

# CRITICAL THINKING

TOOLS FOR TAKING CHARGE  
OF YOUR LEARNING AND YOUR LIFE

SECOND EDITION

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# DEAL WITH YOUR IRRATIONAL MIND

**H**umans often engage in irrational behavior. We fight. We start wars. We kill. We are self-destructive. We are petty and vindictive. We act out when we don't get our way. We abuse our mates. We neglect our children. We rationalize, project, and stereotype. We act inconsistently, ignore relevant evidence, jump to conclusions, and say and believe things that don't make good sense. We deceive ourselves in many ways. We are our own worst enemy.

Behind human irrationality are two overlapping and interrelated motivating impulses, which are the focus of this chapter:

- Human egocentrism, the natural human tendency "to view everything within the world in relationship to oneself, to be self-centered" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*); and
- Human sociocentrism, conceptualized most simply as *group egocentricity*. To define sociocentricity, we might take Webster's definition of egocentricity (above) and substitute *group* for *self*. Consider: *Sociocentric thinking is the natural human tendency to view everything within the world in relationship to one's group, to be group-centered.*

Human egocentricity is best understood as having two basic tendencies.

1. The tendency to see the world in *self-serving* terms, to constantly seek that which makes one feel good, that which one selfishly wants, at the expense of the rights and needs of others.
2. The desire to maintain its beliefs.

Egocentricity is a form of *rigidity of thought*. It views its irrational beliefs as rational.

The second motivating impulse, sociocentric thinking, is an extension of egocentric thinking. Humans are herd animals, largely influenced by and functioning within groups. And because most people are largely egocentric, or centered in themselves, they end up

forming groups that are largely centered in themselves. As a result of egocentrism and sociocentrism, most people are self-serving, rigid, conform to group thinking, and assume the correctness of their own beliefs and that of their groups.

Sociocentric thought, then, is a direct extension of egocentric thought in that it fundamentally operates from the two primary tendencies of egocentric thought:

1. Seeking to get what it (or its group) wants without regard to the rights and needs of others; and
2. Rationalizing the beliefs and behavior of the group (irrespective of whether those beliefs and behaviors are irrational).

Sociocentric thought presupposes the egocentric tendencies of the human mind. The selfish mind finds its natural home in the *self-centered* group. And virtually all groups operate with *in-group* advantages denied to those in the *out-groups*. This is instanced in many forms of social conflict, punishment, and vengeance. It also is close to the root of most wars and war crimes. It enables some (advantaged) people to be comfortable in the face of the wretched suffering of masses of (disadvantaged) others. It enables some in a group (the elite) to manipulate others in the group (the non-elite).

Consider the similarity between street gangs and nations. Gangs collectively pursue irrational purposes and engage in violent behavior against other gangs—behavior that can seem to be justified only by one-sided, *group-serving* thought. In a similar way, countries frequently attack other countries using equally one-sided group-serving thought. The difference often is in sophistication, not in kind. The one is censured by society, the other validated.

In short, people are born into, and join, groups. They then identify with them egocentrically. They rarely dissent. They rarely think for themselves. They rarely notice their own conformity and irrationality. Humans seek what is in their selfish interests and see the world from the perspectives of the (sociocentric) groups to which they belong. Egocentric and sociocentric thought both represent enormous barriers to the development of rational thought. This is true, in part, because these two tendencies in the mind *appear to the mind as perfectly rational*. Unless we fully understand these overlapping tendencies and fight to combat them, we cannot fully develop as rational, autonomous, fair-minded thinkers. We shall elaborate further on these points in the last part of this chapter.

## TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR EGOCENTRIC NATURE

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

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The best thinkers realize they must confront their own egocentrism to improve.

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Humans live with the unrealistic but confident sense that they have fundamentally figured out *the way things actually are*, and that they have done this objectively. They naturally *believe* in their immediate *perceptions*—however inaccurate they may be. Instead of using intellectual standards in thinking, humans often use self-centered psychological (rather than intellectual) standards to determine what to believe and what to reject. The most commonly used psychological standards in human thinking are:

“It’s true because *I* believe it.” *Innate egocentrism*: I assume that what I believe is true even though I have never questioned the basis for many of my beliefs.

“It’s true because *we* believe it.” *Innate sociocentrism*: I assume that the dominant beliefs within the groups to which I belong are true even though I have never questioned the basis for many of these beliefs.

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

“It’s true because I *have always believed* it.” *Innate self-validation*: I have a strong desire to maintain beliefs that I have long held, even though I have not seriously considered the extent to which those beliefs are justified, given the evidence.

“It’s true because it is *in my selfish interest* to believe it.” *Innate selfishness*: I hold fast to beliefs that justify my getting more power, money, or personal advantage even though these beliefs are not grounded in sound reasoning or evidence.

## 11.1 Think for Yourself

### IDENTIFYING SOME OF YOUR IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

Using the above categories of irrational beliefs as a guide, identify at least one belief you hold in each of the categories.

It’s true because *I* believe it.

It’s true because *my group* believes it.

It’s true because I *want* to believe it.

It’s true because I *have always believed* it.

It’s true because it is *in my selfish interest* to believe it.

On a scale of 1–10 (10 equating with “highly irrational” and 1 with “highly rational”), where would you place yourself? Why?

If humans are naturally prone to assess thinking in keeping with the above criteria, it is not surprising that they, as a species, have not developed a significant interest in establishing and teaching legitimate intellectual standards. There are too many domains of our thinking that humans, collectively, do not want to have questioned. They have too many prejudices that they do not want to be challenged. They are committed to having their selfish interests served. They typically are not concerned with protecting the rights of others. They typically are not willing to sacrifice our desires to meet someone else's basic needs. They do not want to discover that beliefs they have taken to be obvious and sacred might not be either obvious or sacred. They will ignore any number of basic principles if doing so enables them to maintain our power or to gain more power and advantage.

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Humans naturally see ourselves as right even in the face of clear evidence to the contrary.

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Fortunately, humans are not always guided by egocentric thinking. Within each person are, metaphorically speaking, two potential minds: one emerges from innate egocentric, self-serving tendencies, and the other emerges from cultivated rational, higher-order capacities (if cultivated). We begin this chapter by focusing on the problem of egocentric tendencies in human life. We then contrast this defective mode of thinking with its opposite: rational or reasonable thinking. We explore what it means to use our minds to create rational beliefs, emotions, and values—in contrast to egocentric ones. We then focus on two distinct manifestations of egocentric thinking: dominating and submissive behavior.

## Understand Egocentric Thinking

Egocentric thinking emerges from our innate human tendency to see the world from a narrow, self-serving perspective. We naturally think of the world in terms of how it can serve *us*. Our instinct is to continually operate within the world, to manipulate situations and people, in accordance with our selfish interests.

At the same time, we naturally assume that our thinking is rational. No matter how irrational our thinking is, no matter how destructive, when we are operating from an egocentric perspective, we see our thinking as reasonable. Our thinking seems to us to be right, true, good, justifiable. Our egocentric nature, therefore, creates perhaps the most formidable barrier to critical thinking.

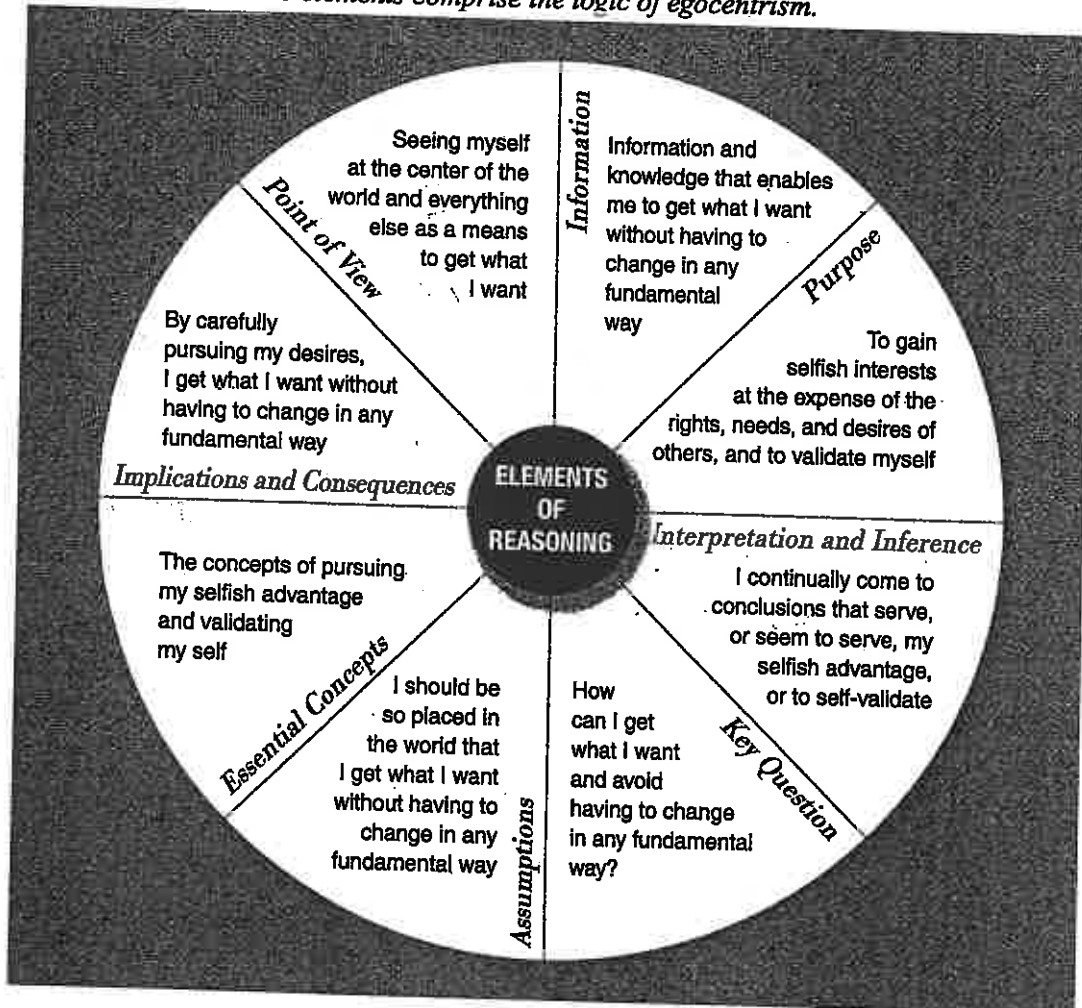
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We naturally think of the world in terms of how it can serve us.

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We inherit from our childhood the sense that we have basically figured out the truth about the world. We naturally *believe* in our sense of who and what we are and what we are engaged in. Therefore, if we behave or think irrationally, we are, in a sense, victims of the beliefs and thought processes we have developed throughout life (because egocentric thinking is commanding us).

As we age, our rational capacities develop to some extent. We come to think more reasonably in some areas of our lives. This can come from explicit instruction or experience. If we are in an environment that models reasonable behavior, we become more reasonable. Yet, it is hard to imagine making significant inroads into egocentric thinking unless we become explicitly aware of it and learn how to undermine or short-circuit

**EXHIBIT 11.1** *These elements comprise the logic of egocentrism.*

it in some way. The human mind can think irrationally in too many ways while masking itself within a facade of reasonability.

The mere appearance of rationality, of course, is not equivalent to its genuine presence. And, unfortunately, much apparently rational adult behavior is at root egocentric or sociocentric. This stems, in part, from the fact that people generally do not have a clear understanding of how the human mind functions. Most important, they fail to realize that thinking, if left to itself, is inherently flawed with prejudices, half-truths, biases, vagueness, arrogance, and the like.

