

## Video Guide

# The Unbiased Mind (1995)

(Video BF449.U73) (23 minutes)

Quoted and shortened from the video guide packaged with the video.

## I. Summary -This video illustrates four thinking traps:

### A. *Confusing Labels with Reality -- Stereotypes*

In an ordinary deck of playing cards, which king shows only one eye? Most people don't know. This perfectly normal "blindness" serves to illustrate our tendency to see only long enough to label or categorize. Dealing with labels instead of individuals is a mental shortcut that leads to stereotype and prejudice.

### B. *Giving Meaning to Unrelated Events -- Problems with Cause and Effect*

Listen to the mysterious "Curse of the Grecian Urn" and decide why ownership of a mysterious urn seems to cause so many untimely deaths. Could the urn be cursed, or does it illustrate a common problem in assigning cause and effect?

### C. *Seeing Only What We Expect to See*

The "confirmation bias" explains why a thin person believes herself overweight, why a higher price on consumer goods usually leads people to believe they are of higher quality, and why believers in the supernatural are most likely to see ghosts. It explains why psychics and horoscopes can so often be accurate, and why useless medicines or home remedies sometimes work miraculous cures.

### D. *Viewing Ourself in a Distorted Way*

Here's a question the video asks viewers: "When you read printed words reflected in a mirror they are "backward and inside out." Why doesn't that happen when you look at your face in the mirror?

See how our "built-in blind spot" leads to muddled conclusions.

## II. Expanded Notes

### A. First Thinking Trap **Confusing Labels With Reality**

#### **The Kings**

When we play a card game, all we need to know is the value of the cards. The details on the pictures do not change the values; so they remain invisible. Card players need only to label the card. That thinking habit works well in a card game. But we often use this same mental shortcut in the "real world." We see people or situations only long enough to assign a label or category. Then we deal with the label instead of the reality – and that prevents clear thinking.

We need labels to make quick judgments, but relying on labels leads to stereotype and prejudice. We ignore individual differences. Soon we see ONLY the label.

A stereotype involves applying one characteristic to an entire group. We usually stereotype groups to which we do NOT belong. The poor stereotype the rich and the rich stereotype the poor. Kids stereotype “old folks”, who in turn stereotype “today’s kids”. We have trouble identifying members of groups we stereotype. To us, “they all look alike.” Police notice this when witnesses try to pick the guilty person out of a lineup made up entirely of one ethnic group.

Nations at war create stereotypes to label the enemy. Soldiers find killing humans like themselves difficult. So propaganda departments create labels for the enemy so they appear less than human, and therefore more “killable.”

When those stereotyped believe the label applied to them, it becomes a “**self-fulfilling prophecy.**” The label encourages behavior that makes the label come true. Any judgment of a person based on membership in a group is probably a stereotype. Statements that begin with “people like you,” or “you people” are likely stereotypes – even if you believe they are factual. The best way to overcome a stereotype is by personal contact. The more individuals in a group you know personally, the more difficult it is to believe a stereotype.

Our first obstacle to clear thinking is relying on labels and stereotypes while ignoring individual differences. We cannot eliminate stereotypes but we can avoid confusing them with reality.

B. **Second Thinking Trap – Giving Meaning to Unrelated Events**  
**The Curse of the Grecian Urn is . . . \***

Humans are animals who seek meanings. We try to link events as cause and effect. If no meaning is obvious, we invent one. We forget that the improbable happens daily.

**Cancer Example -- \* Coin Flipping.**

You’ve heard players in various sports called “streaky” or subject to occasional “hot hands.” Such “streaks” are not only normal, they are unavoidable!

Some people believe excess pollution is to blame for an extreme winter. Others are convinced a hot summer proves the “greenhouse effect.” In reality, unusual weather patterns are the norm. Our explanations merely illustrate the need to find a meaning for what we cannot predict or control.

In other words, the hard-to-believe coincidence and the unlikely clustering of events are normal. We desperately seek to give meaning to such events – a conspiracy, a single cause, a special power. But this natural tendency is an obstacle to clear thinking that leads to wrong conclusions and actions.

