

Thinking in Grey: The Value of Seeing The World in Shades of Grey

Binary thinking can distort your reality

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Most people are binary thinkers and instant in their judgments— they immediately categorise things as good or bad, true or false, right or wrong, black or white, start or finish, success or failure, friend or foe and so on — these slogans become substitutes for critical thinking.

Binary thinkers split almost everything into two while they seldom examine their own behaviour and attitudes because it's a lot easier to make a quick judgement and stay there. It requires less energy and thought.

As Kahneman puts it in his popular book *“Thinking Fast and Slow”*, we would rather take the easier route of thinking fast and settle on one of two options presented by the binary thinking than engage in slow, reflective thinking. However, once you start having a balanced view of things, people and issues, you will start seeing the value of it.

Like most behavioural patterns, “splitting” is very much present in our world today. It's common in Politics, Religion, Education, etc.

In fact, all of us at some time or another split our perceived reality into right and wrong. If we can't handle stressful or complex situations, we easily resort to binary thinking. But if splitting occurs on a regular basis it can be seen as an indication of psychological rigidity —“an obstinate inability to yield or a refusal to appreciate another person's viewpoint or emotions.”

Thinking in black and white can create a distorted picture of reality and restricts the range of our thoughts and emotions. When we look at every situation through a binary lens we are bound to miss essential details and make bad judgements.

Binary thinking can limit our understanding of the world. Black and white thinking can have a negative impact on your relationships and make it more difficult for you to compromise and cooperate with others in the pursuit of common interests. People who think in black and white are often incapable of reconciling the inconsistencies of human nature.

Accepting the world in shades of grey

Instead of leaping to a conclusion, and choosing to categorise, or split your worldview, often the smartest thing that you can do is to think in grey.

“The essence of thinking grey is this: Don’t form an opinion about an important matter until you’ve heard all the relevant facts and arguments, or until circumstances force you to form an opinion without access to all the facts,” explains Steven Sample in his book, [The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership](#). His favourite way to stimulate this kind of thinking is to force himself to contemplate outrageous and impossible ways to address a problem.

He also stresses that you can’t think in grey about every decision you have to make daily — thinking in grey is only necessary for the weightiest of issues, he argues. “If you were to attempt to think grey about everything, your brain would become a jumbled mess. Decisions about clothes, food, and so on are usually made in an off-the-cuff binary way, and that’s perfectly fine.”

Steven Sample was an electrical engineer and inventor whose patents for digital appliance controls, particularly touchpads on microwave ovens, have been licensed to practically every major manufacturer of appliances in the world.

This fundamental truth is easy to grasp in theory and hard to use in practice, every day. It takes practice. Thinking grey is an uncommon characteristic that requires a good deal of effort to develop.

Conventional wisdom considers it a valuable skill to be able to make judgments as quickly as possible. But grey thinkers argue that judgments about the truth of information or the merits of new ideas should be arrived at as slowly as possible.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once described something similar to thinking grey when he observed that the test of a first-rate mind is the ability to hold two opposing thoughts at the same time, while still retaining the ability to function.

“It’s only once you can begin divorcing yourself from good-and-bad, black-and-white, category X&Y type thinking that your understanding of reality starts to fit together properly. Putting things on a *continuum*, assessing the scale of their importance and quantifying their effects, understanding both the good and the bad, is the way to do it,” [explains](#) Shane Parrish, Founder of Farnam Street.

The key to thinking in grey is first to allow your mind to entertain even the outrageous ideas, and only then apply the constraints of practicality, legality, cost, time, and ethics. For every

idea, opinion or argument, ask yourself: Do I know this for sure, or have I simply landed on a comfortable spot?

The value of grey thinking is to break free from the incredibly tight constraints that rule our thinking. It's about being liberated from binary thinking, being for or against an idea instantaneously, and enhancing intellectual independence. The grey is where we find deeper reflective dialogue.

When you consciously want to think in grey, you will open up to people, mindsets, opinions and the world in general.

Pay attention as your brain starts twisting itself into a very uncomfortable state while you explore completely opposing sides of an argument. The process can deepen your understanding of global issues and popular ideas about the world.