

LINDA ELDER AND RICHARD PAUL



FOURTH  
EDITION

# THE THINKER'S GUIDE TO THE HUMAN MIND



*Thinking, Feeling, Wanting,  
and the Problem of Irrationality*

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## Understanding The Human Mind: The Big Picture

*The mind is its own place  
and in itself  
can make a hell of heaven  
or a heaven of hell  
– John Milton*

Everyone thinks. It is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking left to itself is biased, distorted, ill-founded, or prejudiced. Much of our thinking leads to problems in our lives. Much of our thinking leads to cruelty and injustice. Of course, the mind doesn't just think, it also feels and wants. What is the connection?

Our thinking shapes and determines how we feel and what we want. When we think well, we are motivated to do things that make sense and motivated to act in ways that help rather than harm ourselves and others.

At the same time, powerful emotions or desires influence our thinking, help or hinder how well we think in a situation. At any given moment, our minds (that complex of inner thoughts, feelings and desires) can be under the sway of our native irrationality or our potential reasonability. When we are ruled by our irrational tendencies, we see the world from a narrow self-serving perspective. We are not truly concerned with how our behavior affects others. We are fundamentally concerned with getting what we want and/or with validating our beliefs and views.

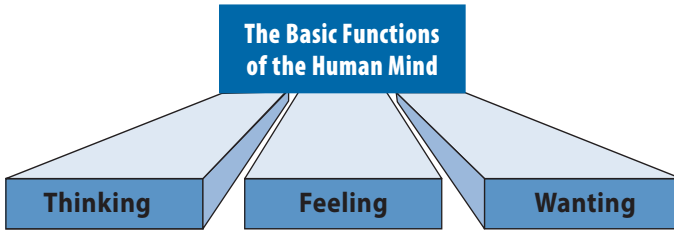
The key to understanding human thought then, is, to understand its essential duality: its capacity for irrationality (being trapped in egocentric and/or sociocentric thought with its attendant self-deception, self-delusion, rationalization, and so forth)) and its capacity for reasonability (freeing itself from self-delusion, myth, and illusion).

Though thinking, feeling and wanting are, in principle, equally important, it is only through thinking that we take command of our minds. It is through thinking that we figure out what is going wrong with our thinking. It is through thinking that we figure out how to deal with destructive emotions. It is through thinking that we change unproductive desires to productive ones. It is fairminded reasonability that frees us from intellectual slavery and conformity.

If we understand our mind and its functions, if we face the barriers to our development caused by egocentric and sociocentric thought, if we work upon our mind in a daily regimen, we can take the steps that lead to our empowerment as thinkers.

## The Mind's Three Distinctive Functions

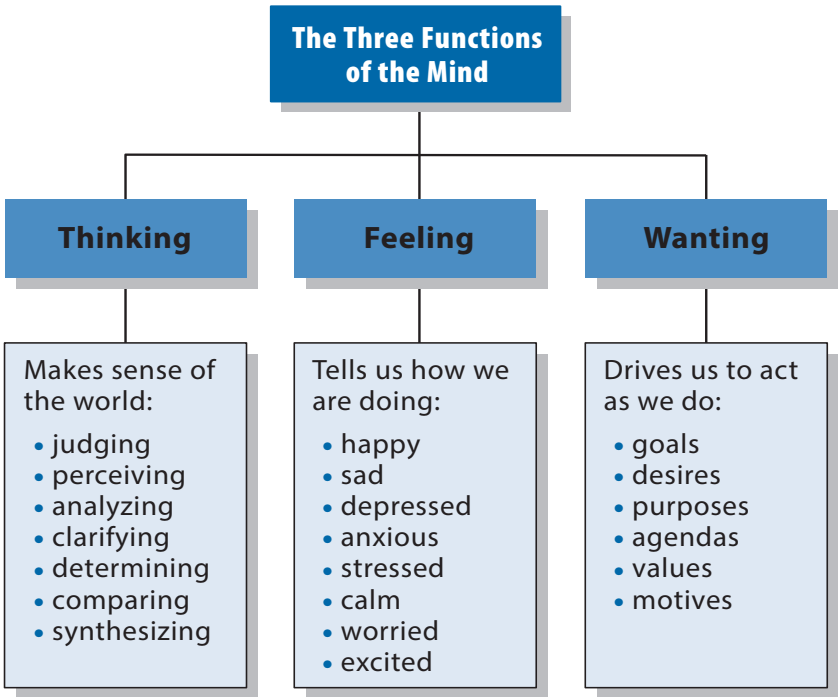
The mind has three basic functions: thinking, feeling, and wanting.



- Thinking is the part of the mind that figures things out. It makes sense of life's events. It creates the ideas through which we define situations, relationships and problems. It continually tells us: This is what is going on. This is what is happening. Notice this and that.
- Feelings<sup>1\*</sup> are created by thinking — evaluating whether the events of our lives are positive or negative. Feelings continually tell us: “This is how I should feel about what is happening in my life. I’m doing really well.” Or, alternatively, “Things aren’t going well for me.”
- Our desires allocate energy to action, in keeping with what we define as desirable and possible. It continually tells us: “This is worth getting. Go for it!” Or, conversely, “This is not worth getting. Don’t bother.”

