

Saving American culture and society,  
one mind at a time. . . .

# Think

Why Crucial Decisions  
Can't Be Made in the Blink of an Eye

Michael R. LeGault  
Award-winning writer

This isn't the time to *Blink*.

It's time to

**THINK!**

—before it's too late.

Outraged by the downward spiral of American intellect and culture, Michael R. LeGault offers the flip side of Malcolm Gladwell's bestselling phenomenon, *Blink*, which theorized that our best decision-making is done on impulse, without factual knowledge or critical analysis. If bestselling books are advising us to not think, LeGault argues, it comes as no surprise that sharp, incisive reasoning has become a lost art in the daily life of Americans. Somewhere along the line, the Age of Reason morphed into the Age of Emotion; this systemic erosion is costing time, money, jobs, and lives in the twenty-first century, leading to less fulfillment and growing dysfunction. LeGault provides a bold, controversial, and objective analysis of the causes and solutions for:

- the erosion of growth and market share at many established American companies, big and small, which appear to have less chance of achieving the dynamic expansion of the past
- permissive parenting and low standards that have caused an academic crisis among our children—body weights rise while grades plummet
- America's growing political polarization, which is a result of our reluctance to think outside our comfort zone
- faulty planning and failure to act on information at all levels that has led to preventable disasters, such as the Hurricane Katrina meltdown
- a culture of image and instant gratification, fed by

(continued on back flap)









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*To my mother and father*



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# Don't Blink, Think

The company, a medium-sized automotive supplier based in Ohio, was already spinning in the upper regions of a vortex heading directly down the tube. What the company did sounded simple enough. It took glass windshields, put a strip of rubber around the perimeter, and shipped them to major automotive manufacturers. An operator placed the glass into a machine, and the machine injected melted rubber around the edge, then quickly cooled it to make it stick. The problem was this: The glass was breaking. The scrap rate mounted—10 percent, 20 percent. Little bar graphs posted in the cafeteria illustrated the amount of money the company was losing each week. Employees blinked uncomprehendingly when the figure reached a million dollars. Was anyone doing anything?

The company was doing all it could, or at least it felt it was. It hired a young, dynamic, university-educated plant manager. Intuition their guide, the plant manager and his team of floor supervisors and engineers attacked the problem. They pulled the dies—large steel molds into which the glass was placed—



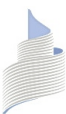
of philosophy and cultural study courses for over twenty-five years. In a 2001 essay about the decline of critical thinking, Bardi states, “The intellectual qualities I see displayed in my classes . . . are getting worse every year, with the current crop [of students] being the worst.” Critical thinking is a cognitive skill that permits a person to logically investigate a situation, problem, question, or phenomenon in order to make a judgment or a decision. Bardi argues that the collapse of critical thinking skills in this country may be “systemic and historical, even inevitable,” although he allows that many of his colleagues have a simpler explanation—that the problem is not history or culture, but today’s students, who, for whatever reason, “lack the critical thinking skills necessary for higher learning.”

Certainly our universities, especially the upper tier, still attract many diligent, gifted students who can knock off a set of differential equations as if they were a connect-the-dot drawing. If Bardi’s and his colleagues’ harsh assessment annoys some, think of it as applied “on average.” Of course, this still means that the critical thinking skills of even the top college students have, on average, declined. If this is the case, it is not surprising, as independent testing on our schoolchildren has confirmed deteriorating performance in reading, math, and science for many years. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducts a triennial evaluation of the math, reading, science, and problem-solving skills of fifteen-year-olds living in the primary industrialized countries. In PISA’s 2003 assessment, American students ranked twenty-eighth out of forty countries in problem-solving ability. The

performance was on par with that of students from Serbia, Uruguay, and Mexico, and well below that of fifteen-year-olds from Japan, France, Germany, and Canada. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress has measured some improvement in the reading and math scores of fourth- and eighth-grade students since 2000. Overall, however, the unvarnished results show that more than two-thirds of our nation's fourth and eighth graders are not performing at their grade levels in either math or reading.

If a decline in thinking skills were limited to unmotivated or hungover university students hell bent on frittering away their parents' money, we could probably muster a shrug, perhaps in the naive belief that the stringent standards of academia will inevitably weed out the deadwood. Poor thinking and nascent idiocy, according to this optimistic view, will be nipped in the bud, contained safely on campus, before they reach the real world. It is obvious, however, that this cannot be the case. Many of these students have become adept at muddling through their curriculums, finding a smorgasbord of courses they can pass, and picking up their degrees. One by one these graduates are transporting their limited knowledge and deficient thinking skills into the fields of their chosen professions, as the next generation of teachers, nurses, sales representatives, and company managers. Thus we have teachers, health care workers, and managers with historically inferior critical-thinking skills teaching, caring for patients, and managing businesses.

