Chapter 11

Monitoring Your Sociocentric Tendencies

Living a human life entails membership in a variety of human groups. This typically includes groups such as nation, culture, profession, religion, family, and peer group. We find ourselves participating in groups before we are aware of ourselves as living beings. We find ourselves in groups in virtually every setting in which we function as persons. What is more, every group to which we belong has some social definition of itself and some usually unspoken "rules" that guide the behavior of all members. Each group to which we belong imposes some level of conformity on us as a condition of acceptance. This includes a set of beliefs, behaviors, and taboos.

The Nature of Sociocentrism

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 (Figure 11.1). 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;
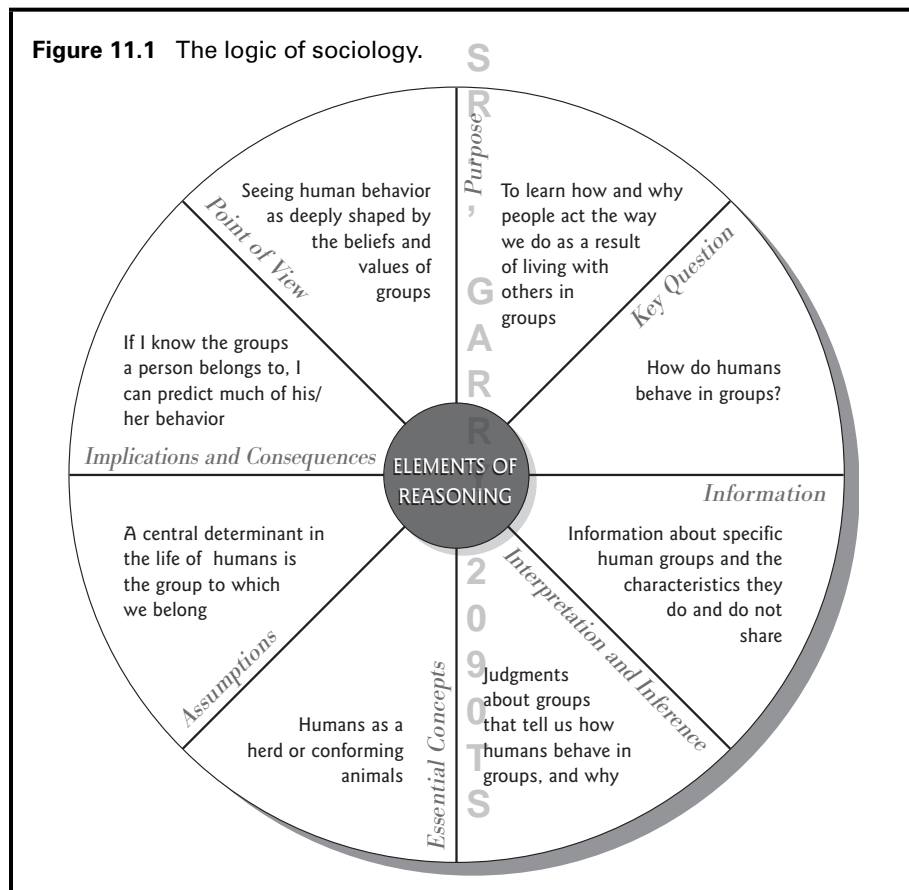- Expected behaviors when around the enemies of the gang;

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- 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.

For most people, blind conformity to group restrictions is automatic and unreflective. Most 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 in a range of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors analogous, in the structures to which they conform, to those of urban street gangs.

Figure 11.1 The logic of sociology.

Point of View: Seeing human behavior as deeply shaped by the beliefs and values of groups

Purpose: To learn how and why people act the way we do as a result of living with others in groups

Key Question: How do humans behave in groups?

Implications and Consequences: If I know the groups a person belongs to, I can predict much of his/her behavior

ELEMENTS OF REASONING

Information: Information about specific human groups and the characteristics they do and do not share

Assumptions: A central determinant in the life of humans is the group to which we belong

Essential Concepts: Judgments about groups that tell us how humans behave in groups, and why

Interpretation and Inference: Humans as a herd or conforming animals

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. It is in all likelihood 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, independence the rare exception.

According to the *The Encyclopedia Americana* (1950, vol 7, page 541):

> [There is an] infinity of variations in human behavior, termed good or evil, well or sick, according to the time and place and surrounding mores. The mescalin intoxicated priest carrying out an Indian ritual is adapted and healthy according to the rules of the game. Under other circumstances and in other places his behavior would probably bring him confinement in the police station or in a mental hospital.

To fail to conform to social expectation is to become subject to being cut off from the group: Here is how such a person is characterized in *Tom Brown's School Days* (Hughes, 1882):

> The person whose appearance had so horrified Miss Winter was drawing beer for them from a small barrel. This was an elderly raw-boned woman, with a skin burned as brown as that of any of the mowers. She wore a man's hat and spencer, and had a strong harsh voice, and altogether was not a prepossessing person. She went by the name of Daddy Cowell in the parish, and had been for years a proscribed person. She lived up on the heath, often worked in the fields, took in lodgers, and smoked a short clay pipe. These eccentricities, when added to her half-male clothing, were quite enough to account for the sort of outlawry in which she lived. Miss Winter, and other good people of Engle-bourn, believed her capable of any crime, and the children were taught to stop talking and playing, and run away when she came near them.

Sociocentric Thinking as Pathology

Sociocentric thinking, as we intend this expression, is egocentric thinking raised to the level of the group. It is as destructive as egocentric thinking, if not more so, as it carries with it the sanction of a social group. In both cases, we find a native and uncritical dogmatism implicit in its principles. And therein lies its pathology. Like egocentric thinking, it is absurd at the level of conscious expression. If sociocentric thinking is made explicit in the mind of the thinker, its unreasonableness will be obvious.

Note the parallels in Table 11.1 for egocentric and sociocentric patterns of thought.

Table 11.1 Egocentric and Sociocentric Patterns of Thought	
Egocentric Standard	**Related Sociocentric Standard**
"It's true because I believe it."	"It's true because we believe it."
"It's true because I want to believe it."	"It's true because we want to believe it."
"It's true because it's in my vested interest to believe it."	"It's true because it's in our vested interest to believe it."
"It's true because I have always believed it."	"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.