## 11.2 *Think for Yourself*

### BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND EGOCENTRIC THINKING

**T**ry to think of a recent disagreement in which you now realize you were not fairly minded listening to the views of someone else. Perhaps you were defensive during the conversation, or you were trying to dominate the other person. You were not trying to see the situation from the perspective of the person with whom you were interacting. At the time, however, you believed that you were being reasonable. Now you realize that you were close-minded. Complete these statements:

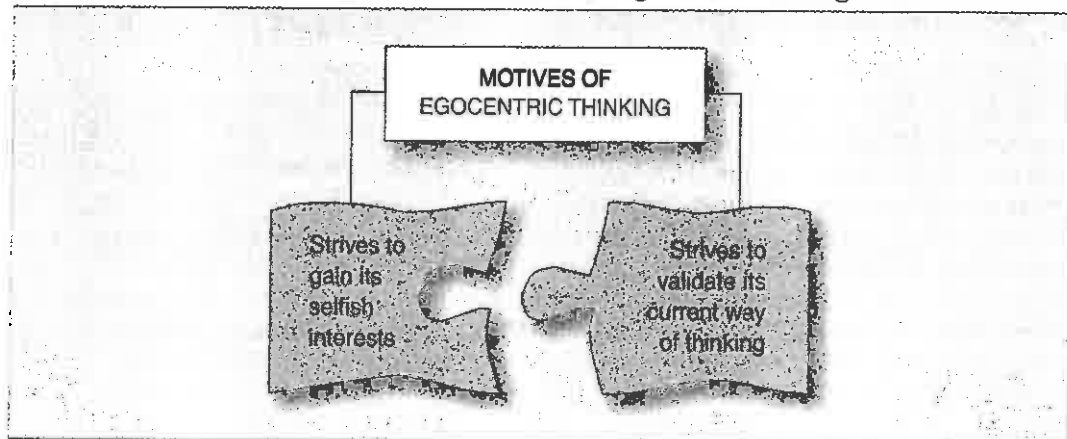
1. The situation was as follows . . .
2. My behavior/thinking in the situation was as follows . . .
3. I now realize that I was close-minded because . . .

If you cannot think of an example, think of a situation you were in recently in which someone else was close-minded. Also, ask yourself why you cannot think of any examples of close-mindedness on your part.

### Understand Egocentrism as a Mind Within the Mind

Egocentric thinking functions subconsciously, like a mind within us that we deny we have. No one says, "I think I will think egocentrically for a while." Its ultimate goals are gratification and self-validation. It does not respect the rights and needs of others—though it may be protective of those with whom it ego-identifies. When we are thinking egocentrically, we see ourselves as right and just. We see those who disagree with us as wrong and unjustified.

**EXHIBIT 11.2** *Two fundamental motives underlie egocentric thinking.*



Our family, our children, our country, our religion, our beliefs, our feelings, our values—all are privileged in our egocentric mind. Our validation is crucial to us, and we seek it even if we have been unfair to others or irresponsibly harmed them in a flagrant way. We are interested only in facts we can twist to support us. We dislike or fear people who point out our inconsistencies. If we criticize ourselves, it is not the occasion for significantly changing our behavior but, rather, the means of avoiding such change. For example, if I think, “I know I have a short fuse, but I can’t help it. I lose my temper just like my father did!” my criticism justifies my continuing to lose my temper.

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Egocentric thinking functions subconsciously, like a mind within us that we deny we have.

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One of the ways we use egocentric thinking, then, is to validate our current belief system. When we feel internally validated, we live comfortably with ourselves even if what we are doing is actually unethical. For example, if I have been brought up to believe that people of a certain race are inferior, my egocentric thinking enables me to maintain all of the following beliefs: (1) I am not prejudiced (they simply are inferior), (2) I judge each person I meet on his or her own merits, (3) I am an open-minded person.

With these beliefs operating in my thinking, I do not see myself as jumping to conclusions about members of this race. I do not think of myself as wronging them in any way. I see myself as simply recognizing them for what they are. Though I ignore the evidence that demonstrates the falsity of what I believe, I do not see myself ignoring the evidence. I do not think of myself as a racist, for being a racist is bad and I am not bad.

Only when we explicitly develop our ability to analyze ourselves rationally can we begin to see these tendencies in ourselves. When we do, it is almost never at the precise moments when our egocentric mind is in control. Once egocentric thinking begins to take control, it spontaneously rationalizes and deceives itself into believing that its position is the *only* justifiable position. It sees itself as experiencing the truth, no matter how inaccurate is the picture of things it is painting. This skilled deceiving of self effectively blocks reasonable thoughts from correcting distorted thoughts. And the more highly self-deceived we are, the less likely we are to recognize our irrationality, the less likely we are to consider relevant information that our egocentricity is blocking from our view, and the less motivated we are to develop truly rational beliefs and views.

## 11.3 Think for Yourself

### DISCOVERING PREJUDICES IN YOUR BELIEFS

As egocentric thinkers, we see ourselves as possessing the truth. At the same time, we form many beliefs without the evidence to justify them. We form many prejudices (judgments *before* the evidence). If this is true, we should be able to begin to unearth some of our prejudices, using our rational capacity. In an attempt to begin this process, complete the following statements:

1. One of the prejudices I have is . . . (Think of generalizations you tend to make even though you don't have the evidence to justify them. They can be about anything you please: a religion, atheists, men, women, homosexuals, heterosexuals, and so

on. Put your prejudice in this form. All X are Y, as in *all women are . . .*, or *all men are . . .*)

2. A more rational belief with which I should replace this faulty belief is . . .
3. If I use this new belief in my thinking, my behavior would change in the following ways . . .

## Successful Egocentric Thinking

Though egocentric thinking is irrational by nature, it can be functional within a dysfunctional logic. For example, it often enables us to selfishly get what we want without having to worry about the rights of the people we deny in getting what we want. This type of thinking—though defective from the points of evidence, sound reasoning, objectivity, and fair play—is often “successful” from the point of view of self-gratification. Hence, though egocentric thinking is inherently flawed, it can be successful in achieving what it is motivated to achieve.

We see this in many persons of power and status in the world—successful politicians, lawyers, businesspeople, and others. They often are skilled in getting what they want and are able to rationalize unethical behavior with great sophistication. The rationalization can be as simple as, “This is a hard, cruel world. We have to be realistic. We have to realize we don’t live in a perfect world. I wish we did. And, after all, we are doing things the way things have always been done.” Conversely, rationalization can be as complex as that which is masked in a highly developed philosophy, ideology, or party platform.

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Though egocentric thinking is inherently flawed, it can sometimes successfully achieve what it wants.

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Hence, though egocentric thinkers may use ethical terms in their rationalizations, they are not responsive to ethical considerations. They do not really respect ethical principles. They think of ethical principles only when those ethical principles seem to justify their getting what they want for other reasons.

Egocentric thinking, then, is inherently indifferent to ethical principles or genuine conscience. We cannot be focused exclusively, at one and the same time, on getting what we selfishly want and genuinely taking into account the rights and needs of others. The only time egocentric thinking takes others into account is when it is forced to do so to get what it wants. Hence, an egocentric politician may take into account the views of a public-interest group only when her reelection depends on the support of that group. She is not focused on the justice of the group’s cause but, rather, on the realization that if she fails to publicly validate those views, that group will refuse to support her reelection. She cares only about what is in her selfish interest. As long as the concern is selfish, by definition, the rights and needs of others are not perceived as relevant.

Corporate executives who ensure that the expected earnings of the company are significantly overstated (to enable them to sell their stock at a high price) cause innocent people to lose money investing in a company that appears to be (but is not) on the upswing. Most CEOs who manipulate data in this way do not worry about the well-being

of potential investors. Their justification must be, "Let the buyer beware!" By using this type of justification, they don't have to face the unethical nature of their behavior.

Highly skilled egocentric thought can be generated in every type of human situation, from situations involving the rights and needs of thousands of people to simple, everyday interactions between two people. Imagine that a couple, Max and Maxine, routinely go to the video store to rent movies. Inevitably Max wants to rent an action-filled movie while Maxine wants to rent a love story. Though Maxine is often willing to set aside her choices to go along with Max's desires, Max is never willing to go along with Maxine's choices. Max rationalizes his position to Maxine, telling her that his movie choices are better because they are filled with thrilling action, because love stories are always slow-moving and boring, because his movies are always award-winners, because "no one likes to watch movies that make you cry," because, because, because. . . . Many reasons are generated. Yet all of them camouflage the real reasons: that Max simply wants to get the types of movies he likes, that he shouldn't have to watch movies that he does not want to watch. In his mind, he should get to do it because he wants to. Period.

Max's egocentrism hides the truth even from himself. He is unable to grasp Maxine's viewpoint. He cannot see how his self-centered thinking adversely affects Maxine. Insofar as his thinking works to achieve his desires, and he is therefore unable to detect any flaws in his reasoning, he is egocentrically successful.

## 11.4 *Think for Yourself*

### RECOGNIZING EGOCENTRIC THINKING IN ACTION

**T**hink of a situation in which someone you know was trying to selfishly manipulate you into doing something incompatible with your interest. Complete the following statements:

1. The situation was as follows . . .
2. This person, X, was trying to manipulate me in the following way (by giving me these reasons for going along with him/her) . . .
3. At the time, these reasons (did/did not) seem rational because . . .
4. I now believe this person was trying to manipulate me because . . .
5. I think the real (irrational) reason he/she wanted me to go along with his/her reasoning is . . .

## Unsuccessful Egocentric Thinking

When egocentric thought is unsuccessful, it creates problems for those influenced by the thinker and also for the thinker himself or herself. Let's return to Max and Maxine and the movies for a moment. Imagine that for many months Max and Maxine go through this video-store routine in which, through self-serving argumentation, Max is

able to manipulate Maxine into going along with his video choices. But one day Maxine decides that she simply isn't going along with Max's selfish behavior in choosing which movie to rent. She begins to feel resentment toward Max. She begins to think that perhaps Max isn't truly concerned about her. The more she thinks about it, the more she begins to see that Max is selfish in the relationship in a number of ways. He is unwilling to go along with her movie choices and, further, tries to control where they go to lunch every day, when they eat lunch, when they visit with friends, and so on.

Maxine begins to feel manipulated and used by Max, and out of her resentment emerges a defensive attitude toward Max. She rebels. She no longer simply goes along with Max's unilateral decisions. She begins to tell him when she doesn't agree with his choices.

At this point, the table is turned for Max. His egocentric thinking is no longer working for him. He feels anger when he doesn't get his way. Because he lacks insight into his dysfunctional thinking, though, he doesn't realize that he is actually abusing Maxine and treating her unfairly. Because Maxine's resentment is now leading to acts of retaliation on her part, Max's life is less successful than it was. Maxine may end up deciding that she is not going to happily agree to Max's movie choices in the future. Her resentment may lead her to seek subtle ways to punish Max for his unfair treatment of her. If she does go along with his movie choices, she might sulk the entire time they are watching the movie. Both of them may become unhappy as a result of Maxine's rebellion, and they may interrelate in a perpetual state of war, as it were.

This is merely one pattern in a myriad of possible patterns of egocentric thinking leading to personal or social failure. Egocentric thinking and its social equivalent, sociocentric thinking (discussed later in the chapter), can lead to social prejudice, social conflict, warfare, genocide, and a variety of forms of dehumanization. Though on occasion some person or group might be "successful" as a result of the ability to wield superior power, quite often the consequences will be highly negative for themselves as well as their victims.

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When we are egocentrically unsuccessful, we create problems for ourselves and/or others.

