PRAISE FOR *LIBERATING THE MIND*

"How easy it is to see the corrosive effect of groupthink in others—over history or across borders. Linda Elder wants more from us. She wants us to comprehend, in ourselves and in our own time, just how much our fragile psyches are built of beliefs and opinions that have value only as signs of group membership."

   —Ethan Watters, Author of *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*

"Human beings are, above all, social animals. On the whole, this is a good thing, but it can also lead to the kind of groupthink that poet William Blake called 'mind-forged manacles.' *Liberating the Mind* is a clarion call for independent thinking and critical analysis. Using compelling examples, Linda Elder illuminates the perils of sociocentric thought."

   —Mark Pendergrast, author of *Victims of Memory* and other books

"Many people understand the drawbacks of egocentric thought. Less widely known, however, is the downside at the other extreme: 'sociocentric' thought. Yet, as Linda Elder shows so clearly, excessive group-orientation can dangerously deform our thoughts, our lives, our planet. Read *Liberating the Mind* and then reflect on how sociocentric thought (actually, a failure of thought) has influenced you and those around you. When it comes to counteracting this insidious process, there is nothing better than good, clean, honest, hard, serious and probing thought, and *Liberating the Mind* is a superb handbook for precisely this antidote."

   —David P. Barash, professor of psychology, University of Washington, and author, most recently, of *Homo mysterious: evolutionary mysteries of human nature*

"*Liberating the Mind: Overcoming Sociocentric Thought*, by Linda Elder, provides a detailed and challenging review and examination of critical thinking, and serves as an effective guide toward careful and productive thought. Various patterns and pitfalls of common cognitive practices are evaluated. Abundant examples are given of human problems and failures resulting from actions based on self-centered and group-centered thinking. Dr. Elder's many quotations from notable thinkers provide interest and color . . . Linda Elder has done it again. Her latest contribution is a very worthwhile treatise on the importance of critical thinking. It will (and should) be widely distributed and read."

   —Joseph Erwin, primatologist, editor and author of *Captivity and Behavior*

Liberating the Mind offers useful exercises to help readers think through their own preconceptions as well as those held by their families, religions, and societies. A practical tool for those looking to free their minds."

   —Doug Merlino, author of *The Hustle*

FOREWORD

In *Liberating the Mind: Overcoming Sociocentric Thought and Egocentric Tendencies*, Linda Elder addresses the topic of sociocentrism, one of the two most serious obstacles to critical thinking and to developing a critical society. (The other, which she also discusses with insight, is egocentrism.) She lays out many of the crucial and all-pervasive ways that our socialization, our very human trait of being a member of a group, influences our thinking and our behavior; she details the skills, faculties of mind, and intellectual virtues that constitute our main ways to recognize and emancipate ourselves from the dysfunctionalities of that influence; and she heads us toward an ideal—the ideal of a critical society—that can be created only by the systematic, explicit, global, and disciplined cultivation of our rational selves.

It is unusual for a book on critical thinking to devote so much focused attention to the obstacles to thought. Writers on critical thinking often tend to bypass extensive discussion of obstacles in favor of treating the skills, and sometimes the dispositions, of critical thinking. But Elder argues persuasively that the influence of sociocentrism is so deeply rooted in being human that it permeates all aspects of our thinking skills and dispositions. What we take to be clear, accurate, and relevant depends, to a disturbing degree, on what the groups we belong to assume is clear, accurate, and relevant. Even critical thinking virtues, such as fairmindedness and intellectual empathy, can be tainted by sociocentrism: the points of view toward which we are fairminded and intellectually empathetic tend to be those sanctioned by the social mores we live within; points of view that are at odds with our sociocentrism tend not to receive such fair and empathetic treatment. Thus, what Elder analyzes is the dark side of being a social animal. And she illuminates key steps to take for us to emancipate ourselves from the dysfunctionalities it produces.

Her emphasis, though, is not on critical thinking in a vacuum, or even on fostering it for its own sake. Hers is not a rarefied or ivory-tower view of critical thinking and education. Valuable as she believes critical thinking to be in itself, even more valuable is the power it has to move us toward critical societies. For all its detailing of the dysfunctionalities of society, Elder's is at heart a visionary book. She lays out six of what she calls "the hallmarks of a critical society." These are factors such as the extent to which clear, accurate, relevant thinking is actually valued in the society, or the extent to which ethical reasoning and the intellectual virtues are fostered in public discourse and action. As she articulates these hallmarks, it becomes apparent how very far we are from anything like achieving a critical society. At the same time, her work on the elements, standards, and traits of critical thinking lays out the most fundamental means for seeing through the negative influences of our societies, and the means also perhaps of changing those societies.

> — Gerald Nosich, author of *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking across the Curriculum*

LIBERATING THE MIND

OVERCOMING SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT AND EGOCENTRIC TENDENCIES

LINDA ELDER

FOREWORD BY GERALD NOSICH

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the life and memory of Richard Paul (1937-2015), whose seminal work in critical thinking is widely recognized. When Paul established the Center for Critical Thinking in 1980, his goal was to establish a permanent center of scholarship that would bring together, over the long run, scholars, educators, and citizens interested in pursuing a substantive conception of critical thinking—one relevant to thinking within all professions and academic disciplines, in all domains of human thought and life. Since establishing the Center, and later the Foundation for Critical Thinking, Paul worked indefatigably to help people understand the importance of critical thinking to the cultivation of fairminded critical societies. Paul's work and thought largely laid the groundwork for a bonafide field of critical thinking studies. Almost 40 years later, the message is the same: if we want to significantly improve the decisions we make in human societies, we must improve how we think about the decisions we make. Our thinking is the key, the tools of critical thinking, the fundamental answer.

Paul emphasized the importance of fairmindness and intellectual integrity in a rich conception of critical thinking, and was himself a living example of the essential human virtues. For every theoretical point laid down, Paul helped us work our way through real problems. From early on in Paul's work, keeping with the Socratic tradition, we see a commitment to understanding things as they are, conceptualizing reality in ways that make most sense given the evidence, and living in accordance with the ideas one professes. Paul argued for the most foundational and transformative ways of approaching thought, so as to gain the greatest leverage for most effectively dealing with issues and problems in every part of life.

As a long-time student of Paul, my work dovetails in such a way with Paul's thinking as to make our conceptual work united, if not virtually one. Hence, the underpinnings for this book have been laid over many years of my work with Richard Paul. For my own scholarship, I am indebted to him for the deep and enduring insights he illuminated in his early and mid-life writings. (All of his later work was written in coauthorship with me.) I am even more in his debt for the tremendous energy he personally dedicated to my learning and development throughout the 20 extraordinary years of our marriage. Before he became ill, Paul wrote the Afterword for this book; but he was taken from us before we were able to get this manuscript to publication. Its realization is a humble contribution to his memory.

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PREFACE
COMMANDING THE DARK SIDE WITHIN

This book has been written fundamentally to help bring the problems implicit in sociocentric thought more prominently into view in human life. It focuses on the types of influences groups tend to have on individual human thought, and on some of the significant problems that result from these influences. It is concerned with the dysfunctional patterns within which groups routinely operate, as well as the root causes of groupthink. In short, it is about the problem of sociocentricity in human life.

Sociocentrism, in brief, is the powerful propensity among humans to privilege their own and to control, or eliminate, those who go against the group. It is routinely found throughout human life in the tendency to be biased in favor of our own groups, to impose sanctions on those who go against the group, to unquestioningly submit to those in power, and to validate the beliefs of our respective groups.

Sociocentrism is a powerful force in every culture in the world. It is exemplified in widespread group selfishness, conformity, and myopia. It threatens the well-being of humans, other species, and the planet. Due to technological advances, the capacity of human groups to cause great suffering among themselves, as well as to other sentient creatures, is now unprecedented. Insofar as I understand, the magnitude of destruction to the planet at the hands of human groups in the last 150 years has been exponentially greater than anything seen in the previous history of *Homo sapiens*. This is due largely to speciescentrism, a form of sociocentrism in which humans see themselves as superior to other living creatures in terms of fundamental rights.

Pressing and complex problems deriving from sociocentric thought now abound in every important domain of life. Our only hope for dealing with these problems lies in our thinking. There is no other way. Yet, we as humans give very little attention to the thinking that leads to most of our problems. Until we do, we won't be able to emancipate our thinking from the shackles of social ideologies, rules, conventions, mores, taboos, groupthink, prejudice, bias, vested interest, selfishness, arrogance, closed mindedness, and hypocrisy. Until we do, we cannot hope to significantly reduce sociocentrically-caused human destructiveness.

To my mind, we are in need of an integrated, intuitive, substantive conception of sociocentric thought. To date, what has been written about sociocentricity has often been written under the label "ethnocentricity" or the term "groupthink"; the research that illuminates it is often scattered and disorganized. Consequently, no adequate theory has been developed that makes full sense of why and

how sociocentricity occurs in human cultures. No integrated theory has been articulated that illuminates root tendencies in human thought and their interrelationships. For instance, little has been written about the relationship between native egocentric and sociocentric thought—about how these two sets of tendencies influence, and are influenced by, one another. Further, the complex interplay between sociocentric thought, egocentric thought, and rational thought has been little explored in the developing theory of the human mind.

Root causes of problems in human thought can be largely understood in terms of these two sets of cognitive tendencies, both of which are "natural" and "comfortable" to the human mind: 1) egocentrism, or narrowminded, selfish thought, and 2) sociocentrism, or narrowminded, "groupish" thought. Both are briefly dealt with in this book. Again, the primary focus is on sociocentrism; but because egocentric and sociocentric propensities are best understood in relationship with one another, these irrational tendencies are approached as an interactive pair.

Finally, let us not forget the human potential for fairminded thought and rational living. I believe that we humans are capable of gaining significant command of our egocentric and sociocentric tendencies if: 1) we understand them deeply, and 2) we actively work to diminish their power in our lives.[1]

In this book, I argue that each of us is a mixture of reasonability, selfishness, and what I term "groupishness." We routinely engage in all three ways of thinking (often every day). The best hope for our survival and the well-being of the planet lies in cultivating our capacities for fairmindedness and criticality, diminishing thereby the power of our native egocentric and sociocentric tendencies.

If we are ever to thrive as a species, we must embrace new ways of thinking. We must ask new questions, pursue new purposes, create new ideas. We must begin with new assumptions and look at things from new perspectives. And we need all of these new ways of thinking to be based in *critical thought*—not selfishness, arrogance, or groupthink.

For instance, when we grasp the intimate connection between thinking and behavior, we understand that our actions are caused by our thinking. When we

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1   It is important to point out, before going further, that there are many ways to conceptualize the mind, some better than others. The concepts of sociocentric, egocentric, and rational thought are well rooted in scholarship focused on understanding human behavior. The ways in which I have developed these ideas are in keeping with educated uses of words and can be easily exemplified by a careful study of human behavior. But the human mind is complex and, in the final analysis, can only be imperfectly understood, and then often only through analogies and metaphors.

understand the role that thinking plays in our lives, we begin to take command of the thinking that is controlling us. We can change the thinking that causes us to behave in irrational ways. We can replace unreasonable, illogical, self-centered, or group-centered thought with reasonable, logical, ethical thought.

We can work toward the cultivation of critical societies—societies in which fairminded, critical thought is the rule rather than the exception. We can create cultures in which people routinely enter and empathize with alternative viewpoints, within and among cultures. We can develop societies in which people regularly look for and correct mistakes in their thinking, and in which people expect the same high standards of themselves that they expect of others. We can follow the example of Socrates; we can try to *live the examined life*, even within complex political structures.

The ideas in this book are largely conceptual, rather than empirical, in nature. I have tried to use intuitive examples to support a given conceptual point. But this is not a guide to experimental studies on humans as social animals. Many excellent studies have been conducted that illuminate our understanding of human thought and behavior. Some of these studies have been referenced herein. But this book is primarily constitutive of theory, not enumerative of scientific fact. When you come across a point that seems counterintuitive, it might help to formulate your own examples before you decide whether to accept or reject the idea for which I am arguing. I have at all times tried to adhere to what I consider paradigm cases and examples.

Where I do refer to empirical studies, some will wish I had used more current studies. Where I quote from important thinkers from the past, some will wish I had quoted from important thinkers of today. I have tried to keep this book brief while supporting the conceptual points implicit in a substantive conception of sociocentric thought, critically analyzed and assessed. These points could certainly be further developed with additional examples. Many of the conceptual points might perhaps have been supported by better examples.

Moreover, a number of my examples may be considered controversial. This is a natural implication of the concepts with which I am dealing, since examples meant to illuminate sociocentric thought will focus on critiquing the received views of human societies (either past or present). If you have accepted uncritically an established cultural practice, and someone is critical of that practice, your natural tendency will be to negate or feel offended by their critique. This is true for us all as humans, *precisely because we are sociocentric*. Ironically, then, our

very sociocentrism may keep us from internalizing the idea of sociocentrism itself (because by negating the idea, we can avoid facing our own irrational tendencies within our respective groups). In the final analysis, it is for you to judge whether the theory I have developed and the assertions I have made are sound and worthy of your serious attention.

Because there are many complexities in human thought generally and sociocentric thought more specifically, I have been unable to deal with all the theoretical relationships between and among the concepts introduced in this book. My hope has been to develop scaffolding that helps us more deeply comprehend groupthink and group selfishness—to better understand how human thought becomes dysfunctional in human groups, and how we can intervene in our thought to create, in the long run, more just and free societies.

I should point out that two of the primary terms used in this book—egocentricity and sociocentricity—are often used in various ways that may differ from my use herein. For instance, some might argue that egocentric and sociocentric thought are important or have been important for human survival. These people tend to look at human behavior from an evolutionary perspective. My concern is not so much with what may have helped humans survive tens of thousands or more years ago, but rather *what we need to do to survive and thrive today and into the future*. Thus, I view egocentric and sociocentric thought as inherently problematic, naturally-occurring phenomena in human thought. The labels we use for these realities and their evolutionary roots are not nearly as important as that we come to terms with them, and that we explicitly intervene in them wherever they rear their ugly heads.

In short, the world is in desperate need of a better way of living that can only come to fruition through better ways of thinking. Sociocentric thought along with egocentric thought, in my view, together represent a formidable twin-barrier to reasonability and the cultivation of fairminded critical societies. Hence the need for this book, and for open minds to read it.

