



**Interview with Tom Chatfield**  
**Author, *How To Think***

**For podcast release**  
**Monday, January 9, 2023**

KENNEALLY: Sure, you've been told what to think many times. You could even say that's what the internet is for. Now comes Tom Chatfield with a paradigm twist. The author and digital philosopher offers us advice for how to think.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content. "I think, therefore I am," the famous formulation of René Descartes, is the foundation principle of Western philosophy. Thinking is uniquely human. It defines us as a species – *Homo sapiens*, the thinking human. Thinking requires no instructions for any of us, yet Tom Chatfield believes we can be trained to think better and more effectively. In *How to Think*, he explores what it means to think well, and he shares his ideas on the nature of understanding and the joy of creativity.

Tom Chatfield joins me now from his office outside London. Welcome to the program.

CHATFIELD: Thank you very much, Chris. Great to be here.

KENNEALLY: Great to have you, Tom. *How to Think* is a follow-up to your bestselling textbook *Critical Thinking*, also from SAGE Publishing. Why write textbooks about thinking, Tom? Do students and others today need to learn how to think?

CHATFIELD: As you say, there's something a bit presumptuous about telling people how to think when they've been thinking all the time. At the same time, if you imagine yoga instruction, we breathe all the time, but being told how to breathe in certain ways can have remarkable impacts on mental health and serenity and so on. And in some ways, I think instructing people on critical thinking and thinking techniques is not dissimilar to that. You're surfacing the stuff that we don't even know we're doing, and you're doing it for a purpose, which is to help people engage more rigorously and richly and confidently with the world around them.

For me, I love writing textbooks. I'm kind of surprised how much I love it. Because you get to help people. You get to be useful to people. And I feel that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context, we're deluged with information and options. We're rich in information and poor



in time. Helping people take a little bit more control of their cognitive environment is incredibly valuable, and it's a lovely offering to make.

KENNEALLY: Well, it does sound like a fabulous way to write and to think yourself, Tom Chatfield. You're a curious man at heart, it seems. And curiosity, of course, lies at the heart of thinking. What does it mean to you and to human beings to be curious about the world? Are there techniques to sharpen our innately curious natures?

CHATFIELD: So we are deeply curious animals, but we're also bifurcated cognitively, by which I mean, in the famous phrase of Daniel Kahneman, the behavioral economist, we think both fast and slow. In order to survive as creatures in the world, we have to do a lot of things without thinking about them much. And that's great. That's fine. No one wants to spend a lot of time wondering whether they should step out of the way of a very fast train that is coming towards them on a level crossing. And nobody really wants to spend 15 hours agonizing about what they're going to have for lunch on Friday or whether they should or shouldn't have an extra coffee. So we need to primarily react to the world fast and appropriately.

In this context, slow, deliberate, curious thinking is this kind of amazing luxury we have as a species. Of course, we have a lot more time for it today than our ancestors did, because we are not, broadly speaking, spending all our time hunting or trying to survive. And curiosity – I'm glad you zeroed in on that word, because curiosity is to be more interested in what we don't know than in what we do know. It's a beautiful thing. Curiosity is a group activity. It's a team game.

Really, my single message that I like to emphasize on thinking is that it's a team sport. It's not about sitting there and being very clever and very disciplined and coming up with amazing ideas. That's a lovely aspiration. But when you're curious – when you're reading, when you're thinking, when you're speaking, when you're reaching for questions – what you're doing is acknowledging that what you've got right now is not good enough, that you need to know more, that what's out there is much bigger than you. It's a very beautiful thing to engage with it openly.

So we can think, I guess, really of two different ways of interacting with the unknown. One way is the fearful and defensive way – that is to say that is strange, that is threatening, that is not familiar. I am uncomfortable. That is bad. That is other. Sometimes, perhaps, we need to do that to protect ourselves, to survive, or whatever. But much more precious is the times when we say that is strange, that is new, I don't understand it, I don't know enough, so how can I grasp it better? Where are the reinforcements? Who knows about this? What is there out there? What might there be to understand?



So curiosity for me is the communal engine through which we reach out to each other, to the world, with open questions and in which we start to engage with all that we don't know. Of course, that which we don't know is much bigger than that which we do know. I know a tiny amount. (laughter)

KENNEALLY: Tom Chatfield, you propose that to learn how to think, we begin by understanding the nature of our own ignorance. Practically speaking, how do we address our intellectual shortcomings?

CHATFIELD: Ignorance is a great thing. Unless we can admit we're ignorant, we can't learn. If I think I know everything already, by definition, I can't learn. So I'm very influenced by thinkers like the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, who was really interested a century ago in doubt as a necessary and exciting condition of discomfort. We become uncomfortable with an uncertainty, and then we reach out beyond that.

So I guess a fundamental thinking tool for me is what you might call constructive doubt. I would define this by contrasting it to things like cynicism and relativism. Relativism is the anything goes idea. And in its extreme form, or to be relativist, is simply to say, well, you've got your truth, and I've got mine, and who's to say which one is ultimately true? We can muster any number of facts to make any number of claims. Cynicism is to say, well, you would say that, wouldn't you? Because you're self-interested. You're trying to manipulate me. You want my money or my time. And I guess we could add dogmatism or self-righteousness to our list of defensive or unhelpful ways of thinking.

