Mary Belenky and others (details are in the suggested readings), develops this point of view. However accurate that point of view may be, however, the ways of reasoning this chapter attributes to Americans represent a still-existing cultural norm.

THE CONTEXT

Psychologist Richard Nisbett reports on an experiment conducted by one of his graduate students "to test the hypothesis that Asians view the world through a wide-angle lens, whereas Westerners have tunnel vision" (2003, 89).

The experimenter presented realistic animated scenes of fish and other underwater objects to Japanese and American students and asked them to report what they had seen.

> Americans and Japanese made about an equal number of references to the focal fish, but the Japanese made more than 60 percent more references to background elements, including the water, rocks, bubbles, and inert plants and animals. In addition, whereas Japanese and American participants made about equal numbers of references to movement involving active animals, the Japanese participants made almost twice as many references to relationships involving inert, background objects.
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> Perhaps most tellingly, the very first sentence from the Japanese participants was likely to be one referring to the environment ("there was a lake or a pond"), whereas the first sentence from Americans was three times as likely to be one referring to the focal fish ("There was a big fish, maybe a trout, moving off to the left"). (2003, 90)

In a subsequent recognition task, Japanese performance was harmed by showing the focal fish with the wrong background, indicating that the perception of the object had been "bound" to the field in which it had appeared. In contrast, American recognition of the object was unaffected by the wrong background (90–92).

In the preceding paragraph about differences between Japanese and American ways of perceiving things, the context is the background (or "field," as psychologists call it) in which something occurs—in this case the context included the water and the plants. The object is the main or focal aspect of the situation—in this scene, the fish. Nisbett and many other psychologists have noted that Americans, in their perceptions and thoughts, tend to focus on the object and pay relatively less attention to the context. By contrast, Japanese, Chinese, and other Easterners pay relatively more attention to the context.

This difference in attention to object and context also arose when I was serving as an academic adviser to undergraduate students in Malaysia. The students had to write application essays to the American universities they wanted to attend to convince the admissions committee that they ought to be admitted.

The Malay students' essays almost invariably began with the words, "I was born in 19XX in (name of city or town)." The essays went on, "My father's occupation was . . . . My mother was a housewife. I have XX brothers and XX sisters." For the Malays, this background information was necessary to convey an understanding of who they were. Without such a context, the object (their academic history and future goals) would not make sense.

For the Americans reading their applications, though, such background information was irrelevant. What mattered to the American admissions officers, in general, was not where an applicant was born, what the applicant's parents did for a living, or how many siblings the applicant had. These readers wanted to know what the applicants themselves had accomplished, the courses they had taken, the marks they had earned, the clubs they had joined, their academic goals, and so on.

We advised the Malay students to remove the background information from their application essays. "The Americans reading your application won't care about that," we told them. "Even worse," we said, "the Americans might consider you poor writers and thinkers because of your apparent inability to get to the point."

THE POINT

To understand how Americans think about things, it is necessary to understand about the *point*. Americans mention it often: "Let's get right to the point," they say. "My point is . . . ." "You're off track. What's the point of all this?"

For Americans, the point is the idea or piece of information they presume is, or should be, at the center of people's thinking, writings, and spoken comments. It is the fish, without the water or the seaweed. It is the student's academic accomplishments, not her birthplace or her father's occupation.

In general, American speakers and writers are taught to include only the ideas and information directly and obviously related to the topic at hand. They are supposed to "make their points clear," meaning that they should focus explicitly on the information they wish to convey and downplay the context.

People from many other cultures, of course, have different ideas about the point. Africans traditionally recount stories to convey their thoughts rather than stating "the point" explicitly. Japanese traditionally speak indirectly, leaving a respectful amount of room for the listener to figure out what the point is rather than, as they see it, insulting the listener's intelligence by making the point explicit. Thus, while an American might say to a friend, "I don't think that coat goes very well with the rest of your outfit," a Japanese

might say, "Maybe this other coat would look even better than the one you have on." Americans value a person who "gets right to the point." Japanese and people from other countries (such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines) may consider such a person insensitive or even rude.

Some linguists argue that the Chinese and Japanese languages, for example, are characterized by vagueness and ambiguity. The precision, directness, and clarity Americans associate with the point cannot be attained, at least not gracefully, in Chinese and Japanese. Speakers of those languages are thus compelled to learn a new way of reasoning and conveying their ideas if they are going to interact satisfactorily with Americans. Such speakers often say they "feel different" when using English because their ideas come out more explicitly.