At least one high-level automotive executive, General Motors' Robert Lutz, has lamented the inferior problem-solving skills of U.S.-trained engineers. Other refined mental skills



crucial to workplace performance also appear to be deteriorating. A 2004 report released by the National Commission on Writing, a panel of educators assembled by the College Board, brought to light the growing disgruntlement of businesses with employee writing skills. The report, *Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . or a Ticket Out*, included a survey of chief executives from the nation's top corporations. The results were not pretty—about a third of the companies said only one-third or fewer of their employees knew how to write clearly and concisely.

Predictably, as if filling a growing market niche, a new-age, feel-good pop psychology/philosophy has sprung up to bolster the view that understanding gleaned from logic and critical analysis is not all that it's cracked up to be. This outlook, which sounds especially appealing after a couple of beers in a loud bar, suggests that the rational model is often unnecessary, and may even be obsolete. Malcolm Gladwell has recently set the high-water mark for this philosophy with his book *Blink—The Power of Thinking without Thinking*. In *Blink*, Mr. Gladwell argues that our minds possess a subconscious power to take in large amounts of information and sensory data and correctly size up a situation, solve a problem, and so on, without the heavy, imposing hand of formal thought.

As a demonstration of the omnipotence of instantaneous, Blinklike snap judgments, defined as an understanding arrived at “in the first two seconds,” Mr. Gladwell relates a story about a forged Greek statue purchased by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 1984. The sculpture was a nude male youth, claimed by the art-dealer-seller to be one of the stylized statues known as a *kouros* produced in ancient Greece.

Officials at the Getty were apparently suspicious of the origins of the statue from the start, as it radiated “a light colored glow” not typical of ancient statues. Nonetheless, after extensive scientific tests showed that the marble from which the statue was carved came from an old quarry in Greece, and also verified that the statue was covered with a fine layer of calcite—a substance believed to be formed over thousands of years by natural processes—the Getty purchased the *kouros* for many millions of dollars.

Then, as Mr. Gladwell describes it, things began to unravel. One by one, a host of art experts were led to the statue, with each expert, to a person, instantaneously experiencing the same feeling that there was something “not right.” The Getty became so concerned it had the statue packed up and shipped to Greece to be examined by the country’s leading authorities on ancient Greek sculpture. One of the experts, the director of the Benaki Museum in Athens, felt a wave of “intuitive repulsion” the moment he laid his eyes on the statue. With alarms going off, the Getty launched a full-scale investigation, uncovering a trail of fabrication and trickery, and ending with the unhappy discovery that the statue had been made in a forger’s workshop in Rome in the 1980s.

Boiled down, the Statue That Didn’t Look Right is a cautionary tale about the limits and failure of applauded scientific methods and rational analysis, and the far-reaching power and success of homely, undervalued gut feelings and intuition. (*Blink* unpackaged being, by any other name, intuition.) But how meaningful is the story in proving the author’s thesis that quick snap judgments often yield results equal to or better than those produced by thoughtful critical analysis?

First, the scientific testing did not fail. The dolomite marble of the statue was covered in a thin layer of calcite. The ingenious forger had apparently used potato mold to induce calcite formation in a couple of months. Other initial evidence had corroborated the apparent authenticity of the *kouros*, including records of ownership that turned out to be phony.

Second, if you read the story carefully, it is clear there is something else going on in the experts' minds other than just out-of-the-blue hunches and intuition. Laying eyes on the *kouros*, the first word that popped into the mind of Thomas Hoving, former director of New York's Metropolitan Museum, was "fresh," that is, too new-looking to be several thousand years old. The director of Athens' Acropolis Museum, George Despinis, said he "could tell that that thing has never been in the ground." The Benaki Museum director's "intuitive repulsion" was apparently informed by his observation of a contradiction between the statue's style and the fact that the marble had come from a specific quarry on the Greek island of Thasos.

In other words, lying behind these "snap judgments" are educated impressions formed by years of study, thought, and analysis. And these educated hunches were confirmed by further analysis, which established, for instance, that the Greek statue was "a puzzling pastiche of several different styles from several different places and time periods."

One of the appeals of *Blink* is that we all have intuition and rely on it to help us make decisions and get through the day. There is a sort of mythology that has sprung up about the power of first impressions. But mythology is not scientific. In

a section on “speed dating,” a tightly organized event in which a group of men and women have a few minutes to talk to each other and decide if they want to go out together, Mr. Gladwell taps into the power of the belief that first impressions are the best validation of people’s characters and personalities, especially as they relate to male-female relationships.