LIBERATING THE MIND

OVERCOMING SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT AND EGOCENTRIC TENDENCIES

LINDA ELDER

FOREWORD BY GERALD NOSICH

CHAPTER ONE
THE PROBLEM OF SOCIOCENTRISM

As humans, we are all born *centered in ourselves.* 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 worldviews 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 perspectives of our groups: family, gender, peers, colleagues, ethnic group, nationality, religion, profession, and indeed any groups in which we are members. Thus, we come to see the world as Japanese, American, Turkish, Korean, or Chinese persons. We see it as Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Agnostics, or Atheists. We see it as teachers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, judges, prosecutors, or police officers. We see it as women, men, people of a certain age, heterosexuals, homosexuals, people of a certain ethnic group, and so on.

Sociocentric thought is the native human tendency to see the world from narrow, biased, group-centered perspectives—to operate within the world through subjective and partial group beliefs, group influences, group rules, and group interests. It seems intimately connected with the human "need" for validation—the

> Conventional people are roused to fury by departures from convention, largely because they regard such departures as a criticism of themselves. … Where the environment is stupid or prejudiced or cruel, it is a sign of merit to be out of harmony with it. … Galileo and Kepler had "dangerous thoughts" … and so have the most intelligent men of our day.
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> — *Bertrand Russell, 1930*

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innate need to be accepted and esteemed by others.

This mentality can be seen, for instance, in a powerful social force pervasive in many powerful countries today: nationalism—or, in other words,

our country is the best. We have the best government, legal system, schools, cars, and cities. We are the most sophisticated and charming, talented, and inventive. To demonstrate our superiority, we need to have the best weapons, be the first to go to the moon, have the most sophisticated satellite systems, surveillance systems, and rockets. You are either for us or against us. You are either on our side, or on the side of our enemies.

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.

Sociocentrism, as a way of thinking, contrasts with that of the emancipated human mind (the mind that thinks beyond narrow group interests to the rights and needs of all humans, as well as other sentient species). The first is intellectually dysfunctional but common; the second is a high and challenging ideal, largely unrealized in human groups. The first entails prejudices and delusions in favor of group interests and desires; the second requires openmindedness, intellectual autonomy, and intellectual empathy. The first comes naturally to the mind; the second must be cultivated.

Starting at a very young age, humans begin fitting themselves into groups. They do so not by their own choice, but out of instinct, and primarily in order to survive. Young children lack the skills to critique the beliefs thrust upon them by these various groups—to determine group practices that make sense to accept, to identify those that need modification, and to abandon those that should be rejected. Thus, from a very young age, humans for the most part uncritically accept the beliefs of family, school, religion, peers—indeed any group in which they become members. Then they spend their lives largely defending and building on views they have uncritically accepted as children. As we age, we don't *naturally* become less sociocentric, just perhaps more sophisticated in our sociocentrism.

Test the Idea

Think of one group you were thrust into as a child that influenced your thinking (this might be your "family"). Complete these statements:

1. I would describe this group in the following ways . . .
2. Some beliefs I probably uncritically accepted from this group are . . .
3. Some problems I see with these beliefs are . . .
4. It makes sense to replace these beliefs with the following beliefs . . .

Of course, many of the beliefs given to us through group membership make perfect sense to accept; many of them help us survive. But many are based in dangerous ideologies. And we don't inherently distinguish the one from the other.

Test the Idea

Distinguish between the reasonable and unreasonable ideas within one group you belong to. Complete these statements:

1. Some beliefs in this group that seem to make perfect sense, objectively speaking, are …
2. Some beliefs in this group that cause problems are…
3. I believe that these beliefs need to be replaced with the following, more rational, beliefs …

Jean Piaget, an eminent twentieth-century developmental psychologist and philosopher, conducted numerous studies to better understand the ways in which children specifically, and people more generally, perceive reality; he was interested in the psychological and intellectual processes implicit in human thought. Through his studies, he uncovered sociocentricity as a common, universal phenomenon in children. For instance, he documented the fact that even young children routinely display the belief that their group is best. Consider this passage from Piaget's study for UNESCO (Campbell, 1976), a dialogue between an interviewer and three children from three different countries, about the causes of war. These dialogues illuminate the problem of nationalism:

Michael M. (9 years, 6 months old): Have you heard of such people as foreigners? *Yes, the French, the Americans, the Russians, the English …* Quite right. Are there differences between all these people? *Oh, yes, they don't speak the same language.* And what else? *I don't know.* What do you think of the French, for instance? *The French are very serious, they don't worry about anything, an' it's dirty there.* And what do you think of the Russians? *They're bad, they're always wanting to make war.* And what's your opinion of the English? *I don't know … they're nice …* Now look, how did you come to know all you've told me? *I don't know … I've heard it … that's what people say.*

Maurice D. (8 years, 3 months old): If you didn't have any nationality and you were given a free choice of nationality, which would you choose? *Swiss nationality.* Why? *Because I was born in Switzerland.* Now look, do you think the French and Swiss are equally nice, or the one nicer or less nice than the other? *The Swiss are nicer.* Why? *The French are always nasty.* Who is more intelligent, the Swiss or the French, or do you think they're just the same? *The Swiss are more intelligent.* Why? *Because they learn French quickly.* If I asked a French boy to choose any nationality he liked, what country do you think he'd choose? *He'd choose France.* Why? *Because he was born in France.* And what would he say about who's the nicer? Would he think the Swiss and French equally nice, or one better than the other? *He'd say the French are nicer.* Why? *Because he*

was born in France. And who would he think more intelligent? *The French.* Why? *He'd say the French want to learn quicker than the Swiss.* Now you and the French boy don't really give the same answer. Who do you think answered best? *I did.* Why? *Because Switzerland is always better.*

Marina T. (7 years, 9 months old): If you were born without any nationality and you were given a free choice, what nationality would you choose? *Italian.* Why? *Because it's my country. I like it better than Argentina where my father works, because Argentina isn't my country.* Are Italians just the same, or more, or less intelligent than the Argentineans? What do you think? *The Italians are more intelligent.* Why? *I can see people I live with, they're Italians.* If I were to give a child from Argentina a free choice of nationality, what do you think he would choose? *He'd want to stay an Argentinean.* Why? *Because that's his country.* And if I were to ask him who is more intelligent, the Argentineans or the Italians, what do you think he would answer? *He'd say Argentineans.* Why? *Because there wasn't any war.* Now who was really right in the choice he made and what he said, the Argentinean child, you, or both? *I was right.* Why? *Because I chose Italy.*

One can easily see that the children in these interviews have been indoctrinated into the beliefs, with accompanying ideologies, of their respective nations and cultures. These children cannot articulate why they think their countries are better than others, but they have no doubt that they are. Seeing one's group as superior to other groups is both natural to the human mind and encouraged by the cultures in which we live, and it has grave consequences which will be explored presently.

Sociocentricity operates at the unconscious level of thought; it is not explicitly recognized by the mind, yet it guides much human behavior.[2] Only to the extent that each of us takes command of this hidden part of our nature can we begin to extricate ourselves from dogmatic and dangerous group ideologies, from irrational group rules, taboos, and conventions, and from group righteousness, all of which undermine the cultivation of critical societies.

This picture illuminates the fact that human social thought and behavior can be harnessed for good; Martin Luther King, Jr. exemplified extraordinary courage and leadership in bringing people together, peacefully, to work towards the realization of the most basic of civil rights.

Photo and caption taken from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Martin_Luther_King_Jr_St_Paul_Campus_U_MN.jpg

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2   In other words, humans do not inherently recognize sociocentricity in their own thought. It should be pointed out, however, that people often do notice it in others.

Test the Idea

Think of some ways in which children in our culture are indoctrinated into group ideologies (e.g., that "our country is the best," that learning means doing what the teacher says, that everyone must stand and say the pledge of allegiance when told to do so). Complete these statements:

1. From a very young age, children in our country are indoctrinated into the following beliefs . . .
2. In schools, children are often indoctrinated into the following beliefs . . .
3. These types of beliefs cause the following significant problems for children and people in our country . . .

SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT SHOULD BE DISTINGUISHED FROM SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

There are many situations in which people need to work together as a cohesive unit. For this to happen, some level of agreement is necessary. *That* people function in groups is not the problem; this is only natural. But *how* they function in groups often is a problem—whether and to what extent blind obedience is required or expected, whether and to what extent reasoned dissent is allowed and encouraged, etc. These realities determine, to a large degree, the extent to which any group can be said to be reasonable or rational.

Thus it is important to distinguish *dysfunctional* group-centered thought and behavior from that which is either productive and useful, or neutral. Healthy groups can and do exist (though every group can potentially fall prey to groupthink, prejudice, bias, distortion in thought, and so on). Many advocacy groups have well-reasoned goals and processes for reaching those goals. Many families function as rational entities, concerned not only with the well-being of family members but also with the well-being of those outside the family. In short, many groups function so as to nurture group members, while at the same time being concerned with the rights and needs of those outside the group.

Test the Idea

Think of some group in which people work together toward positive change or toward the advancement of at least some aspect(s) of fairminded critical societies. Complete these statements:

1. One group I believe brings about positive change in the world is . . .
2. The good that this group is working to bring about can be described as follows . . .
3. If more people took this group's ideas seriously and acted on them, things could improve in the following ways . . .

Yet the extent to which any particular group can be said to be sociocentric is a matter of degree. Just as people are a mixture of the reasonable and the unreasonable, so are groups. Group members may, for instance, function reasonably well as a group, with each member taking into account the concerns of all other group members, while at the same time ruthlessly pursing vested interests which harm those outside the group. Many businesses exemplify this phenomenon. Take, for example, the marketing department of a successful tobacco company. The marketing "team" may work effectively together, showing concern and empathy for one another's viewpoints. They may spend time together on weekends enjoying one another's company and that of their families. They make exchange gifts at Christmas and sympathize with one another through personal difficulties. They may, in short, function reasonably and empathically within the group in terms of interpersonal relationships, while at the same time creating marketing strategies that play a key role in the deaths of millions of gullible people who become addicted to cigarettes (not to mention the millions of people who don't necessarily die from smoking cigarettes, but suffer other negative effects associated with it). Similarly, people focused on environmental advocacy may work together to advance the health of ecological systems while, alas, simultaneously forming "in-groups" that lead to back-biting and/or other forms of group pathologies. An organization focused on helping animals may be unwilling to work with other groups that have the same goals, because it sees its approach and philosophy as "superior" or wants more money for its group.

In sum, humans are naturally *social*; and though, to some extent, they will always be *sociocentric*, they need not be primarily so. Social behavior is a problem only when it causes problems, objectively speaking. Because groups tend to assume their own thought and behavior to be reasonable, they often have difficulty recognizing their own unreasonable perspectives, viewpoints, inferences, and conceptions.

Test the Idea

Think of some behavior that a group you belong to sees as reasonable, but which you think is dysfunctional (or you might choose a group you belonged to in the past). Complete these statements:

1. I would describe this group in the following ways . . .
2. The beliefs this group perceives as reasonable, but which I see as unreasonable, are . . .
3. I think these beliefs are unreasonable because they lead to the following types of behavior . . .
4. If I were to mention my views to the group, I think its members would react to my views as follows . . .

Those who aspire to critical thinking recognize that any group to which they belong may or may not pursue reasonable goals, and may or may not work together in ways that take into account the views of all relevant parties. They seek to participate only in those groups that have fairminded purposes and healthy systems of communication. They avoid dysfunctional groups where possible. They look for potential contradictions in the ways they themselves treat in-group and out-group members, and they naturally work to avoid such contradictions in the pursuit of intellectual integrity.

HUMANS ARE INFLUENCED BY GROUPS WITHIN GROUPS

Because humans are intrinsically social creatures, we form groups for almost every imaginable purpose. Any given person will belong to numerous groups in a lifetime. These groups will each have their own sets of social rules, expectations, and taboos. Many groups will overlap with others; some will operate more independently. Some people will be more autonomous, allying themselves with fewer groups. And each of us, whether we like it or not, belongs to a broader culture or society that imposes rules on its members.

To put this another way, everyone is part of a number of groups, each of which has its own influence and many of which influence one another. Any given individual is usually influenced first by the family, each member of which has in turn been influenced by the groups he or she has been a member of. Then, as we go through life, the groups we become members of (either voluntarily or involuntarily), with their various ideologies and belief systems, influence our thought and actions in many ways.

A typical pattern of group influence begins with family, wherein the views of the family are thrust upon the child—views on "the family," on marital relations, sibling relations, intimacy, parenting, sexuality, health and well-being, and so forth. If the family is religious, the child is likely expected to uncritically accept the religious beliefs of the family. When the child goes to school, the views of teachers are inculcated into the mind of the child. At the same time, peers can have significant influence on the child's developing mind. As the child moves through childhood and adolescence, there are many influencing parties—teachers and peers, neighbors and clergy, and still the parents and siblings—each having varying degrees of sway at different ages. Religion, sports, TV (and other media), extracurricular activities, and other agencies contend for the child's attention. The young adult may attend college and be carried along by various crowds in various directions, then move into the world of work, and of professions with their varied influences. Add to all of these the many cultural ideologies

> In most instances, the mind can find ways to justify itself—even when engaging in highly unethical acts.

trickling down through each group and manifested, again, in media sources like TV, newspapers, radio, and the internet.

Given these many group influences, from birth throughout life, one can hardly imagine what one's life or views would be, or would have been, without them. Importantly, these influences cause us to form ideas and assumptions almost before we have the benefit of conscious reasoning, and certainly before we have developed critical capacities for discerning what to accept and what to reject. When we do develop these capacities, to the extent that we do, we still are often overly influenced by groups and cultures—by groups within groups that affect the way we think and live.

When significant contradictions arise between and among groups to which we belong, we often (if not typically) compartmentalize, rather than resolve the contradictions. Take, for example, the wealthy college student whose parents have taught him not to socialize with people of lower economic status. Let's imagine that this student has uncritically accepted the view of his parents—that people of a lower economic class are "beneath" him. Then, while attending college, he is thrown into a social group comprised of people from differing economic levels, and befriends someone less wealthy than his family. In so doing, he has two choices: he rejects (either in the long- or short-run) his parent's views as narrow and dogmatic, or he makes an exception in this particular case (again, either short- or long-term). Very likely he will do the latter, having been indoctrinated into his parents' views before he could reasonably critique the validity of these beliefs. This is a common way of dealing with contradictions in the mind— maintain the original beliefs while making an exception.