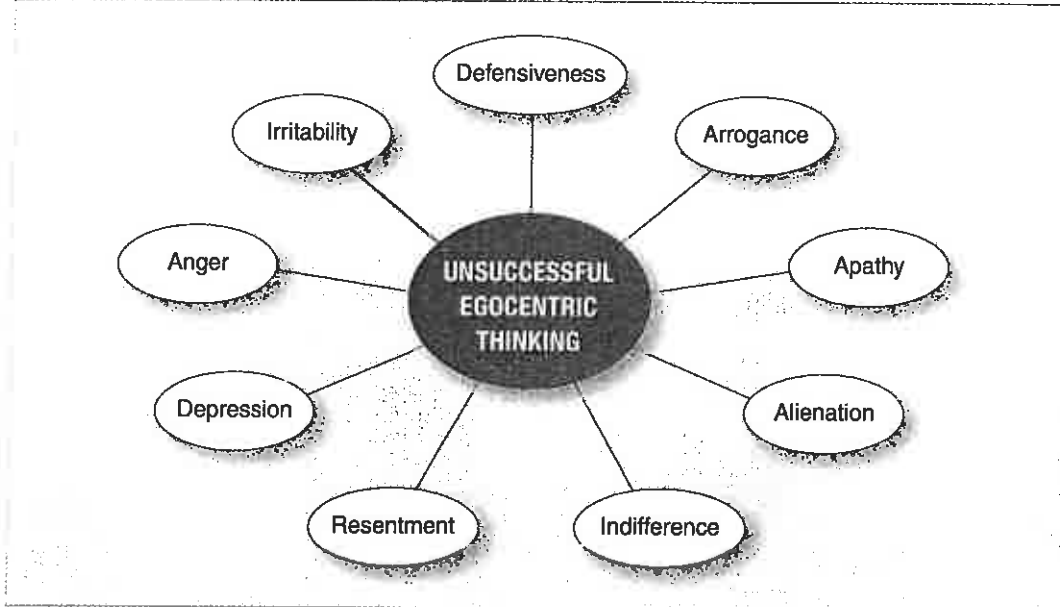
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Consider a gang that randomly chooses a person to harass who is wearing a sweatshirt of the same color as its group "color." The members begin with verbal assaults, which quickly lead to physical attacks, which in turn result in serious injury to the victim. Consequently, the gang members responsible for the attack are arrested on suspicion, then found guilty of a serious crime, which leads to their imprisonment.

Even if it does not cause direct harm to others, egocentric thinking may lead to chronic self-pity or depression. When problems emerge, it is easy to revert to this type of thinking:

I don't know why I should always get the short end of the stick. Just when I think things are going well for me, I have to face another problem. Is there no end? Life seems to be nothing but one problem after another. My instructors expect too much of me. My parents won't give me the money I need to get by. My boss doesn't think I'm doing a good enough job. My wife is always complaining about something I do, and now I've got to figure out how to deal with this car. Life is just a pain in the neck. I don't know why things don't ever go my way.

**EXHIBIT 11.3** *These are some of the many feelings that might accompany egocentric thinking. They often occur when egocentric thinking is "unsuccessful."*



Egocentric, self-pitying persons fail to recognize the positives in life. They screen these out in favor of self-pity. They inflict unnecessary suffering on themselves. They say to themselves, "I have a right to feel all the self-pity I want, given the conditions of my life." In situations such as this, because the mind is unable to correct itself, it is its own victim. It chooses to focus on the negative and engage in self-punitive behavior.

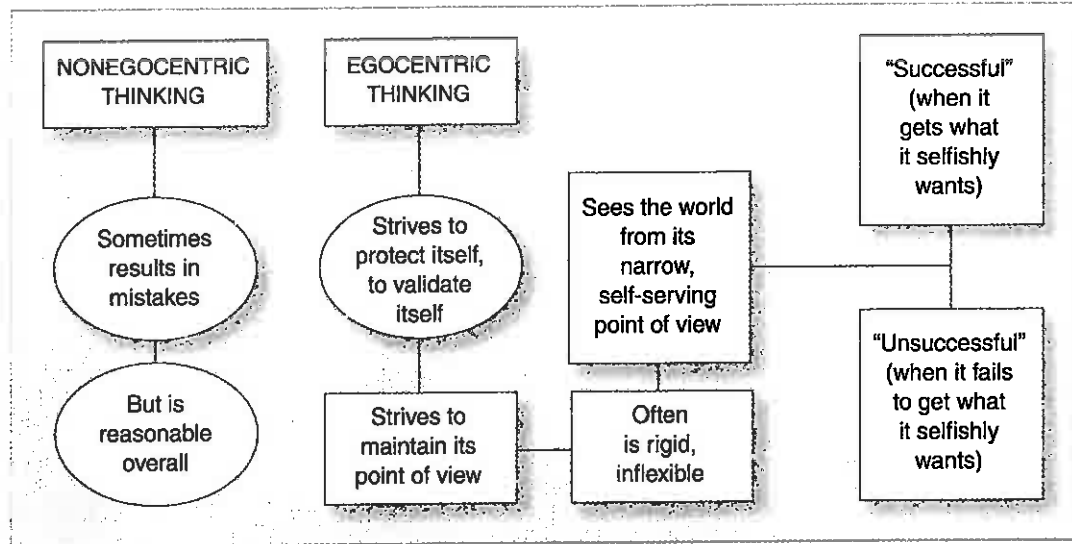
## 11.5 *Think for Yourself*

### UNEARTHING DYSFUNCTIONAL EGOCENTRIC THINKING

Try to think of a time when your desire to selfishly get what you wanted failed because of your egocentric behavior. Complete these statements:

1. The situation was as follows . . .
2. When I didn't get what I wanted, I thought . . . and behaved . . .
3. A more rational way to think would have been . . .
4. A more rational way to act would have been . . .

**EXHIBIT 11.4** Problems in thinking can be either egocentrically or nonegocentrically based.



## Rational Thinking

Although irrationality plays a significant role in human life, human beings are, in principle, capable of thinking and behaving rationally. Humans can learn to respect evidence even though it does not support our views. We can learn to enter empathically into the viewpoint of others. We can learn to attend to the implications of our own reasoning and behavior. We can become compassionate. We can make sacrifices for others. We can work with others to solve important problems. We can discover our tendency to think egocentrically and begin to correct for that tendency.

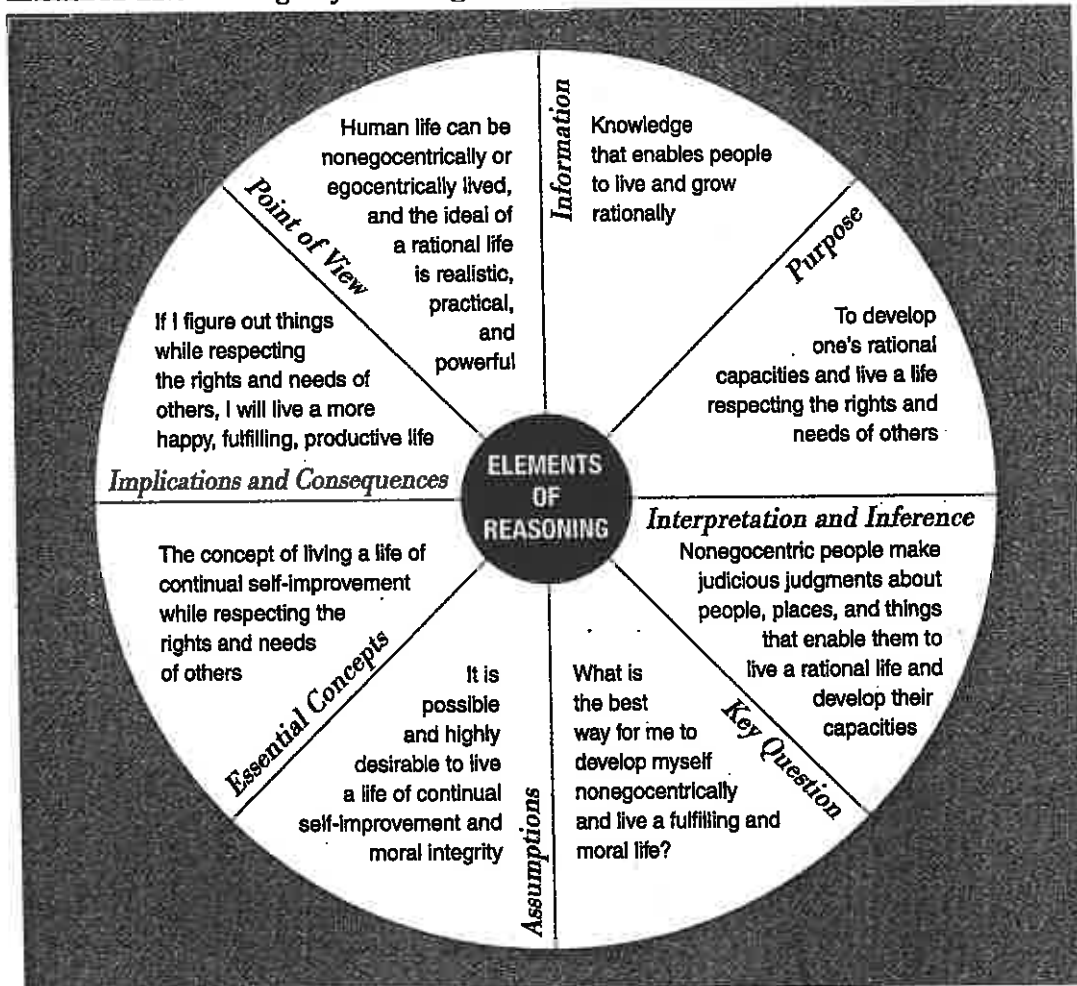
Hence, though egocentrism causes us to suffer from illusions of perspective, we can transcend these illusions by practicing the thinking that takes us into the perspective of others. Just as we can assimilate what we hear into our own perspective, so can we learn to role-play the perspectives of others. Just as egocentrism can keep us unaware of the thinking process that guides our behavior, critical thinking can help us learn to explicitly recognize that thinking process. Just as we can take our own point of view to be absolute, we also can learn to recognize that our point of view is always incomplete and sometimes blatantly self-serving. Just as we can remain completely confident in our ideas even when they are illogical, we can learn to look for lapses of logic in our thinking and recognize those lapses as problematic.

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Though humans are naturally egocentric, they can learn to be rational.

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We need not continually confuse the world with our own perspective of the world. We can learn to consider and understand others' points of view, to see situations from more than one point of view. We can learn to assess our thinking for soundness. We can strive to become conscious of our thinking, as we develop our "second nature."

**EXHIBIT 11.5** *The logic of the nonegocentric mind.*

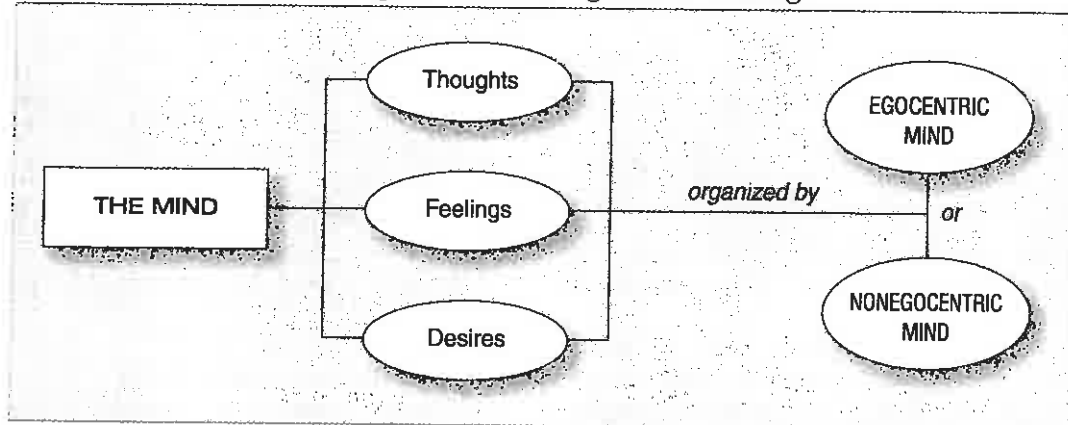
Each of us has at least the potential for developing a rational mind and using that development to resist or correct for egocentric thought patterns. This requires a certain level of command over the mind that few people have. It involves disciplined thinking. It means holding oneself accountable. It means developing an inner voice that guides thinking so as to improve it. It means thinking-through the implications of thinking before acting. It involves identifying and scrutinizing our purposes and agendas, explicitly checking for egocentric tendencies. It involves identifying irrational thinking and transforming it into reasonable thinking.