THE ORGANIZATION

It is not enough, however, to make points clear. The points must be organized in a certain way if American listeners or readers are to be expected to "follow the argument" and take it seriously.

In school many American teachers give this advice about how to organize speeches and written reports: "Tell the audience what you are going to tell them. Then tell them. Then tell them what you told them."

Sometimes teachers elaborate on this advice: "Your speech or paper should have three main parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. In the introduction you do something to get your audience's attention, and then you explain what your presentation is about and how it is organized.

"In the body," the teacher would go on, "you express your points, giving the evidence for each one and showing how each point relates to the points that have come before.

"And in your conclusion," the teacher would finish, "you summarize your main points and perhaps give some implications for the future."

This linear organization of a piece of reasoning is free of what Americans label "digressions" or "tangents," that is, ideas that do not relate clearly and directly to the point of the statement, speech, paragraph, chapter, or book. Even at the level of the paragraph, this linear organization is expected.

Teachers advise their students to begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that announces what the paragraph is about. The remainder of the paragraph elaborates on the topic sentence, giving an example or presenting evidence.

THE EVIDENCE

In any system of reasoning, the *evidence* leads from some initial information, assumption, or premise to a conclusion. What constitutes evidence varies depending on the subject matter and, of course, the culture. In the general American view, a reliable speaker or writer makes clear points organized in a linear fashion, as we have seen. A responsible speaker or writer is then expected to prove that each point is true, accurate, or valid.

As they grow up, Americans learn what is and is not acceptable as proof or evidence. The most important element of a proof is the *facts*. In elementary school, children are taught to distinguish between facts (which are good things) and opinions (which might be interesting, but which prove nothing). A student might state an opinion and the teacher will ask, "What are your facts?" or "What data do you have to support that?" or "How do you know that's true?" The teacher is reminding the student that without facts to support the opinion it will not be considered legitimate or valid.

Americans assume there are facts of life, of nature, and of the universe that can be discovered by professionals (preferably "scientists") using special techniques, equipment, and ways of thinking. "Scientific facts," as Americans think of them, are assumed to exist independently of the individuals who study or talk about them. This important assumption—that facts exist independently of the people who observe them and of the field from which they are drawn—is not shared throughout the world.

The most reliable facts, in the American view, are those in the form of quantities—specific numbers, percentages, rates, rankings, or amounts. Many foreign visitors in the States are struck—if not stunned—by the abundance of numbers and statistics they encounter in the media and in daily conversations. "We've had eleven consecutive days with temperatures above 95 degrees," one small-talking Texan might say to another. "Nine out of ten doctors recommend this brand of mouthwash," says a television commercial

or a magazine advertisement. (Doctors are viewed as scientists or appliers of science and are held in high esteem.) "The humidity is at 47 percent," says the TV weatherperson. "The barometric pressure is at 29.32 and rising. Yesterday's high temperature in Juneau, Alaska, was 47 degrees."

While Americans feel secure in the presence of all these numbers, international visitors often wonder what significance they really have.

Look back at the quotation from Professor Nisbett earlier in this chapter. Notice all the numbers: "60 percent more references to background elements," "equal numbers of references to movement," and so on. For many Americans, this is reliable scientific evidence from an experiment. To them it seems entirely convincing.

Citing quantifiable facts is generally considered the best way to prove a point, although facts based on personal experience can also be considered persuasive evidence. Americans accept information and ideas that arise from their own experience or that of others they know and trust. Television advertisers seek to capitalize on this aspect of American reasoning through commercials that portray presumably average people (a woman in a kitchen, for example, or two men in an auto repair shop or a bar) testifying that their experience with the product or service being advertised has been positive. Other credible testifiers are famous entertainers or athletes and people dressed to look like scientists or doctors.

Of the various ways of having personal experience, Americans regard the sense of sight as the most reliable. "I saw it with my own eyes" means that it undoubtedly happened. Not everyone in the world shares the Americans' faith in eyewitness accounts, however. Some people believe that what any person sees is influenced by that person's background and interests, and even by the quality of the person's vision. Some people believe eyewitness accounts are necessarily biased and should not be trusted.