Test the Idea
Thinking About the Groups You Belong To

Make 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 thought 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 thinking 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.

It is clear that 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.

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 fol-

lowing 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 that 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.

Test the Idea
Identifying Social Stratification

Try 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. We pointed out in Chapter 10 that 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 sociocenric thinking can do greater harm to greater numbers of people.

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 Use of Language in Groups

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 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 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)

Disclosing Sociocentric Thinking Through Conceptual Analysis

Concepts are one of the eight basic elements of human thinking. We cannot think without them. 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 had thought using the concepts of medieval European serfs, we would experience the world as they did. If we had 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 the 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 not only on potential solutions to the problems, but 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.

Revealing 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 "terrorists" by some are called patriots by the others.

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:

- *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*: 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.

The Mass Media Foster Sociocentric Thinking

The mass media and press in a country tend to present events in the world in descriptive terms that presuppose the correctness of the self-serving world view dominant in the country. As critical consumers of the mass media, we must learn to recognize when language is being used ideologically (and so violating the **basic** meanings of the terms themselves). We must learn how to recognize sociocentric bias wherever we find it.

Many examples of sociocentric thinking can be found in the mass media. This is true, in part, because the media are an inherent part of the culture within which they function. Because much of the thinking within any given culture is sociocentric in nature, we can expect the sociocentric thinking of the culture to be furthered through the mass media as vehicles of large-scale social communication.

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

present in largely unfavorable terms those nations and groups that significantly oppose us.

For example, to most citizens of the United States, it seems naturally to be a leader of all that is right and good in the world. The mass media largely foster this view. When we look critically at the mainstream mass media of a country, it is easy to document the bias of its presentations of the important events in the world.

It follows that the mainstream news media are biased toward their country's allies, and prejudiced against its enemies. The media therefore present events that regard the countries of allies in as favorable a light as possible, highlighting positive events while downplaying negative events. As for its enemies, the opposite treatment can be expected. Thus, positive events in the countries of one's enemies are either ignored or given little attention while negative events are highlighted and distorted. The ability of a person to identify this bias in action and mentally rewrite the article or representation more objectively is an important critical thinking skill.

In the United States, for example, because Israel is our ally, our media usually ignore or give minor attention to mistreatment of the Palestinians by the Israelis. On the other hand, because Fidel Castro of Cuba is our enemy, mainstream news writers take advantage of every opportunity to present Castro and Cuba in a negative light, ignoring most achievements of the Cuban government (e.g., in the area of universal education and medical care).

Let's consider some examples from the news to exemplify this pattern of sociocentric bias in the news.

U.S. Releases Files on Abuses in Pinochet Era (from *New York Times*, July 1, 1999, p. A11)

Historical background. In 1973 a group of military officers overthrew the government of the democratically elected president of Chile, Salvador Allende. Their announced justification was that Allende was trying to replace democracy with communism. At the time of the coup the U.S. government repeatedly denied any involvement in the coup and any knowledge of the torture and murder of people considered enemies of the coup leaders and the imposed political structure. Accordingly, the mainstream news media presented the official U.S. position (along with its official explanations) as the truth of the matter. The coup leaders were presented as a positive force against communism. The democratically elected government was presented as a threat to our way of life. The coup, in other words, was presented favorably. Human rights violations were played down.

Contents of article. In this article, written some 27 years after the coup, the mainstream media finally admitted that the United States played a significant role in the Chilean coup. The article states:

> The C.I.A. and other government agencies had detailed reports of widespread human rights abuses by the Chilean military, including the killing and torture of leftist dissidents, almost immediately after a 1973 right-wing coup that the United States supported, according to the once-secret documents released today.… The Clinton Administration announced last December that, as a result of the arrest of General Pinochet (who seized power in the coup), it would declassify some of the documents.

Another article in the New York Times, dated November 27, 1999 (article entitled "Judge Is Hoping to See Secret Files in U.S.," p. A14), states, "The Nixon Administration openly favored the coup and helped prepare the climate for the military intervention against the Socialist Government of Salvador Allende Gossens, by backing loans, financing strikes, and supporting the opposition press."

Significance.   This account illustrates how successfully sociocentric renditions of events are rendered by the news media at the time of their occurrence and for many years thereafter. It also points out, in its failure to suggest—even now—that some significant breach of morality originally occurred, or that, even worse, breaches of our announced values are common. There is also no criticism of the media for their failure at the time to discover and publish the truth of the U.S. involvement in the coup.

U.S. Order to Kill Civilians in Korea Illegal, Experts Say: Prosecution Seen as Impossible Now (from *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 2, 1999, p. A12 (taken from the Associated Press)

Historical background.   During the Korean War (1950-1953), the news media represented U.S. involvement in the war as a fight, on our side, for the freedom of the South Korean people against a totalitarian government in North Korea (which we presented as dupes of the Chinese communists). That the government we supported in South Korea did not itself function in a democratic fashion and easily could have been represented as our "dupes" was not mentioned in the news coverage of the time. The coverage implied that we were there for humanitarian reasons: to protect the rights of innocent Koreans to have a democratically elected government and universal human rights. The mainstream media also failed to point out any problems with either our involvement in the war or the methods we used to deal with "the enemy."

Contents of article.   This article, written 25 years after the events in question, focuses on the killing of civilian refugees by American soldiers during the Korean War:

> The Associated Press reported Wednesday that a dozen veterans of the 1st Cavalry Division said their unit killed a large number of South Korean refugees at a hamlet 100 miles southeast of the Korean capital.… The survivors say 400 people were killed in the mass shooting and a preceding U.S. air attack.… In the 1st Cavalry Division, the operations chief issued this order: "No refugees to cross the front line. Fire at everyone trying to cross lines."

Such orders are patently illegal, military law experts say today. "I've never heard of orders like this, not outside the orders given by Germans that we heard about during the Nuremberg Trials," said Scott Silliman of Duke University, a retired colonel and Air Force lawyer for 25 years.