Let us imagine the case of Todd and Teresa, who are dating. Todd finds himself feeling jealous when Teresa talks with another man. Then Todd recognizes the feeling of jealousy as irrational. Now he can intervene to prevent his egocentric nature from

**EXHIBIT 11.6** *This figure compares the tendencies of inherent egocentric thinking with those of cultivated nonegocentric thinking.*

THE EGOCENTRIC MIND	THE NONEGOCENTRIC MIND
Pursues selfish interests at the expense of the rights, needs, and desires of others while stunting development of the rational mind	Respects the needs and desires of others while pursuing its own needs and desires and is motivated to develop itself, to learn, and to grow intellectually
Seeks self-validation	Is flexible, adaptable
Can be inflexible (unless it can achieve its selfish interests through flexibility)	Strives to be fair-minded
Is selfish	Strives to interpret information accurately
Makes global, sweeping positive or negative generalizations	Strives to gather and consider all relevant information
Distorts information and ignores significant information	Reacts rationally to situations by taking charge of emotions and using emotional energy productively
Reacts with negative, counterproductive emotions when it fails to have its desires met	

**EXHIBIT 11.7** *At any given moment, depending on the situation, the three functions of the mind are controlled by either egocentric or nonegocentric thinking.*



asserting itself. He can ask himself questions that enable him to begin to distance himself from his "ego": "Why shouldn't she talk to other men? Do I really have any good reason for distrusting her? If not, why is her behavior bothering me?"

Through this sort of self-scrutinizing, reasonable persons seek to understand what lies behind their motivations. They come to terms with their own egocentrism. They establish relationships characterized by reasonability and mutual respect. Rational thinking, then, is flexible, disciplined, and fair-minded in its approach. It is able to chart its own course while adhering to ethical demands. It guides itself deliberately away from irrational tendencies in itself.

Thus, just as unconscious, self-deceptive thinking is the vehicle for accomplishing irrational ends, conscious, self-perceptive thinking is the vehicle for achieving rational ends. An intrinsic dimension of rational thinking, therefore, is raising to the conscious level all instinctive irrational thought. We cannot improve by ignoring our bad habits, only by breaking them down. This requires that we admit we have bad habits. And it requires an active self-analytic stance.

Following this line of reasoning, a rational act is one that is able to withstand reasonable criticism when brought entirely into the open. All thought that we cannot own entirely up to should be suspect to us. Like a contract with many pages of fine print that the contract writer hopes the reader will not explicitly understand, the egocentric mind operates to hide the truth about what it is actually doing. It hides the truth both from itself and from others, all the while representing itself as reasonable and fair.

Rational thinking, by contrast, is justified by the giving of good reasons. It is not self-deceptive. It is not a cover for a hidden agenda. It is not trapped within one point of view when other points of view are relevant. It strives to gather all important relevant information and is committed to self-consistency and integrity. Reasonable people seek to see things as they are, to understand and experience the world richly and fully. Reasonable people are actively engaged in life. Reasonable people are willing to admit when they are wrong, and to learn from their mistakes. Indeed, they want to see themselves as wrong when they are wrong.

To develop your rational capacities, then, you have to understand that at any given moment, your thoughts, feelings, and desires can be controlled by either egocentric or rational thinking. For your rational mind to prevail over your egocentric tendencies, you will function in a way analogous to that of the orchestra leader. The leader controls the process of musical production, maintains discipline within the orchestra, assesses the quality of the sounds, listens for flaws in delivery, points out those flaws for correction, and, through routine scrutiny and continual practice, is finally able to elicit music of high quality.

For you to reach more of your rational potential, you must become a student of the interplay between rational and irrational thought and motivation in your life. You must come to see that, ultimately, your thinking is what is controlling who and what you are, determining the essential quality of your life.

## 11.6 *Think for Yourself*

### TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU RATIONAL?

**N**ow that you have read an introduction to rationality and irrationality (egocentrism), think about the extent to which you think you are either rational or irrational. Answer these questions:

1. If you were to divide yourself into two parts, one being egocentric and the other rational, to what extent would you say you are either? Would you say you are 100% rational, 50% rational and 50% egocentric, or how would you divide yourself?

2. What reasoning would you give to support your answer to number 1 above? Give examples from your life.
3. To the extent that you are egocentric, what problems does your egocentrism cause?
4. Does your egocentric thinking tend to cause more problems for yourself or for others? Explain.

## Two Egocentric Functions

We have introduced you to the distinction between rationality and irrationality. Now we will discuss two distinctively different patterns of egocentric thinking. Both represent general strategies the egocentric mind uses to get what it wants; both represent ways of irrationally acquiring power.

First let's focus on the role that power plays in everyday life. All of us need to feel that we have some power. If we are powerless, we are unable to satisfy our needs. Without power, we are at the mercy of others. Virtually all that we do requires the exercise of some kind of power, whether small or large. Hence, the acquisition of power is essential for human life. But we can pursue power through either rational or irrational means, and we can use the power we get to serve rational or irrational ends.

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

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

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To get what we want egocentrically, we either try to dominate others or try to submit to them.

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Insofar as we are thinking egocentrically, we seek to satisfy our egocentric desires either directly, by exercising overt power and control over others, or indirectly, by submitting to those who can act to serve our interest. To put it crudely, the ego either bullies or grovels. It either threatens those who are weaker or subordinates itself to those who are more powerful, or both.

Both of these methods for pursuing our interests are irrational, both fundamentally flawed, because both are grounded in unjustified thinking. Both result from the assumption that the needs and rights of egocentric persons are more important than those they exploit for their advantage. We will briefly explore these two patterns of irrational thinking, laying out the basic logic of each.

Before we discuss these patterns, one caveat is in order: As we have mentioned, many situations in life involve using power. Using power need not imply an inappropriate use, however. For example, in a business setting, hierarchical protocol requires managers to make decisions with which their employees may not agree. The responsibility inherent in the manager's position calls for that manager to use his or her power to make decisions. Indeed, managers who are unable to use the authority vested in their positions are usually ineffective. They are responsible for ensuring that certain tasks are completed. Therefore, they must use their power to see those tasks to completion. Of course, that does not justify their using power unjustifiably to serve selfish ends.

The use of power, then, is and must be part of human life. The fundamental point is that power can be used either rationally or irrationally, depending on the motivation and manner of the person wielding it. Thus, if power is used to serve rational ends, and pursues those ends in a reasonable manner, it is justified. In contrast, if power is used to control and manipulate others for irrational, self-serving ends, that is another matter entirely.

Let us now turn to the two predominant patterns of irrational thinking that all of us use to the extent that we are egocentric.

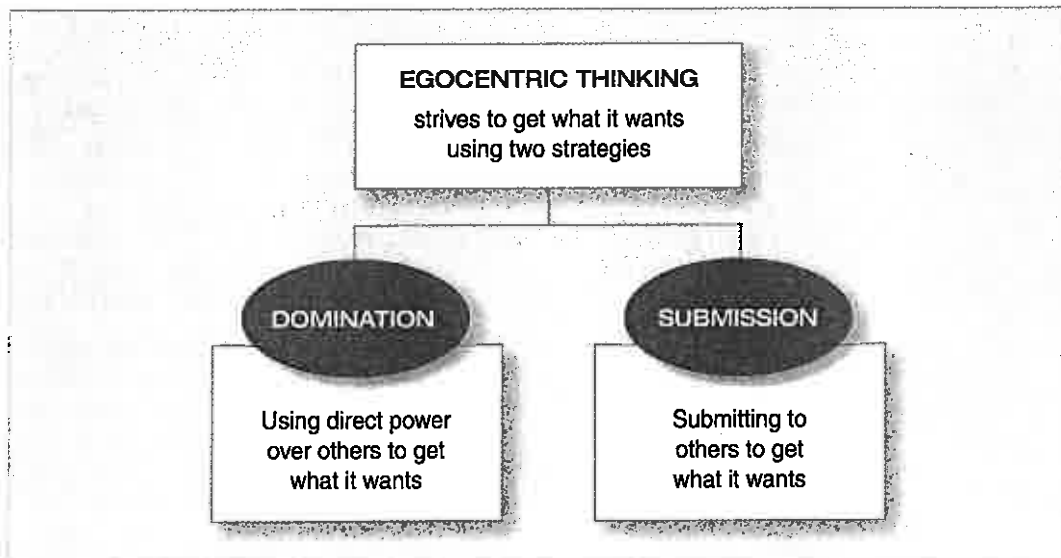
1. The dominating ego function: "I can get what I want by fighting my way to the top."
2. The submissive ego function: "I can get what I want by pleasing others."

The egocentric mind chooses one over the other either through habit or through an assessment of the situation. For example, it can either forcefully displace those at the top or please those on top and thereby gain its desires. Of course, we must remember that these choices and the thinking that accompanies them function subconsciously.

### *Egocentric Domination*

Between the two functions of egocentric thinking, perhaps the one more easily understood is the dominating function—or the *dominating ego*, as we usually will refer to it for the purposes of this chapter. When we are operating within this mode of thinking, we are concerned, first and foremost, to get others to do precisely what we want by

**EXHIBIT 11.8** *Whenever we think egocentrically to serve our interests, we attempt to either dominate or submit to others.*



means of exerting power over them. Thus, the dominating ego uses physical force, verbal intimidation, coercion, violence, aggression, "authority," and any other form of overt power to achieve its agenda. It is driven by the fundamental belief that to get what we want, we must control others in such a way that were they to resist us, we could force them to do what we want. At times, of course, domination may be quite subtle and indirect, with a quiet voice and what appears to be a mild manner.

For examples of the dominating ego at work, we need only to look to the many people who are verbally or physically abused by their spouses, or the many children similarly abused by their parents. The basic unspoken pattern is, "If others don't do what I want, I force them to do it." Or consider the man in a bar who gets into a fight to force another man away from his girlfriend. His purpose, on the surface, is to protect her. In reality, his purpose may be to ensure that she won't be tempted into a romantic relationship with someone else, or to embarrass the other man in front of his peers.

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The dominating ego uses force and control over others to get what it wants.

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Domination over others typically generates feelings of power and self-importance. Through self-deception, it also commonly entails a high sense of self-righteousness. The dominator is typically arrogant. To the dominator, control over others seems to be right and proper. The dominator uses force and control "for the good" of the person being dominated. The key is that there is self-confirmation and self-gain in using power and forcing others to submit. Others must undergo undeserved inconvenience, pain, suffering, or deprivation as a result.

Given these mutually supporting mental structures, it is difficult for those who successfully dominate others to recognize any problems in their own behavior or reasoning. Why change when, in your mind, you are doing what ought to be done? Hence, as long as the dominating ego is "successful," it experiences positive emotions. To the extent that it is "unsuccessful"—unable to control, dominate, or manipulate others—it experiences negative emotions.