Critical thinkers recognize that they have been influenced by all of the groups in which they have been members. They examine their beliefs to understand how, and to what extent, these beliefs have been guided by group assumptions and ideologies. They understand that the differing agendas and convictions of the groups to which they belong often conflict with one another. They try, whenever possible, to deal directly and forthrightly with these conflicts and contradictions. Insofar as possible, they join only those groups that function with a critical spirit. Recognizing that all groups may fall prey to irrational thought, they are ever on the lookout to tease apart the reasonable from the unreasonable views and actions within a given group.

Test the Idea

Make a list of the groups you believe have had the strongest impact on your thinking. Complete these statements for each group:

1. This group has influenced my thinking in the following ways . . .
2. The following ideas within this group seem incompatible with one another . . .
3. I would now question the following beliefs I "received" from this group . . .

    After answering these questions for each group, write out whether and to what extent the beliefs of each group are "compatible" with one another.

PRIMARY FORMS OF SOCIOCENTRIC THOUGHT

Sociocentric thought may be categorized into at least four distinct forms. These forms function, and are manifest, in complex relationships with one another; all are destructive, and they are seen throughout human life in potentially all domains.[3] We may summarize these tendencies as follows:[4]

1. *Groupishness*[5] *(or group selfishness)*—the tendency of groups to seek the most for the in-group without regard for the rights and needs of others, in order to advance the group's vested interests. Groupishness is almost certainly a primary tendency in sociocentric thinking, a foundational driving force behind it (probably connected to survival in our evolutionary 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 keeping with the group's interests. This tendency informs the world view from which everyone outside the group is seen and understood, and by which

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3   Remember that 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 my view, it is important to see sociocentric thought as destructive because 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.

4   Also see Appendix B for "the logic of" each form.

5   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.

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, and everyone outside the group being judged according to the standards and beliefs of the in-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 that they 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 a multiplicity of ways, and thus should be understood as four parts of an interconnected puzzle. Some of their interrelationships will be discussed presently.

These pathological forms of thought 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.[6,7]

Test the Idea

A good way to test your understanding of an idea is to articulate it in your own words. Before reading further, write down each of these main forms of sociocentric thought (groupishness, group validation, group control, and group conformity):

1. Articulate the meaning of each one in your own words.
2. Come up with one or two examples of each from your own experience.

6   See the section on egocentrism for further discussion on this topic.

7   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).

People Tend to Blindly Conform to Group Rules and Groupthink

As I have said, living a human life entails membership in a variety of human groups. This typically includes groups such as nations, cultures, professions, religions, families, and peer groups. We find ourselves participating in groups even before we are aware of ourselves as living beings. We find ourselves as part of one or more groups in virtually every setting. What is more, every group to which we belong has some social definition of itself and some usually unspoken "rules" that guide the behavior of all members. Each group to which we belong imposes some level of conformity on us as a condition of acceptance. This includes a set of beliefs, behaviors, and taboos.

All of us, to varying degrees, uncritically accept as right and correct whatever ways of acting and believing are fostered in the social groups to which we belong. This becomes clear to us if we reflect on what happens when, say, adolescents join an urban street gang. When they do so, they identify themselves with:

- a name that defines who and what they are,
- a way of talking,
- a set of friends and enemies,
- gang rituals in which they must participate,
- expected behaviors involving fellow gang members,
- expected behaviors when around the enemies of the gang,
- a hierarchy of power within the gang,
- a way of dressing,
- social requirements to which every gang member must conform,
- a set of taboos—forbidden acts that every gang member must studiously avoid under threat of punishment.

> Each group to which we belong imposes some level of conformity on us as a condition of acceptance.

What we tend not to see is that these same principles, or slightly revised versions of them, are implicit in *most* group behavior, and are hence in no way confined to gang membership or "the masses." For instance, consider college faculty as a group. They have names or labels, such as "professor," "assistant professor," "instructor," and so on, each of which designates rank. When referring to ideas within their disciplines, they often speak with one another using specialized language that only they understand (and often write books for one another using this same type of specialized language). They invite one another to special parties and dinner engagements, and they exclude people not in their special "club." They might invite a select group of graduate-level students, or students considered "gifted," or in some other way considered "special" and therefore deserving of their attention. There is usually a hierarchy that everyone in the group recognizes and "respects," often having to do with "rank" or seniority. Those with more prestige (for instance, those who are highly published) might be viewed as deserving special attention, or they might be frowned upon as

having too much status or "celebrity" outside the group (i.e., they are objects of professional jealousy). These faculty have a code of dress, often entailing a casual but "professional" look. Any number of taboos might be implicit in the group code, such as having too many publications, too few publications, or publications of the wrong sort; fraternizing too much with students; not being open enough to students (being considered "cold"); or teaching in any number of ways considered unorthodox within the group.

Test the Idea

Think of some group to which you belong, or have belonged, in the past. See if you can articulate the following for this group:

1. the name that defines who and what they are,
2. a way of talking,
3. a set of friends and "enemies" (or "out-group" persons),
4. rituals in which group members must participate,
5. expected behavior involving fellow members,
6. expected behavior when around the "enemies" of the group (or the "out-group"),
7. the hierarchy of power within the group,
8. the approved way of dressing,
9. social requirements to which every member must conform,
10. the group's taboos—forbidden acts that every member must studiously avoid under threat of punishment.

For most people, blind conformity to group restrictions is automatic and unreflective. Most people effortlessly conform without recognizing their conformity. They internalize group norms and beliefs, take on the group identity, and act as they are expected to act—without the least sense that what they are doing might reasonably be questioned. Sumner (1906; 1940) articulates the point well:

> *Whether the masses will think certain things wrong, cruel, base, unjust, and disgusting; whether they will regard certain projects as sensible, ridiculous, or fantastic, and will give attention to certain topics, depends on the convictions and feelings which at the time are dominant in the mores. (p. 114)*

For most people, blind conformity to group restrictions is automatic and unreflective.

Historian Howard Zinn (2003) exemplifies the problem of blind conformity through nationalism, which is, in the main, achieved through manipulation of the masses. Consider how people collectively beat the drums to war, lining up behind those in power:

> *As always, in a situation of war or near-war, the air becomes filled with*

patriotic cries for unity against the enemy. What is supposed to be an opposition party declares its loyalty to the president. The major voices in the media, supposed to be independent of government, join the fray. Immediately after President Bush declared "war on terrorism" and told Congress, "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists," television anchorman Dan Rather … spoke. He said, "George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and, you know, as just one American, if he wants me to line up, just tell me where." Speaking again to a national television audience, Rather said about Bush: "He is our commander in chief. He's the man now. And we need unity. We need steadiness." (p. xiii)

Test the Idea

To what extent do you see nationalism as a problem in human societies today? Give examples that illuminate this problem. Look in the news for examples. Look particularly at your own country, which may be more difficult than finding the problem of nationalism in other countries. (What countries do we consider "our friends"? What countries do we consider "our enemies"? How do we decide who our friends and enemies are, as a country? How do we treat each one? Do we base our treatment of other countries on ethics, or on some ulterior motive?)

Again, conformity of thought, emotion, and action is not restricted to the masses, the lowly, or the poor. It is characteristic of people in general, independent of their role in society, independent of status and prestige, independent of years of schooling. It is in all likelihood as true of college professors and their presidents as it is of students and custodians, as true of senators and chief executives as it is of construction and assembly-line workers. Conformity of thought and behavior (or group submission) is the rule for humans; independence is the exception. If we, the people, are to cultivate fairminded critical societies, critique of mores and ideological convictions must become commonplace throughout the world.

In his classic text *The Power Elite*, C. Wright Mills (1956) examines the thinking and behavior of the powerful in America. He exemplifies groupthink as common among chief executives:

When it is asked of the top corporate men: "But didn't they have to have something to get up there?" The answer is, "Yes, they did." By definition, they had "what it takes." The real question accordingly is: the sound judgment, as gauged by the men of sound judgment who select them. The fit survive, and fitness means, not formal competence—there probably is no such thing for top executive positions—but conformity with the criteria of those who have already succeeded. To be compatible with the top men is to act like them, to look like them, to think like them: to be of and for them—or at least to display oneself to them in such a way as to create that

group influence go largely unnoticed. For instance, the sheer amount of frivolous toys produced and sold in "developed" societies creates enormous strain on the earth's resources.

Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of rules and laws are thrust upon us when we enter life as humans, most of which are created by humans functioning within the twin logics of group control and group conformity. The critical thinker examines not the many thousands of mores and rules in a given culture, but the fundamental beliefs and assumptions upon which they are based.

People will race to get the "latest and best" gadget, with no sense that they are entrenched in sociocentric ideologies, sometimes even trampling others in the process.

Test the Idea

Now that you have a basic idea of group control and group conformity, articulate three or four examples of each which illuminate these problems. Then find examples of both in the news, a book, or an essay. Consider some examples in which people are "recruited" by those in control through effective propaganda.

Group Conformity Is Often Dangerous

Group conformity is often very dangerous. Because people don't see themselves conforming when they are, in fact, highly submissive to group beliefs, those who hold persuasive and literal power in the group can easily move the majority to do what is against their interests or those of other sentient creatures.

Take human sacrifice. For thousands of years, various human cultures have engaged in this horrific practice, primarily for religious purposes. Most people have gone along with this custom, believing it to be required or desired by their gods. Slaves were often chosen by the ruling group to be sacrificed. As long as people in these groups submitted to the dominating ideology, as handed down by the ruling class, the practice continued.

Female genital cutting, or female genital mutilation,[15] is a similarly ghastly practice; it deprives girls and women of the right to determine for themselves how their bodies are treated. It denies them the right to enjoy healthy sexuality through the full retention of their sexual organs.[16] This tradition, practiced mainly in Northern Africa and the Middle East, has been handed down through generations and continues primarily due to social pressure. The 2010 *Population Reference Bureau* reports that:

> *… an estimated 100 million to 140 million girls and women worldwide have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and more than 3 million girls are at risk for cutting each year on the African continent alone. FGM/C is generally performed on girls between ages 4 and 12, although it is practiced in some cultures as early as a few days after birth or as late as just prior to marriage.*

This folkway is considered essential to the proper raising of a girl, and preparatory to adulthood as well as marriage. Female genital cutting is connected with what is considered appropriate sexual behavior, namely, maintaining virginity before marriage and fidelity during marriage. It is associated with the notion of female cleanliness and beauty through the removal of body parts considered "male" or "unclean."

People don't see themselves conforming when they are, in fact, highly submissive to group beliefs.

Of course, there is some opposition to this barbaric practice. The World Health Organization, the United Nations, and Amnesty International are strongly against it. This custom would almost certainly cease if all women in practicing countries simply refused to subject their daughters to it. The fact that so many women go along with this gruesome custom, when it denies both them and their daughters a fundamental human right, illuminates the power of group conformity.

The American war in Vietnam also provides a stunning case of dangerous conformity. For more than a decade, the American people supported this horrific war that was opposed by enlightened people across the world. Swept up in the zeal to stop "communism," at the behest of our leaders, the vast majority of Americans failed to question the roots of the war, the reasons for the war, or the implications of the war. Their view was mostly this: what our government tells us to believe, we believe; if we are asked to support war, there must be good reasons

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15 It should be noted that many women and girls who undergo this procedure will fiercely defend their right to do this, just as many Chinese women were horrified when no longer required to bind their feet. Indeed, people may defend any common practice they have participated in but which is revealed as irrational or unreasonable. This fact exemplifies how deeply people can be, and are, indoctrinated into belief systems that are harmful, or which deprive them of some basic right. The fact that these people would defend irrational practices (in the name of doing what seems right to them, or behaving in accord with their beliefs) does not make them intellectually autonomous thinkers or reasonable persons.

16 Female genital cutting (FGC), also known as female genital mutilation (FGM), female circumcision, or female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), is any procedure involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs. The term is almost exclusively used to describe traditional or religious procedures on a minor, which requires the parents' consent because of the age of the girl.

to support it. Submitting to "authority" figures, assuming the U.S. government to be inherently right as our "leader," uncritically accepting the propaganda fed to the American people through media—all exemplify sociocentric conformity. In his book *War Crimes in Vietnam*, Bertrand Russell (1967) gives these estimates regarding the results of the war:

> … *160,000 dead by mid 1963; 700,000 tortured and maimed; 400,000 imprisoned; 31,000 raped; 3,000 disemboweled with livers cut out while alive; 4,000 burned alive; 1,000 temples destroyed; 46 villages attacked with poisonous chemicals; 16,000 [concentration] camps existing or under construction. (p. 59)*

A refugee camp in Ukhia, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, is inhabited by Rohingya refugees that fled from ethnic and religious persecution in neighboring Myanmar. It is estimated that more than 24,000 Rohingya were killed by the Myanmar military and local Buddhists since "clearance operations" started in 2017. Ethnic wars directly result from dangerous group ideologies.

Photo and caption taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rohingya_refugees_in_Bangladesh, September 3, 2019

Remembering that the war was to continue until 1975, the numbers reflecting tortures, murders, and false imprisonment grew well beyond these already staggering figures.