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\* When we speak of feelings, we are not referring to emotions caused by dysfunctional biological processes such as problems in brain chemistry. When emotions are caused by imbalances in brain chemistry which people cannot control themselves, clinical help may be needed. When we speak of feelings, we are also not referring to bodily sensations, though feelings often accompany bodily sensations. For instance being “cold” might cause you to feel irritable. Recognizing the feeling of irritability might lead you to do something about being cold, like putting on a jacket. Finally, though the terms “feelings” and “emotions” might be used in some cases to refer to different phenomena, we use these terms interchangeably in this guide.

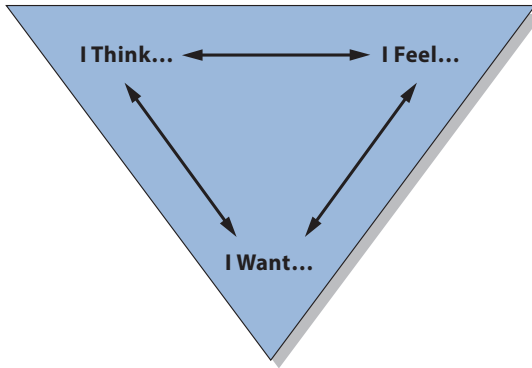


**Essential Idea:** Our mind is continually communicating three kinds of things to us:

- 1) what is going on in life,
- 2) feelings (positive or negative) about those events, and
- 3) things to pursue, where to put our energy (in light of 1 and 2).

## The Dynamic Relationship Between Thinking, Feeling, Wanting

There is an intimate, dynamic interrelation between thinking, feeling, and wanting. Each is continually influencing the other two.

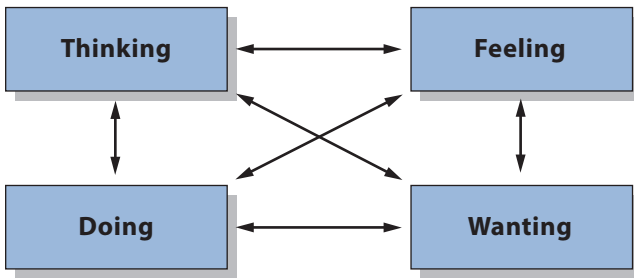


For example, when we think we are being threatened, we feel fear, and we inevitably want to flee from or attack whatever we think is threatening us. When we feel depressed, we think that there is nothing we can do to improve our situation, and we therefore lack the motivation to do anything about our situation. When we want to improve our eating habits it may be because we think that our diet is causing us harm and we feel dissatisfied with our diet.

Though we can consider the functions of the mind separately (to better understand them), they can never be absolutely separated. Imagine them as a triangle with three necessary sides: thoughts, feelings and desires. Eliminate one side of the triangle and it collapses. Each side depends on the other two. In other words, without thinking there can be no feelings or desires; without feelings, no thoughts or desires; without desires, no thoughts or feelings. For example, it is unintelligible to imagine thinking that something is threatening you and might harm you, wanting to escape from it, yet feeling nothing in relationship to what you think and want. Because you think you might be harmed and you want to flee, you necessarily feel fear.

## Behavior: A Product of the Mind's Functions

Thoughts, feelings and desires continually interact, and produce behavior as a result of that interaction. To understand this, consider the example on the previous page about eating habits. Suppose you feel dissatisfied with your diet. You want to improve your diet because you think that by doing so you will improve your health.



You therefore behave in the following ways:

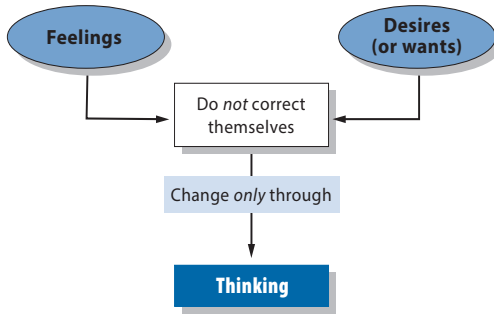
1. read about different diets (behavior),
2. come to conclusions about the best diet for you, then change your diet accordingly.

After a few weeks you notice that you feel better physically and are losing weight. You now feel satisfied. You think that your diet is improving your health. You therefore want to continue with the new diet.

But then after a few more weeks you think: "I don't want to eat any more salads and tasteless foods. I can't keep this up for the rest of my life! There must be a diet available that is not boring." You therefore act on that thinking. Again you consider different diet possibilities, finally deciding upon a new diet. The process begins again, with thoughts, feelings, desires, continually shaping behavior.

