

The Thinker's Guide to

TAKING CHARGE OF THE HUMAN MIND

Thinking, Feeling, Wanting, and
The Problem of Irrationality

FOURTH EDITION,
REVISED AND EXPANDED

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Forward

To live well is to live as a reasonable and ethical person.

Yet humans are not by nature rational or ethical. Humans are predisposed to operate in the world in narrow terms of how it can serve them. Their brains are directly wired into their own pleasure and pain, not that of others. They do not automatically consider the rights and needs of others.

However, humans have the raw capacity to become reasonable and ethical persons, to develop as fairminded skilled thinkers. But to do so requires:

1. Understanding how the mind works.
2. Using this understanding to develop skills and insights.

This guide addresses the first of these requirements. It lays the conceptual foundations necessary for understanding the mind, its functions, its natural propensity toward irrationality, and its capacity for rationality.

It is designed for those interested in developing their potential to be fairminded reasonable persons, concerned with how their behavior affects the lives of others, concerned to develop their full humanity, concerned with making the world a more civilized and just place.

It is designed for those willing to transform their thinking to improve their decisions, the quality of their lives, the quality of their interpersonal relationships, and their vision of the world.

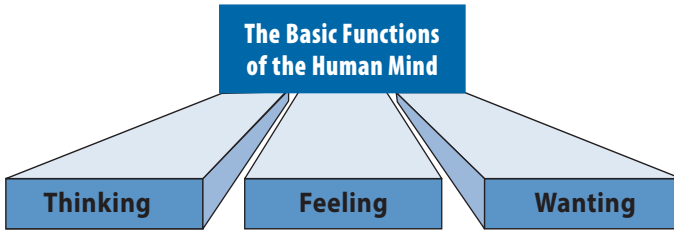
It is intended to provide an initial map to help interested persons begin to free themselves from the traps their minds have constructed. It begins to detail the intrinsic egocentric and sociocentric tendencies that give rise to irrationality in human life and human thought. It points the way toward mindfulness and self-understanding through critical thinking.

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The Mind's Three Distinctive Functions

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

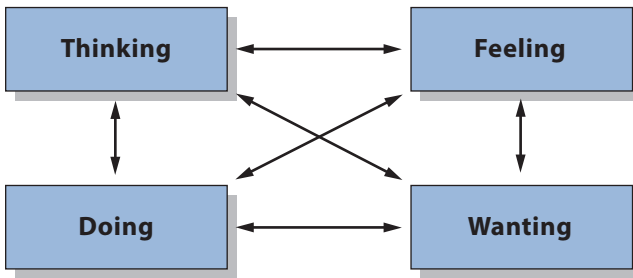


- Thinking is the part of the mind that figures things out. It makes sense of life's events. It creates the ideas through which we define situations, relationships and problems. It continually tells us: This is what is going on. This is what is happening. Notice this and that.
- Feelings^{1*} are created 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.

Behavior: A Product of the Mind's Functions

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



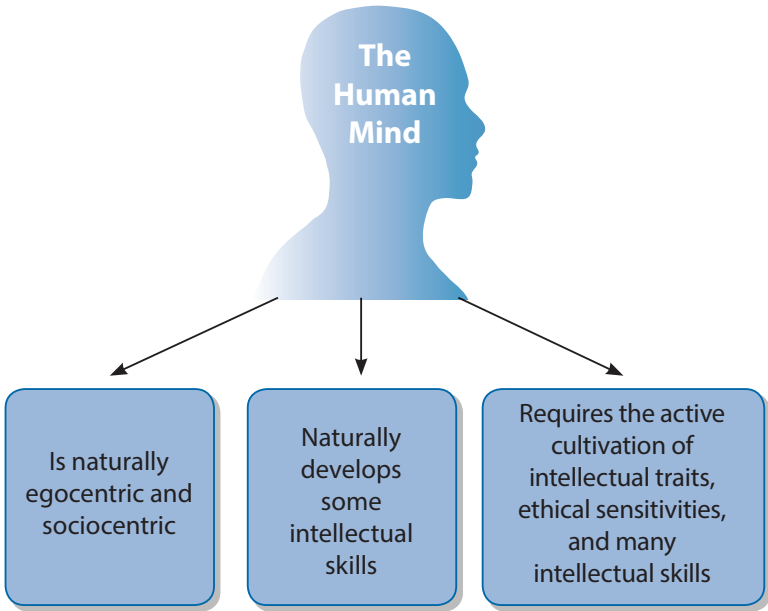
You therefore behave in the following ways:

