



## Think Like a Freak

By Steven D. Levitt  
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### Questions for Discussion

1. The authors open the book with the question: "What does it mean to think like a Freak?" Now that you've read the book, offer your answer.
2. "Most of us, if asked how we would behave in a situation that pits a private benefit against the greater good, won't admit to favoring the private benefit. But as history clearly shows, most people, whether because of nature or nurture, generally put their own interests ahead of others," the authors write. Why is it difficult to acknowledge our own selfishness? How might the world be a better place if more people considered the personal motivations behind their choices and actions? Do you think that awareness would change behavior?
3. The authors argue that an overreliance on morality can be detrimental to good decision-making, that it biases our thinking. What is your opinion? What kind of a society would we be if we relied less on our moral compass when making important decisions?
4. One of the lessons the authors teach is to admit and embrace what we don't know. Are you able to say this when you don't know something? Why is it difficult for us to admit a lack of knowledge? Have you followed their advice since reading the book? If so, what is the general reaction you receive when you say "I don't know?"
5. In discussing how to identify the right problem, the authors touch on education reform and ask this question: "So maybe, when we talk about why American kids aren't doing so well, we should be talking less about schools and more about parents?" Why does the discussion focus on schools, teachers, and curriculum? Why do we often shift the subject away from what really needs to be examined? How can we refocus? Think of an example from the news and talk about it: are the questions covered the right ones that either the politicians or the journalists should be asking?
6. One of the ways to think like a Freak is to think like a child. Why is doing so fruitful? How can we spark and retain our youthful sense of curiosity? Is it possible to overcome our preconceptions often when we don't even realize we hold such biases?
7. How can you determine someone's true incentives? What incentive will get you to do something you may not want to do? What about a family member or a friend you know? Think about the story of Smile Train. Why was its counter-intuitive fund-raising approach so successful?
8. In talking about incentives, Levitt and Dubner write, "Thinking like a Freak may sometimes sound like an exercise in using clever means to get exactly what you want, and there's nothing wrong with that. But if there is one thing we've learned from a lifetime of designing and analyzing incentives, the best way to get what you want is to treat other people with decency. Decency can push almost any interaction into the cooperative frame." Why does decency work? Why is often overlooked in daily interactions, and in some cases, completely forgotten?
9. Do you believe you can persuade someone who doesn't want to be persuaded? Think about someone who holds a different opinion than you about politics, the environment, taxes, or any other issue. What approach would you use to try to change his or her viewpoint?
10. The last lesson the Freakonomics team offers is to learn to quit when something isn't working. Looking back at your own experiences, are there times that a project or relationship should have been ended sooner to save time, money, or pain? Share some examples with your reading group.
11. In *Think Like a Freak*, the authors use data to tell stories they find interesting and to illustrate their lessons from a hot-dog-eating champion to an ulcer detective to a man who wanted to give free surgery to the world's poorest children. How does this storytelling method enhance their message? Try their method yourself: use a story of your own to emphasize a point about the book you found most interesting or important.
12. Do you have a particular approach for solving problems? Did reading the book provide you with new insights and ideas for improving or enhancing your own process? Explain.
13. Choose two three of the lessons from the book you found to be the most provocative or enlightening. Talk about why you found them to be remarkable, and what you learned from each.
14. What did you take away from reading *Think Like a Freak*?