Yet, "during the 1950-53 war, there were no prosecutions of anything more than individual murders of civilians by U.S. servicemen," the experts note.

In pondering the question: Why were the orders to kill refugees kept quiet all these years?… a retired Colonel who eventually became chief drafter of the Korean armistice agreement commented, "If it was in their unit, then for the sake of the unit they didn't want to report it." He goes on to state that for much of U.S. history, "we've done very badly in not trying these cases.… What bothers me most is the fact that the American public seems to take the side of the war criminal if he's an American."

Significance.   The significance of this article is that, on the one hand, it again is an example of how successfully the news media render sociocentric events at the time of their occurrence and for many years afterward. What is unusual in this article is the suggestion of a pattern of behavior that goes beyond the events at this particular time ("We've done very badly in not trying these cases.… What bothers me most is the fact that the American public seems to take the side of the war criminal if he's an American"). This suggestion of a pattern of American wrong-doing is exceptional, as it diverges from the usual sociocentric tendency of the news. It should be noted, however, that we find this merely in the quote of one individual. The suggestion is not taken up in any follow-up articles. It is not a newsmaker, as was the story of President Clinton's sexual escapades. In this sense, the sociocentrism of the news media is not significantly breached.

Treatment Is New Salvo Fired by Reformers in War on Drugs: Courts, voters beginning to favor therapy, not prisons, to fight crack (from *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 11, 1999, p. A9, taken from the New York Times)

Historical background.   Sufficient historical background is given in the contents of the article itself.

Contents of article.

A dozen years after the national alarm over crack hastened the decline of drug treatment in favor of punitive laws that helped create the world's largest prison system, anti-drug policy is taking another turn. Treatment is making a comeback.… In the crack years of the 1980s, treatment programs were gutted while the drug-fighting budget quadrupled. New reports said crack was the most addictive substance known to humanity, and prisons started to fill with people who once might have received help instead. The number of Americans locked up on drug offenses grew from 50,000 in 1980 to 400,000 today. Yet even during the height of the prison boom, when some people were sentenced to life behind bars for possessing small amounts of a drug, a number of treatment centers continued to have success. While not all addicts respond to treatment, these programs

showed that crack was less addictive than some other street drugs, or even nicotine, and that many of its users responded to conventional therapy.

Significance. This article exemplifies the powerful role of the media in feeding social hysteria and thereby affecting social and legal policy. The view advanced by news reports that crack is the most addictive substance known to humanity was the popular view of the day. Also popular in the 1980s was the view that crack users are best dealt with by imprisonment rather than through treatment of the drug abuse problem. The news media reinforced a simplistic Puritanical tradition that is deep in our culture: that the world divides into the good and the evil. According to this social ideology, the good defeat the bad by the use of physical force and superior strength, and the bad are taught a lesson only by severe punishment.

Test the Idea
Identifying Sociocentric Bias in the News I

Read through the newspaper every day for a week and attempt to locate at least one article revealing sociocentric thinking in the news. One of the best ways to do this is to carefully read any articles about the "friends" or "enemies" of your country's power structure. You should be able to identify a bias toward preserving this nationalistic view. Any negative article about one of your country's friends will play down the negative events and present extenuating excuses for those events. You will rarely find positive articles about your country's enemies, for in nationalistic ideology those who are evil do no good.

Use the format we have been using in writing what you have found, including Historical Background (if possible), Contents of the Article, and Significance. It also will be useful if you think through how the article might have been written if it did not reflect a sociocentric bias.

Sometimes an article in the news does not display our socio-centrism, but implicitly documents the sociocentrism of another group. For example, the *New York Times*, June 20, 1999, included an article entitled "Arab Honor's Price: A Woman's Blood" (p. 1), focusing on the sociocentric thinking of Arab religious groups in Jordan. The facts it covers are the following:

- An Arab woman in Jordan was shot and killed by her 16-year-old brother for running away from home after her husband suspected her of infidelity;

- After her husband divorced her, she had run away and remarried;

- Her family had been searching for her for six years in order to kill her. "We were the most prominent family, with the best reputation," said Um Tayseer, the mother. "Then we were disgraced. Even my brother and his family stopped

talking to us. No one would even visit us. They would say only, "You have to kill." "Now we can talk with our heads high," said Amal, her 18-year-old sister.

The article goes on to document the way in which traditional Arab culture places greater emphasis on chastity in women than on any other "virtue." The article states:

- "What is honor? Abeer Alla, a young Egyptian journalist, remembered how it was explained by a high-school biology teacher. He sketched the female reproductive system and pointed out the entrance to the vagina. 'This is where the family honor lies!' the teacher declared;

- More than pride, more than honesty, more than anything a man might do, female chastity is seen in the Arab world as an indelible line, the boundary between respect and shame;

- An unchaste woman, it is sometimes said, is worse than a murderer, affecting not just one victim, but her family and her tribe;

- It is an unforgiving logic, and its product, for centuries and now, has been murder—the killings of girls and women by their relatives, to cleanse honor that has been soiled."

Test the Idea
Identifying Sociocentric Bias in the News II

Locate at least one newspaper article containing evidence of sociocentric thinking on the part of some group. Complete these statements:

1. The article I identified is entitled…

2. A brief summary of the article is as follows…

3. The sociocentric thinking depicted in this article is as follows…

4. If this group had not been thinking sociocentrically, and instead had been thinking rationally, it would have behaved in the following way…

The Mass Media Play Down Information That Puts the Nation in a Negative Light

The media not only represents the news in terms favorable to the nation, it also plays down information that puts the nation in a negative light. The news media of the U.S. is a case in point.

When the UN General Assembly opposes the U.S. virtually unanimously, the U.S. media play that down, either by not reporting the vote at all or burying it in fine print or with an obscure notice. For example, most Americans are unaware of the extent to which the United States has stood alone, or virtually alone, in votes of the

general assembly of the United Nations. According to the United Nations (2001), the U.S. was *the only nation in the world* voting against the following resolutions:

- Resolutions seeking to ban testing and development of chemical and biological weapons (1981, 1982, 1983, 1984);
- Resolutions seeking to prohibit the testing and development of nuclear weapons (1982, 1983, 1984);
- Resolutions seeking to prohibit the escalation of the arms race into space (1982, 1983);
- Resolutions condemning and calling for an end to apartheid in South Africa (five in 1981, four in 1982, four in 1983);
- Resolutions calling for education, health care, and nourishment as basic human rights (1981, 1982, 1983);
- Resolutions affirming the right of every nation to self determination of its economic and social systems free of outside intervention (1981, 1983).