This American trust in facts is accompanied by a general distrust of emotions, as was mentioned in chapter 2. Schoolchildren in the United States are taught (but do not always learn) to disregard the emotional aspects of an argument as they look for "the facts." In their suspicion of emotional statements, Americans differ from many others. Iranians, for example, have a tradition of eloquent, emotion-filled speech and will often quote revered poets who have captured the feeling they want to convey. They seek to move their audiences to accept them and their viewpoints not so

much because of the facts they have presented but because of the human feelings they share.

A Brazilian graduate student was having difficulty in his English writing class. "It's not just a matter of verbs and nouns," he said. "My teacher tells me I'm too subjective. Too emotional. I must learn to write my points more clearly."

Female American students sometimes find themselves subject to similar criticisms, since they may be less inclined than their male counterparts to rely on objective data and more inclined to accept the validity of more emotional and holistic presentations.

In evaluating the significance of a point or a proof, Americans are likely to consider its practical usefulness. Americans are famous for their pragmatism—that is, their interest in whether a fact or an idea has practical consequences. A good idea is a practical idea. Other adjectives that Americans use to convey approval of ideas or information are *realistic*, *down-to-earth*, *hardheaded*, and *sensible*.

Americans tend to distrust theory and generalizations, which they might label "impractical," "unrealistic," "too abstract," "a lot of hot air," or "just theoretical." Remember the prospective Chinese student who wanted my Western opinion about her proposed answers to the consular officer. I suggested that she not talk to the officer about her plan to "contribute to the development of the private sector in China's rapidly changing economy." An American would be more likely to be persuaded by her statement that she could earn a specific amount of money as a chief executive officer of a Chinese business in her field.

A Latin American graduate student, to give another example, heard himself being criticized (openly and directly) by the American professor in his international organization class. The student had written a paper concerning a particular international organization and had discussed the principles of national sovereignty, self-determination, and noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries. "That's just pure Latin American bunk," the professor said to him. "That's nothing but words and theory. It has nothing to do with what really happens." The embarrassed student was told to write another paper and to ground his ideas in documentable facts.

Latin Americans and many Europeans are likely to attach more weight to ideas and theories than Americans do. Rather than compiling facts and statistics as evidence on which to base conclusions, they may generalize from one theory to another, or from a theory to facts, according to certain rules of logic. Americans believe in some theories and in certain rules of logic, of course, but in general they are suspicious of theory and generalizations unless they are associated with specific facts. Thus "French intellectuals," well known for their abstract reasoning, find only a limited audience in the United States.

In some Chinese traditions, truth and understanding come neither from accumulating facts nor generalizing from theories, but from silent meditation. In Japanese Zen, truths cannot even be expressed in language. Zen masters do not tell their students what the point is.

THE CAUSE

The final element of ways of reasoning we will mention is the matter of *cause-and-effect* relationships. Americans tend to suppose that most events have some knowable, physical cause. "Things don't just happen," they often say. "Something makes them happen." Americans tend to believe they can study individual things, place them in categories, learn how things in the category operate or behave, and devise rules for understanding them and predicting their responses.

For example, if an airplane crashes, Americans will assume that a careful study of a list of possible causes will help them to isolate the actual cause. Was it human error? A mechanical failure? The weather? Or a systemic error, which resulted from some combination of organizational or environmental factors? Very few events are considered the result of "chance," "luck," or "fate." Some religious Americans ascribe certain kinds of events (such as the otherwise inexplicable death of a child) to "God's will." But such intangible factors are not usually held responsible for what happens to people.

By contrast, people in many Eastern cultures look not to specific objects or factors to explain what happens; rather, they look at the context or the

relationships among many objects when they seek to understand causes. Why did the airplane crash? Maybe the pilot simply should not have been flying on that day. Maybe it had something to do with the actions of one of the passengers. Maybe a cause cannot be ascertained.

As suggested in chapter 1, most Americans have difficulty even comprehending the notion, so prevalent in many other parts of the world, that fate determines the course of people's lives.

When people with differing ways of reasoning interact, the typical feeling they both get is that the other person "just doesn't understand," "isn't making sense," or is "on another wavelength." Each then tries harder to be more "logical," not realizing that the problem is their differing conceptions of what is logical. Foreigners in America will need to learn that Americans will consider them "not logical," "too emotional," or "fuzzy-minded" if they include seemingly irrelevant ideas in their speech or writing, if they fail to use specific facts to support or illustrate their ideas and opinions, if they speak mainly in terms of abstractions and generalizations, or if they attribute important events to nonmaterial causes.