C. **Third Thinking Trap - Seeing Only What We Expect To See – Selective Attention**

You've probably used the phrase "I'll believe it when I see it." But we act on the opposite – "I'll see it when I believe it." We tend to see only what we already believe; what confirms our expectations and prejudices. In other words, belief precedes perception.

If I put on these glasses, the colored lens filters everything I see. Beliefs and expectations work the same way. They influence all our thinking. And we are usually unaware of the filter that colors our beliefs.

For example, how can a thin woman see herself as fat? The belief colors her perception. Her belief that "I am fat," causes her to SEE herself as overweight. No matter if a dozen friends tell her otherwise, she knows she is "fat." Even victims of anorexia see themselves as too heavy no matter how thin they are. We see what we believe.

I have two watches, this one priced at \$98 and this at \$498. Let's say you are one of many who believe that "you get what you pay for." In other words, you believe a higher priced item is usually of better quality. This is a belief, a preconception. If you hold this belief, you will actually SEE this higher priced watch as being of better quality, even if it is no better than the \$98 watch.

Believers in paranormal powers see ghosts. Believers in UFOs are most likely to be honored by visits from alien beings. Believers in tarot cards or palm readings are most likely to see their futures in the readings. Their belief colors their experience to make it radically different from a non-believer.

Here's a surprising example of how belief influences behavior. Psychologists call it the think/drink effect. People who drink flavored water under the belief it is a vodka and tonic often act as if they really drank alcohol. How people **expect** alcohol (or any mind-altering drug) to affect them influences how they behave while "under the influence."

The power of belief to influence perception can work in medicine as well. A **placebo** (sometimes called a sugar pill) is a pill with no chemical effects. Doctor-prescribed placebos cure many patients. The patient's faith in medicine becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A study recently examined 7,000 patients who had medical procedures that were later proven totally useless or who took drugs later found to have no effect on their illness. The study found that 40% of the patients reported "excellent" improvement and another 30% "good" improvement. This in spite of evidence that their treatment was useless. Even 19<sup>th</sup> century snake oil and patent medicines cured people. Faith in the power of a drug or belief can promote self healing.

Psychologists call this the “**confirmation bias.**” We try to make new information fit so it agrees with what we already know. We ignore information that doesn’t agree with what we *think* we already know. Millions believe in the ability of horoscopes or palm readers to see into the future. But such belief is yet another example of seeing only what we already believe.

### **Horoscopes \***

Another, related obstacle to clear thinking is to give too much weight to events that stand out in our memory and too little weight to ordinary events. Events that involve us emotionally or are highly unusual are easier to remember. The trap is we rely too much on these “easy” memories.

For example, if we believe “the phone always rings when I’m in the shower,” it’s because this is an irritating event we remember. When we take a shower and the phone does not ring, we don’t remember it – it’s a non-event. (**Selective Remembering**)

Many people believe rain falls most often on weekends. Why? Because the weekend is their time off and rain irritates them – they remember it.

That’s why people who believe dreams foretell the future find support for their belief. They remember only the small percentage of dreams that somehow connect to later events. Other dreams become forgotten nonevents.

If you believe strange and terrible things tend to happen when the moon is full, you will remember such events and ignore strange events when the moon isn’t full. “We believe, therefore, we see.” We don’t see things as THEY are, We see thing as WE are.

#### **D. Fourth Thinking Trap – The Inability To See Ourselves Clearly**

We rarely hear our own voice as others hear it. We’re often surprised at a high fidelity recording of ourselves. We ask, “that’s not how I sound.” And then follow with “. . .is it?”

You rarely see your own face. When you hold the printed word up to a mirror it’s nearly unreadable – it appears backwards or inside out. But why doesn’t that happen when you look at your face in the mirror. Your face isn’t inside out. It’s there -just like real life.

#### **Why are words distorted and not faces?\***

The obvious answer is the face that greets you in the mirror is not the same one other people see. It is instead, the mirror image of your face. But it’s the one you see so often you actually believe that’s how you look. You label this mirror image as “my face.” It’s close enough, but it isn’t your face.