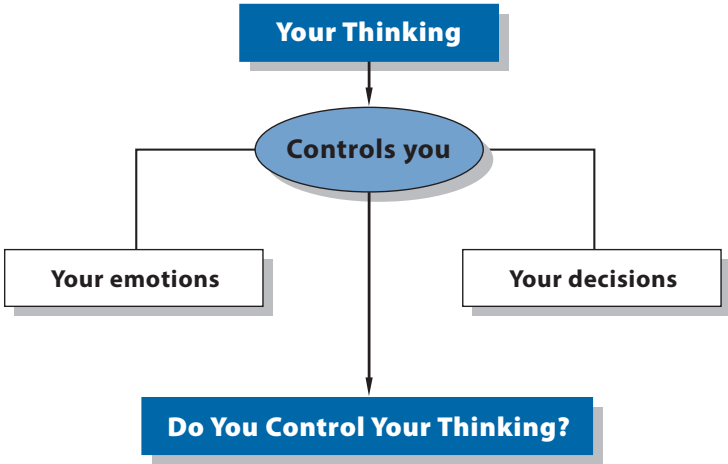
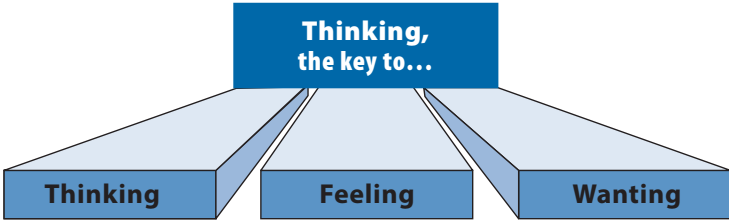
## Thinking as the Key to Feelings and Desires

Though thoughts, feelings and desires play equally important roles in the mind, continually influencing and being influenced by one another, thinking is the key to command of feelings and desires. To change a feeling is to change the thinking that leads to the feeling. To change a desire is to change the thinking that underlies the desire.



If I feel angry because my child is behaving disrespectfully toward me, I can't simply replace anger with satisfaction, for example. To change the anger to a more positive emotion, I must change the thinking I am doing in the situation. Perhaps I need to think about how to teach my child to behave respectfully towards me, and then behave in accordance with that new thinking. Perhaps I need to think about the influences in my child's life that might be causing the rude behavior and then try to eliminate those influences. In other words, I get control of my emotional state through my thinking.

Similarly we can't change a desire without changing the thinking that causes the desire. Suppose, for example, two people, Jan and John, have been in a romantic relationship but John has broken off the relationship. Yet Jan still wants to be in the relationship. Suppose that her desire comes from thinking (that may be unconscious) that she needs to be in the relationship to be emotionally stable, that she won't be able to function without John. Clearly this thinking is the problem. Jan must therefore change her thinking so she no longer wants a relationship with John. In other words, until she thinks that she does not need John to be OK, that she can function satisfactorily without him, that she doesn't need to be in a relationship with a person who doesn't want to be with her, she will want to be in the relationship with John. In short, unless her thinking changes, her desire won't change. She must defeat the thinking that is defeating her.





## Rational Capacities or Irrational Tendencies Can Control the Mind

The three functions of the mind — thoughts, feelings and desires — can be guided or directed either by one's native irrationality or by one's rational capacities. Irrational tendencies function automatically and largely unconsciously. Rational tendencies tend to arise from active self-development and are largely conscious. Irrationality can be principally categorized according to whether and to what degree it is egocentric and/or sociocentric in nature. Egocentric thought, as we refer to it in this guide, is focused on the pursuit of one's own desires and needs without regard to the rights and needs of others. Sociocentric thought is focused on the pursuit of group goals without regard to the rights and needs of those outside the group. Detailing and unpacking the concepts of egocentric and sociocentric thought, in juxtaposition with rationality or reasonability, are the primary emphasis of the rest of the guide.

### Egocentricity

Egocentricity exists in two forms: skilled and unskilled. Both pursue selfish ends. Highly skilled egocentric persons use their intelligence to effectively rationalize gaining their selfish ends at the expense of others. They skillfully distort information to serve their interest. They are often articulate in arguing for their ends (which they typically cover with altruistic language). They hide their prejudices well. Naïve others often fail to see their selfish core (masked, as it is, in an ethical or seemingly considerate façade). They often succeed in moving up the social ladder and gain prestigious jobs and honored positions. Skilled egocentric persons may favor either domination or submission, but often combine both in effective ways. For example, they may successfully dominate persons “below” them while they are subtly servile to those “above” them. They know how to tell people what they want to hear. They are consummate manipulators and often hold positions of power.

Unskilled egocentric persons are unsuccessful in pursuing their selfish ends because many see through them and do not trust them. Their prejudices and narrowness are more obvious and less schooled. They often have blatantly dysfunctional relationships with others. They are often trapped in negative emotions they do not understand. Unskilled egocentric persons may prefer either domination or submission as a means of getting what they want, but whichever they use, they are usually unsuccessful at either. Sometimes they are overtly cruel or play the victim in openly self-pitying ways.