In 1981, the U.S. and Israel were *the only nations in the world* voting against 11 otherwise unanimous resolutions condemning Israel for human rights abuses committed against the Palestinians. And on December 7, 1987, the U.S. was the only nation to abstain from supporting a unanimous resolution calling for a convention on the rights of the child (United Nations, 2001).

The view that the U.S. fosters about itself, both at home and abroad, is, of course, that of being the leader of the free world. This view would be largely shattered if it were widely reported in the U.S. that, in fact, no other nation is following its lead.

On the one hand, the U.S. media foster the view that the U.S. is the best place to live in the world. At the same time, "The U.S. now imprisons more people than any other country in the world—perhaps half a million more than Communist China (Atlantic Monthly, December 1998)." One state alone, California, "now has the biggest prison system in the Western industrialized world… The state holds more inmates in its jails and prisons than do France, Great Britain, Germany, Japan, Singapore, and the Netherlands combined" (*Atlantic Monthly*, December 1998).

Freedom from Sociocentric Thought: The Beginnings of Genuine Conscience

The thesis of this chapter is that we are by nature sociocentric as well as egocentric. Without a clear understanding of our sociocentric tendencies, we become victims of the conformist thought dominant in social groups, and we become potential victimizers of others who disagree with our group's ideology. What is important is that we begin to identify sociocentrism in our thinking and our lives. Every group to which we belong is a possible place to begin to identify sociocentrism at work in ourselves

and others. Once we see the many patterns of social conformity in our lives, we can begin question those patterns. As we become more rational, we neither conform to conform nor rebel to rebel. We act, rather, from a clear sense of values and beliefs we have rationally thought through, values and beliefs we deem worthy of our free commitment.

The Capacity to Recognize Unethical Acts

Only when we can distinguish sociocentric thinking from ethical thinking can we begin to develop a conscience that is not equivalent to those values into which we have been socially conditioned. Here are some categories of acts that are unethical in-and-of themselves:

- SLAVERY: Enslaving people, whether individually or in groups;

- GENOCIDE: Systematically killing large masses of people;

- TORTURE: Using torture to obtain a "confession";

- DENIAL OF DUE PROCESS: Putting persons in jail without telling them the charges against them or providing them with a reasonable opportunity to defend themselves;

- POLITICALLY MOTIVATED IMPRISONMENT: Putting persons in jail, or otherwise punishing them, solely for their political or religious views;

- SEXISM: Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their gender;

- RACISM: Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their race or ethnicity;

- MURDER: The pre-meditated killing of people for revenge, pleasure, or to gain advantage for oneself;

- ASSAULT: Attacking an innocent person with intent to cause grievous bodily harm;

- RAPE: Forcing an unwilling person to have intercourse;

- FRAUD: Intentional deception to cause someone to give up property or some right;

- DECEIT: Representing something as true which one knows to be false in order to gain a selfish end harmful to another;

- INTIMIDATION: Forcing a person to act against his interest or deter from acting in his interest by threats or acts of violence.

Conclusion

Inescapably, living a human life entails membership in a variety of human groups. And such membership almost always generates sociocentric thought. This holds independently of whether we are speaking of nation, culture, profession, religion, family, or peer group. We find ourselves participating in groups before we are aware of ourselves as living beings. We find ourselves in groups in virtually every setting in which we function as persons. Sociocentric thought is the natural by-product of uncritically internalizing social concepts and values. To the extent that we remain sociocentric, we cannot become independent thinkers, nor can we develop a genuine conscience. The tools of critical thinking enable us to achieve perspective upon the social and cultural bases of our day-to-day thinking. It enables us to judge those bases with standards and criteria that free us from the intellectual confinement of one-dimensional thought. It enables us to locate concepts, standards, and values that transcend our culture and society. It enables us to develop a genuine conscience. It enables us to think within and beyond the social groups to which we belong.

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Chapter 12

Developing as an Ethical Reasoner

One of the most significant obstacles to fair-mindedness is the human tendency to reason in a self-serving or self-deluded manner. This tendency is increased by the extent to which people are confused about the nature of ethical concepts and principles. In understanding ethical reasoning, the following foundations are essential:

1. Ethical principles are not a matter of subjective preference.
2. All reasonable people are obligated to respect clear-cut ethical concepts and principles.
3. To reason well through ethical issues, we must know how to apply ethical concepts and principles reasonably to those issues.
4. Ethical concepts and principles should be distinguished from the norms and taboos of society and peer group, religious teachings, political ideologies, and the law.
5. The most significant barriers to sound ethical reasoning are the egocentrism and socio-centrism of human beings.

First we will seek to clarify the problem that ethics poses in human life: what ethics is, what its basis is, what it is commonly confused with, what its pitfalls are, and how it is to be understood.

Following that discussion, we emphasize three essential components in sound ethical reasoning: 1) the principles upon which ethics are grounded; 2) the counterfeits to avoid; and 3) the pathology of the human mind.

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Why People are Confused About Ethics

The ultimate basis for ethics is clear: Human behavior has consequences for the welfare of others. We are capable of acting toward others in such a way as to increase or decrease the quality of their lives. We are capable of helping or harming others. What is more, we are capable of understanding—at least in many cases—when we are doing the one and when we are doing the other. This is so because we have the raw capacity to put ourselves imaginatively in the place of others and recognize how we would feel if someone were to act toward us in the manner in which we are acting toward them.

Even young children have some idea of what it is to help or harm others. Children make inferences and judgments on the basis of that ethical awareness, and develop an outlook on life that has ethical significance for good or ill. But children tend to have a much clearer awareness of the harm done to them than they have of the harm they do to others:

- "That's not fair! He got more than me!"