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

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

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

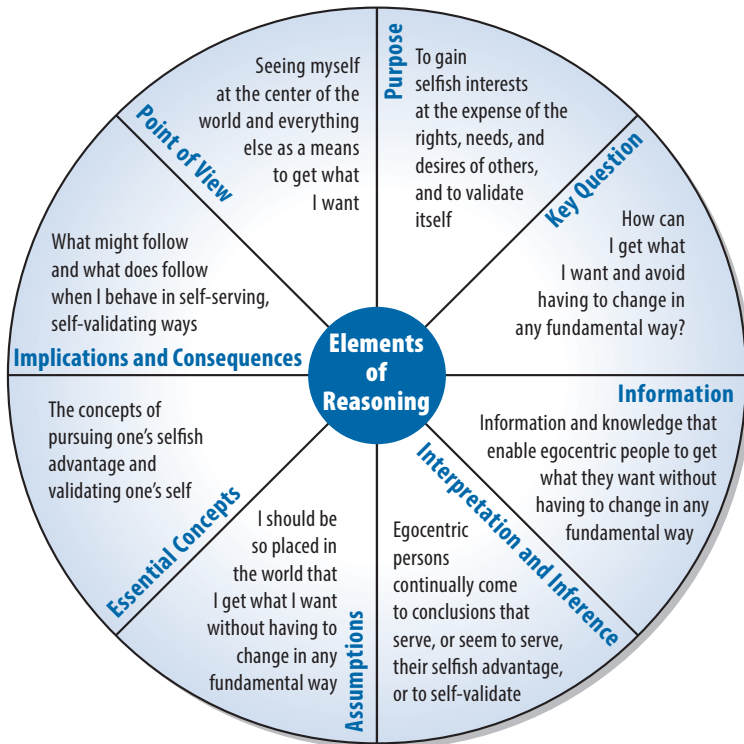
The Human Mind is Frequently Irrational While Having the Capacity for Rational Thought



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

The Logic of Egocentrism

Egocentrism has a self-contained logic. To itself, it appears logical. By focusing on its logic we can figure out how it functions. We can figure out its purpose, assumptions, point of view, etc.¹



¹An overview of the elements of reasoning, which provide a structure for understanding this logic and the others in this miniguide, can be found in *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools*. (see criticalthinking.org)

Primary Forms of Sociocentric Thought

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

1. **Groupishness³ (or group selfishness)**—the tendency on the part of groups to seek the most for the in-group without regard to the rights and needs of others, in order to advance the group's biased interests. Groupishness is almost certainly the primary tendency in sociocentric thinking, the foundational driving force behind it (probably connected to survival in our dim dark past). Everyone in the group is privileged; everyone outside the group is denied group privileges and/or seen as a potential threat.
2. **Group validation**—the tendency on the part of groups to believe their way to be the right way and their views to be the correct views; the tendency to reinforce one another in these beliefs; the inclination to validate the group's views, however dysfunctional or illogical. These may be long-held or newly established views, but in either case, they are perceived by the group to be true and in many cases to advance its interests. This tendency informs the world view from which everyone outside the group is seen and understood and by which everything that happens outside the group is judged. It leads to the problem of *in-group* thinking and behavior—everyone inside the group thinking within a collective logic; everyone outside the group being judged according to the standards and beliefs of the in-group.

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

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