### Sociocentricity

As humans, we are all born centered in ourselves. As part of our native egocentricity, we feel directly and unavoidably our own pain and frustration, our own joy and pleasure. We largely see the world from a narrow, self-serving perspective. But we humans are also

social animals. We must interact with others to survive as beings in the world. In interacting with others in groups we form complex belief systems. These belief systems often reflect a variety of forms of intellectual blindness as well as intellectual insights. In living a human life, we develop world views that are a mixture of self-serving, group-serving, and rational thought.

Our social groups not only provide us with ways and means of surviving; they also impose on us relatively narrow ways of looking at the world. And they powerfully influence our thoughts and actions. Our intrinsic narrowness of perspective, focused on our own needs and wants, merges with our group views as we are increasingly socialized and conditioned, over time, to see the world, not only from our own point of view but from the perspective of our groups: family, gender, peers, colleagues, ethnic group, nationality, religion, profession, and so forth.

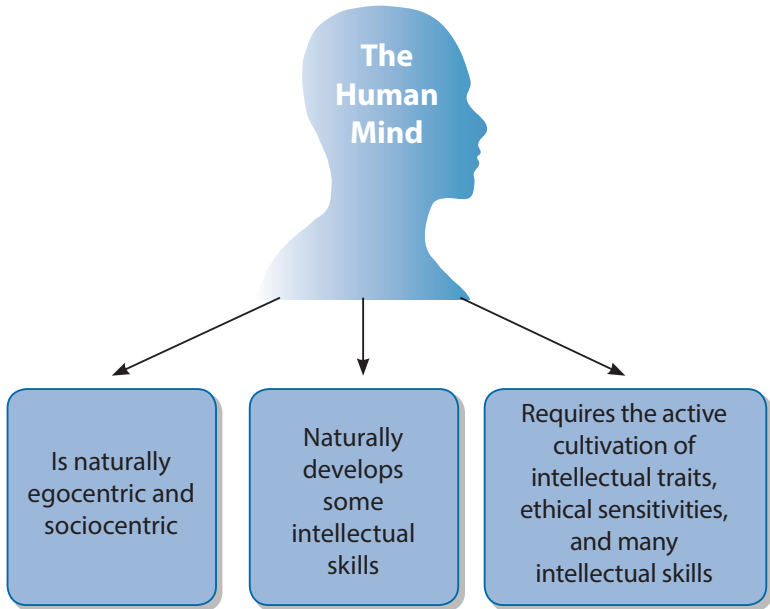
Sociocentric thought is the native human tendency to see the world from narrow and biased group-centered perspectives, to operate within the world through group rules, group interests. It is intimately connected with the human “need” for validation — the innate need to be accepted and esteemed by others.

## **Rationality**

Rationality is properly thought of as a way of thinking and acting in which intelligence and sound reasoning are used to serve justice, in which the actor adheres to the same standards by which he judges his enemy, in which he does not need to rationalize or project a false façade to impress others. Successful powerful people are often intelligent, unreasonable, and unscrupulous—all in one. They often cannot openly admit the games they play to obtain social and economic success. They often suppress evidence that puts them in a bad light. Reasonable people, on the other hand, respect the rights and needs of others, are flexible, open-minded, and just. They have intellectual integrity as well as intellectual humility and perseverance. They have confidence in reason and follow its lead. They are able to enter empathically into the point of view of others. They do not misuse language. They say what they mean and mean what they say.

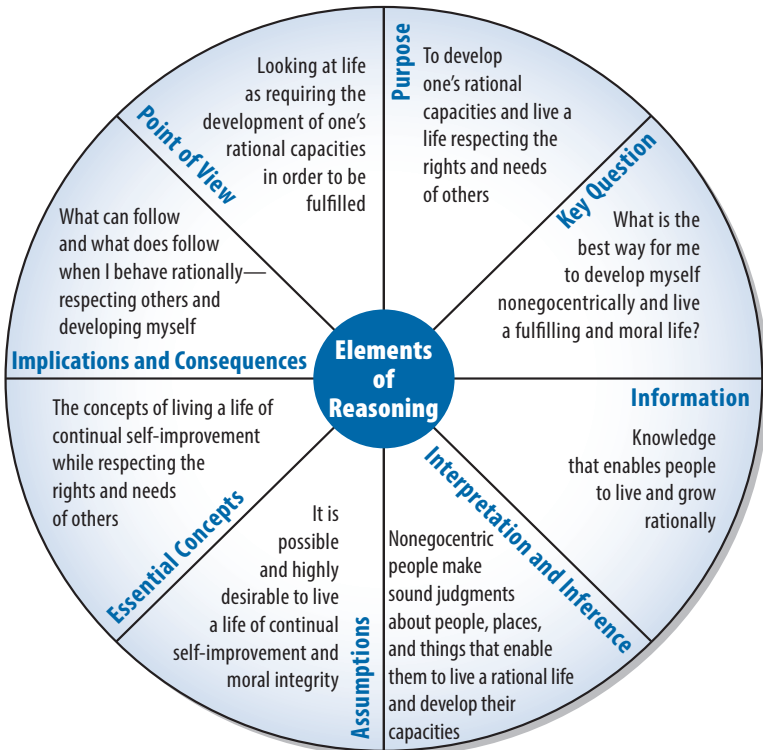
Rationality is sometimes wrongly thought of as covering both those who intelligently and successfully pursue selfish ends and those who intelligently and successfully pursue unselfish ends. We believe that those who intelligently pursue selfish ends are those described below as skilled egocentric persons. In other words, we do not think that those who sophisticatedly manipulate people to act against their interests and consequently lack integrity, are properly called “reasonable” persons. Consummate manipulators, however skilled and successful, are not reasonable persons (since they would be the first to object to being treated as they routinely treat others).