The negative emotions frequently generated from the frustrated failure to control include anger, rage, wrath, rancor, hostility, antagonism, depression, and sadness. Consider the abusive husband who, for many years, is successfully able to control his wife. When she decides to leave him, he may go into a fit of rage and kill her, and perhaps even himself. As long as he thinks he is in control of her, he feels satisfied. But when he no longer can dominate her, his irrational anger may well lead him to the extreme of physical violence.

Examples of the kinds of thinking that dominating persons use in justifying their irrational controlling behavior are:

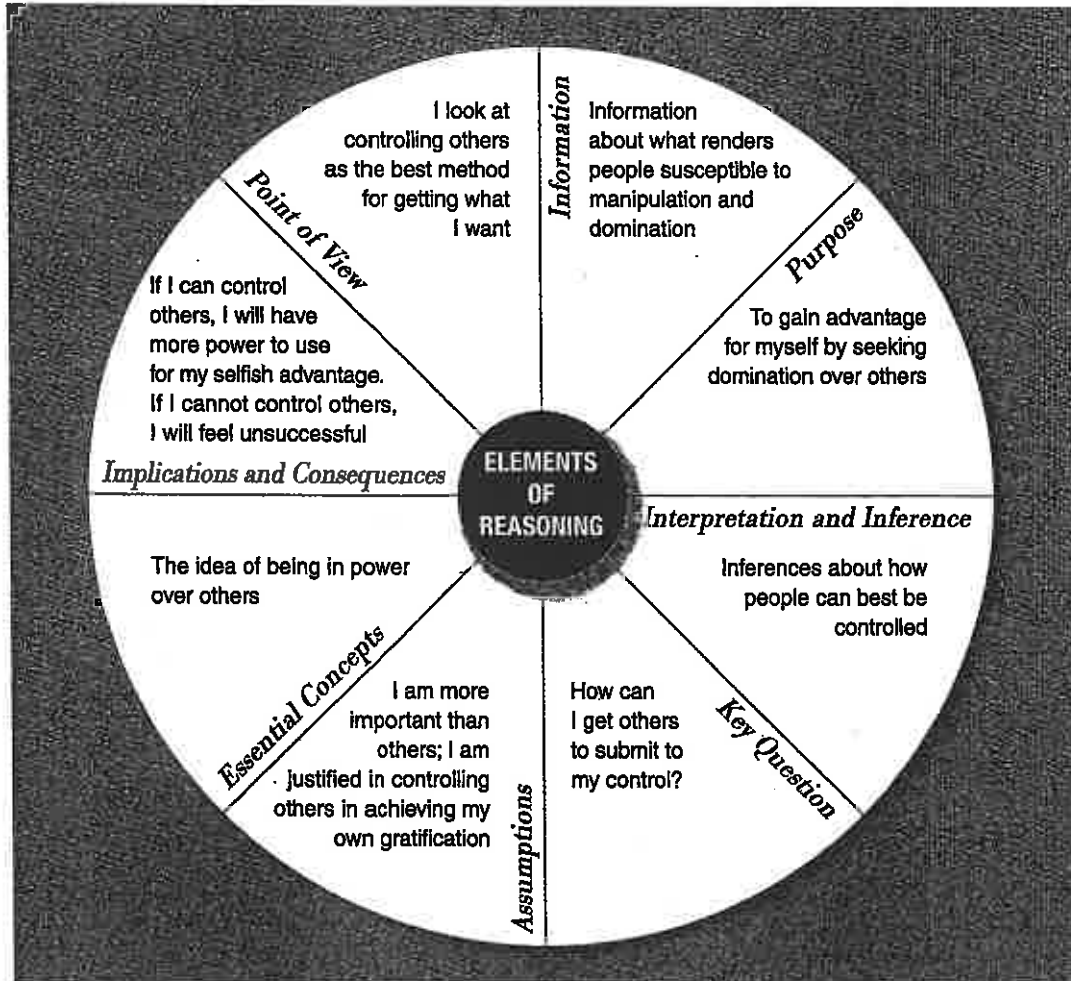
"I know more than you do."

"Since I know more than you, I have an obligation to take charge."

"If I have to use force to make things right, I should do so because I understand better what needs to be done."

"If I have more power than you do, it is because I am superior to you in skill and understanding."

"I have a right to take the lead. I understand the situation best."

**EXHIBIT 11.9** *The logic of the dominating ego encompasses these elements.*

"You are behaving stupidly. I cannot let you hurt yourself."

"I am an expert. Therefore, there is nothing you can teach me that I need to know or that I don't already know."

Given these subconscious beliefs and thoughts, it follows that people who operate primarily from the dominating ego would be likely to have difficulties in interpersonal relationships, especially when they come up against another dominating ego or against a strong, rational person. Just as the unconscious tendency to dominate impedes healthy personal relationships, so it often impedes the learning process for students who previously have been able to avoid disciplined learning by using the strategy and tactics of a dominating ego.

Intellectual arrogance is a common byproduct of the tendency to dominate. All of the following thoughts—often unconscious—lead to or derive from intellectual arrogance on the part of students who have successfully avoided significant learning through the exercise of power over teachers and parents:

“Why should I have to learn this? It’s useless to me.”

“This is just theory and abstraction. I want practical knowledge.”

“I know as much as I need to know about this subject.”

“This isn’t in my major. I will never have any use for it.”

“I’m intelligent. If I don’t understand what is being taught to me, there is obviously something wrong with the way the instructor is presenting it.”

“I’ve always made good grades before. So if I don’t make a good grade in this class, it’s the teacher’s fault.”

Another benchmark of the dominating ego is its propensity to impose higher standards on others that it imposes on itself. For example, it may require something near perfection in others while ignoring blatant flaws in itself. For a simple, everyday example, we can turn to what often happens in traffic jams. People frequently drive as if their “rights” were sacred (“No one should ever cut me off”) while they frequently cut off others (“I have to get into this lane—too bad if others have to wait.”). In short, the dominating ego expects others to adhere to rules and regulations it has the “right” to thrust aside at will.

From an ethical point of view, those who seek control over others frequently violate the rights, and ignore the needs of, others. Selfishness and cruelty are common in these people. It is difficult to gain any ground by reasoning with people who are under the sway of their dominating ego, for they will use any number of intellectual dodges to avoid taking moral responsibility for their behavior.

## 11.7 *Think for Yourself*

### TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU EGOCENTRICALLY DOMINATING?

**T**hink about your typical patterns of interaction with friends, family members, fellow workers, and others. Complete the following statements:

1. I tend to be the most (egocentrically) dominating in the following types of situations . . .
2. Some examples of my dominating behavior are . . .
3. I usually am successful/unsuccessful in dominating others. My strategy is . . .
4. My controlling behavior creates problems because . . .

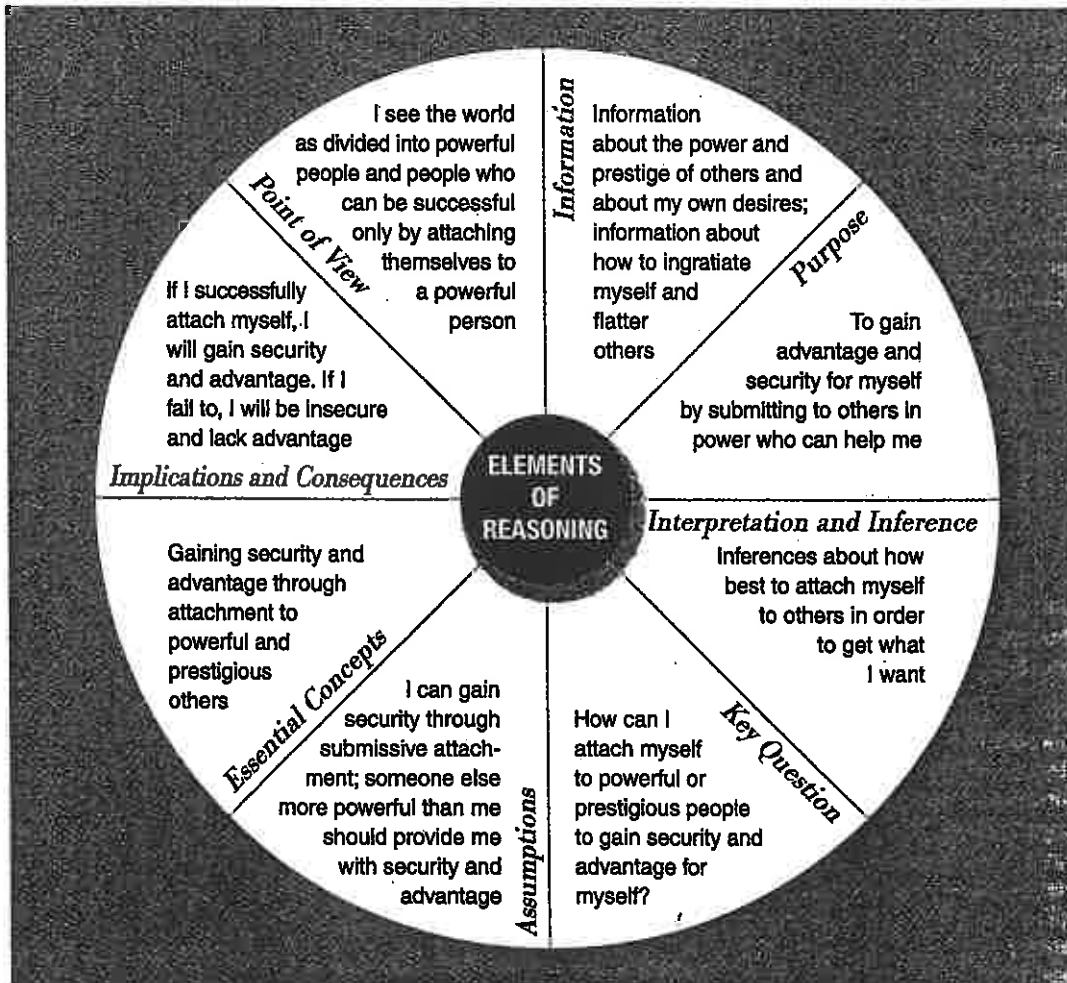
Next we lay out the logic of egocentric submissive thinking—thinking that seeks power and security through attachment to those who dominate and wield power. We are not assuming that everyone who has power has achieved it by dominating others. They

may well have achieved power through rational means. With this caveat in mind, let us begin with a basic outline of the submissive ego.

### *Egocentric Submission*

If the hallmark of the dominating ego is control over others, the hallmark of the submissive ego is *strategic subservience*. In this mode of thinking, people gain power not through the direct struggle for power but, instead, through subservience to those who have power. They submit to the will of others to get the powerful person to act in their selfish interest. In this way, people with submissive egos gain indirect power. To be successful, they learn the arts of flattery and personal manipulation. They must become skilled actors and actresses, appearing to be genuinely interested in the well-being and

**EXHIBIT 11.10** *The logic of the submissive ego encompasses these elements.*



interests of the other while in reality pursuing their own interest through the other. At the same time, they must hide this mode of functioning from themselves, as they have to maintain some level of self-respect. If they had to consciously admit to themselves that they were submitting to others to have their own way, they would have trouble feeling justified.

There are countless examples of this mode of functioning in everyday life. The teenage female, for example, who pretends to enjoy fishing (while being inwardly bored by it) so her boyfriend will like her better is engaging in this type of thinking. She submits to his desires and his will only because she wants to gain specific ends (of having a prestigious boyfriend, gaining attention from him, feeling secure in the relationship, and so on). Though she readily agrees to go fishing with him, she probably will end up resenting having done so in the long run—especially once she secures his commitment to her. By virtue of the bad faith implicit in the strategies of the submissive ego, it is common for resentment eventually to develop in the person who functions consistently in this mindset.