But how cut-and-dried is this truism? If first impressions are so important in modern society in establishing close relationships, why is the divorce rate so high? Indeed, we have no inclination to track or know how often our first impressions and snap judgments fail us. Upon hearing that a serial killer lived in their community, people are often surprised. “He seemed a nice, regular guy,” is a statement one commonly hears on the news. For thousands of years, humans’ first impression of the earth was that it was flat. When, looking through his newly improved telescope at the sun, Galileo saw dark spots, the Church brought heresy charges. The first impression of the sun was that God had made it uniformly bright.

In essence, Mr. Gladwell is making a case for one-half of a classic false dichotomy. A false dichotomy, sometimes also called “the fallacy of the excluded middle,” is an either-or proposition presented in such a way as to make us think only one, not both of the choices, can be true. The ruse is often used in politics, as in, “Will you reelect Congresswoman Smith, or face the prospect of more jobs going overseas?” In this case the false dichotomy is intuition versus stepwise analysis and critical reasoning. Mr. Gladwell not only separates and

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distills intuition as a mental power unto itself; he promotes it as a potential source of unbounded, utilitarian good: “What would happen if we took our instincts seriously? I think that would change . . . the kinds of products we see on the shelves, the kinds of movies that get made, the way police officers are trained . . . and if we combine all of those little changes, we would end up with a different and better world.”

He allows that our biases can lead automatic judgments astray, but provides no definitive insight on how to improve our snap-judgment ability other than “practice.” In fact, critical scientific reasoning almost always involves a component of intuition, and intuition is almost always informed by experience and hard knowledge won by reasoning things out. When Einstein was working on his theory of special relativity, he had a “hunch” that energy and matter were different versions of the same thing. Not until he worked out the equations using his astounding powers of critical reasoning, arriving at the famous  $E = mc^2$ , was his hunch worth a damn.

The technique by which we make good decisions and produce good work is a nuanced and interwoven mental process involving bits of emotion, observation, intuition, and critical reasoning. The emotion and intuition are the easy, “automatic” parts, the observation and critical reasoning skills the more difficult, acquired parts. The essential background to all this is a solid base of knowledge. The broader the base, the more likely one is to have thought through and mastered different concepts, models, and ways of interpreting the world. The broader the base, the more likely all the parts will fit together. Yet, just as intuition is possessed by each of us, so is the ability to think and reason critically. One of the fundamental

principles of the Age of Enlightenment, a period of discovery in which evidence for the great power of human reasoning came to full light, was that *all* people have the ability to shake off dogma and superstition and think for themselves. Much of modern twentieth-century philosophy also largely rests on the assumption of man's basic freedom and his ability to create his own destiny through reason, free will, and personal responsibility.

This is the point where *Think!* and *Blink* diverge: the assumption that in contemporary life the public is somehow wary of making snap judgments; that our tendency by nature or cultural custom is to methodically research and analyze data before reaching any conclusion. If Mr. Gladwell were limiting the scope of his book to select research labs and corporate management teams, his assertion might have weight. In wider society, however, a society bombarded by a glut of information, spin, marketing messages, and demands on one's time, snap judgments have become the norm. We are living and, in some cases, dying by snap judgments. Many people resort to paying someone else to think for them. We have become a society dependent on the views of experts—psychologists, landscape designers, financial advisors, even parent coaches. The realm in which we are permitted to entertain, play, and puzzle over life's everyday mysteries has narrowed. In the absence of a habit of mind conditioned by careful, unbiased observation and applied critical thinking, snap emotion-based judgments have come to predominate. Snap judgments may account for "A nation divided," the tag line that got so much play in the media during the Bush-Kerry election. We've become a "gut-level" society, relying more and more on in-



THINK!

instinct to make our way through life. We're very comfortable with what we already believe and know. Change, even of our opinions or thinking processes, has become the great anxiety for most people.

As naturopathic medicine taps into a deep mystical yearning to be healed by nature, *Blink* exploits popular new-age beliefs about the power of the subconscious, intuition, even the paranormal. *Blink* devotes a significant number of pages to the so-called theory of mind reading. While allowing that mind reading can "sometimes" go wrong, the book enthusiastically celebrates the apparent success of the practice, despite hosts of scientific tests showing that claims of clairvoyance rarely beat the odds of random chance guessing.

Although it is completely unverified by any rigorous scientific test, Mr. Gladwell's premise has an air of legitimacy thanks to the groundwork laid by several generations of academic "postmodernists" and activists who zealously attempt to deconstruct each and every certainty of nature or society into an underlying set of bogus cultural assumptions. The same method is used to cast doubt on the very method of critical reasoning. These groups argue that rational, reductionist thought is sexist and repressive because it is based on assumptions already compatible with a power structure's values and outlook. As a result, the status of scientific ideas derived from skepticism and rational thought has waned, while the standing of whole hosts of faith-based views and trends has correspondingly risen. *Blink* not only assures us that making snap judgments is good practice, it implies a compatibility with the new-age paradigm of mental acuity based on instinct, emotion, and intuition.