Russell (1967) illuminates the role often played by media in advancing the agendas of those in power. In referring to the Vietnam War and how mainstream media systematically fed the views of the government to the masses, Russell says:

> … *although some newspapers were prepared to publish isolated pieces of horrifying information, they had no intention of forming a coherent picture of the war from these reports and every intention of preventing others from doing so. The informed press knew that there was something seriously wrong about the war, but restricted themselves to pedestrian comments and peripheral criticisms … Repeatedly the press gets away with such disgraceful behavior through the helplessness of the public. … As the war in Vietnam escalated, slowly and steadily, the* New York Times *came under increasing pressure not to print articles which exposed the lies and distortions of the American Government. An important suppression of vital information occurred as early as March 1962, for example, when the* New York Times *(as well as every other major American daily newspaper) declined to publish an article sent over the wires of the Associated Press by Mr. Malcolm Brown, later a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in journalism for his reporting from Vietnam. (pp. 30-31)*

Dominating groups often create special rules for themselves, and other people (denied these same privileges) usually don't object. They conform to the status quo because they don't detect these special rules. On February 23, 2006, the *New*

York Times highlighted a report by Human Rights First; the report stated that five months was the longest sentence for any member of the American military linked to torture-related deaths of a detainee in Iraq or Afghanistan. "In only 12 of 34 cases has anyone been punished for the confirmed or suspected killings, said the group. … Beyond those cases, in almost half of 98 known detainee deaths since 2002, the cause was never announced or was reported as undetermined." The report also documented the fact that "In dozens of cases … grossly inadequate reporting, investigation and follow-through have left no one at all responsible for homicides and other unexplained deaths." In Baghdad, a victim's son said, "Justice wasn't done in our father's case by the U.S. forces, because if he was a criminal, they should have interrogated him fairly and not tortured him barbarically and then killed him." His father, who was suspected of "supporting the anti-American insurgency, died in 2003 when an Army interrogator covered him in a sleeping bag, sat on his chest and put his hand over his mouth." He had been detained when he appeared at an American base to seek the release of his four sons. His interrogator, originally charged with murder, was convicted of negligent homicide in a military trial and was reprimanded without jail time. If the average person in the United States committed murder in these same ways (outside the special rules of war), he would be convicted of murder under U.S. law, and would most likely serve life in prison or receive the death penalty. But the military often has special rules for its members, as is seen in this and many similar cases.

Group control and group conformity are implicit in *social stratification*. According to Plotnicov and Tuden (1970), since virtually all modern societies today are complex, characteristics of stratification presumably can be found in every such society. Each entails social groups that:

1. are ranked hierarchically;
2. maintain relatively permanent positions in the hierarchy;
3. have differential control of the sources of power, primarily economic and political;
4. are separated by invidious cultural distinctions that also serve to maintain social distances between the groups; and
5. are articulated by an overarching ideology which provides a rationale for the established hierarchical arrangements. (pp. 4–5)

Given this phenomenon, we should be able to identify, for any group in our society, where approximately it stands in the hierarchy of power, how the sources of power and control are determined and arranged, how the distinctions that indicate status are formulated, how social distances are maintained between the groups, and what overarching ideology provides the rationale for the group's perspective.

> ### Test the Idea
>
> Do you think that some people in your culture have more power than others? If so, complete these statements:
>
> 1. It seems to me that the groups with the most power in my country are . . . I think this because . . . These groups are (or are not) mainly economic or political (explain).
> 2. Those with the most power separate themselves from those with less power in the following ways . . .
> 3. The ideologies (or beliefs) that those in power use to maintain their power are . . . (consider, for instance, the wealthy. Do they tend to have more power in your country? If so, how?)

Dissenters Are Frequently Punished

Because people are expected to go along with mainstream views, dissenters, or those who simply do not live in accordance with conventional traditions, are often treated harshly in today's societies. A *New York Times* article (August 12, 2010) highlights a case in Iran in which Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani was charged with adultery and sentenced to death by stoning. Among other things, the article mentions the fact that one of her attorneys, Mohammad Mostafaei, was summoned by authorities to appear for interrogation. Another of her lawyers "fled Iran … after his office was ransacked and members of his family were arrested, and he is now seeking asylum in Norway. Mr. Mostafaei has taken on dozens of controversial cases, and has urged Iran's judiciary to ban stoning, juvenile executions and the imprisonment of political dissidents." In this case, the woman charged with adultery violated the sacred norms of society, not any objective standard of ethics. Her attorneys were willing to risk perhaps even their lives to work toward a more fair society. The Iranian government has made it clear that they will punish such dissention.

One of the most well-known dissenters in history is Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), who was put to death by the state for "corrupting" the young by teaching them to think critically about traditions and customs, and for presumably not believing in the gods sanctioned by the "city." Galileo advanced the notion, put forth by Copernicus, that the sun (rather than the earth) was the center of the universe, which got him in trouble with authorities (1615). He was warned to abandon his view, which he did in order to save his skin. Later he defended his views (1632) in his most famous work, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. Consequently, he was tried by the Inquisition, found suspect of heresy, forced to recant, and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

When Charles Darwin introduced his conception of evolution, "it was everywhere met with ridicule and abuse" (Macdonald, 1931; 1972, p. vii). In the

70 years between when Darwin published his first book and Macdonald wrote his important work, *Fifty Years of Free Thought*,

> *the whole scientific world accepted [Darwin's] conclusion, and his theory of evolution is taught in every school worthy of the name. Amongst the intelligent people of the world it is almost as well established as the once heretical doctrine that the earth is round. It is well to take a look at the story of privation and suffering of the early apostles of freedom and science who at great risk and through dire privations went up and down the world seeking to emancipate the human mind. (p. vii)*

The truly autonomous thinker is rare, and penalties for independent thinking can be stiff.

Emotionally charged issues often lead people to stereotype dissenters, however sound the reasoning or justifiable the actions of those dissenting. The reader may recall the case of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, dubbed "Dr. Death" by mass media, who fought for the rights of the suffering to end their own lives in dignity. He argued that medical doctors have an ethical responsibility to assist terminally ill patients in ending their lives, should these patients choose to do so; he argued for euthanasia as a basic human right. Jack Lessenberry, a prominent Michigan journalist for the *Detroit Metro Times*, wrote, "Jack Kevorkian … was a major force for good in this society. He forced us to pay attention to one of the biggest elephants in the room: the fact that today vast numbers of people are alive who would rather be dead, who have lives not worth living" (*New York Times*, June 4, 2011). Though the debate continues as to whether euthanasia should be legalized, Kevorkian's advocacy for the right of people to end their lives impacted how people think of euthanasia. Further, Kevorkian's actions "helped spur the growth of hospice care in the U.S. and made physicians more sympathetic to those in severe pain and more willing to prescribe medication to relieve it" (*New York Times,* June 4, 2011). Still, Kevorkian spent eight years in prison for assisting one patient in ending her life. Because his perspective offended the mainstream, he was punished.

Dissenters can be found (and punished) in potentially any area of human life. Because of his views on Israel, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner was briefly kept from receiving an honorary degree from the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York. Kushner has criticized Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza. According to the *Press Democrat* (June 4, 2011), one trustee of the board, Jeffrey Wiesenfeld, denounced Kushner's views, branding him "'a Jewish anti-Semite' and a 'kapo,' a term for Jews who worked for the Nazis in concentration camps." In response, Kushner told graduates of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, "they, too, must engage with society's thorniest issues and urged them to 'find the human in yourself by finding the citizen in yourself, the activist, the hero in yourself.'"

Test the Idea

Think of your own examples of dissenters, or those who go against (or have gone against) mainstream views. What are some important consequences of their actions? See if you can find examples in the newspaper or another news source or book.

GROUPISHNESS, GROUP VALIDATION, GROUP CONTROL, AND GROUP CONFORMITY INTERCONNECT AND INTERACT

Though *groupishness, group validation, group control,* and *group conformity* each has a unique logic, these phenomena often interact in complex ways. From a sociocentric perspective, for the group to "successfully" achieve its goals and agendas, the group seeks cohesion. Group members continually reinforce (validate) a shared set of beliefs among themselves. The majority of people in the group submit (conform) to the collective will of the group. When too much dissent is allowed within the group—when differing subgroups hold conflicting philosophies and perspectives—the larger group cannot pursue its (groupish) objectives as effectively. Thus the group, concerned fundamentally with achieving what it perceives to be in its vested interests, requires conformity from its group members and affirmation of group ideologies. Dissent is discouraged or forbidden. Militant groups, which exact blind allegiance and obedience from their members, offer a paradigm case of this point. Again, in groups where direct force is frowned upon, group members are frequently "recruited" (controlled) through manipulation.

> The patriotic bias is a recognized perversion of thought and judgment against which our education should guard us.
>
> — *William Graham Sumner*

In understanding the relationship between groupishness, group validation, group control, and group conformity, there are countless examples we might draw upon. For one such example, consider how the "Tea Party" groups work with the oil industry to advance the notion that global warming either doesn't exist, or is not caused by human actions. This idea conveniently fits the vested interests of the oil industry, which has financially backed "Tea Party" candidates for congressional races. According to the *New York Times* (Oct. 21, 2010), the views of Tea Party candidates "align with those of the fossil fuel industries, which have for decades waged a concerted campaign to raise doubts about the science of global warming and to undermine policies to address them. … The oil, coal and utility industries have collectively spent $500 million just since the beginning of 2009

to lobby against legislation to address climate change and to defeat candidates … that support it."

Groupishness and group validation are easily seen in this example. But what about group control and submission? The fossil-fuel industries supporting Tea Party candidates, according to the *New York Times* article, "have created and lavishly financed institutes to produce anti-global warming studies, paid for rallies and Web sites to question the science, and generated scores of economic analyses that purport to show that policies to reduce emissions of climate-altering gases will have a devastating effect on jobs and the overall economy."

All this propaganda is aimed at controlling the way people think about global warming and climate change, leading them to believe that humans aren't responsible for these problems (and therefore don't need to do anything about them). Those seeking office under the Tea Party flag are interested in power and control. The fossil-fuel industry is interested in money, more money, power, and control. Working together through disseminating incorrect or distorted information, they manipulate and control the way people think about climate change. If they are effective, people are recruited to their cause; these people reject the idea of climate change and support the candidates who have manipulated them.

The view that climate change is not a growing problem is sometimes coupled with the religious notion that the earth, and its resources, were designed by God to be enjoyed by his people and exploited for their own ends. This idea is used by many Tea Party candidates as part of their manipulative propaganda; apparently, it often works. In response to the issue of global warming, Norman Dennison (*New York Times*, Oct. 21, 2010), founder of the Corydon Tea Party, said, "It's a flat-out lie. … I read the Bible. … He made this earth for us to utilize." Lisa Deaton, a small-business owner who started We the People Indiana, a Tea Party affiliate, said, "They're trying to use global warming against the people. … It takes away our liberty. … Being a strong Christian I cannot help but believe the Lord placed a lot of minerals in our country and it's not there to destroy us."

We see in this example:

1. groupishness—unbridled pursuit of vested interests,

2. group validation—group members validating the primary views of the group,

3. group control (or recruitment) through manipulation and distortion of the truth, and

4. group conformity to those in power.

For another example, consider the treatment of women in Afghanistan. According to the *New York Times* (September 21, 2010), "in a land [Afghanistan] where sons are more highly valued, since in the tribal culture usually only they can inherit the father's wealth and pass down a name, families without boys

CHAPTER TWO
MANIFESTATIONS OF SOCIOCENTRIC
THOUGHT IN HUMAN SOCIETIES

Examples of sociocentric thought can be found in virtually every part of human life where people gather in groups. Let us now consider some of the powerful manifestations of sociocentric thought. (There are many others.)

MASS MEDIA SHAPE AND
ARE SHAPED BY SOCIOCENTRIC THINKING

One of the most influential forms of sociocentric thought is found in media bias and propaganda. In any given country, the mass media and press tend to describe world events in terms that presuppose the correctness of the country's dominant ideologies. For instance, language is often used ideologically by the press. In so doing, the media violate the basic meanings of the terms themselves (see example, p. 109).

Those in mass media often forward a sociocentric agenda because they are naturally a part of the culture within which they function, and they therefore have, like others in that culture, been indoctrinated into its mainstream views.

For example, the mass media routinely validate the view that one's own country is "right" or ethical in its dealings in the world. This cultivates one-sided nationalistic thinking. The basic idea is that as largely sociocentric thinkers, all of us tend to think of our nation and the groups to which we belong in mostly favorable terms. It follows, therefore, that the media will present in mostly unfavorable terms those nations and groups that significantly oppose "us."

When we look critically at the mainstream mass media of a given country, it is easy to document how they present important world events in biased ways. For instance, the mainstream news media are biased in favor of their country's political "allies" and prejudiced against its "enemies." The media therefore present events that regard the countries of allies in the most favorable light possible, highlighting positive events while downplaying negative ones. As for its enemies, the opposite treatment can be expected. Thus, positive events in the countries of one's enemies are either ignored or given little attention, while

> One of the most influential forms of sociocentric thought is found in media bias and propaganda.

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negative events are highlighted or distorted. The ability of a person to identify this bias in action and mentally rewrite the article or representation more objectively (as one is reading it) is an important critical-thinking ability.

For example, because Israel has historically been an ally of the United States, the U.S. media has tended to ignore or give minor attention to mistreatment of Palestinians by the Israelis. On the other hand, because Fidel Castro of Cuba has been, until only recently, considered an "enemy" of the United States, mainstream news writers have historically taken advantage of every opportunity to present Castro and Cuba in a negative light, ignoring most achievements of the Cuban government and its people (e.g., in the areas of universal education, literacy rates, and medical care).[25] Of course, if the doors of Cuba continue to open to U.S. commerce, our treatment of Cuba in the mainstream news will trend towards positive aspects of Cuba, and our "hatred" of Cuba will likely turn to friendship. Over time, this is especially likely if the U.S. can again gain economic control of Cuba. News reporters would likely soon forget their negative stories of the past as our "friendship" with Cuba solidified.

Another primary reason why those in the mainstream media distort reality in presenting "news" can only be understood in terms of its ultimate purpose—profit. To "sell" the news, the media industry must make it "palatable" to their "consumers." Otherwise people won't "buy" it. To make it palatable, they must present a sugar-coated version of the truth, or in any case, the version most people want to hear. When reporters are indoctrinated into the same unrealistic picture of life and what goes on within it (as is everyone else in the culture), the next step of telling people stories they want to hear is almost automatic.[26]

In illuminating the problems that now permeate journalism and the media world, including the role that profit plays in the news "served" to the American people. Leonard Downie, Jr. and Robert Kaiser (2002), of the *Washington Post*, say:

> *Most newspapers, television networks and local television and radio stations now belong to giant, publicly owned corporations far removed from the communities they serve. They face the unrelenting quarterly profit pressures from Wall Street now typical of American capitalism … Americans would rather be entertained than informed … The temptation to push serious news aside in favor of glitz and melodrama has too often been irresistible. A national infatuation with celebrities, both encouraged and exploited by news media, has had a profound influence on journalism.*

Those who reason from a critical perspective recognize the pervasiveness of media bias and propaganda in human societies. They recognize that news reporters in every country have been indoctrinated into the ideologies of their

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25 For further discussion of the problem of media bias as a sociocentric force, see Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2006), *The Thinker's Guide for Conscientious Citizens on How to Detect Media Bias & Propaganda*. Dillon Beach: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.