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The submissive ego submits to those in power to get what it wants.

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If the pattern of thinking of the submissive ego takes root in the young woman we just imagined, she eventually may marry a financially secure man so she can be taken care of, will not have to work, and can enjoy the luxuries of a life without personal sacrifice. Consciously, she may deceive herself into believing she loves the man. Yet, because she does not relate to him rationally, the relationship is likely to be dysfunctional.

A similar pattern often occurs in social groups. Within most groups there will be a structure of power, with some playing a dominant and others a submissive role.

Most people will play both roles, depending on the situation. Nazi Germany and the ideology of Fascism provide an excellent example of a system that simultaneously cultivated both dominating and submissive behavior. In this system, nearly everyone had to learn to function within both egocentric types, depending on the context. A hierarchy was established in which everyone was required to give absolute obedience to those above them and to have absolute authority over everyone below them. Only Hitler did not have to use the strategy of submission, as there was no one for him to submit to. Theoretically, no one in such a system has to rationally persuade anyone below him or her in the system. The expectation is clear: Anyone below submits; anyone above dominates.

In the ideology of most human cultures, a greater place is officially given to the use of reason in human life than it was in Fascist society. Much of the official ideology of any society, however, is more window dressing than reality. Suffice it to say that because all societies are stratified and all stratified societies have a hierarchical structure of power, all societies, to date, encourage the thinking of the dominating and submissive ego.

Part of that stratification is found in work-related contexts. In many work situations, men and women alike feel forced to operate in a submissive manner toward their supervisors, allowing themselves to be dominated and manipulated by their superiors so these employees can stay in favor, keep their jobs, or get promotions.

Thus, the submissive ego operates through artifice and skillful self-delusion to ensure its security, advantage, and gratification. To achieve its objectives, it engages in behavior that is compliant, servile, cowering, acquiescent—though all of these characteristics may

be highly disguised. It continually capitulates, defers, caves in, succumbs, yields to the will of others to gain advantage and maintain its artificial self-esteem.

To avoid the feeling of caving in to superiors, one of the most effective image-saving devices is to adopt the point of view of the superior. In this case, the submission appears as simple agreement: "He didn't pressure me; I agree with him."

As long as the submissive ego achieves "success," it experiences positive emotions—satisfaction, happiness, fulfillment, pleasure, and the like. To the extent that it is not achieving its goals and fails to gain its ends through submission, however, it feels any of a number of negative emotions including bitterness, resentment, animosity, ill will, spitefulness, vindictiveness, enmity, antipathy, and loathing. What's more, depending on the situation, a sense of having failed may lead to insecurity, fear, helplessness, depression, and anxiety.

When unsuccessful, the submissive ego tends to punish itself inwardly, much more than the dominating ego, which, when experiencing pain, tends to respond by inflicting pain on others. Egocentric feelings mirror egocentric thought. Hence, when inflicting pain on itself, the submissive ego sees itself as justified in feeling bad. It experiences a form of sick pleasure in reminding itself that it has every reason to feel negative emotions.

Consider, for example, the woman who believes that her husband should deal with all the unpleasant decisions that have to be made. If he asks her to handle some of those decisions, she goes along with him but is resentful as a result. She may think thoughts such as: Why should I have to deal with these unpleasant decisions? They are his responsibility. I always have to do the things he doesn't want to do. He doesn't really care about me because if he did, he wouldn't ask me to do this.

She feels justified in thinking these negative thoughts, and in a way she enjoys the feelings of resentment that accompany the thoughts.

The submissive ego often has a "successful" relationship with a person who functions within the dominating-ego mindset. The paradigm case of this phenomenon can be found in marriages in which the male dominates and the female submits. She submits to his will. He may require that she do all the household chores. In return, either implicitly or explicitly, he agrees to take care of her (serve as the primary breadwinner). Although she may resent his domination at times, she understands and, at some level, accepts the bargain. Through rationalization she convinces herself that she probably couldn't do better with any other man, that this one provides the comforts she requires, that in essence she can put up with his domineering behavior because the pay-offs are worth it.

Thus, the submissive ego can experience a form of dysfunctional "success" as long as it feels that it is having its desires met. Take the employee who behaves in a subservient manner to a verbally abusive manager to get promotions. As long as the manager takes care of the employee—by looking after his interests, by giving him the promotions he is striving toward—the employee has positive feelings. When the manager ceases doing this, however, and therefore no longer seems to be concerned with the employee's needs and desires, the employee may feel degraded and resentful of the manager and the subservient role he is forced to play. If given an opportunity, he may turn on his supervisor.

As the submissive ego relates to others, its feelings, behaviors, and thoughts are controlled by beliefs deriving from its own subconscious sense of inferiority. To justify its need to submit to the desires and will of another person, it must perceive itself as inferior to that person. Otherwise it would be unable to rationalize its subservience. It would be forced to recognize its dysfunctional thinking and behavior. Consider the following unconscious beliefs that drive the thinking of the submissive ego:

- “I must go along with this (decision, situation) even though I don’t agree with it. Otherwise I won’t be accepted.”
- “For me to get what I want, I must submit to those who are more powerful than I am.”
- “Since I’m not very smart, I must rely on others to think for me.”
- “Since I’m not a powerful person, I must use manipulative strategies to get others to get what I want.”

As is true with all manifestations of egocentric thinking, none of these beliefs exists in a fully conscious form. These beliefs require self-deception. Otherwise the mind would immediately recognize them as irrational, dysfunctional, absurd. Consequently, what the mind consciously tells itself is very different from the beliefs operating in egocentric functioning. Consider the first belief, “I must go along with this decision even though I don’t agree with it. Otherwise I won’t be accepted.” The conscious thought parallel to this unconscious thought is something like: “I don’t know enough about the situation to decide for myself. Even though I’m not sure this is the right decision, I’m sure the others are in a better position to decide than I am.” This is the thought the mind believes it is acting upon, when in reality it is basing its reasoning on the other, unconscious belief. Thinking within this logic, the person is “dishonestly” going along with the decision, in a sense pretending to agree, but all the while doing so only to forward an agenda of acceptance.

In addition to serving as a major barrier to the pursuit of rational relationships, the submissive ego stunts the development of the rational mind, limiting its capacity for insight into self. The submissive ego is enabled to do this through any number of self-protecting beliefs:

- “I’m too stupid to learn this.”
- “If I have a question, others might think I’m ignorant.”
- “I’m not as smart as others.”
- “No matter how hard I try, I can’t do any better than I’m already doing.”
- “I’ll never be able to figure this out.”
- “Since I know I’m too dumb to learn this, there’s no point in really trying.”

Thus, the submissive ego, like the dominating ego, creates significant barriers to development. It routinely turns to others for help when it is capable of performing without that help. The submissive ego experiences frustration, anxiety, and even depression when it fails, or when it anticipates failure, in learning situations. Whereas the dominating ego believes it already knows what it needs to know, the submissive ego often believes it is incapable of learning.

## 11.8, 11.9 *Think for Yourself*

### TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU EGOCENTRICALLY SUBMISSIVE?

**T**hink about your typical patterns of interaction with friends, family members, fellow workers, and others. Complete the following statements:

1. I tend to be the most (egocentrically) submissive in the following types of situations . . .
2. Some examples of my submissive egocentric behavior are . . .
3. I am usually successful/unsuccessful when I try to manipulate others through submissiveness. My strategy is . . .
4. My submissive behavior creates problems because . . .

### TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU EGOCENTRICALLY DOMINATING VERSUS SUBMISSIVE?

**T**hink about your typical patterns of interaction with friends, family members, fellow workers, and others. Do you tend to be more dominating or submissive in most situations in which you are egocentric? What about your friends, family members, co-workers? Do they tend to be dominating or submissive? Given your experience, what problems emerge from people behaving in dominating or in submissive ways?

## Pathological Tendencies of the Human Mind

We now can put explicitly into words an array of interrelated natural dispositions of the human mind that follow as consequences of the pathology of the natural mind. To significantly develop our thinking, we must overtly identify these tendencies as they operate in our lives, and we must correct them through critical-thinking processes. As you read them, ask yourself whether you recognize these as processes that take place regularly in your own mind (if you conclude, “not me!” think again):

- **Egocentric memory:** the natural tendency to “forget” evidence and information that do not support our thinking and to “remember” evidence and information that do
- **Egocentric myopia:** the natural tendency to think in an absolutist way within an overly narrow point of view
- **Egocentric righteousness:** the natural tendency to feel superior in the light of our confidence that we possess the *Truth* when we do not
- **Egocentric hypocrisy:** the natural tendency to ignore flagrant inconsistencies—for example, between what we profess to believe and the actual beliefs our behavior implies, or between the standards to which we hold ourselves and those to which we expect others to adhere

- **Egocentric oversimplification:** the natural tendency to ignore real and important complexities in the world in favor of simplistic notions when consideration of those complexities would require us to modify our beliefs or values
- **Egocentric blindness:** the natural tendency not to notice facts and evidence that contradict our favored beliefs or values
- **Egocentric immediacy:** the natural tendency to overgeneralize immediate feelings and experiences, so that when one event in our life is highly favorable or unfavorable, all of life seems favorable or unfavorable to us
- **Egocentric absurdity:** the natural tendency to fail to notice thinking that has “absurd” consequences

## Challenge the Pathological Tendencies of Your Mind

It is not enough to recognize abstractly that the human mind has a predictable pathology. As aspiring critical thinkers, we must take concrete steps to correct it. This requires us to develop the habit of identifying these tendencies in action. This is a long-term project that is never complete. To some extent, it is analogous to stripping off onion skins. After we remove one, we find another beneath it. To some extent, we have to strip off the outer layer to be able to recognize the one underneath. Each of the following admonitions, therefore, should not be taken as simple suggestions that any person could immediately, and effectively, put into action, but, rather, as strategic formulations of long-range goals. We all can perform these corrections, but only over time and only with considerable practice.

**Correcting egocentric memory.** We can correct our natural tendency to “forget” evidence and information that do not support our thinking and to “remember” evidence and information that do, by overtly seeking evidence and information that do not support our thinking and directing explicit attention to them. If you try and cannot find such evidence, you should probably assume you have not conducted your search properly.

**Correcting egocentric myopia.** We can correct our natural tendency to think in an absolutist way within an overly narrow point of view by routinely thinking within points of view that conflict with our own. For example, if we are liberal, we can take the time to read books by insightful conservatives. If we are conservative, we can take the time to read books by insightful liberals. If we are North Americans, we can study a contrasting South American point of view or a European or Far-Eastern or Middle-Eastern or African point of view. By the way, if you don’t discover significant personal prejudices through this process, you should question whether you are acting in good faith in trying to identify your prejudices.

**Correcting egocentric righteousness.** We can correct our natural tendency to feel superior in light of our confidence that we possess the *truth* by regularly reminding

ourselves how little we actually know. In this case, we can explicitly state the unanswered questions that surround whatever knowledge we may have. By the way, if you don't discover that there is much more that you do not know than you do know, you should question the manner in which you pursued the questions to which you do not have answers.

**Correcting egocentric hypocrisy.** We can correct our natural tendency to ignore flagrant inconsistencies between what we profess to believe and the actual beliefs our behavior implies, and inconsistencies between the standards to which we hold ourselves and those to which we expect others to adhere. We can do this by regularly comparing the criteria and standards by which we are judging others with those by which we are judging ourselves. If you don't find many flagrant inconsistencies in your own thinking and behavior, you should doubt whether you have dug deeply enough.