I am certainly not out to bury intuition, “ah-ha” moments, or emotion. As I’ve noted, these elements of the human psyche are all indispensable to critical and creative thinking. But as far as delivering results, that is, favorable outcomes, critical thinking and its main elements, observation, logical reasoning, and skepticism have a demonstrably better track record. This fact is also why *Think!* differs structurally from *Blink*. It is not the aim of this book to be a compendium of case studies proving the superiority of critical thinking over intuition. In this respect, I, along with many others, need simply note there is nothing to prove. The case is closed. As documented in books such as Michael Lewis’s *Moneyball*, statistics and analysis almost always beat instinct and guessing. That’s why managers study tendencies of batters and pitchers and “play the percentages,” that’s why blackjack players good at card-counting methods do better than players who wing it, that’s why companies employ systematic analytical tools such as design of experiment and Six Sigma to solve problems and improve efficiencies. Yet, if the case is closed about the overall superiority of critical thinking to improve decision-making, the mystery remains why subjectivity, emotion, and instinct have come to predominate in the lives of people and the wider society. This, then, is a book analyzing the causes of the decline of logic and reasoning in American life, and also a book proposing solutions for stopping and reversing this slide. While the analysis is made with America in mind, it is not strictly limited in scope to American society, as many other industrialized countries appear to be suffering from a similar malaise in thinking, for similar reasons. There are political connotations to some of these conclusions and recommenda-

tions, but this is not the book's main point. The book's aim is not macroscopic, it's microscopic—not changing institutions, but changing thinking and habits that have often led to institutionalized dysfunction. If some writers focus on the value of the “bricks” of society and culture, my attention is directed to the importance of the “molecules”—the way we think and how it shapes our lives, destiny, and society. And surely, as it inevitably plays out in millions of decisions made each day, there is a direct connection between the way we think and the society we get.

In reality, the only thing being created by the swelling desire for the easy and thought-free is a critical mass of bad outcomes:

- Blunders in planning and emergency preparedness that led to the catastrophe in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina
- Big and small American companies that seem to have “plateaued,” with declining prospects for dynamic growth in a changing world economy
- Worsening science, math, reading, and problem-solving skills across all levels of American education
- Growing numbers of teachers who cannot even clearly explain a class assignment, let alone effectively teach difficult subjects such as math and English
- The strident, automatic alienation of Americans along ideological lines on any given issue or problem
- The alarming decline in health of millions of Americans whose bodies are merely following the decline of critical capacities of their minds

These are all, to be sure, complex situations. When the facts are all tallied, however, the root cause for each of these problems must ultimately be traced to hazy, nonrigorous, institutionalized, faulty thinking: faulty thinking in government planning and execution, defectively conceived corporate strategy, an indifferent attitude to the value of knowledge and its power to fulfill our daily existence.

THE CONTINUING DETERIORATION in thinking ability of students emerging from the nation's education system also naturally raises the question of how to account for it. As many studies have shown, much of a person's ability to learn is fostered through parental nurturing and instilled values that create the desire and work habits leading to good thinking skills. If the vast majority of the so-called Y or millennial generation has strictly a utilitarian interest (or lack of interest) in intellectual pursuits, and an impatient, even hostile attitude toward the formal work involved in mastering thinking methodologies—logic, research, analysis, deductive reasoning—it seems reasonable to assume that the psychology behind these habits has been “picked up” from their surroundings. Surroundings can be taken to mean the milieu of moral, ethical, and practical values found in contemporary society. Young people mainly encounter and absorb those values through social interactions with family, friends, and mentors.

The chapters that follow will track down and record the increasingly debilitating effects of the marginalization of thought and intellect in our society. This quest will be informed by a no-holds-barred look at some of the historical and

*"The barbarians aren't at the gates, they're dining with us.*

*Their names are J.Lo, Ja Rule, and Paris Hilton."*

—from **Th!nk**

In a bracing wake-up call to America, Michael R. LeGault mourns the decline of intellectualism, in favor of feel-good fixes and instant gratification in our popular, political, and social cultures—and delivers a no-holds-barred prescription for reversing the erosion of American civilization.

**Has your mind been fed intellectual junk food?**

Americans are abundantly gifted with the ability to lead an intellectual life, but pervasive commercialism, a reluctance to embrace personal responsibility, and a politically correct culture of mindless dependence on received ideas have robbed many Americans of their ability to think.

**It's time to wake up, America.**

**It's time to**

**THINK!**

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