

LIBERATING THE MIND

OVERCOMING SOCIOCENTRIC
THOUGHT AND EGOCENTRIC
TENDENCIES

LINDA ELDER

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PREFACE

COMMANDING THE DARK SIDE WITHIN

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

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

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

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

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

on the regulation of human conduct, is the feeling in each person's mind that everybody should be required to act as he, and those with whom he sympathizes, would like them to act. (p. 45)

As Mill points out, people frequently impose rules on others without seeing themselves as obliged to even give reasons for these rules. Mill sees the prevailing principle for human conduct in modern societies as something like this: *Everyone should be required to act as I, and other people who agree with me, would have them act.* People tend to assume their group's norms to be inherently ethical, and they expect everyone to behave in accordance with these norms. Naturally, people are not consciously aware of these assumptions. They wouldn't admit to them, even to themselves.

In addition to the fact that people tend not to recognize the pervasive role that customs play in their lives, people tend not to understand the pervasive role that ideologies play in their thought and conduct. Ideologies, or human belief systems, often lead people to conjure up images, negative or positive, of all kind of controversial ideas, like impurity, sinful living, perversion, patriotism, free markets, democracy, and the good life.

Ideologies thrust upon us lead us to think in particular ways about marriage, the family, intimacy, cooperation, ethics, religion, education—indeed, potentially any complex concept. At one point most people in the U.S. believed in this notion: *spare the rod, spoil the child.* In recent decades, a more enlightened view has begun to prevail. Similarly, it is now commonly believed that students should undergo weeks of “standardized testing” to prove some level of “proficiency” before moving to the “next grade,” and that this level of “proficiency” is intimately connected with becoming an educated person. This view, however, cannot be substantiated.

The imposition of group ideologies on group members is antithetical to critical thinking and *intrinsically damaging to people inside the group.* Because human cultures do not actively work against sociocentric group control, and instead tend to encourage it, children are injured by society from the very beginning of their lives. For the most part, children are not encouraged to understand their minds, to cultivate their minds, to grapple with the problematics in native human thought, or to see through capriciously-imposed group control. There is, then, a sense in which *society is abusive to the developing child.* The child needs and wants to grow, to develop intellectually, but societies typically won't allow this unless to a limited degree. Societies instead impose subjective, often unethical, rules

The practical principle which guides [people] to their opinions on the regulation of human conduct, is the feeling in each person's mind that everybody should be required to act as he, and those with whom he sympathizes, would like them to act.

— John Stuart Mill

uses of words, and thus are unable to use words like these in a nonloaded way: capitalism, socialism, communism, democracy, oligarchy, plutocracy, patriotism, freedom, liberty, terrorism, nationalism. When these words are used ideologically, their root meanings are often lost or distorted. The words are used to put a positive or negative gloss on events, obscuring what is really going on. Hence, in countries where the reigning ideology extols capitalism, diverging economic systems like socialism and communism are demonized; democracy is equated with capitalism, and plutocratic realities are ignored or hidden. In countries where the reigning ideology is communism, the ideology of capitalism is demonized. Democracy is equated with capitalism, and oligarchic realities are ignored or hidden. Those called “terrorists” or “insurgents” by one group are called “patriots” and “freedom-fighters” by another.

If we examine these words and use them in keeping with the core meanings they have in the English language, we may more easily recognize contradictions and inconsistencies in their common use. We may more easily notice 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*:

- **capitalism**: an economic system in which all or most of the means of production and distribution, such 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 in which society or the community, rather than private individuals, own and operate the means of production and distribution, with all members sharing in the work and products
- **communism**: any economic theory or system based on the ownership of all property by the community as a whole
- **democracy**: 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

Most people are unaware of the fact that their concepts guide their interpretations of reality; hence, they tend to have little command of the words they use, and they tend to be unaware of how those words influence their thinking.

power structure, many of those who were formerly powerful in the communist party are now among the most prominent and acquisitive neo-capitalists.

In short, it appears that politicians rarely act for ethical reasons. Struggling against each other for power and control, people in political movements and with differing interests often sacrifice ethical ideals for practical advantage. They often rationalize unethical acts as unavoidable necessities (“forced on them” by their opponents). They frequently use propaganda to further vested-interest agendas (or groupishness). They routinely engage in group validation. They often “control” the people through manipulation. The people usually submit to those in power (while perceiving themselves to be autonomous, independent thinkers).

In conceptualizing a “new ethic” for future societies, Erich Neumann (1969; 1973) says of politicians:

The incompetence of the politicians, which has become so cruelly and sanguinely obvious to modern man, is essentially due to their human inadequacy—that is, to a morally undermining of their psychic structure which culminates in their total breakdown when faced with any real decision. To future ages, the fact that the leading politicians of our period were not required to pass a test of any kind to determine their human and moral qualifications will appear exactly as grotesque as it would seem to us today if a diphtheria-carrier were to be placed in charge of the children’s ward in a hospital.

One might question whether such a test could be developed, but Neumann’s comments remind us that in human societies today, politicians are usually chosen not for their ethical reasoning abilities, but instead for their charismatic style and in accord with the amount of money they can rake in to support their candidacies. Politicians in most societies today are held only to minimal ethical standards (if any at all). Indeed, given the usually unethical nature of the election process itself, truly ethical, honest persons can rarely gain entrance into today’s political arenas, much less survive in them. Since voters tend to confuse ethics with social rules and conventions, and since most are indoctrinated into mainstream views, they usually elect politicians who reflect (their) mainstream views and who will therefore maintain the status quo (within some minimal range). Mainstream voters tend to view social rules as inherently illuminating “the right way to live.” They want these rules to be maintained in the society, and hence supported, rather than questioned, by politicians. They are easily swayed by political manipulation through media bias and propaganda.

Critical thinkers, however, are not manipulated by unethical politicians. They look beneath the surface of the words politicians use to their actions. Critical thinkers are keenly aware of the problem of vested interest in politics. Though critical thinkers do not assume that every politician is corrupt, they recognize that systems of power are frequently dysfunctional and, hence, lead to corruption. Those who think critically work toward the cultivation of political systems that serve the people rather than special interest groups.

20 BARRIERS TO CRITICAL SOCIETIES

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

Most people:

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