- "She won't let me have any of the toys!"

- "He hit me and I didn't do anything to him. He's mean!"

- "She promised me. Now she won't give me my doll back!"

- "Cheater! Cheater!"

- "It's my turn now. You had your turn. That's not fair."

Through example and encouragement, we can cultivate fair-mindedness in children. Children can learn to respect the rights of others and not simply focus on their own. The main problem is not so much the difficulty of deciding what is helpful and harmful but, instead, our natural propensity to be egocentric. Few humans think at a deep level about the consequences to others of their selfish pursuit of money, power, prestige, and possessions. The result is that, though most people, independent of their society, ethnicity, and religion, give at least lip service to a common core of general ethical principles, few act consistently upon these principles. Few will argue that it is ethically justified to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, harm, or steal from others, nor hold that we have no ethical responsibility to respect the rights of others, including their freedom and well being. But few dedicate their lives to helping those most in need of help, to seeking the common good and not merely their own self-interest and egocentric pleasures.

As we pointed out in the last chapter, there are acts that rational persons recognize are in-and-of themselves harmful to people. They include slavery, genocide, torture, denial of due process, politically motivated imprisonment, sexism, racism, murder, assault, rape, fraud, deceit, and intimidation.

The United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, which all countries have ratified, articulates universal ethical principles. And a core of ideas defines the domain of ethicality and ethics, for reasonable people, in a broad and global way. Many fail to act in accordance with ethical principles, nevertheless. At an abstract level, there is little disagreement. Virtually no one would argue that it is ethically justifiable to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, and harm others merely because one wants to or simply because one has the raw power to do so. At the level of action, though, mere verbal agreement on general principles does not produce a world that honors human rights. There are too many ways in which humans can rationalize their rapacious desires and feel justified in taking advantage of those who are weaker or less able to protect themselves. There are too many forces in human life—for example, social groups, religions, and political ideologies—that generate norms of right and wrong that ignore or distort ethical principles. What is more, humans are too skilled in the art of self-deception for mere verbal agreement on abstract ethical principles to translate into the reality of an ethically just world.

To further complicate the picture, the ethical thing to do is not always self-evident— even to those who are not significantly self-deceived. In complex situations, people of seeming good will often disagree as to the application of this or that ethical principle to this or that concrete case. One and the same act often receives ethical praise from some and condemnation from others.

We can put this dimension of the problem another way: However strongly motivated to do what is ethically right, people can do so only if they know what is ethically justified. And this they cannot know if they systematically confuse their sense of what is ethically right with their vested interest, personal desires, political ideology, or social mores, or if they lack the capacity to reason with skill and discipline in the ethical domain.

Because of complexities such as these, skilled ethical reasoning presupposes the art of self-critique and ethical self-examination. We must learn to check our thinking for egocentrism, socio-centrism, and self-deception. This, in turn, requires development of the intellectual dispositions we discussed earlier in the book, including intellectual humility, intellectual integrity, and fair-mindedness. Sound ethical reasoning often requires a thinker to recognize and get beyond the pitfalls of ethical judgment: ethical intolerance, self-deception, and uncritical conformity. Sound ethical reasoning often requires us to recognize when our reasoning is a reflection of our social indoctrination. Sound ethical reasoning often requires us to enter empathically into points of view other than our own, gather facts from alternative perspectives, question our assumptions, and consider alternative ways to put the question at issue.

Few adults, however, acquire the skills or insights to recognize the complexities inherent in many everyday ethical issues. Few identify their own ethical contradictions, or clearly distinguish their vested interest and egocentric desires from what is genuinely ethical. Few have thought about the counterfeits of ethical

sentiment and judgment or have thought through a coherent ethical perspective in light of the complexities and pitfalls of ethical reasoning. As a result, everyday ethical judgments are often an unconscious mixture of genuine and counterfeit ethics, of ethical insight, on the one hand, and prejudice and hypocrisy on the other—each in a web of beliefs that seem to the believer to be self-evidently true.

Inadvertently, we pass on to our children and students our own ethical blindness, ethical distortions, and closed-mindedness. As a result, many who trumpet most loudly for ethics to be taught in the schools merely want students to adopt their own beliefs and perspectives, however flawed those beliefs and perspectives might be. They take themselves to have THE TRUTH in their pockets. They take their perspective to be exemplary of all ethical truths. What these same people fear most is someone else's ethical perspective taught as the truth: conservatives are afraid of liberals being in charge, liberals are fearful of conservatives, theists of nontheists, nontheists of theists, and so on.

All of these fears are justified. People—except in the most rare and exceptional cases—have a strong tendency to confuse what they believe with the truth. "It's true

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Test the Idea
Distinguishing Between Indoctrination and Education

As a person interested in developing your thinking, you must clearly distinguish between indoctrination and education. These two concepts are often confused. Using a good dictionary as your reference, complete the following statements (you may want to look these words up in more than one dictionary for a more comprehensive understanding of the terms):

1. According to the dictionary, the meaning of the word indoctrination that contrasts with the meaning of education is…

2. According to the dictionary, the most fundamental meaning of the word education that contrasts with the meaning of indoctrination is…

3. The main difference between education and indoctrination, therefore, is…

Once you feel reasonably clear about the essential differences between these terms, think about your previous schooling and figure out the extent to which you think you have been indoctrinated (in contrast to having been educated). Complete these statements:

1. As a student, I believe I have been mainly (educated or indoctrinated). My reasons for concluding this are…

2. For example…

because I believe it" is, as we have already emphasized, a deep subconscious mindset in most of us. Our beliefs simply feel like "the Truth." They appear to the mind as the truth. In the "normal" human mind, it is always the others who do evil, are deceived, self-interested, closed-minded—never us. Thus, instead of cultivating genuine ethical principles in students, teachers often unknowingly indoctrinate them, systematically rewarding students for expressing the beliefs and perspectives the teachers themselves hold. To this extent, they indoctrinate rather than educate students

The Fundamentals of Ethical Reasoning

To become skilled in any domain of reasoning, we must understand the principles that define that domain. To be skilled in mathematical reasoning, we must understand fundamental mathematical principles. To be skilled in scientific reasoning, we must understand fundamental scientific principles (principles of physics, of chemistry, of astronomy, and so on). In like manner, to be skilled in ethical reasoning, we must understand fundamental ethical principles. Good-heartedness is not enough. We must be well-grounded in fundamental ethical concepts and principles. Principles are at the heart of ethical reasoning.