## The Human Mind is Frequently Irrational While Having the Capacity for Rational Thought

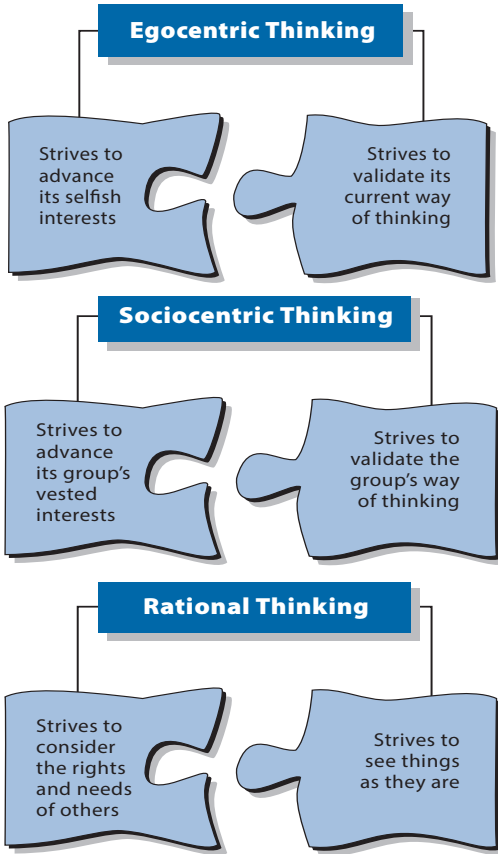


**Essential Idea:** All humans are innately egocentric and sociocentric. Humans also have (largely undeveloped) rational capacities. Humans begin life as primarily egocentric creatures. Over time, infantile egocentric self-centered thinking merges with sociocentric group-centered thinking. All humans regularly engage in both forms of irrational thought. The extent to which any of us is egocentric or sociocentric is a matter of degree and can change significantly in various situations or contexts. While egocentric and sociocentric propensities are naturally occurring phenomena, rational capacities must be largely developed. It is through the development of rational capacities that we combat irrational tendencies and cultivate critical societies.