26 I have been referring here to those in the mainstream media, and pointing out general problems that are easily exemplified with a critical reading of the news. Reporters themselves will naturally fall on a continuum in terms of the extent to which they conform uncritically to mainstream views.

culture, and that this indoctrination may play a significant role in their reporting. Those who see through media bias understand that the primary purpose of news outlets is not to present unbiased stories of events, but to make money. Critical thinkers take these realities into account when critiquing the mainstream news. They seek alternative credible news sources to gain understanding of differing perspectives on important issues.

Test the Idea

Look for examples of media bias in the news that come from sociocentric thought. Newspapers are a good place to start. Select one issue in international news; to what extent do you see evidence of prejudice in favor of the "home" country, and prejudice against those countries we see as our "enemies"?

UNBRIDLED GLOBAL CAPITALISM IS A POWERFUL SOCIOCENTRIC FORCE IN HUMAN LIFE

Capitalism[27] is the predominant economic force on the planet. Almost all humans and other sentient creatures now experience implications of capitalism. Even countries with socialist governments are intertwined with capitalism. In his book *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, William Robinson (2004) argues that we are now living in a new economic system of global capitalism, the theory of which he details:

> *Globalization is the underlying structural dynamic that drives social, political, economic, and cultural-ideological processes around the world in the twenty-first century. … Global capitalism has generated new social dependencies around the world. Billions of people who may have been at the margins of the system or entirely outside of it have now been brought squarely within its confines. The maintenance of the system is very much a life-and-death matter for millions, indeed billions, of people who, willingly or otherwise, have developed a stake in it. (p. xv)*

Though capitalism has its strengths, the many negative implications that result from *unrestrained* capitalism are largely passed over or played down in today's mainstream western cultures and beyond. In developed countries, people tend to assume capitalism

…the many negative implications that have resulted from *unrestrained* capitalism are largely passed over or played down.

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27 It might be useful to point out that the term "capitalism" has largely been replaced by the term "free-market economy." However, since a truly free market doesn't exist, this latter term is largely a politically-generated euphemism for capitalism.

is the best economic system; those who argue for public ownership and cooperative management of the means of production, through what are frequently stereotyped as "socialist" programs, are often marginalized and even demonized. People in capitalist countries generally fail to see capitalism as one choice among several viable economic systems. Born into capitalistic societies, they tend to uncritically accept capitalistic ideology.

Street child, Bangladesh.

And capitalism represents a tremendously powerful sociocentric force in human life today.

One problem with capitalism, according to Robinson, is that it naturally expands. "In order to survive, capitalism requires constant access to new sources of cheap labor, land, raw materials … and markets" (p. 3). In his concluding chapter on the contradictions of capitalism, Robinson (2004) points to some of its far-reaching problems:

> … as capitalism produces vast amounts of wealth, it also generates … social polarization and crisis … workers produce more goods and services than they are actually able to purchase with their wages … at some point capitalists as a group … are left with more goods and services produced by their workers than they are able to market. … This is the point at which economic recession typically sets in. … The polarization of world income, downward mobility, and declining purchasing power among broad swaths of humanity make it impossible for the world's majority to consume all the goods being churned out by the global economy … two processes germane to capitalist development have intensified through globalization. One is the secular process by which the spread of capitalism uproots precapitalist classes such as peasantries and converts them into members of the working class. The accelerated incursion of capitalist production into the countryside around the world in the second half of the twentieth century uprooted hundreds of millions of peasants and threw them into the capitalist labor market, often as unemployed or underemployed workers. (pp. 147–149)

One implication of unbridled capitalism is the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, not only in the United States, but across the world. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (June 25, 2010) reports: "The gaps in after-tax income between the richest 1 percent of Americans and the middle and poorest fifths of the country more than tripled between 1979 and 2007. … [T]he new data suggest greater income concentration at the top of the income scale than at any time since 1928." The United Nations reports that "around the world more than 2.5 billion men, women and children live in grinding poverty on less than

$2 a day. Such extreme poverty results in chronic hunger and malnutrition, preventable diseases such as malaria, measles and tuberculosis, environmental degradation, low literacy rates and countless other social, public health, economic and political problems."[28] According to the United Nations Development Report (1999), "Global inequalities in income and living standards have reached grotesque proportions."[29] The report goes on to say:

> *The richest countries, such as the United States, have 20 percent of the world's people but 86 percent of its income … 82 percent of its exports and 74 percent of its telephone lines. The 20 percent living in the poorest countries, such as Ethiopia and Laos, have about 1 percent of each. The three richest officers of Microsoft—Bill Gates, Paul Allen and Steve Ballmer— have more assets, nearly $140 billion, than the combined gross national product of the 43 least-developed countries and their 600 million people.*

Around the world more than 2.5 billion men, women and children live in grinding poverty on less than $2 a day.

— United Nations

> *When the market goes too far in dominating social and political outcomes, the opportunities and rewards of globalization spread unequally and inequitably— concentrating power and wealth in a select group of people, nations and corporations, marginalizing the others.*

> *The challenge is … to provide enough space for human, community and environmental resources to ensure that globalization works for people, not just for profits.*

> *One result of globalization is that the road to wealth—the control of production, patents and technology—is increasingly dominated by a few countries and companies … this monopoly of power is cutting poorer nations off from a share of the economic pie and, often, from decent health care and education.*

Approximately 150 years ago, in a private letter, President Abraham Lincoln (1864) predicted that the wealth of the U.S. would increasingly fall into the hands of a few; in essence, he anticipated the term "überwealthy," now in almost common use. He could see powerful and unethical forces, emerging through capitalistic thought during his lifetime, and hence predicted what has in fact come true.

> *I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country … corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money of the*

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28 Taken from the website of the United Nations, http://www.un.org/works/sub2.asp?lang=en&s=17 December 19, 2010.

29 The United Nations Human Development Report, found at http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1999/

country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands. … I feel at this moment more anxiety for the safety of my country than ever before, even in the midst of war.

Given the increasing gap between the rich and poor, and the consequent inordinate power now in the hands of the wealthiest few, Lincoln's fears, again, have been realized. In his book *Free Lunch: How the Wealthiest Americans Enrich Themselves at Government Expense (and Stick You with the Bill)*, David Cay Johnston (2007) writes:

In the past quarter century or so our government has enacted new rules that have created not only free markets, but rigged ones. These rules have weakened and even destroyed consumer protections while increasing the power of the already powerful. … The rich and their lobbyists have taken firm control of the levers of power in Washington and the state capitals while remaking the rules in their own interests … For more than a quarter century now our government has been adopting rules that tilt the playing field in favor of the rich, the powerful, and the politically connected. … We sing the praises of investors who owe their wealth not to creating businesses, but to buying companies in deals that require destroying lives and careers, just so that they could squeeze out more money for themselves … (p. 12-15)

> The rich and their lobbyists have taken firm control of the levers of power in Washington and the state capitals while remaking the rules in their own interests.
>
> — *David Cay Johnston*

In the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, we see evidence of all four forms of sociocentric thought—groupishness, in which the wealthy pursue more and more money without regard for the rights and needs of those with less; group validation, in which the wealthy collectively validate or justify their greed and its concomitant power; group domination, in which the rich are able to wield power over the mass of people (for instance, by having more political power); and group submission, in which the common people seem to have no choice but to go along with those in power. Of course, many intricacies are entailed in human thought, and it may be possible for people to be wealthy without also being sociocentric in these ways. Every case must be individually examined to determine the extent to which sociocentric forces are at play.

Not only do the wealthiest Americans have inordinate power over the federal government, but there has, for a number of years, been an alarming relationship between mass media, big business, and

> Not only do the wealthiest Americans have inordinate power over the federal government, but there has, for a number of years, been an alarming relationship between mass media, big business, and military interests.

military interests. This relationship has given rise to what David McGowan (2000) refers to as the "military-industrial-media complex." In his book *Derailing Democracy*, McGowan details how the military has become increasingly powerful through its associations with capitalists agendas; McGowan also discusses how mass media have come under the power of fewer and fewer corporations—themselves with a capitalist agenda. He notes, for example:

> *The number-one purveyor of broadcast news in this country—NBC, with both MSNBC and CNBC under its wing as well as NBC news and a variety of "news magazines"—is now owned and controlled by General Electric, one of the nation's largest defense contractors. Is it not significant that as GE's various media subsidiaries predictably lined up to cheerlead the use of U.S. military force in Kosovo, it was at the same time posting substantial profits from the sale of high tech tools of modern warfare it so shamelessly glorifies? … Following the same course that virtually every other major industry has in the last two decades, a relentless series of mergers and corporate takeovers has consolidated control of the media into the hands of corporate behemoths. The result has been that an increasingly authoritarian agenda has been sold to the American people by a massive, multi-tentacled media machine that has become, for all intents and purposes, a propaganda organ of the state. (pp. 1-2)*

This shows how media and military agendas are now dangerously combined with capitalistic forces, enabling the super-wealthy to essentially control how people think. Pathological relationships such as these illuminate the sociocentric forms of *groupishness* (conglomerates accumulating more and more power and money), *group validation* (conglomerates validating war mongering beliefs which enable them to get more money and more power), *group control* (these conglomerates controlling the messages people receive about military campaigns, which in turn serve the vested interests of these companies), and *group conformity* (people naively going along with the war agendas disseminated by biased media outlets, which are largely controlled by these behemoths).

In addition to the obvious problems caused by unrestrained capitalism, there are important hidden problems. In their book *The Winner-Take-All Society*, Robert Frank and Philip Cook (1995) focus on the fact that the American capitalist system encourages economic waste, income inequality, and an impoverished culture. They say:

> *Winner-take-all markets have increased the disparity between the rich and poor. They have lured some of our most talented citizens into socially unproductive, sometimes destructive tasks. In an economy that already invests too little for the future, they have fostered wasteful patterns of investment and consumption. They have led indirectly to greater concentration of our most talented college students in a small set of elite institutions. They have made it more difficult for "late bloomers" to find a productive niche in life. And winner-take-all markets have molded our culture and discourse in ways many of us find deeply troubling. (pp. 4–5)*

In an article in the *New York Times Review* (March 10, 2013), Graham Hill points out some of the ways in which the pursuit of material possessions can be almost all-consuming, and yet how such pursuit cannot lead us to happiness. He tells how, "flush with cash" from his internet business, he bought things and more things, surrounding himself with all manner of material possessions and gadgetry which ultimately expended his time and exhausted his energy. He says, "somehow this stuff ended up running my life … the things I consumed ended up consuming me." Studies increasingly show that people in the wealthiest countries are often the least happy.

At some point we may recognize that we cannot find meaning in this endless greed for more things, with the latest bells and whistles. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl (1959; 1984) addresses the problem of meaninglessness and boredom that accompanies what he terms "the existential vacuum." He says,

> *… I turn to the detrimental influence of that feeling of which so many patients complain today, namely the feeling of the total and ultimate meaninglessness of their lives. They lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves … The existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century … [and] manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom … ultimately man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life … (pp. 128, 131)*

We can trace much of the meaninglessness of life so often experienced by humans today to our (largely unconscious) capitalistic orientation. This worldview leads to the widespread accouterments in modern cultures that trap us within superficial logics, within trivial and artificial mindsets, but of which we are hardly aware.

> Beginning in infancy and continuing throughout life, the things we see and read profoundly alter the kinds of people we become.
>
> — *Frank & Cook*

In exemplifying ways in which American capitalism affects our culture, Frank and Cook (1995) point to such things as how the book and movie industries tend to foster, in essence, sociocentric thought. They note that publishers tend to publish books by previously successful authors, however ill-written these books might be. They note that books tend to stay on the market to the extent that they are widely read in the culture. The same is true of movies: popular movies are those that stay in the movie theaters longer so more people can see them. Consequently, books and movies that offer dissenting views don't tend to survive, or are never given fair attention. These realities are disturbing because, as Frank and Cook stress, " … beginning in infancy and continuing throughout life, the things we see and read profoundly alter the kinds of people we become" (p. 19).

Notice how reasonable it seems to make movies and publish books based on what was previously financially successful. If a genre is successful at the box office—violent movies, for example, or as-the-world-turns romance novels—it seems reasonable to make more movies in that genre. But the only reason it seems so reasonable (and natural) is that we've internalized the sociocentrism of a highly advanced capitalist economy. By choosing to produce items on the basis of their profitability, we are choosing to put aside the many more important values we could be emphasizing, such as fostering empathy and concern for the environment, improving the quality of life for humans and other species, and striving to create increasingly fairminded critical societies. The depth of the sociocentrism is apparent by observing that publishing-for-profit often seems, to the common person, less ideological than publishing to further a cause. It seems *almost neutral* compared with other values, such as protecting versus exploiting the environment, or exploring the idea that health care should, or should not, be free to all. But, of course, it's not at all value-neutral. Instead, it is a key part of the ideology of capitalism. This is just one of the many subtle examples of the ill effects of capitalism as we now experience it.

Consider the role advertising plays in the life of the average person today. On a daily basis, if we leave the house at all, or turn on our technological gadgets or TVs, we are heavily influenced by advertising messages designed to continually point out our "flaws"—flaws which a given product promises to "do away with." Again, these messages are often subtle and implicit. Even highly insightful people fall prey to these messages. And as a result of our gullibility, we purchase far more "things" than we need, a phenomenon that contributes to the problem of diminishing resources on the planet.