People thinking through an ethical issue must be able to identify the ethical principles relevant to the specific ethical situation. They must also muster the intellectual skills required to apply those principles fairly to the relevant case or situation. Ethical principles alone, however, do not settle ethical questions. For example, ethical principles sometimes can be applied differently in cases that are ethically complex.

Consider for instance, the question: Should the United States maintain relations with countries that violate human rights? The most important ethical concepts relevant to this question are justice and integrity, yet matters of practicality and effectiveness clearly must be considered as well. Justice and integrity would seem to require cutting off relations with any country that violates fundamental human rights. But is isolating and confronting these countries the most effective way to achieve these high ethical ends? What is more, history reminds us that nearly all countries violate human rights in one form or another—the United States not excluded. To what extent do we have the right to demand that others live up to standards that we ourselves often fail to meet? These are the kinds of challenging ethical issues often ignored by the naive and the good-hearted on the one hand, and the self-deceived cynical on the other.

Because ethical reasoning is often complex, we must learn strategies to deal with those complexities. The three intellectual tasks we believe to be the most important to ethical reasoning are:

1. Mastering the most basic ethical concepts and the principles inherent in ethical issues.

2. Learning to distinguish between ethics and other domains of thinking with which ethics is commonly confused.

3. Learning to identify when native human egocentrism and socio-centrism are impeding one's ethical judgments (probably the most challenging task of the three).

If any of these three foundations is missing in a person's ethical reasoning, that reasoning will likely be flawed. Let's consider these abilities in turn.

Ethical Concepts and Principles

For every ethical question, some ethical concept or set of concepts directly relevant to the question must be identified. One cannot reason well with regard to ethical issues if one does not clearly understand the force of ethical terms and distinctions. Some of the most basic ethical concepts include honesty, integrity, justice, equality, and respect. In many cases, application of the principles implied by these concepts is simple. In some cases it is difficult.

Consider some simple cases. Lying about, misrepresenting, or distorting the facts to gain a material advantage over others is clearly a violation of the basic principle inherent in the concept of honesty. Expecting others to live up to standards that we ourselves routinely violate is clearly a violation of the basic principle inherent in the concept of integrity. Treating others as if they were worth less than we take ourselves to be worth is a violation of the principles inherent in the concepts of integrity, justice, and equality. Every day human life is filled with clear-cut violations of basic ethical principles. No one would deny that it is ethically repugnant for a person to microwave cats for the fun of it. Nor is it ethically acceptable to kill people to get their money or to torture people because we think they are guilty and ought to confess.

Nevertheless, in addition to the clear-cut cases are also complicated cases, requiring us to enter into an ethical dialogue, considering counter-arguments from different points of view. Consider, for example, the question: Is euthanasia ever ethically justifiable? Certainly there are any number of instances when euthanasia is not justified. To consider the question of whether it is ever justified, however, we must consider the various conditions under which euthanasia seems plausible. For example, what about cases involving people who are suffering unrelenting pain from terminal diseases? Within this group are some who plead with us to end their suffering by helping them end their lives (since, though in torment, they cannot end their lives without the assistance of another person).

Given the fact, then, that a person so circumstanced is experiencing intense terminal suffering, one significant ethical concept relevant to this question is the concept of

cruelty. Cruelty is defined by Webster's New World Dictionary as "causing, or of a kind to cause, pain, distress, etc; cruel implies indifference to the suffering of others or a disposition to inflict it on others." Cruelty, in this case, means "of a kind to cause" unnecessary pain. It means allowing an innocent person to experience unnecessary pain and suffering when you have the power to alleviate it—without sacrificing something of equal value.

Once cruelty is identified as a relevant concept, one ethical injunction becomes clear: "Strive to act so as to reduce or end the unnecessary pain and suffering of innocent persons and creatures." With this ethical principle in mind, we can seek to determine in what sense, in any given situation, refusing to assist a suffering person should be considered cruel and in what sense it shouldn't.

Another ethical concept that may be relevant to this issue is, "Life is good in itself." The principle that emerges from this concept is, "Life should be respected." Some would argue that, given this principle, life should not be terminated by humans under any circumstances.

As a person capable of reasoning, you should come to your own conclusions. At the same time, you must be prepared to state your reasoning in detail, explaining what ethical concepts and issues seem to you to be relevant, and why. You must be prepared to demonstrate that you have given serious consideration to alternative perspectives on the issue, that you are not ignoring other reasonable ways to think through the question at issue. You must be ready to present what you take to be the most relevant and important facts in the case. You must be prepared to do what any good thinker would do in attempting to support reasoning on any issue in any domain of thought. The fact that an issue is ethical does not mean that you can abandon your commitment to disciplined, rational thought.

Or consider: Under what conditions, if any, is animal experimentation justifiable? Again, one relevant ethical concept is cruelty, for anyone informed about animal experimentation knows that sometimes animals are subjected to extreme pain, anxiety, and suffering in the name of scientific inquiry. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), a proactive animal rights organization, focuses on the negative implications of animal experimentation. PETA, at its Web site, makes claims such as the following:

- Every year, millions of animals suffer and die in painful tests to determine the "safety" of cosmetics and household products. Substances ranging from eye shadow and soap to furniture polish and oven cleaner are tested on rabbits, rats, guinea pigs, dogs, and other animals, despite the fact that test results do not help prevent or treat human illness or injury. In these tests, a liquid, flake, granule, or powdered substance is dropped into the eyes of a group of albino rabbits. The animals are often immobilized in stocks from which only their heads protrude. They usually receive no anesthesia during the tests…. Reactions to the

substances include swollen eyes. The rabbits' eyelids are held open with clips. Many animals break their necks as they struggle to escape.