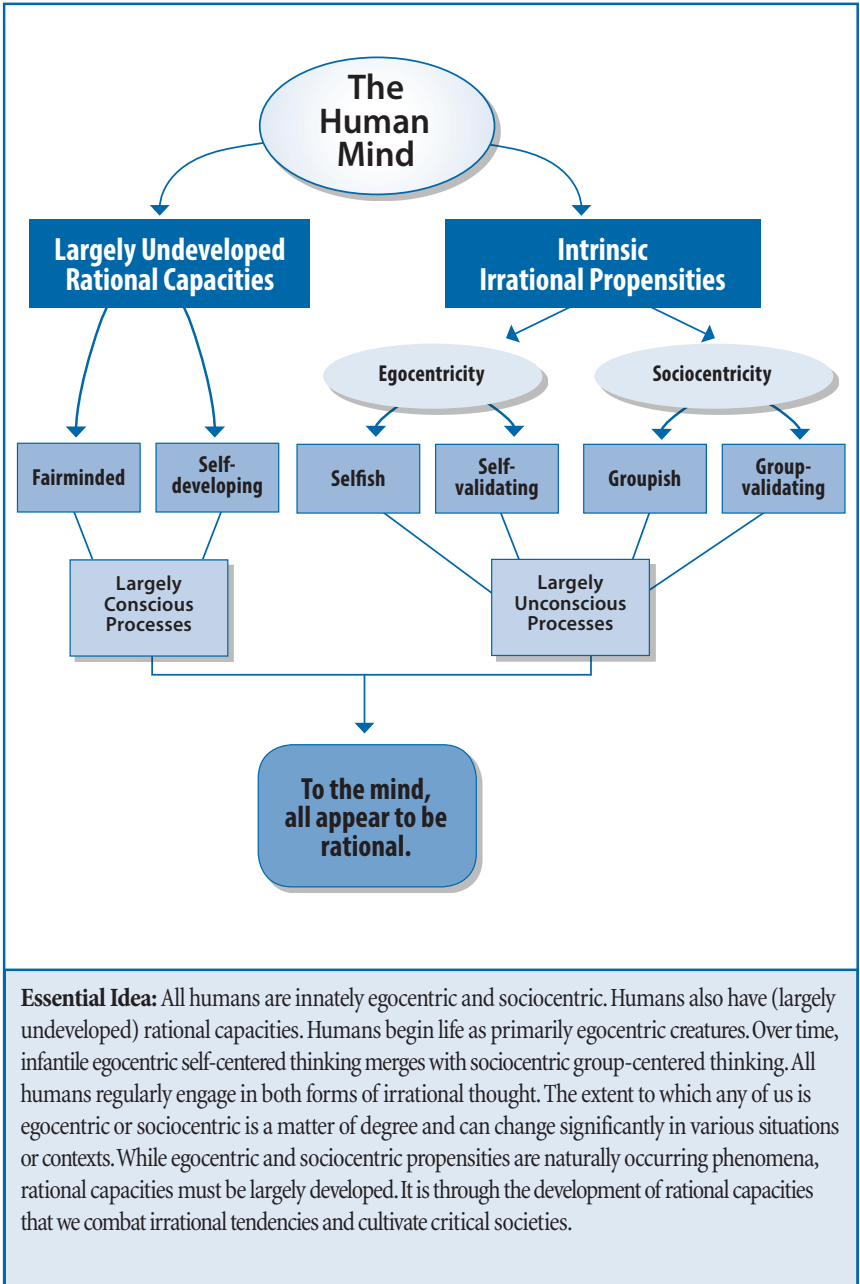
# The Logic of Rationality



## Distinguishing Rational from Egocentric and Sociocentric Motives

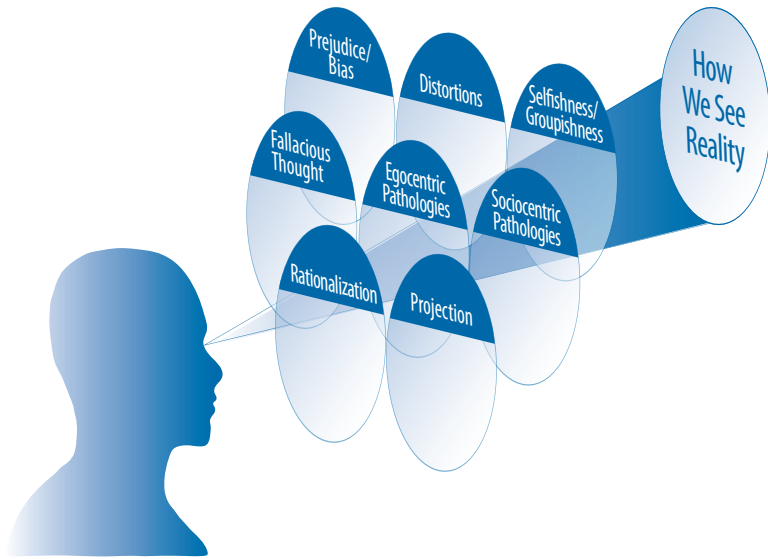


**Essential Idea:** Though egocentric, sociocentric and rational thought may be complex, we can capture their basic motives.



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## Humans Often Distort Reality Through Irrational Lenses



When engaging in irrational pursuits, the mind must deceive itself; it relies on pathologies of thought to do it. The pathologies of thought can be pictured as a set of filters or lenses that:

- cause or “enable” us to see the world according to our perceived interests, without regard to others,
- distort reality so we can get what we want,
- lead us to ignore relevant information to paint a favored picture of the world, based on our vested interests.

These pathologies allow us to deceive ourselves into believing what we want to believe (in order to get what we want or maintain our viewpoint). Pathologies of thought, hence, serve their master—self-deception. They are manifest in both egocentric and sociocentric thought.

## The Problem of Egocentric Thinking

Egocentric thinking comes from the unfortunate fact that humans do not naturally consider the rights and needs of others, nor do we naturally appreciate the point of view of others or the limitations in our own point of view. We become explicitly aware of our egocentric thinking only if trained to do so. We do not naturally recognize our egocentric assumptions, the egocentric way we use information, the egocentric way we interpret data, the source of our egocentric concepts and ideas, the implications of our egocentric thought. We do not naturally recognize our self-serving perspective.

As humans we live with the unrealistic but confident sense that we have fundamentally figured out the way things actually are, and that we have done this objectively. We naturally believe in our intuitive perceptions—however inaccurate. Instead of using intellectual standards in thinking, we often use self-centered psychological standards to determine what to believe and what to reject. Here are the most commonly used psychological standards in human thinking:

**“IT’S TRUE BECAUSE I BELIEVE IT.”** *Innate egocentrism:* I assume that what I believe is true even though I have never questioned the basis for many of my beliefs.

**“IT’S TRUE BECAUSE I WANT TO BELIEVE IT.”** *Innate wish fulfillment:* I believe in, for example, accounts of behavior that put me (or the groups to which I belong) in a positive rather than a negative light even though I have not seriously considered the evidence for the more negative account. I believe what “feels good,” what supports my other beliefs, what does not require me to change my thinking in any significant way, what does not require me to admit I have been wrong.