Perhaps the most serious problem connected with capitalism is that of vested interest—groups exploiting other groups (or individuals) while pursuing their own interests. This problem is documented every day, in every major newspaper in the world. More than 200 years ago, during the early stages of modern capitalism, it was a primary concern of Adam Smith (1776; 1976), who was considered the father of modern economics. Though his name is often invoked by those economic and political theoreticians who advance capitalism, in his book *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith stressed the importance of checks and appropriate controls in capitalist economies. He said, for instance:

> People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices. It is impossible indeed to prevent such meetings, by any law which either could be executed, or would be consistent with liberty or justice. But though the law cannot hinder people of the same trade from sometimes assembling together, it ought to do nothing to facilitate such assemblies; much less to render them necessary. (p. 152)

> Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who

have some property against those who have none at all. (p. 775)

Our merchants and master-manufacturers complain much of the bad effects of high wages in raising the price, and thereby lessening the sale of their goods both at home and abroad. They say nothing concerning the bad effects of high profits. They are silent with regard to the pernicious effects of their own gains. They complain only of those of other people. (p. 117)

Capitalism is a complex economic system that has fundamentally developed largely over the past two centuries. It is one economic system among a number of possibilities that has been created by human thought and executed by human agents. Unfortunately, as Max Weber said in 1905, uncontrolled capitalism has largely entrapped us in what he called an *iron cage*, replete with its bureaucratic systems that, in effect, imprison us. This *iron cage*—from which, as Weber sees it, no escape seems possible—is a direct consequence of sociocentric human thought. But, again, capitalism is, in the first instance, a human idea; and as with all human ideas, it can be changed. It can be improved. It can be displaced. Insofar as it serves the people and minimizes suffering, it should be applauded. But insofar as it causes suffering and injustice, it should be altered, or, yes, even abandoned.

Critical thinkers want to see things as they are, assess things as they are, and work toward improvement where improvement is needed. They do not blindly accept any system of thought, such as capitalism, even when the majority of people in the world go along with it. Critical thinkers see through terms like "free-market economy," when the use of such terms skews reality (e.g., implying that world economies operate "freely," when in fact they are controlled by any number of variables). Critical thinkers can imagine a world where people emancipate themselves from oppressive economic systems. Critical thinkers work toward egalitarianism; they want to see the world's resources more evenly distributed (as we have seen in movements such as "Occupy Wall Street … we are the 99%").

Test the Idea

To what extent do you see capitalism, or "free-market economy," causing problems in human societies? Find examples in the news or other literature to support your position. What can be done about these problems?

SCHOOLING IS A PREVAILING SOCIOCENTRIC AGENT

In every country in the world, students are indoctrinated into the ideologies of their culture through schooling. This is, at present, a natural phenomenon stemming from the fact that no human societies now advance or support fairminded critical thinking as a universal ideal. Accordingly, schooling is an agent of the state, of the status quo, and of the mainstream view. Fostering independence of thought in schooling is rare. Teachers who attempt it are often marginalized, removed from the classroom, or otherwise penalized. Consider the *Scopes Monkey Trial* of 1925, a legal case in which John Scopes, a high-school teacher in Tennessee, was indicted and convicted for teaching evolution (in violation of the Butler Act, which made it unlawful to teach evolution). Though the verdict was overturned on a technicality, the trial illuminates the difficulties teachers face in swimming against the main stream of the culture, even when the mainstream view is absurd.

> In every country in the world, students are indoctrinated into the ideologies of their culture through schooling.

Or consider, again, our example of Socrates, going back to 399 BCE, when he was accused, indicted, and ultimately put to death for two reasons:

1. Introducing and believing in gods other than those sanctioned by the state. (Although some accused Socrates of atheism, all evidence points in the opposite direction, including the fact that Socrates believed in life after death.)
2. Corrupting the young (by fostering their intellectual development and encouraging them to question the status quo).

To understand Socrates' views in connection with education and the problem of sociocentric thought, consider the following passage from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967):

> There was reason for fearing Socrates as a social force. Where arête [excellence, in terms of how to make the best of oneself and live a rational life], education, and state were fused in one image, an educator critical of received assumptions was a revolutionary. Socrates not only publicly raised such fundamental questions as "What is arête?" and "Who are its teachers?" but also by discrediting through their own representatives the accepted educational channels and by creating a climate of questioning and doubt, he was suspected by conservative minds of the dangerous game of discomfiting all authority before a circle of impressionable youths and subtracting from the state the stability of tradition. It was also apparent that the values by which Socrates lived, his indifference to material wealth and prosperity, and his freedom from desire and ambition were themselves a living criticism of all institutions and of politicians who did not seem to know what they were

doing or who were compromising their principles. (p. 482)

Socrates was perhaps the most original, influential, and controversial figure in the history of Greek thought. … [H]e was obviously at home in the best society, but he had no respect for social status. … Tradition holds that by refusing to compromise his principles, he deliberately antagonized the court. (p. 480)

Prominent thinkers throughout history have commented on schooling as an agent of indoctrination. Comenius, a 16th- and 17th-century educator and scholar, said that he was only one of thousands whose youth was wasted in these "slaughterhouses" of the young.

John Henry Newman, a leading 19th-century university president and theologian, who penned one of the most important and well-developed treatises on the educated mind and the educated person, lamented the wretched state of instruction at the university level during his time. Here is just a sampling of his work, taken from *The Idea of a University* (1852; 1996):

I will tell you, Gentlemen, what has been the practical error of the last twenty years—not to load the memory of the student with a mass of undigested knowledge, but to force upon him so much that he has rejected all. It has been the error of distracting and enfeebling the mind by an unmeaning profusion of subjects; of implying that a smattering in a dozen branches of study is not shallowness, which it really is, but enlargement, which it is not; of considering an acquaintance with the learned names of things and persons, and the possession of the clever duodecimos, and attendance on eloquent lecturers, and membership with scientific institutions … that all this was not dissipation of mind, but progress. All things now are to be learned at once, not first one thing and then the other, not one well, but many badly. Learning is to be without exertion, without attention, without toil; without grounding, without advance, without finishing. There is to be nothing individual in it; and this, forsooth, is the wonder of the age. What the steam engine does with matter, the printing press is to do with the mind; it is to act mechanically, and the population is to be passively, almost unconsciously enlightened. (p. 103)

Emma Goldman (1869-1940) wrote extensively on oppressive governments and the consequences of their unethical behavior. She indicts not just governments, but all of society, for contributing to the problem. She says:

However, it is not only government in the sense of the state which is destructive of every individual value and quality. It is the whole complex of authority and institutional domination which strangles life. It is the superstition, myth, pretense, evasions, and subservience which support authority and institutional domination. It is the reverence for these institutions instilled in the school, the Church, and the home in order that man may believe and obey without protest. Such a process of devitalizing and distorting personalities

of the individual and of whole communities may have been a part of historical evolution; but it should be strenuously combated by every honest and independent mind in an age which has any pretense to enlightenment. (Goldman, 1996, pp. 434-435)

C.S. Lewis (1947) points out that authors assume their texts will be accepted uncritically by students, which is itself a form of indoctrination. He says, "The very power of [textbook writers] depends on the fact that they are dealing with a boy: a boy who thinks he is 'doing' his 'English prep' and has no notion that ethics, theology, and politics are all at stake. It is not a theory they put into his mind, but an assumption, which ten years hence, its origin forgotten and its presence unconscious, will condition him to take one side in a controversy which he has never recognized as a controversy at all" (p. 48).

Einstein (Clark, 1979, p. 33) believed that most of his teaching colleagues did little more than encourage "the obedience of a corps." Einstein speaks of the meaninglessness and hypocrisy with which most people plod through life, and of the crushing realization he experienced in seeing through dogmatism by his own self-education (Clark, 1979):

When I was a fairly precocious young man I became thoroughly impressed with the futility of the hopes and strivings that chase most men restlessly through life. Moreover, I soon discovered the cruelty of that chase, which in those years was much more carefully covered up by hypocrisy and glittering words than is the case today. By the mere existence of his stomach everyone was condemned to participate in that chase. The stomach might well be satisfied by such participation, but not man insofar as he is a thinking and feeling being.

As the first way out there was religion, which is implanted into every child by way of the traditional education-machine. Thus I came—though the child of entirely irreligious (Jewish) parents—to a deep religiousness, which, however, reached an abrupt end at the age of twelve.

Through the reading of popular scientific books I soon reached the conviction that much in the stories of the Bible could not be true. The consequence was a positively fanatic orgy of freethinking coupled with the impression that youth is intentionally being deceived by the state through lies; it was a crushing impression. (pp. 3, 5)

In the early twentieth century, Sumner (1906; 1940) was concerned that schools were well on their way to becoming mere extensions of the society—replete with its prejudices and biases. Consider his developed view and ask yourself whether his fears have been realized in schooling today:

The boards of trustees are almost always made up of "practical men," and if their faiths, ideas and prejudices are to make the norm of education,

the schools will turn out boys and girls compressed into that pattern. … We seem likely to have orthodox history (especially of our own country), political science, political economy, and sociology before too long. It will be defined by school boards who are party politicians. As fast as physics, chemistry, geology, biology, bookkeeping, and the rest come into conflict with interests, and put forth results which have a pecuniary effect … then the popular orthodoxy will extend to them, and it will be enforced as "democratic." … The reason is because there will be a desire that children shall be taught just that one thing which is "right" in the view and interest of those in control, and nothing else. … In fact, this is the reason why the orthodox answers of the school boards and trustees are mischievous. They teach that there are absolute and universal facts of knowledge, whereas we ought to teach that all our knowledge is subject to unlimited verification and revision. (p. 632)

In his book *Teachers as Intellectuals*, Henry Giroux (1988) focuses on some of the root problems in schooling that result from, and lead to, sociocentric thought:

The rationality that dominates traditional views of schooling and curriculum is rooted in the narrow concerns for effectiveness, behavioral objectives, and principles of learning that treat knowledge as something to be consumed and schools as merely instructional sites designed to pass onto students a "common" culture and set of skills that will enable them to operate effectively in the wider society. Steeped in the logic of technical rationality, the problematic of traditional curriculum theory and schooling centers on questions about the most thorough or most efficient ways to learn specific kinds of knowledge, to create moral consensus, and to provide modes of schooling that reproduce the existing society. For instance, traditional educators may ask how the school should seek to attain a certain predefined goal, but they rarely ask why such a goal might be beneficial to some socioeconomic groups and not to others, or why schools, as they are presently organized, tend to block the possibility that specific classes will attain a measure of economic and political autonomy. (p. 6)

Richard Paul enriches our understanding of this problem in his classic anthology, *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World* (1993; 2012):

No culture sees itself as indoctrinating the young or discouraging intellectual development. Each sees itself as concerned with education worthy of the name. The rhetoric of reason and objective learning is everywhere. Yet classroom instruction around the world, at all levels, is typically didactic, one-dimensional, and indifferent, when not antithetical, to reason. Blank faces are taught barren conclusions in dreary drills. There is nothing sharp, nothing poignant, no exciting twist or turn of mind and thought … no struggle, no conflict, no rational give and take, no intellectual excitement or discipline, no pulsation in the heart or mind. Students are not expected

focused on Helen Keller. He notes that Keller's life tends to be treated superficially in history textbooks. He stresses that though a section on Helen Keller is often "included" in such books, the story tends to focus on her physical disabilities and how she is taught to read and speak despite these disabilities. What is rarely discussed is the fact that Helen Keller became a radical socialist and helped found the American Civil Liberties Union to fight for freedom of speech. What is frequently excluded from the history of Helen Keller is how her conversion to socialism "caused a storm of publicity—and outrage" (p. 14). Whether or not people agree with her socialistic views is irrelevant to the fact that, importantly, most people have no sense that she held such views. Not only are most students never encouraged to read Keller's essays on social issues, in fact, most never learn that she wrote them. Still, students are highly encouraged to see Keller as a hero.

When we can critique the many ways in which schooling is guided by, and leads to, dysfunctional group thought and action, we can begin to forge a new path—one that effectively deals with these dysfunctionalities and systematically cultivates the educated, emancipated mind.

Test the Idea

Take several quotes from this section. Articulate your understanding of them in your own words, and then interrelate the main ideas of each. If people took these ideas seriously, how might schooling change (both academically and as a social force)?

SPECIESCENTRISM IS A DANGEROUS FORM OF SOCIOCENTRISM

Sociocentrism is based on the notion that human groups intrinsically see themselves as privileged over other groups. Accordingly, humans naturally see their species (their "in-group") as privileged over other species ("out-group"). And it is their speciescentrism that causes humans to be insensitive to the suffering of animals.

Speciescentrism has been exemplified throughout human history.[30] Consider, for instance, the use of primates in research. There is growing concern among reasonable people about whether, and to what extent, primate research is ethically justifiable, given the suffering that it almost always (if not always) causes. Primate research has historically been conducted for, and rationalized by, its potential human benefit. It is based on the (usually unstated) assumption that because human needs and desires take precedence over those of other species, humans are entitled to treat other species as they wish, with little or no regard for the

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30 It may be that the term "speciescentrism" can be used interchangeably with anthropocentrism and humanocentrism. Keep in mind that my use of the term "speciescentrism" refers to the pathological tendency of humans to see "our" species as privileged over other species, and therefore justified in using other species to serve our vested interests—without regard to the rights and needs of individuals within species.

thoughts or feelings of those species. In his book, *Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees*, Roger Fouts (1997) argues, on ethical grounds, against the use of primates for any research purposes. He points out that the chimpanzee (our closest ancestor, alongside the bonobo) has for hundreds of years been viewed as a model research subject because, though virtually "human," chimps are perceived (genetically) to lack human emotions:

Chimpanzees, like all feeling creatures, deserve our empathy.

In 1699, England's best-known anatomist, Edward Tyson, performed the first dissection of a chimpanzee and revealed an anatomy that resembled "Man in many of its Parts, more than any of the Ape-kind, or any other Animal in the World." Tyson was especially troubled by the creature's brain and laryngeal region. They looked almost human, indicating that this animal might be capable of thought and speech. But Tyson was a good Cartesian and he assumed that a thinking, talking animal was simply not possible. So he decided that though this ape-man had all the machinery for thought and speech, it did not have the God-given ability to use them. It was Tyson who invented the paradigm of the mindless ape: the chimpanzee with a human brain but no single thought in it, the chimpanzee with a nervous system but not the slightest emotion, the chimpanzee with the apparatus for language but not a thing to communicate. Tyson dreamed up the view of the chimpanzee that biomedical researchers still cling to today: a beast with the physiology of a human but the psychology of a lifeless machine—a hairy test tube created for the sake of human exploitation. (p. 50)

But Fouts' research, along with that of many ethologists, has shown what is, in fact, obvious to any unbiased observer: that chimpanzees (and indeed all apes) experience feelings just as humans do. Fouts (1997) documents a number of egregious acts perpetrated on chimpanzees for research purposes, which violated their basic rights and caused them tremendous suffering. For instance, he reveals how the Air Force "recruited" infant chimpanzees from Africa in the 1950s and 1960s for its space program:

Speciescentrism has been exemplified throughout human history, and causes untold suffering to creatures outside the human "in-group."