Another common distortion in our self-image concerns success and failure. We often attribute success to our own abilities, and failures to external circumstances. In other words, we succeed or win because we're good or talented or hard working. But we fail or lose because of unfair competition, or bad luck.

A bridge or poker player believes he is skillful, but "just doesn't get the cards." The player ignores the fact that, over time, the distribution of cards will even out. Many believe "good luck" is something only other people enjoy.

After an exam, students who do well believe the exam was fair and they studied hard. Those who do poorly often complain the exam was unfair or the questions unclear. Teachers, too fall into this thinking trap. They often attribute student's success to their own teaching skill. But failure is caused by student's laziness.

Why do we hold these beliefs? Perhaps they are important to our self-esteem. But they all stem from an inability to see a completely accurate reflection of ourselves.

## II. Discussion Questions

### A. Confusing Labels with Reality

1. We tend to see things only long enough to label them. The video used playing cards as an example of this tendency. Why does this habit work well in card games but cause problems in "real life?"
2. Each of us holds a stereotype of the "criminal type" based mainly on movies and films. How could a criminal use this stereotype to "con" someone?
3. What is a self-fulfilling prophecy? Can you give any examples?
4. The video points out that contact with groups we stereotype often shatters the stereotype. Many laws were passed in the 1900s to give disabled persons more access to society. How could these laws change our stereotype of the "disabled?"

## **B. Giving Meaning to Unrelated Events**

1. Can you think of real life or other fictional examples of “The Curse of the Grecian urn”? (*Hint: Consider conspiracy theories and tabloid news.*)
2. The video showed an example of a cluster of cancer within one mile of an abandoned battery factory as “80% above normal.” A TV reporter interviewed an angry resident who said “cancer rates here are soaring” and “we plan to take this to the Supreme Court if we have to.” How could you explain this “epidemic” of cancer assuming you knew the old factory had nothing to do with it?

## **C. Seeing Only What We Expect to See**

1. Explain this: We say, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” But the way we act everyday is based on the opposite, “I’ll see it when I believe it.”
2. Explain: We don’t see things the way THEY are, we see things the way WE are.
3. Explain why the best way to change the world is to change yourself.
4. What is the “confirmation bias”?
5. A college student made a few dollars giving palm readings one summer. He found that people reported his readings amazingly accurate. He based his interpretation on reading a few books on the subject from the local library. A friend suggested he try an experiment. He said to tell people exactly the opposite of what he saw in the palm reading. So he tried this method and found that people still told him his readings were “amazingly accurate.” How can you explain this?

6. What is a placebo? What are some examples of its use?
7. The video showed an experiment in horoscope belief. Why did so many students rate the reading an “A” or “B” on a five point scale?

**D. Viewing Ourselves In a Distorted Way**

1. Explain these results in terms of the invisible self: A survey of high school seniors finds 70% think of themselves above average in leadership ability, and only 2% label themselves below average. When asked “how well do you get along with others,” almost all say they are above average. In fact, 60% said they were in the top 1%.

**E. Event #1**

The time is May, 1976.

The place: A high tech semiconductor factory in Malaysia.

The event: Employees run from their workbenches terrified by a ten-foot tall headless ghost.

The solution: Management calls in a witch doctor who sprinkles rice and water around the factory and sacrifices a goat to appease the spirits of the dead.

Result: The workers return, and the ghost stays away.

Explain these events in terms of “I’ll see it when I believe it.” Remember that restless ghosts are very much a part of folk culture in Malaysia. If you were a worker at the factory, what would you have seen?

**Event #2**

The time now is May, 1995.

The place: A brand new office building in the Midwestern United States.

The event: Dozens of employees leave work reporting dry throats, dizziness, nausea and other symptoms. The symptoms spread until nearly a third of the workforce is absent due to illness. Ill workers blame their condition on the air in the new building.

The solution: Management calls in specialists to investigate another example of the “sick building syndrome.” Over a million dollars is spent redesigning air vents and filters even though engineers find nothing wrong. Months later workers return and the situation returns to normal.

Discuss these events in terms of “I’ll see it when I believe it,” and the placebo effect. How does this story compare to that of the Malaysian ghost?