But constructive doubt is simply to say I'm not sure, and that's fine, because I'm interested in trying to remedy my uncertainty. The two ways we might try to remedy our uncertainty to engage with doubt constructively is to go out and find people or information that can help us become less wrong. It's a great phrase – less wrong, less deceived. I am not going to end up with some perfect and final truth about anything, really, in my life. That's not, I think, the way the world works.

Some people might disagree, but my perspective is very much that we are, all of us together, in the incremental business of trying to become less deceived and less wrong. So we need to be very open about our doubts and very interested in the techniques that can help us reduce uncertainty. The scientific method and empirical research is one such technique, but also empathetic, open, and curious conversation is another such technique. And perhaps above all, having a good emotional relationship with our own uncertainties and owning them and being able to hold – so Dewey makes this point – really that it can be very harmful to resist and fear doubt. Your ability to hold that doubt and be comfortable with that discomfort is a precondition for a lot of the other positives that can come from collaborating around its reduction.



KENNEALLY: Tom Chatfield, does the internet age change how we think about thinking? It certainly is easier than ever to find evidence to support almost any assertion.

CHATFIELD: I'm a big fan of what you might call the extended mind hypothesis or theory which philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers advanced in a paper a number of years ago by that name. You don't have to know about their philosophy to grasp the gist of the theory, which is simply that my mind, as opposed to my brain, is not just inside my body. My mind is partly composed of the tools and resources and language and networks I use. To be human is to be a linguistic, networked, technological creature.

So I think the digital age is profoundly important because of the enormous resources we have at our fingertips. I guess one of the most obvious things it does is it gives us options to find information at very high speed, but also tremendous seductions and temptations. It makes it very easy for us to fall victim to confirmatory biases, whereby you are constantly paying attention to and seeking out stuff that flatters your preconceptions or prejudices. And as part and parcel of that, there can come the problem that – as we often see on social media – we confuse the emotional impact of something. A headline grabs you. This statistic is awful. This story is shocking. That person is terrible. They're a horrible person. And we mistake the emotional impact for the truth value or significance of that thing. This is the dangerous side.

But on the positive side, and it's a huge positive, these same resources give us access to a diversity of others' perspectives and to a diversity of perspectives through which we can triangulate and push back against our own limitations. So I worry most about technology when it's driven by kind of constant, emotionally intense series of gut reactions, when we're almost guaranteed to miscalculate and misevaluate. But I think also when we are in the mindset of questioning, of triangulation, of exploration, suddenly the resources at our fingertips are enablers of the most astonishing kind of mental extension. And I think it's really important to celebrate that.

There's loads more we could say about tech. I think I'll kind of hold back on that for the time being. But the fundamental point, I guess, for me is that these systems are not neutral. They embody certain values, certain affordances, certain potentials. So we need to be really cognizant, for example, whether the system we're using wants us to react fast and send out a thousand messages a day without thinking about them or whether it is engineered to get us digging in deep, seeking truth, engaging with other people in a respectful manner. This is the constant deep tension. And our minds are bound up with it in a very intimate way.



KENNEALLY: Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge. Was he right, Tom Chatfield? What is the role of imagination in thinking?

CHATFIELD: I love that quote, partly because Einstein did actually say that. And as we all know from going online, if you believe everything you read online, Einstein and the Buddha and Elon Musk have said pretty much everything that can possibly be said. But this is a great line. Einstein is the paradigm of the genius physicist, the scientist, yet he did say in a 1929 interview that the imagination was more important than knowledge, and he glossed this by saying that it was more important because it spans all that is, all that might be – the entire realm of possibilities, not just the stuff that we’ve kind of currently proved. I think it’s a very powerful point that the imagination is what inspires us to make a leap between what we currently know and what might be true or could be true and also what might be wrong with our current paradigm, our current worldview.

When we talk about reasoning, there are traditionally, I guess, two main ways in which we apply reasoning. We deduce things logically – if A, then B. We use inductive reasoning to say, well, given that water always appears to boil at 100 degrees Centigrade at sea level, there is something going on here that is predictable. This is an induction. But excitingly, we also abduct – which doesn’t mean we steal things. It means we leap to conclusions. We move quite beyond the realm of the known to say, well, there might be a general rule here. There might be something larger at play. There might be a speed limit to the universe, which is one of Einstein’s great abductive leaps.

So it is for me the faculty of imagination that really defines the miraculousness of human thought. And I think it plays its role in science, because it’s not about saying anything can be true. It’s not about saying anything you can imagine is true. It’s about saying that humans – and perhaps as opposed to artificial intelligences at the moment, certainly – humans have this capacity to imagine the world different and then to set about testing and building and making and interrogating their assumptions in the light of the realm of the possible. So this is a wonderful skill if it’s deployed with sufficient critical rigor.