The military procured the chimps from African hunters who stalked mother chimpanzees carrying a baby. Usually the mother was shot out of her hiding place high up in a tree. If she fell on her stomach, then her infant, clinging to her chest, would die along with her. But many mother chimpanzees shielded their infants by falling on their backs. The screaming infant would then be bound hand and foot to a carrying pole

and transported to the coast, a harrowing journey usually lasting several days. If the infants survived this second ordeal, and many did not, then they were sold for four or five dollars to a European animal dealer who kept them in a small box for days until the American buyer arrived—in this case the Air Force. Those still alive when the buyer came were crated up and sent to the United States, a journey that mirrored the slave trade of earlier centuries. Very few babies emerged from the crates. It is estimated that ten chimpanzees died for every one that made it to this country. (pp. 42–43)

Countless research studies conducted each year on innocent creatures center on topics of little practical use, or which merely serve human greed and vanity. In his book *Minding Animals*, Marc Bekoff (2002) offers the following descriptions of two such research projects. The first focuses on learned helplessness, the other on the effects of radiation. Note the conclusions that researchers come to in each case:

When a normal, naïve dog receives escape/avoidance training in a shuttlebox, the following behavior typically occurs: At the onset of electric shock the dog runs frantically about, defecating, urinating, and howling until it scrambles over the barrier and so escapes from the shock. … However, in dramatic contrast … a dog who had received inescapable shock while strapped in a
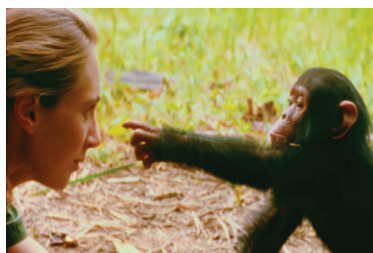
Jane Goodall has been a powerful advocate for the rights of wild animals for than 50 years.

Pavlovian harness soon stops running and remains silent until shock terminates. … It seems to "give up" and passively "accept the shock."

In one set of tests, [monkeys] had been subjected to lethal doses of radiation and then forced by electric shock to run on a treadmill until they collapsed. Before dying, the unanesthetized monkeys suffered the predictable effects of excessive radiation, including vomiting and diarrhea. After acknowledging all this a DNA [Defense Nuclear Agency] spokesman commented: "To the best of our knowledge, the animals experience no pain." (p. 140)

Jane Goodall, famous for her research on chimpanzees in the wild and for her advocacy of animal rights, illuminates some of the many ways in which humans use animals in research, often causing suffering that, if it were done to humans, would be called torture. In her book *Reason for Hope* (2000), Goodall says:

In the name of science and with the various goals of improving human health, keeping dying people alive, ensuring human safety, testing researchers' hypotheses, and teaching students, animals are subjected to countless invasive, frightening, and sometimes very painful procedures. To test product safety and efficacy, animals such as rats and mice, guinea pigs, cats, dogs, and monkeys are injected with or forced to swallow, or have dripped into

their eyes, a whole variety of substances. Surgical techniques are practiced by medical students on animals, and new surgical procedures are tested on animals. To try out experimental techniques for treating burns, vast areas of animals' bodies are subjected to first degree burns.
To discover more about the effect of smoking, taking drugs, eating too much fat, and so forth on human animals, other kinds of animals are forced to inhale huge quantities of smoke, take drugs, and overeat.
To learn about biological systems, scientists stick electrodes into animals' brains, deafen, kill and dissect them. To learn about mental functions, researchers subject animals to a vast array of tests; mistakes are punished with electric shocks, food and water deprivation and other cruelties. In short, what is done to animals in the name of science is often, from the animals' point of view, pure torture—and would be regarded as such if perpetrated by anyone who was not a scientist. (pp. 218–219)

> Humans systematically violate the rights of animals.

Bekoff focuses on a number of systematic ways in which humans violate the rights of animals.[31] These violations are easily rationalized by human perpetrators when we assume, quite conveniently, that animals feel no pain. Bekoff details, for instance, the fact that wearing animals as clothing is still a common practice, and that there are no laws in the United States which regulate fur farms or how trapped animals can or cannot be killed. He says:

Wild fur-bearing animals, over 40 million individuals per year, are cruelly captured, injured, and killed for profit. Many are trapped using contraptions that cause psychological and physical suffering. These devices include leg hold traps, wire snares that encircle an animal and pull tight as the animal struggles, and conibears that grip the entire body and break the neck or back. Beavers are often trapped in water and drown after struggling for some time. . . . Animals are also raised on farms only to be slaughtered for clothing. Recently dogs and cats (bred specifically for use as clothing, or strays) have been used to make fur products. These individuals typically are kept in deplorable conditions before being beaten, hanged, suffocated, or bled to death. …Animals such as mink are killed by neck-snapping. They show great distress when removed from their cages to be killed—screeching, urinating, defecating, fighting for their lives. (p. 156)

In addition to the many mainstream beliefs that lead to animal suffering, there are many weird beliefs that also cause untold suffering for innocent creatures. In a *National Geographic* article (January 2010), Bryan Christy offers an exposé on the world's most notorious wildlife dealer. In this article, he focuses on Asia's wildlife trade and insatiable demand for traditional medicines, exotic pets, and culinary

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31 The sociocentric thought on the part of researchers that we see throughout this section on the treatment of non-human research subjects should be apparent when we consider that such treatment often straightforwardly violates our own laws about preventing cruelty to animals.

delicacies. In cataloging these practices, he says:

> *Tigers are all but extinct in the wild. … There's a valuable black market for tigers. Tibetans wear tiger-skin robes; wealthy collectors display their heads; exotic restaurants sell their meat; their penis is said to be an aphrodisiac; and Chinese covet their bones for health cures, including tiger-bone wine, the "chicken soup" of Chinese medicine. … In some Asian countries, tourist attractions called tiger parks secretly operate as front operations for tiger farming—butchering captive tigers for their parts and offering a potential market for wild-tiger poachers too. (p. 98)*

Tigers have been exploited for human use and "sport" for hundreds of years or more.

The sad fact is that the exploitation of animals throughout human history has been well-documented—from the killing of whales for their blubber to the killing of elephants for their tusks; from the use of wild animals in circuses and animal "parks" to the breeding of animals for display in zoos; from bullfighting in Spain to wild animal "sporting" in all parts of the world; from mass-consumer farming to the use of animals in research. It might be said that every animal that *can* be exploited for human use, *has* been thus exploited.

Peter Singer (2000), a preeminent philosopher who specializes in practical ethics, has had perhaps more influence than any other writer in advancing the rights of animals. In much of his work, he reveals the unnecessary suffering many animals face at the hands of humans. He says:

> It might be said that every animal that *can* be exploited for human use, *has* been thus exploited.

> *… [W]e have no right to discount the interests of nonhuman animals simply because, for example, we like the taste of their flesh. Modern industrialized agriculture treats animals as if they were things, putting them indoors and confining them whenever it turns out to be cheaper to do so, with no regard at all paid to their suffering or distress, as long as it does not mean that they cease to be productive. But we cannot ethically disregard the interests of other beings merely because they are not members of our species. Note that this argument says nothing at all about whether it is wrong to kill nonhuman animals for food. It is based entirely on the suffering that we inflict on farm animals when we raise them by the methods that are standard today. (p. xvi)*

The implications of sociocentric thought in the professions can be far-reaching and highly significant. In his book, *How Doctors Think*, Jerome Groopman (2007) details the following problems in medicine, all of which are caused by or connected with sociocentric thought:

1. Physicians tend to overly rely on classification schemes and algorithms when treating patients. Such an approach often fails to take into account the course of a specific person's disease, and the individual characteristics of the patient, sometimes leading to dire consequences. Groopman says, "scoring schemes are proliferating in all branches of medicine" (p. 238) and these schemes suit the "hectic pace of today's clinical care" (p. 239). (Physicians thus sociocentrically validate one another in using this oversimplified approach to complex medical problems.)

2. Physicians often stick with traditional approaches to medical problems, even when such approaches are ineffective. These doctors rationalize their behavior through the mantra, "it's a bad disease" (p. 240) rather than risking failure by trying a different approach. (Traditional ways of doing things, despite evidence which suggests need for change, continue because group members validate one another in maintaining the established views.)

> Where people think *collectively*, we are likely to find people vying for power, using power over others in unethical ways, and behaving in subservient ways to those in positions of power.

3. Doctors do not generally tend to focus on their mistakes. They do not tend to analyze their mistakes, document them, or use knowledge of these mistakes to improve. Groopman says, "During my training, I met a cardiologist who had a deserved reputation as one of the best in his field. Not only a storehouse of knowledge but also a clinician with excellent judgment. He kept a log of all the mistakes he knew he had made over the decades, and at times revisited this compendium when trying to figure out a particularly difficult case. He was characterized by many of his colleagues as eccentric, an obsessive oddball" (p. 21). (These colleagues were engaging in sociocentric validation: "Doctors who meticulously document and analyze their mistakes are kooky eccentrics, while we are the real professionals.")

4. Doctors often ignore information that contradicts a fixed way of diagnosing or treating patients. (This is an example of doctors being trapped within a sociocentric paradigm of diagnosis and treatment—providing sociocentric validation—i.e., "this is the way we do things. Our way is the correct way.")

5. Doctors almost always use heuristics, or shortcuts, in diagnosing and treating patients. Groopman says, "the problem is that medical schools do not teach shortcuts. In fact, you are discouraged from using them, since they deviate sharply from the didactic exercises in classrooms or on bedside rounds

conducted by the attending physicians" (p. 36). Groopman believes that because doctors naturally use shortcuts in their thinking, they need to know how and when they are taking shortcuts; they need to know the advantages of doing this and the disadvantages of doing it. Groopman thinks that medical schools need to teach students how to take command of this process of using shortcuts in thinking. (By ignoring how doctors actually think and work, medical schools are stuck in a sociocentric paradigm of group validation—"this is the way we have always done things. This is the way we will continue to do things.")

To appreciate the problem of sociocentric validation in the medical profession, consider the case of Barry Marshall, an Australian doctor who in 1981 traced both ulcers and stomach cancer to a gut infection. This suggested that both might be

> Even highly skilled professionals can fall prey to the phenomenon of groupthink.

treatable by antibiotics. For many years, mainstream gastroenterologists dismissed his theory, holding fast to the established view that ulcers were caused by stress. Marshall, who presented his views to the annual meeting of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, said, "To gastroenterologists, the concept of a germ causing ulcers was like saying that the Earth is flat."[34] Marshall tried to get funding for his work from pharmaceutical companies, all of which initially refused him. This is not surprising, given that these companies were making billions of dollars a year selling Zantac and Tagamet to treat ulcers as consequences of stress. Though the view that ulcers are caused by bacterial infection is now widely accepted, it required a decade for this view to take root, and then only after Marshall, in desperation, resorted to the surreal to prove his theory. He infected himself with the ulcer-causing bacteria he obtained from one of his patients (to prove the cause of ulcers) and then treated himself with antibiotics (to prove the cure). This example highlights the fact that even highly-skilled professionals can fall prey to the phenomenon of groupthink, and that when they do so, the consequences can be quite harmful.

In an attempt to explain why a doctor at Johnson & Johnson failed to warn his peers about the artificial hip sold by the company, which was so poorly designed it was causing patients to suffer unnecessarily, Dr. Harlan Krumholz, a professor at Yale School of Medicine, said, "Questioning the status quo in medicine is not easy." Dr. Robert Hauser, a cardiologist who warned other doctors about a defective heart implant in 2005, said, "the standard in the medical community is not to report"—not to report, in other words, medical mistakes. When, in 2008, Dr. Lawrence D. Dorr, an orthopedic specialist, warned his peers in an open letter that a hip implant made by Zimmer Holdings was flawed, he "became the subject of a whisper campaign that questioned his skills as a surgeon."[35] Such campaigns,

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34 See interview with Barry Marshall, *Discover Magazine*. March 2010, pp. 66-74.

35   These quotes are taken from Barry Meier's article "Doctors Who Don't Speak Out," found in the *New York Times*, February 6, 2013.

CRITICAL THINKING IS LARGELY IGNORED IN TODAY'S SOCIETIES

Since thinking is at the heart of every human action (because everything we do is either determined or influenced by our thinking), there is no more important set of skills, abilities, and dispositions to develop than those of the critical mind. To create critical societies we must begin—as a species, across countries, religions, genders, and races—to take thinking seriously. We must begin to address it as we address the development of complex skill sets in any domain of life, such as training as an athlete, learning to play an instrument, and other areas of life requiring disciplined, routine, committed practice to achieve a given skill set. We must assume that improvement will occur only incrementally, throughout many years, and will depend on daily practice driven by sheer grit and determination.

> People with untrained minds should no more expect to think clearly and logically than those people who have never learnt and never practiced can expect to find themselves good carpenters, golfers, bridge-players, or pianists.
>
> —*A.E. Mander*

At present, little attention is given to the *thinking* that underlies our decisions, actions, emotions, and desires. Though every field and subject of study presupposes skilled, disciplined thought, few people within any field *think about the thinking* at the heart of their disciplines. Few explicitly concern themselves with the thinking that determines the questions they ask and the assumptions at the root of their thinking; few are aware of the concepts that determine the information they consider and the conclusions they draw; few realize they have developed points of view from which they examine issues within their fields of study and that, hence, those viewpoints might be reasonably questioned like any other.