- Chimpanzees are now popular subjects for AIDS research, although their immune system does not succumb to the virus. Chimpanzees are also used in painful cancer, hepatitis, and psychological tests, as well as for research into artificial insemination and birth control methods, blood diseases, organ transplants, and experimental surgery. Their use in military experiments is suspected, but such information is kept secret and hard to verify. . . . Chimpanzees are highly active and very socially oriented. When kept isolated in laboratories with no regular physical contact with either humans or chimps, they quickly become psychotic. . . . Because adult chimpanzees are strong and often unmanageable, and because infected chimpanzees cannot be placed in zoos or existing sanctuaries, many chimpanzees are killed before the age of 10.

- Sleep deprivation is recognized as a form of human torture. For decades, sleep deprivation has been used by repressive governments to extract classified information or false confessions from political prisoners. But some people do it legally. These people aren't called torturers. Because their subjects are animals, they're called "scientists". . . . For more than a quarter century, Allan Rechtschaffen, an experimenter of the University of Chicago, deprived animals of sleep. He started out keeping rats awake for up to 24 hours and then letting them recover. He moved on to total sleep deprivation—he kept rats awake until their bodies could no longer cope and they died of exhaustion. This took anywhere from 11 to 32 days. To prepare the gentle animals for this long nightmarish journey to death, Rechtschaffen stuck electrodes in the rat's skulls, sewed wires to their hearts, and surgically buried thermometers in their stomachs, so that he could track their temperatures and brain waves. To make blood drawing easier (for him), he snaked catheters through their jugular veins, down their necks and into their hearts. . . . Clinical studies have already shown that humans deprived of sleep suffer from lack of concentration and hallucinations, and that they recover quickly with even brief periods of sleep. So what did Rechtschaffen hope to discover? In his own words, "We established that rats died after 17 days of total sleep deprivation. Thus, at least, for the rat, sleep is absolutely essential."

Information such as this is relevant to the question of whether, to what extent and under what conditions animal experimentation is ethically justified. Some argue that animal experimentation is justified whenever some potential good for humans may emerge from the experiment. Others argue that animal experimentation is unethical because there are always alternative ways, such as computer simulations, to get the information being sought. At its Web site, PETA claims:

- More than 205,000 new drugs are marketed worldwide every year, most after undergoing the most archaic and unreliable testing methods still in use: animal studies.... Many physicians and researchers publicly speak out against these outdated studies. They point out that unreliable animal tests not only allow dangerous drugs to be marketed to the public, but may also prevent potentially useful ones from being made available. Penicillin would not be in use today if it had been tested on guinea pigs—common laboratory subjects—because penicillin kills guinea pigs. Likewise, aspirin kills cats, while morphine, a depressant to humans, is a stimulant to cats, goats, and horses. Human reactions to drugs cannot be predicted by tests on animals because different species (and even individuals within the same species) react differently to drugs.

- The Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine reports that sophisticated non-animal research methods are more accurate, less expensive, and less time-consuming than traditional animal-based research methods.

Some argue that, in experiments in which animal suffering cannot be avoided, the suffering is ethically justified because in the long run the knowledge gained from this experimentation reduces the pain and suffering otherwise endured by humans. These proponents of experimentation argue that minimizing human pain and suffering is a superior ethical end to that of minimizing animal pain and suffering.

When reasoning through complex ethical questions, then, skilled ethical reasoners identify the ethical concepts and facts relevant to those questions and apply those concepts to the facts in a well-reasoned manner. In coming to conclusions, they consider as many plausible ways of looking at the issue as they can. As a result of such intellectual work, they develop the capacity to distinguish when ethical questions are clear-cut and when they are not. When ethical issues are not clear-cut, it is important to exercise our best ethical judgment.

The Universal Nature of Ethical Principles

For every ethical issue, there are ethical concepts and principles to be identified and used in thinking through the issue. Included in the principles implied by these concepts are the rights articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This set of rights, established on December 10, 1948, by the General Assembly of the United Nations, holds that the:

> …recognition of inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world .... Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

The Universal Declaration of Humans Rights was conceived as "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations." It is a good example of an explicit statement of important ethical principles. It is significant, we believe, that every nation on earth has signed the declaration.

Here are a few of the principles laid out in the 30 articles of the declaration:

*   All humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

*   Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.

*   No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.

*   No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

*   Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.

*   Everyone has the right to education.

*   Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

*   Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kinds, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or status.

*   All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.

One ability essential to sound reasoning is the ability to identify ethical principles relevant to the issue at hand. In Test the Idea 12.2, you should think through the identification and application of some of these principles with respect to a specific ethical question.

Test the Idea
Recognizing Violations of Human Rights Based Universal Ethical Principles

In this activity, we will briefly describe an issue as presented in a New York Times article, "Iraq Is a Pediatrician's Hell: No Way to Stop the Dying." We then will ask you to identify any violations of human rights suggested by the manner in which events are characterized.

This article focuses on the medical problems for sick children in Iraq "when the country's medical system is all but paralyzed as a result of economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations eight years ago." The article states that hospitals cannot obtain the medical equipment and supplies they need to handle diseases from the complicated to the "easily curable ailments." This means that virtually all children with leukemia,

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for example, die in Iraq. The article mentions a three-year-old girl with leukemia, Isra Ahmed, who bleeds profusely from her nose, gums, and rectum. The hospital's chief resident, Dr. Jasim Mazin, says that the hospital lacks the equipment to perform the kind of operation she needs. He states, "We're helpless." He goes on to say, "Iraq used to be the best country in the Arab world in terms of science and medicine. Now we can't even read medical journals because they are covered by the embargo." Dr. Mazin said his worst period came in April 1998 when he lost 75 children to chest infections and gastroenteritis. He believes all of them could have been saved with antibiotics commonly available in neighboring countries. Assume for this exercise that the factual claims in this article are accurate.