**“IT’S TRUE BECAUSE I HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED IT.”** *Innate self-validation:* I have a strong desire to maintain beliefs that I have long held, even though I have not seriously considered the extent to which those beliefs are justified, given the evidence.

**“IT’S TRUE BECAUSE IT IS IN MY SELFISH INTEREST TO BELIEVE IT.”** *Innate selfishness:* I hold fast to beliefs that justify my getting more power, money, or personal advantage even though these beliefs are not grounded in sound reasoning or evidence.

Since humans are naturally prone to assess thinking in keeping with the above criteria, it is not surprising that we, as a species, have not developed a significant interest in establishing and teaching legitimate intellectual standards. It is not surprising that our thinking is often flawed.



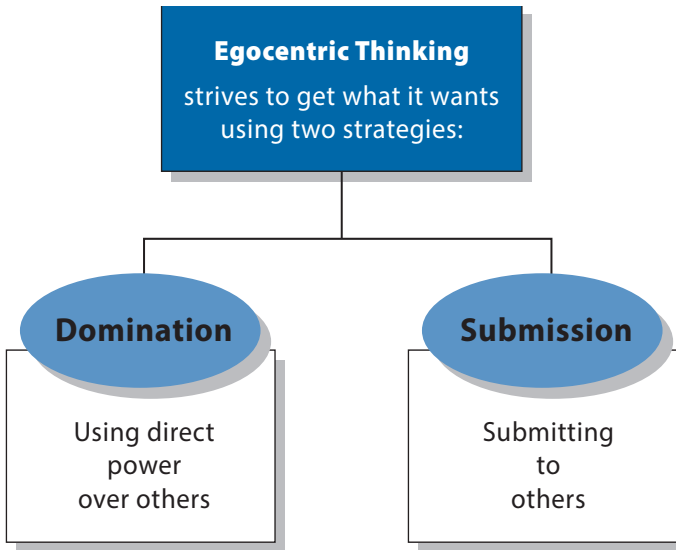
## Feelings That Accompany Egocentrism

These are some of the many feelings that might accompany egocentric thinking. They often occur when egocentric thinking is “unsuccessful.” Note that some of these emotions may be concomitant with rational thought — depending on the context and particulars in a given case.



**Essential Idea:** When egocentric thinking is successful in getting what it wants, positive feelings accompany it. But when egocentric thinking is not able to achieve its purposes, negative feelings result.

## Distinguishing Egocentric Domination From Egocentric Submission



**Essential Idea:** Two irrational ways to gain and use power are given in two distinct forms of egocentric strategy:

- 1) The art of dominating others (a direct means to getting what one wants).
- 2) The art of submitting to others (an indirect means to getting what one wants).

Insofar as we are thinking egocentrically, we seek to satisfy our egocentric desires either directly or indirectly, by exercising power and control over others, or by submitting to those who can act to serve our interest. To put it crudely, egocentric behavior either bullies or grovels. It either threatens those weaker or subordinates itself to those more powerful, or oscillates between them in subtle maneuvers and schemes.

## Primary Forms of Sociocentric Thought

Consider four distinct forms of sociocentric thought. These forms function and are manifest in complex relationships with one another; all are destructive.<sup>2</sup> They can be summarized as follows:

1. **Groupishness<sup>3</sup> (or group selfishness)**—the tendency on the part of groups to seek the most for the in-group without regard to the rights and needs of others, in order to advance the group's biased interests. Groupishness is almost certainly the primary tendency in sociocentric thinking, the foundational driving force behind it (probably connected to survival in our dim dark past). Everyone in the group is privileged; everyone outside the group is denied group privileges and/or seen as a potential threat.
2. **Group validation**—the tendency on the part of groups to believe their way to be the right way and their views to be the correct views; the tendency to reinforce one another in these beliefs; the inclination to validate the group's views, however dysfunctional or illogical. These may be long-held or newly established views, but in either case, they are perceived by the group to be true and in many cases to advance its interests. This tendency informs the world view from which everyone outside the group is seen and understood and by which everything that happens outside the group is judged. It leads to the problem of *in-group* thinking and behavior—everyone inside the group thinking within a collective logic; everyone outside the group being judged according to the standards and beliefs of the in-group.

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<sup>2</sup> The term sociocentric thought is being reserved for those group beliefs that cause harm or are likely to cause harm. Group thought that is reasonable, useful, or helpful would not fall into this category. In our view, it is important to see sociocentric thought as destructive because otherwise the mind will find a variety of ways to rationalize it. By recognizing it as irrational, we are better able to identify it in our thinking and take command of it.

<sup>3</sup> By groupishness we mean group selfishness. This term refers to group pursuit of its interests without sufficient regard for the rights and needs of those outside the group; its counterpart is selfishness, which refers to individual pursuit of one's interests without sufficient regard for the rights and needs of others. We might use the term "group selfishness" for our intended meaning here; but it seems rather to be an oxymoron. How can a group be selfish, given the root word "self," which refers to the individual? The term "groupish" seems a better fit for the purpose. Note that this use of the term "groupish" differs from the way in which evolutionary biologists use the same term. Their use generally refers to the fact that members of a group are aware of their group membership and are aware that there are others (like them) in the group.