20 BARRIERS TO CRITICAL SOCIETIES

To illustrate the fact that we as humans tend not to take thinking seriously in today's cultures, consider the following 20 barriers to critical societies. Most people:

1. are only superficially aware of critical thinking.
2. cannot clearly articulate the ideal of critical thinking, know of it only as a positive buzz term, and, in any case, habitually violate its standards, and in multiple ways. Most humans, in other words, have not aspired to the ideal of critical thought, and most who have done so (having only an implicit idea of it) have succeeded only modestly.
3. uncritically accept the traditional, mainstream views and beliefs of their culture.
4. are "culture bound" (enslaved within social conventions).
5. uncritically accept the views of authority figures.
6. are not aware of, and do not attempt to explicitly use, intellectual standards in their thinking.
7. do not understand human thinking (their own or others') or the impediments to reasonability.
8. (unconsciously) believe much that is arbitrary or irrational.
9. uncritically accept bureaucratic rules, procedures, and formulas.
10. accept a variety of forms of authoritarianism (such as blindly following a religious ideology).
11. are uncreative and unoriginal.
12. are trapped in their social class.
13. never come to think well within any subject, and have no sense of what it is to think beyond subject-matter compartments.
14. do not believe in freedom of thought and speech, or in a wide range of other inalienable freedoms.
15. are biased on questions of gender, culture, species, and politics.
16. use their intellects only superficially.
17. have little command over their primitive emotions and desires; rather, they tend to be at the mercy of their own irrational impulses and passions.
18. do not value true spontaneity, naturalness, or artlessness.
19. are unable and/or unwilling to think within the viewpoints of others who hold a different worldview.
20. are unable to achieve self-actualization, self-command, or enlightenment, because they lack command of their thoughts and understanding of the relationship between thoughts and emotions.

> ### Test the Idea
> Go through the above list of barriers to critical societies and ask yourself this question: to what extent do you, or those in your group(s), fall prey to these barriers?

> ### Test the Idea
> See if you can add to my list of barriers to critical societies.

In 1936, in a book titled *Clearer Thinking*, A. E. Mander (1936; 1938) conceptualized the development of thinking as requiring training and discipline, and as entailing skills that must be practiced over time. He says:

> *Thinking is skilled work. It is not true that we are naturally endowed with the ability to think clearly and logically—without learning how, or without practicing than those people who have never learnt and never practiced can expect to find themselves good carpenters, golfers, bridge-players, or pianists. Yet our world is full of people who apparently do suppose that thinking is entirely unskilled work; that thinking clearly and accurately is so easy and so "natural" that "anybody can think"; and that any person's thinking is quite as reliable as any other person's. This accounts for the fact that, as a people, we are so much less efficient in this respect than we are in our sports. For nobody assumes that any game is so easy that we are all first-class players "naturally," without having to learn how to play or without practice (p. vii).*

Thus the first and most important characteristic of a critical society is that thinking is taken seriously and studied carefully. Consistently high-quality reasoning is understood to entail an integrated, agreed-upon, explicit set of skills, abilities, and traits that must be developed over time through committed practice.[53]

CRITICAL SOCIETIES SUPPORT MAXIMUM FREEDOMS

Because humans will always be social creatures, what we need is what might be termed a *socio-egalitarian* orientation—a worldview that values and affirms equal rights for all, that does not favor one's own group over others, and that

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[53] For an overview of the explicit tools in a substantive conception of critical thinking, see Richard Paul and Linda Elder's *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools* (2014), and *The Thinker's Guide to Analytic Thinking* (2016), Tomales, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.

consistently and actively pursues fair treatment of any and all creatures. We might juxtapose the term sociocentric with *criticocentric*, the latter referring to groups that truly and deeply value critical thinking.

Critical societies, then, take seriously the importance of human freedoms. Such societies simultaneously cultivate and systematically reward many forms of freedoms, including freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, political freedom, economic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom to learn, freedom to dissent, academic freedom, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom to participate in government, sexual freedom, freedom from inhumane treatment, and the freedom to maintain one's own privacy. Each of these freedoms supports one another. And most are presupposed in the others. Their coexistence becomes a powerful underlying dynamic for moving from the narrow provincialism now prevalent in human societies to cosmopolitan internationalism, and from the vulgar dogmatic worldviews now pervasive to cultivated ethical worldviews now so rare.

> If we cannot freely and openly discuss ideas of every kind—ideas that critique the way things are in our societies, ideas that call into question mainstream views, ideas that may even undermine the status quo—it cannot be said that we live in a free society.

One of the most valued characteristics of critical societies is freedom of thought. Freedom of thought presupposes freedom of speech. If we cannot freely and openly discuss ideas of every kind—ideas that critique the way things are in our societies, ideas that call into question mainstream views, ideas that may even undermine the status quo—it cannot be said that we live in a free society. If we cannot dissent without being stereotyped, typecast, pigeon-holed, and marginalized—if we cannot openly disagree with, oppose, contest, and resist irrational and unfair laws and rules—we are not a free society.

In the early nineteenth century, H. L. Mencken (1923), arguably the most distinguished journalist in U.S. history, illuminated the importance of allowing maximum individual freedoms. He said:

I believe in liberty. And when I say liberty, I mean the thing in its widest imaginable sense—liberty up to the extreme limits of the feasible and tolerable. I am against forbidding anybody to do anything, or say anything, or think anything so long as it is at all possible to imagine a habitable world in which he would be free to do, say, and think it. The burden of proof, as I see it, is always upon the policeman, which is to say, upon the lawmaker, the theologian, the right-thinker. He must prove his case doubly, triply, quadruply, and then he must start all over and prove it again. The eye through which I view him is watery and jaundiced. I do not pretend to be "just" to him—any more than a Christian pretends to be just to the devil. He is the enemy of everything I admire and respect in this world—of everything

makes it obvious to what extent such a concept contradicts our sense of justice. External compulsion can, to a certain extent, reduce but never cancel the responsibility of the individual. In the Nuremberg trials this idea was considered to be self-evident. Whatever is morally important in our institutions, laws, and mores, can be traced back to interpretation of the sense of justice of countless individuals. Institutions are in a moral sense impotent unless they are supported by the sense of responsibility of living individuals. An effort to arouse and strengthen this sense of responsibility of the individual is an important service to mankind (p. 27).

Intellectual freedom—the freedom to think for oneself, to determine what to believe and what to reject on one's own using disciplined thought—is essential to the critical society. It requires open access to, and free exchange of, information. It enables us to see through indoctrination and propaganda. It requires a host of interrelated freedoms that must be protected.

CRITICAL SOCIETIES ENTAIL THE FOLLOWING SIX HALLMARKS

We can now summarize six hallmarks of a critical society. Critical societies will develop only to the extent that these dimensions are present. Each overlaps with, and illuminates, all the others.

1. Critical thinking is highly valued when people in the culture:

- see critical thinking as essential to living reasonably, rationally, and fruitfully.
- come to understand, from an early age, that, generally speaking, the development of their thinking takes precedence over their development in every other skill area, because the quality of every part of their life, and their ability to live peacefully with other people, depends on the quality of their thinking.
- continue to develop the skills, abilities, and traits of the disciplined mind throughout life.
- understand that the development of critical thinking occurs in stages and in accordance with one's level of commitment and willingness to practice.
- are committed to becoming increasingly more skilled at fairminded critical thinking over time.
- recognize the importance of all people in societies learning to think critically, and work together to help one another develop intellectually.

> Critical societies protect maximum freedoms, while fostering the development of autonomous intellectual skills and abilities.

2. **The problematics in thinking are an abiding concern when people in the culture:**
- recognize that everyone falls prey to mistakes in thinking, and therefore are constantly on the lookout for problems in their own thinking and in the thinking of others.
- systemically discourage closedmindedness and systematically encourage openmindedness.
- recognize egocentric and sociocentric thinking as significant barriers to critical thought.
- routinely study and diminish irrational thought.
- avoid manipulating, controlling, or using others to serve their selfish interests; avoid being manipulated, controlled, or used by others.
- recognize and guard against the natural tendencies of the human mind toward self-deception, rationalization, hypocrisy, conformism, intellectual arrogance, and other related pathologies.

3. **Intellectual virtues are consistently fostered when people in the culture:**
- think for themselves and avoid uncritically accepting the thinking or behavior of others.
- regularly and routinely enter the viewpoints of those with whom they disagree, in order to understand those viewpoints and to acknowledge any merit that might be found in them.
- encourage and foster multicultural worldviews; consider themselves citizens of the world, just as concerned with the well-being of all people on the planet as they are with the well-being of their own families, neighbors, societies, and countries.
- routinely and willingly engage in open, free discussion when reasoning through issues and problems.
- do not fear new ideas and ways of looking at things. Rather, they regularly think within ideas that may at first seem "strange" or "dangerous" in order to understand them.
- are not trapped in ideological systems.
- systematically apply the same standards to themselves as they do to others, expecting as much (or more) from themselves as they do of others.
- regularly seek and willingly admit to problems in their reasoning.
- regularly distinguish between what they know and don't know.
- believe deeply in the idea that their interests, and those of society, are best served by giving the freest play to reason.
- regularly examine their beliefs and are willing to publicly disagree with others on issues they have deeply thought through.
- persevere through the difficulties in issues and problems, using their best reasoning abilities; do not give up when faced with complexities in thought.
- communicate and relate with others through civility and mutual respect.

4. Ethical reasoning is systematically fostered when people in the culture:

- treat the rights and needs of others as equal to their own.
- do not use other people to serve their selfish interests.
- are routinely encouraged and expected to question the rules, mores, requirements, and taboos of the culture.
- are taught the important distinctions between ethics, social rules, laws, and religious belief systems.
- do not confuse theological beliefs and social rules with ethics.
- do not see their groups as superior to other groups in terms of fundamental human rights.
- do not perceive the rights of humans as superior to the rights of other sentient creatures.
- use intellectual skills and abilities for the betterment of people and sentient creatures across the world, not to serve power and vested interests.
- recognize the intimate connections between how we live today, the health of the planet, and the well-being of future generations.

5. The analysis and assessment of reasoning are routinely used as primary tools for determining what to believe when people in the culture:

- recognize the predominant role of reasoning in human thought—the fact that the main activity of the human mind is reasoning.
- recognize that all reasoning contains eight elements: it targets *purposes*, formulates *questions*, pursues *information*, makes *inferences*, begins with *assumptions*, is shaped by *concepts*, is guided by a *point of view*, and leads to *implications*.
- are skilled at analyzing thinking; routinely analyze their own and others' thinking in order to assess its quality.
- continually improve their ability to take thinking apart in order to better understand it and find potential flaws in it.
- routinely assess reasoning using universal intellectual standards such as *clarity, accuracy, relevance, breadth, depth, logic, precision,* and *fairness.*
- are keenly aware of the relationship between uses of language and the mind's conceptualizations, and routinely study connections between the two.
- do not use language to manipulate other people; do not allow other people to manipulate them through their use of language.
- recognize the important role of questions in living a rational life; recognize that thinking is driven by questions, that significant questions lead to significant understandings, and that superficial questions lead to superficial understandings.
- recognize that their points of view, assumptions, and conceptualizations guide the ways in which they interpret information and influence the conclusions they come to.

6. Freedom of thought and action are protected when people in the culture:

- work together to protect the maximum freedoms for all people.
- work together to minimize the number of laws in the society.
- do not allow irrational power—through systems of justice, the police, or government—to undermine human freedoms.

Hopefully it is apparent that the characteristics laid down in this section are merely a beginning place. When deeply understood, they serve as organizers for a much broader and more detailed conceptualization, yet to be developed, of a critical society. These understandings provide the scaffolding. Perhaps as significantly, they illuminate the distance between current thinking (and practices) and those that would exist in critical societies.

CONCEPTUALIZING EVERYDAY WAYS OF THINKING IN CRITICAL SOCIETIES

Human thinking is frequently a fundamental problem in human life. Yet this understanding is very little appreciated today. How would thinking be treated in critical societies? How would people relate to their own thinking? What role would self-reflection play in daily life? How would people cultivate their thinking? What would typical conversation entail?

> Since thinking is at the heart of every human action, there is no more important set of skills, abilities, and dispositions to develop than those of the critical mind.

To begin, people in enlightened, fairminded critical societies would be keenly aware of the problems of egocentric and sociocentric thought in human life. Hence, they would be consistently on the lookout for these pathological tendencies in themselves. People would everyday be watchful for selfishness, self-deception, biases, and prejudices in their own thinking. In other words, people would look first to themselves for the roots of problems before pointing their fingers at others. Where truth was relevant, people would always attempt to seek it, wherever it might lead and however painful it might be to face. People would combat intrinsic pathologies of their own minds by creating and actively using intellectual strategies. People would develop the ability to make "powerful intellectual moves" to achieve their goals, while also being deeply concerned with the well-being of the global village. People would routinely engage in disciplined, self-reflective analysis and assessment using the tools of critical thought. To improve their reasoning abilities, they would create inner dialogues that would help them better adhere to intellectual standards such as logicalness, reasonability, and fairness. People would bring to these dialogues a rich understanding of "pathologies of thought" in order to guard against them. People would routinely

AFTERWORD

In writing a book on sociocentric thought, Linda Elder is taking on a challenging task. On the one hand, most everyone will agree that unthinking conformity is an obvious and common problem in human thought. Groupthink—who would claim to be free of it? We see it in multiple dimensions of our thought: in our religious beliefs, our national loyalties, our gender—influenced prejudices, our social, political, and cultural ideologies. We all live in a sea of unquestioned presuppositions. Most of us are willing to admit this—in a highly general and non-specific way. Yet, the more specific a sociocentric belief, the more intense is its emotional charge, the more intertwined with our identity, the less willing are we to question it, and the more we greet those who do question it with scorn and derision. To an irrational person, a rational person is irrational.

To the extent that I am right, Linda Elder is bravely (or foolishly) flying into a host of hornets' nests. Hornets' nest number one: RELIGION. Two: SEX. Three: CAPITALISM. Four: HUMAN-INFLICTED SUFFERING TO INNOCENT ANIMALS. Five: UNJUST LAWS. All these domains of life and thought (along with others mentioned in this book) are taboo-infested.

I suspect that Elder will become persona non grata to those who inhabit the nests she is stirring up—to all those who believe and uncritically accept the received views of society. One unfortunate consequence of Elder's decision to target (very hot) manifestations of deep sociocentric thought is that she may well lose many of the readers she seeks to gain, namely those who do not presently question the most destructive beliefs into which they have been deeply socially indoctrinated. Still, Elder may say in her own defense, "Someone must open Pandora's box—if we are to see and transcend what is in it. Someone must model critical thinking in a strong sense—if we are to actually construct the critical societies to which we say we are committed." I certainly hope she is correct. There are some things about which all reasonable people hope to be wrong.

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Dillon Beach, 2013