**Correcting egocentric oversimplification.** We can correct our natural tendency to ignore real and important complexities in the world by regularly focusing on those complexities, formulating them explicitly in words, and targeting them. If you don't discover over time that you have oversimplified many important issues, you should question whether you have really confronted the complexities inherent in the issues.

**Correcting egocentric blindness.** We can correct our natural tendency to ignore facts or evidence that contradicts our favored beliefs or values by explicitly seeking out those facts and evidence. If you don't find yourself experiencing significant discomfort as you pursue these facts, you should question whether you are taking them seriously. If you discover that your traditional beliefs were all correct from the beginning, you probably moved to a new and more sophisticated level of self-deception.

**Correcting egocentric immediacy.** We can correct our natural tendency to overgeneralize immediate feelings and experiences by getting into the habit of putting positive and negative events into a much larger perspective. You can temper the negative events by reminding yourself of how much you have that many others lack. You can temper the positive events by reminding yourself of how much is yet to be done, of how many problems remain. You know you are keeping an even keel if you find that you have the energy to act effectively in either negative or positive circumstances. You know that you are falling victim to your emotions if and when you are immobilized by them.

**Correcting egocentric absurdity.** We can correct our natural tendency to ignore thinking that has absurd consequences by making the consequences of our thinking explicit and assessing them for their realism. This requires that we frequently trace the implications of our beliefs and their consequences in our behavior. For example, we should frequently ask ourselves: "If I really believed this, how would I act? Do I really act that way?"

By the way, personal ethics is a fruitful area for disclosing egocentric absurdity. We frequently act in ways that are "absurd"—given what we insist we believe in. If, after what you consider to be a serious search, you find no egocentric absurdity in your life, think again. You probably are just developing your ability to deceive yourself.

## The Challenge of Rationality

If the human mind has a natural tendency toward irrationality, in the form of dominating and submissive ego functions, it also has a capacity for rationality, in the form of capacity for self-knowledge. We all have a tendency toward hypocrisy and inconsistency, but we nevertheless can move toward greater and greater integrity and consistency. We can counteract our natural tendency toward intellectual arrogance by developing our capacity for intellectual humility. Put another way, we can learn to continually question what we “know” to ensure that we are not uncritically accepting beliefs that have no foundation in fact.

Moreover, we can counteract our tendency to be trapped in our own point of view by learning how to enter sympathetically into the points of view of others. We can counteract our tendency to jump to conclusions by learning how to test our conclusions for their validity and soundness. We can counteract our tendency to play roles of domination or submission by learning how to recognize when we are doing so. We can begin to see clearly why submission and domination are inherently problematic. We can learn to search out options for avoiding either of these modes of functioning. And we can practice the modes of self-analysis and critique that enable us to learn and grow in directions that render us less and less egocentric.

## TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR SOCIOCENTRIC TENDENCIES

Just as all humans are egocentric by nature, we are sociocentric as well. *Sociocentric thinking*, as you may remember, is egocentric thinking raised to the level of the group. And it can be even more destructive than egocentric thinking, because it carries with it the sanction of a social group (which clearly wields more power than does the individual).<sup>\*</sup> Egocentric and sociocentric thought are both implicitly or explicitly self-serving and dogmatic. Like egocentric thinking, sociocentric thinking is absurd at the level of conscious expression. In other words, if sociocentric thinking is made explicit in the mind of the thinker, its unreasonableness will be obvious. Thus our objective, as developing thinkers, is to make explicit in our own minds the sociocentric thinking that influences our behavior.

Note the following parallels for egocentric and sociocentric patterns of thought:

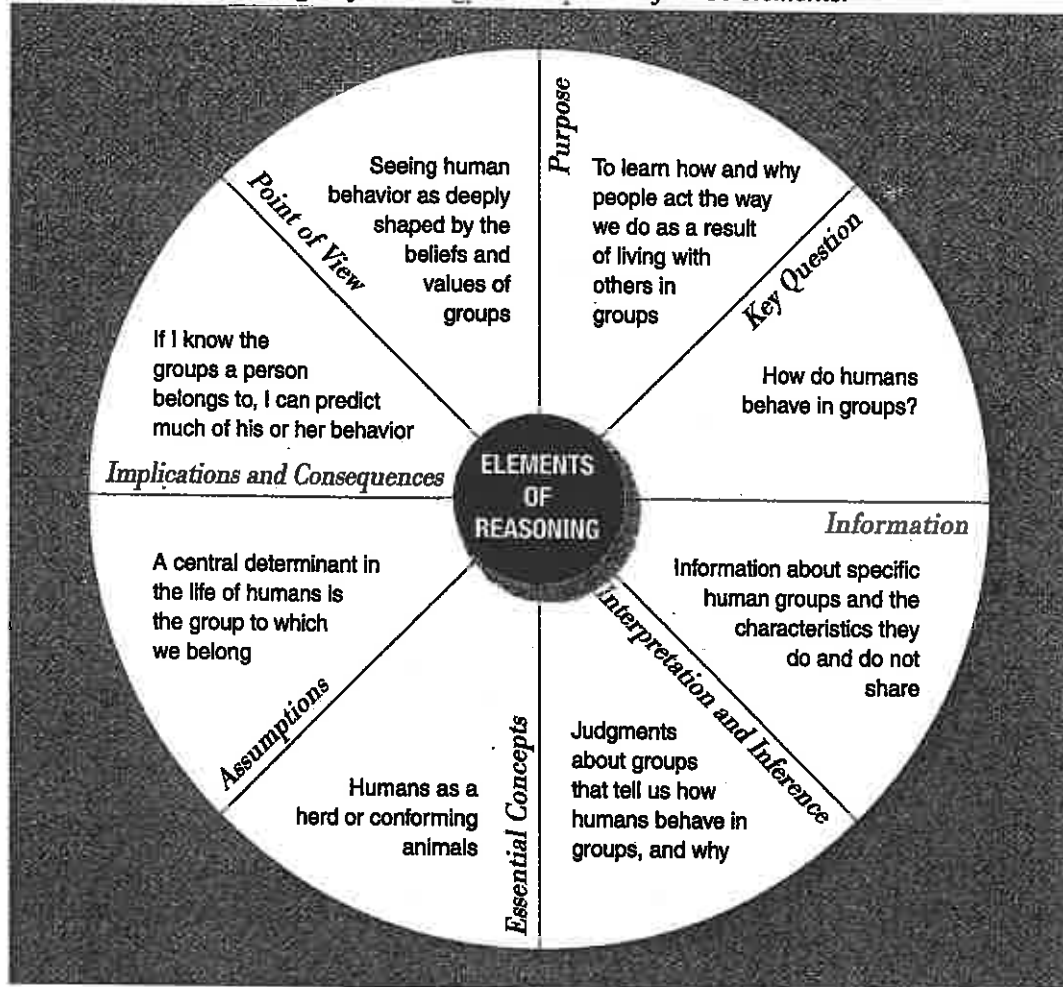
- **Egocentric standard.** “It’s true because I believe it.”  
*Related sociocentric standard:* “It’s true because we believe it.”
- **Egocentric standard.** “It’s true because I want to believe it.”  
*Related sociocentric standard:* “It’s true because we want to believe it.”

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Sociocentric thinking is egocentric thinking raised to the level of the group.

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<sup>\*</sup>Consider, for example, that close to 500,000,000 people died in the 20th century as a result of violent group conflicts (war, that is).

**EXHIBIT 11.11** *The logic of sociology is composed of these elements.*

- **Egocentric standard.** “It’s true because it’s in my vested interest to believe it.”  
*Related sociocentric standard:* “It’s true because it’s in our vested interest to believe it.”
- **Egocentric standard.** “It’s true because I have always believed it.”  
*Related sociocentric standard:* “It’s true because we have always believed it.”

Just as individuals deceive themselves through egocentric thinking, groups deceive themselves through sociocentric thinking. Just as egocentric thinking functions to serve one’s selfish interest, sociocentric thinking functions to serve the selfish interests of the group. Just as egocentric thinking operates to validate the uncritical thinking of the individual, sociocentric thinking operates to validate the uncritical thinking of the group.

## The Nature of Sociocentrism

Living a human life entails membership in a variety of human groups. These typically include groups such as nation, culture, profession, religion, family, and peer group. Even before we are aware of ourselves as living beings, we find ourselves participating in groups. We find ourselves in groups in virtually every setting in which we function as persons. What's 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, an adolescent joins an urban street gang. With that act, adolescents are expected to 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 and speaking;
- 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 severe punishment.

Group membership clearly offers some "advantages." But those advantages come with a price. Groups impose their rules (mores, folkways, taboos) on individuals. Group membership is in various ways "required" for ordinary acts of living. Suppose, for example, that you wanted to belong to no nation, to be a citizen not of a country but *of the world*. You would not be allowed that freedom. You would find that you were allowed no place to live, nor any way to travel from place to place. Every place in the world is claimed by some nation (as its "sovereign" possession), and every nation requires that all visitors to it come as a citizen of some other country (thus, with a "passport").

In addition, everywhere a nation imposes its "sovereignty," it requires the obedience of all persons to literally thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of laws. Of course, no one can memorize thousands of laws, so it is virtually impossible to live in any society without breaking (unknowingly) many of its laws. One consequence of this is that the most powerful sub-groups in any complex society can usually find a way to "punish" weak members of the group.

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. Most people function in social groups as unreflective participants with a range of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors analogous, in the structures to which they conform, to those of urban street gangs.

This conformity of thought, emotion, and action is not restricted to the masses, or 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. In all likelihood, it is as true of college professors and their presidents as students and custodians, as true of senators and chief executives as it is of construction and assembly-line workers. Conformity of thought and behavior is the rule in humans, and independence the rare exception.

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

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## 11.10 *Think for Yourself*

### THINKING ABOUT THE GROUPS YOU BELONG TO

**M**ake a list of the groups you belong to. Then choose the group you think has influenced you the most in your beliefs, values, and behavior.

Complete the following statements:

1. The group that has influenced me the most is probably . . .
2. This group's main function or agenda is . . .
3. Comment on as many of the following variables as you can identify with, with respect to the group you have chosen to analyze. To what extent does your membership in this group involve
  - a name that defines who and what they are;
  - a way of talking;
  - a set of friends and enemies;
  - group rituals in which you must participate;
  - expected behaviors involving fellow members;
  - expected behaviors when around the "enemies" of the group;
  - a hierarchy of power within the group;
  - a way of dressing and speaking;
  - social requirements to which you must conform;
  - a set of taboos—forbidden acts, whose violation is punished.
4. One of the key "requirements" of this group is . . .
5. One of the key "taboos" (what I am forbidden to do) is . . .
6. A group that my group would look down upon is . . . We think of this group as beneath us because . . .

The idea of sociocentric thinking is not new. Under one label or another, many books have been written on the subject. And it has been the focus of important sociological studies. Almost a hundred years ago, in his seminal book *Folkways*, originally

published in 1902, William Graham Sumner wrote extensively about social expectations and taboos. One of the founders of the discipline of sociology, Sumner documented the manner in which *group think* penetrates virtually every dimension of human life. He introduced the concept of ethnocentrism in this way:

Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of thinking in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. . . . Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exacts its own divines, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn. (p. 13)

Sumner describes folkways as the socially perceived "right" ways to satisfy all interests according to group norms and standards. He says that in every society:

There is a right way to catch game, to win a wife, to make one's self appear . . . to treat comrades or strangers, to behave when a child is born. . . .