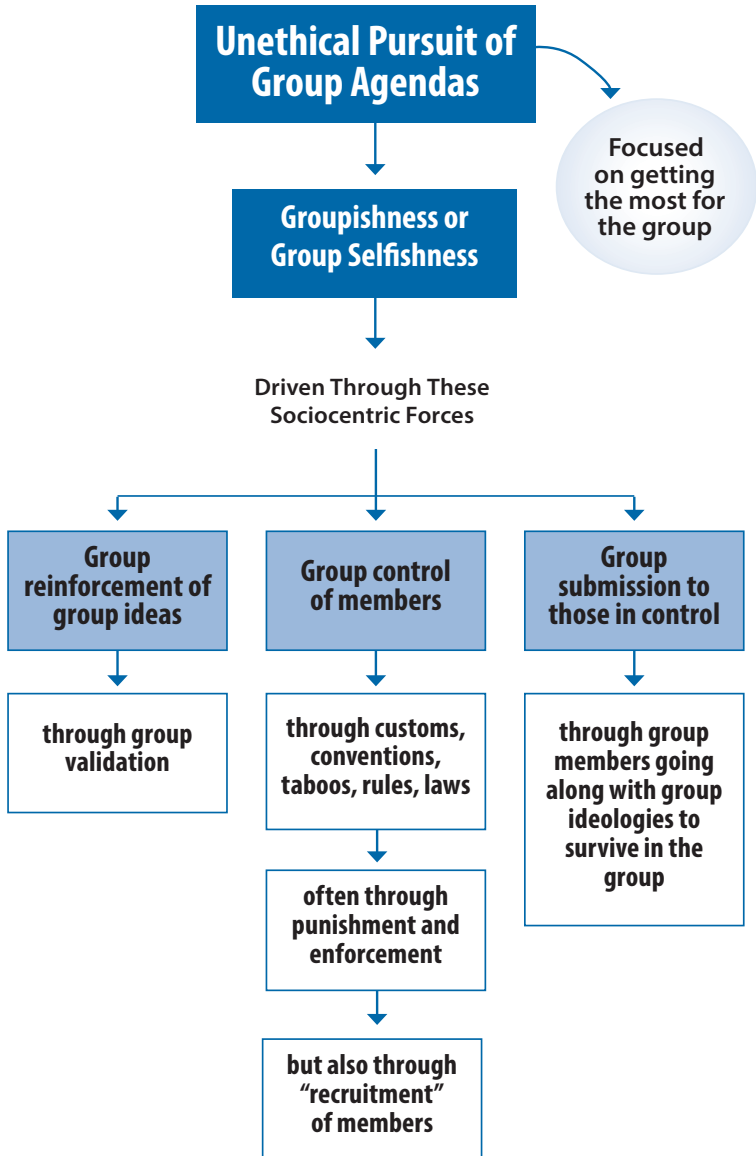
3. **Group control**—the tendency on the part of groups to ensure that group members behave in accordance with group expectations. This logic guides the intricate inner workings of the group, largely through enforcement, ostracism, and punishment in connection with group customs, conventions, rules, taboos, mores, and laws. Group control can also take the form of “recruitment” through propaganda and other forms of manipulation. It is often sophisticated and camouflaged.
4. **Group conformity**—a byproduct of the fact that to survive, people must figure out how to fit themselves into the groups they are thrust into or voluntarily choose to join. They must conform to the rules and laws set down by those in control. Dissenters are punished in numerous ways. Group control and group conformity are two sides of the same coin—each presupposes the other.

These four sociocentric tendencies interrelate and overlap in any number of ways and thus should be understood as four parts of an interconnected puzzle.

Sociocentric tendencies largely lie at the unconscious level. It isn't that people are aware of these tendencies and consciously choose to go along with them. Rather, these dispositions are, at least to some extent, hidden by self-deception, rationalization, and other native mechanisms of the mind that keep us from seeing and facing the truth in our thoughts and actions. The mind tells itself one thing on the surface (e.g., we are being fair to all involved) when in fact it is acting upon a different thought entirely (e.g., we are mainly concerned with our own interests). In most instances, the mind can find ways to justify itself—even when engaging in highly unethical acts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It should be pointed out that there are many circumstances where rational behavior might be confused with sociocentric behavior. For instance, group members may well validate among themselves views that are reasonable. And groups should expect group members to behave in ethical ways. There may also be many other conditions under which it would make sense for an individual to conform to group expectations (e.g. to keep from being tortured or to contribute to the well being of the planet).



Groupishness, to be effectively “achieved”, requires group reinforcement, group control and group submission; this diagram begins to illuminate the complex relationships between and among the four primary forms of sociocentric thought.