

LINDA ELDER AND RICHARD PAUL



FOURTH
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THE THINKER'S GUIDE TO
THE HUMAN
MIND



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

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Contents

The Human Mind: Thinking, Feeling, Wanting

| | |
|---|------|
| We Live in Our Minds | 3 |
| Understanding The Human Mind: The Big Picture..... | 4 |
| The Mind's Three Distinctive Functions | 5–6 |
| The Dynamic Relationship Between Thinking, Feeling, Wanting | 7 |
| Behavior as a Product of the Mind's Functions | 8 |
| Thinking as the Key to Feelings and Desires | 9–10 |

Rational Capacities or Irrational Tendencies Can Control the Mind 11–13

| | |
|---|-------|
| The Logic of Rationality | 14 |
| Distinguishing Rational from Egocentric and Sociocentric Motives | 15–16 |
| Humans Often Distort Reality Through Irrational Lenses | 17 |

The Problem of Egocentric Thinking 18

| | |
|---|-------|
| Feelings That Accompany Egocentrism | 19 |
| The Logic of Egocentrism | 20 |
| Distinguishing Egocentric Domination From Egocentric Submission | 21 |
| The Logic of Egocentric Domination..... | 22 |
| The Logic of Egocentric Submission | 23 |
| Pathological Dispositions of the Human Mind | 24 |
| Challenging the Pathological Dispositions of the Human Mind | 25–26 |
| Defense Mechanisms of the Mind | 27–28 |

The Problem of Sociocentric Thinking

| | |
|--|-------|
| Primary Forms of Sociocentric Thought..... | 29–30 |
| Unethical Pursuit of Group Agendas are Driven by Sociocentric Thought | 31 |
| Sociocentricity: The Logic of Groupishness | 32 |
| Sociocentricity: The Logic of Group Validation | 33 |
| Sociocentricity: The Logic of Group Control..... | 34 |
| Sociocentricity: The Logic of Conformity | 35 |

Popular Misunderstandings of the Mind 36

Emotional Intelligence and Critical Thinking 37

Some Basic Definitions..... 38–40

**As humans
we live
in our**

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Understanding The Human Mind: The Big Picture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Mind's Three Distinctive Functions

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

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

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

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

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

The Dynamic Relationship Between Thinking, Feeling, Wanting

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

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

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

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Rational Capacities or Irrational Tendencies Can Control the Mind

The three functions of the mind — thoughts, feelings and desires — can be guided or directed either by one's native irrationality or by one's rational capacities.

Irrational tendencies function automatically and largely unconsciously. Rational tendencies tend to arise from active self-development and are largely conscious.

Irrationality can be principally categorized according to whether and to what degree it is egocentric and/or sociocentric in nature. Egocentric thought, as we refer to it in this guide, is focused on the pursuit of one's own desires and needs without regard to the rights and needs of others. Sociocentric thought is focused on the pursuit of group goals without regard to the rights and needs of those outside the group. Detailing and unpacking the concepts of egocentric and sociocentric thought, in juxtaposition with rationality or reasonability, are the primary emphasis of the rest of the guide.

Egocentricity

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

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

Sociocentricity

As humans, we are all born centered in ourselves. As part of our native egocentricity, we feel directly and unavoidably our own pain and frustration, our own joy and pleasure.

We largely see the world from a narrow, self-serving perspective. But we humans are also

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

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

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

Rationality

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

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

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The Logic of Rationality

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