The "right" way is the way which ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. It is not held subject to verification by experience. . . . In the folkways, whatever is, is right. (p. 28)

In regard to expectations of group members, Sumner states:

Every group of any kind whatsoever demands that each of its members shall help defend group interests. The group force is also employed to enforce the obligations of devotion to group interests. It follows that judgments are precluded and criticism silenced. . . . The patriotic bias is a recognized perversion of thought and judgment against which our education should guard us. (p. 15)

Even young children exhibit sociocentric thinking and behavior. Consider this passage from Piaget's study for UNESCO (Campbell, 1976), which is a dialogue between an interviewer and three children regarding the causes of war:

**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.*

Clearly these children are thinking sociocentrically. They have been indoctrinated into the belief systems, with accompanying ideologies, of their nation and culture. They cannot articulate why they think their country is better than others, but they have no doubt that it is. Seeing one's group as superior to other groups is both natural to the human mind and propagated by the cultures within which we live.

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Every group of any kind whatsoever demands that each of its members shall help defend group interests.

William Graham Sumner

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## Social Stratification

Sociocentric systems are used in complex societies to justify differential treatment and injustices within a society, nation, or culture. This feature of complex social systems has been documented by sociologists who have specialized in the phenomenon of social stratification. As virtually all modern societies today are complex, the following characteristics of stratification presumably can be found in all of them. According to Plotnicov and Tuden (1970):

Each has 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 cultural and invidious distinctions that also serve to maintain the 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 given group in our society, where approximately it stands in the hierarchy of power, what the sources of power and control are, how the distinctions that indicate status are formulated, how social distances are maintained between the groups, and the overarching ideology that provides the rationale for the way things are.

## 11.11 *Think for Yourself*

### IDENTIFYING SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

**T**ry to construct a hierarchy of the social groups within the culture with which you are most knowledgeable. First identify the groups with the most power and prestige. What characteristics do these groups have? Then identify the groups with less and less power until you reach the groups with the least amount of power. How do the groups with the most power keep their power? To what extent is it possible for groups with the least power to increase their power? To what extent do they seem to accept their limited power? To the extent that they accept their limited power, why do you think they do?

### Sociocentric Thinking Is Unconscious and Potentially Dangerous

Sociocentric thinking, like egocentric thinking, appears in the mind of the person who thinks that way as reasonable and justified. Thus, although groups often distort the meaning of concepts to pursue their vested interests, they almost never see themselves as misusing language. Although groups almost always can find problems in the ideologies of other groups, they rarely are able to find flaws in their belief systems. Although groups usually can identify prejudices that other groups are using against them, they rarely are able to identify prejudices that they are using against other groups. In short, just as egocentric thinking is self-deceptive, so is sociocentric thinking.

Though the patterns of dysfunctional thinking are similar for egocentric and sociocentric thinking, there is at least one important distinction between the two. As we have already pointed out, egocentric thinking is potentially dangerous. Through self-deception, individuals can justify the most egregious actions, but individuals operating alone are usually more limited in the amount of harm they can do. Typically, groups engaging in sociocentric thinking can do greater harm to greater numbers of people.

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Although groups almost always can find problems in the ideologies of other groups, they rarely are able to find flaws in their own belief systems.

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Consider, for example, the Spanish Inquisition, wherein the state, controlled by the Catholic Church, executed thousands of reputed heretics. Or consider the Germans, who tortured and murdered millions of Jews, or the “founders” of the Americas, who enslaved, murdered, or tortured large numbers of Native Americans and Africans.

In short, throughout history and to the present day, sociocentric thinking has led directly to the pain and suffering of millions of innocent persons. This has been possible

because groups, in their sociocentric mindset, use their power in a largely unreflective, abusive way. Once they have internalized a self-serving ideology, they are able to act in ways that flagrantly contradict their announced morality without noticing any contradictions or inconsistencies in the process.

## Sociocentric Uses of Language

Sociocentric thinking is fostered by the way groups use language. Groups justify unjust acts and ways of thinking through their use of concepts or ideas. For example, as William Sumner points out, sociocentrism can be exemplified by the very names groups choose for themselves and the way they differentiate themselves from what they consider lesser groups:

When Caribs were asked whence they came, they answered, "We alone are people." The meaning of the name *Kiowa* is "real or principal people." The Lapps call themselves "men." Or "human beings." The Greenland Eskimo think that Europeans have been sent to Greenland to learn virtue and good manners from the Greenlanders. . . . The Seri of Lower California . . . observe an attitude of suspicion and hostility to all outsiders, and strictly forbid marriage with outsiders. (p. 14)

In the everyday life of sociocentric thinkers, we can find many self-serving uses of language that obscure unethical behavior. During the time when Europeans first inhabited the Americas, they forced Indians into slavery and tortured and murdered them in the name of progress and civilization. By thinking of the Indians as savages, they could justify their inhumane treatment. At the same time, by thinking of themselves as civilized, they could see themselves as bringing something precious to the savages—namely, civilization.

The words *progress*, *savagery*, *civilization*, and *the true religion* were used as vehicles to exploit the American Indians to gain material wealth and property. The thinking of the Europeans, focused on these ideas, obscures the basic humanity of the peoples exploited, as well as their rightful ownership of the land that they had occupied for thousands of years.

Sumner says that the language social groups use is often designed to ensure that they maintain a special, superior place:

The Jews divided all mankind into themselves and the Gentiles. They were "chosen people." The Greeks called outsiders "barbarians." . . . The Arabs regarded themselves as the noblest nation and all others as more or less barbarous. . . . In 1896, the Chinese minister of education and his counselors edited a manual in which this statement occurs: "How grand and glorious is the Empire of China, the middle Kingdom!" . . . The grandest men in the world have come from the middle empire. . . . In all the literature of all the states equivalent statements occur. . . . In Russian books and newspapers the civilizing mission of Russia is talked about, just as, in the books and journals of France, Germany, and the United States, the civilizing mission of those countries is assumed and referred to as well understood. Each state now regards itself as the leader of civilization, the best, the freest and the wisest, and all others as their inferior. (p. 14)

## Disclose Sociocentric Thinking Through Conceptual Analysis

Concepts are one of the eight basic elements of human thinking. We cannot think without concepts. They form the classifications, and implicitly express the theories, through which we interpret what we see, taste, hear, smell, and touch. Our world is a conceptually constructed world. And sociocentric thinking, as argued above, is driven by the way groups use concepts.

If we thought using the concepts of medieval European serfs, we would experience the world as they did. If we thought using the concepts of an Ottoman Turk general, we would think and experience the world that he did. In a similar way, if we were to bring an electrician, an architect, a carpet salesperson, a lighting specialist, and a plumber into the same building and ask each to describe what he or she sees, we would end up with a range of descriptions that, in all likelihood, reveal the special “bias” of each observer.

Or again, if we were to lead a discussion of world problems between representatives of different nations, cultures, and religions, we would discover a range of perspectives on potential solutions to the problems and sometimes as to what a problem is in the first place.

It is hard to imagine a skilled critical thinker who is not also skilled in the analysis of concepts. Conceptual analysis is important in a variety of contexts:

1. The ability to identify and accurately analyze the range of distinctions available to educated speakers of a language (being able to distinguish between meanings of words, given educated usage).
2. The ability to identify the difference between ideological and nonideological uses of words and concepts (being able to figure out when people are giving special, unjustified meaning to words based on their ideology).
3. The ability to accurately analyze the network of technical meanings of words that define the basic concepts within a discipline or domain of thinking (being able to analyze the meanings of words within disciplines and technical fields).

Many problems in thinking are traceable to a lack of command of words and their implicit concepts. For example, people have problems in their romantic relationships when they are unclear about three distinctions: (1) between egocentric attachment and genuine love, (2) between friendship and love, and (3) between misuse of the word *love* (as exemplified by many Hollywood movies) and the true meaning of the word *love* shared by educated speakers of the English language.

## Reveal Ideology at Work Through Conceptual Analysis

People often have trouble differentiating ideological and nonideological uses of words. They are then unable to use the following words in a nonloaded way: *capitalism, socialism, communism, democracy, oligarchy, plutocracy, patriotism, terrorism*. Let's look at this case in greater detail.

When the above words are used ideologically, they are applied inconsistently and one-sidedly. The root meaning of the word is often lost, or highly distorted, while the word is used to put a positive or negative gloss on events, obscuring what is really going on. Hence, in countries in which the reigning ideology extols capitalism, the ideologies of socialism and communism are demonized, democracy is equated with capitalism, and plutocracy is ignored. In countries in which the reigning ideology is communism, the ideology of capitalism is demonized, democracy is equated with communism, and oligarchy is ignored. The groups called "terrorist" by the one are called patriot by the other.

If we examine the core meanings of these words and use them in keeping with the core meanings they have in the English language, we can recognize contradictions, inconsistencies, and hypocrisy when any group misuses them to advance its agenda. Let us review the core meanings of these terms as defined by *Webster's New World Dictionary*:

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In the everyday life of sociocentric thinkers, we can find many self-serving uses of language that obscure unethical behavior.

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- **capitalism:** an economic system in which all or most of the means of production and distribution, as land, factories, railroads, etc., are privately owned and operated for profit, originally under fully competitive conditions; it has generally been characterized by a tendency toward concentration of wealth.
- **socialism:** any of the various theories or systems of the ownership and operation of the means of production and distribution by society or the community rather than by private individuals, with all members of society or the community sharing in the work and the products.
- **communism:** any economic theory or system based on the ownership of all property by the community as a whole.
- **democracy:** a form of government in which the people hold the ruling power either directly or through elected representatives; rule by the ruled.
- **oligarchy:** a form of government in which the ruling power belongs to a few persons.
- **plutocracy:** (1) government by the wealthy, (2) a group of wealthy people who control or influence a government.
- **patriotism:** love, and loyal or zealous support of one's own country.
- **terrorism:** use of force or threats to demoralize, intimidate, and subjugate, especially such use as a political weapon or policy.

To this day, countries in which the reigning ideology is capitalism tend to use the words *socialism* and *communism* as if they meant "a system that discourages individual incentive and denies freedom to the mass of people." Countries in which the reigning ideology is socialism or communism, in their turn, tend to use the word *capitalism* to imply the exploitation of the masses by the wealthy few. Both see the use of force of the other as *terrorist* in intent. Both see the other as denying its own members fundamental human rights. Both tend to ignore their own inconsistencies and hypocrisy.

## CONCLUSION

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The thesis of this chapter is that we can successfully deal with our own egocentric and sociocentric tendencies only by facing, admitting, and undermining them. Without a clear understanding of our egocentric tendencies, we are trapped in a narrow and selfish perspective. Without a clear understanding of our sociocentric tendencies, we are trapped in groupthink.

Dealing with egocentrism and sociocentrism is no easy matter. Because both function subconsciously, it is difficult to identify them. And though no one will object to our being less selfish (personally), if we significantly and publicly dissent from group beliefs, we face an array of informal—if not formal—penalties.

What is important is that we begin to identify egocentrism and sociocentrism in our thinking and our lives. Every time we become aware of selfishness or narrow rigidity in our thinking, we create an opportunity to lessen those pathologies. Every group to which we belong is a possible place to identify sociocentrism at work in ourselves and others. When we begin to identify the many patterns of self-centeredness and social conformity in our lives, we can begin to break out of those patterns. We need not begin with the beliefs that are most challenging to ourselves or whose denial is most “explosive.” Furthermore, we need not make all of what we find a matter of public statement. The key is that we do begin within the privacy of our mind, that we follow through with consistency, and that we give ourselves time to grow progressively into better thinkers and persons. By such inward acts we can become people who think for ourselves and adhere to conscious standards of rationality. By such acts we can develop intellectual integrity and emerge increasingly as fair and just persons.