KENNEALLY: Thinking is a collaborative activity as well as a solitary one. So what are the most important ingredients in a thoughtful thinking collaboration?

CHATFIELD: I guess above all with collaboration, you do need to have common values and respect. I mean simply by that that gathering a diversity of views and perspectives around a common cause is incredibly powerful. It changes the world. But if you don’t have that common cause, if you don’t have metaphorically or literally a kind of room or space that people can enter with mutual respect and then interest in really finding out why other people have different perspectives on what might be going on – if you can’t find that



common cause, then you have the very worst of the human. You have us mobilizing our talents for hatred and exclusion and conflict.

So I think if you're looking about groups, establishing the common ground, establishing the common values, and establishing the respect for each other as human beings is incredibly important. Philosophically, we sometimes talk about the principle of charity, which doesn't mean giving away money. It simply means at least beginning with the assumption that the people you're talking to are not malicious or ignorant – that even if their views seem very strange to you, they have good reasons for holding them, and it's thus worth paying close attention to what those reasons might be, rather than just dismissing them as evil or misguided. Now, of course, some views may be evil and misguided, and some people may be very bad actors. So that's partly why it's so important, I think, to establish a good context.

Once you've got people in the room, I then think the quality of our listening is very important – really trying to work out why someone thinks differently to you. This is the key to a collaboration. We are all very good at rationalizing our own opinions and making the case that this only ceases to be a zero-sum game if we then pay really close attention to what someone else is saying and potentially adapt or expand or alter our own opinions in response and vice versa.

So I love the fact that a good collaboration is not at all a dry thing. It really does involve an emotional bond and an empathetic bond and a commitment. I think it's often said by negotiators that if you've got two people with very different views, you've got to find at least one thing that they agree on, even if it's just that they both want to find a way out of the negotiation somehow, and then you build – you build trust, and you build respect, and you listen, and you hear each other as human beings, and you decide what you can agree to disagree upon.

It's one of the great challenges and opportunities for us as a species – how can we find common causes, and when should and shouldn't we find common causes? Because ultimately, there are going to be things we disagree about, and there's going to be an end to collaboration. Civil society, when it functions, exists partly to draw and defend these lines. It's a very fraught topic these days, to say the least, and I think it's very easy as a philosopher to be a kind of hand-waving, ineffectual optimist rather than a hard-nosed realist, unfortunately.

**KENNEALLY:** Each chapter of *How to Think*, Tom Chatfield, includes a reflection box with questions that stimulate students and other readers for conversation. And the book ends with this open query to readers – what would you say is the most important or interesting thing you've read in this book? So I have to ask you – what have you heard as answers?



And what would you say is the most important or interesting thing you learned while writing the book?

CHATFIELD: That's a lovely question. Actually, one of the great things about textbooks is because people use them, because they're kind of tools, you do get people engaging with them quite closely sometimes, which is a great privilege. People often, when they're reflecting back on the books I've written, talk to me about the very simple idea that it's powerful to stop, and instead of saying I think this, just shrug your shoulders and say I'm not sure. What do you think? That little flip move, which I recommend as a discipline, partly because I'm bad at it – you know, I'm not good at doing that. I need to get better at doing that.

I'm really pleased that a lot of people seem to have found that to be a useful little maneuver, especially online, when a situation can have heated controversy, and sometimes, at least, you can flip things and just say, look, I'm not sure. I might be wrong. What do you think? Why do you think what you think? And at that point, you're creating, at least, the possibility of an empathy, a proper listening, of something more than just the exchange of views.

This links to me towards, I guess, the central point, that you can't separate the intellectual and the emotional. There's this large toolkit you might want to have as a thinker which is partly to do with emotional self-regulation. And the more time I spend working around this and facilitating and giving talks and trying to sort of see what it means to do better thinking in real life, the more I feel that it's the groundwork that matters most of all. If you can get people in the same room agreeing to disagree constructively, great. You've got to get them in the room. And getting people in the room – the literal or the metaphorical room – is not going to be about an argument.

One of the worst things you can do with someone you want to persuade of something is stand up and reel off a lot of facts and figures and effectively imply that they are a stupid person, and you are a clever person, and if they only listened to more clever people, they'd be better off. That's very unpersuasive. You have to begin by establishing a common ground, by showing that you respect where they're coming from, that you're interested in where they're coming from. And you have to really work at giving people reasons that speak to them as people, speak to their lives, not reasons that speak to them as people who ought to listen to you because you're clever.

This is a tough one, of course. Politicians are expert at this. The trouble is sometimes that they're coming up with anything at all that will persuade someone, no matter how untrue. The ninja move is being persuasive while not abandoning some sense of duty towards reality and truth. So I find myself very interested indeed in what it takes to lay the



groundwork to get people into these spaces, to open minds and hearts, so that we can begin to think together.

KENNEALLY: Tom Chatfield, author of *How to Think*, thank you for joining me today.

CHATFIELD: It's been my great pleasure. Thank you very much, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content from CCC.

END OF FILE