Complete the following statements:

1. If the United Nations sanctions are responsible for the conditions discussed in this article, the following human rights have been violated by the United Nations…

2. If you believe one or more violations of human rights exist in this situation, complete the following statements:

   • The universal ethical principle violated was…

   • For this ethical principle to be honored, the following action would have been called for in this situation…

Though the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are universally accepted in theory, even democratic countries do not necessarily live in accordance with them. For example, on October 5, 1998, the *New York Times* ("Amnesty Finds 'Widespread Pattern' of U.S. Rights Violations," p. A11) reported that Amnesty International was citing the United States for violating fundamental human rights. The Amnesty International report stated that "police forces and criminal and legal systems have a persistent and widespread pattern of human rights violations."

In the report, Amnesty International protested the U.S. failure "to deliver the fundamental promise of rights for all." The report states, "Across the country thousands of people are subjected to sustained and deliberate brutality at the hands of police officers. Cruel, degrading, and sometimes life-threatening methods of constraint continue to be a feature of the U.S. criminal justice system."

Pierre Sane, Secretary General of Amnesty International for six years, said, "We felt it was ironic that the most powerful country in the world uses international human rights laws to criticize others but does not apply the same standards at home."

Every country agrees in theory to the importance of fundamental human rights. In practice, though, they often fail to uphold those rights.

Test the Idea
Identifying Violations of Human Rights Based on Universal Ethical Principles

Identify a newspaper article that either directly or indirectly implies at least one governmental violation of human rights. Complete the following statements:

1. The main substance of this article is…
2. The reason this article suggests to me at least one governmental violation of human rights is…
3. The universal ethical principle(s) violated is/are…

Distinguishing Ethics from Other Domains of Thinking

In addition to understanding how to identify ethical concepts and principles relevant to ethical issues, skilled ethical reasoners must be able to distinguish between ethics and other domains of thinking such as social conventions, religion, and the law. Too often, ethics is confused with these other modes of thinking. It is not uncommon, for example, for social values and taboos to be treated as if they define ethical principles.

Thus, religious ideologies, social "rules," and laws are often mistakenly taken to be inherently ethical in nature. If we are to accept this amalgamation of domains, by implication every practice within any religious system is necessarily ethical, every social rule is ethically obligatory, and every law is ethically justified. We could not judge, then, any religious practices—such as torturing unbelievers—as unethical.

In the same way, if ethics and social conventions were one and the same, every social practice within any culture would necessarily be ethical—including social conventions in Nazi Germany. We could not, then, ethically condemn any social traditions, norms, mores, and taboos—however ethically bankrupt we think them to be. What's more, if ethics and the law were inextricable, by implication every law within any legal system would be ethical by definition—including laws that blatantly violate human rights.

It is essential, then, to learn to routinely differentiate ethics and other modes of thinking commonly confused with ethics. This will enable us to criticize commonly accepted, yet unethical, social conventions, religious practices, political ideas, and laws. No one lacking in this ability can truly live a life of integrity.

Ethics and Religion

To exemplify some of the problems in confusing ethics with other disciplines, let us return for a moment, to the question: Are there any conditions under which euthanasia is ethically justifiable? Rather than understanding this as an ethical question,

some take it to be a religious question. Therefore, they think through the question using religious principles. They see some religious principles, namely, the ones in which they believe, as fundamental to ethics.

They argue, for example, that euthanasia is not ethically justifiable because "the Bible says it is wrong to commit suicide." Because they do not distinguish the theological from the ethical, they are likely to miss the relevance of the concept of cruelty. They are not likely to struggle with the problem. This may mean that they find it difficult to feel any force behind the argument for euthanasia in this case or to appreciate what it is to experience hopeless torment without end.

A commitment to some set of religious beliefs may prevent them from recognizing that ethical concepts take priority over religious beliefs when they conflict, as the former are universal and the latter are inherently controversial. Reasonable persons give priority allegiance to ethical concepts and principles, whether these concepts and principles are or are not explicitly acknowledged by a given religious group. Religious beliefs are, at best, supplementary to ethical principles but cannot overrule them.

Consider this example: If a religious group were to believe that the firstborn male of every family must be killed as a sacrifice and failed to exercise any countervailing ethical judgment, every person in that group would think themselves to be ethically obligated to kill their firstborn male. Their religious beliefs would lead them to unethical behavior and lessen their capacity to appreciate the cruel nature of their behavior.

The genuinely ethical thing to do in a society that propagates the above religious belief would be to rebel and resist what others consider to be obligatory. In short, theological beliefs do not properly override ethical principles, for we must use ethical principles to judge religious practices. We have no other reasonable choice.

Religious Beliefs Are Socially or Culturally Relative

Religious relativity derives from the fact that there are an unlimited number of alternative ways for people to conceive and account for the nature of the "spiritual." The Encyclopedia Americana, for example, lists over 300 different religious belief systems. These traditional ways of believing adopted by social groups or cultures take on the force of habit and custom. They are handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in a given group, despite the large number of possibilities, their particular beliefs often seem to be the ONLY way, or the only REASONABLE way, to conceive of the "divine." For most people these religious beliefs influence their behavior from cradle to grave. Religions answer questions like this:

* What is the origin of all things? Is there a God? Is there more than one God? If there is a God, what is his/her nature? Are there ordained laws that exist to guide our life and behavior? What are these laws? How are they communicated to us?

How should we treat transgressions of these laws? What must we do to live in keeping with the will of the divine?

Religious beliefs bear upon many aspects of a person's life—with rules, requirements, taboos, and rituals. Many of these regulations are neither right nor wrong, but simply represent social preferences and subjective choices. However, sometimes, without knowing it, social practices, including religious beliefs or practices, violate basic human rights. Then, they must be criticized. For example, if a society accepts among its social practices any form of *slavery, torture, sexism, racism, persecution, murder, assault, rape, fraud, deceit, or intimidation,* it should be ethically criticized. For example, in religious warfare ethical atrocities are often committed. The question, then, ceases to be one of social preference and relativity. No religious belief can legitimately be used to justify violations of basic human rights.

Test the Idea
Distinguishing Between Ethics and Religion

Focus on one religious belief system (as commonly held) to identify possible confusions between theological beliefs and ethical principles. See if you can identify any practices within the religion that might be critiqued as unethical. See also if you can identify any practices that the religion considers unethical that are in fact unrelated to ethics. Select any religion about which you are sufficiently knowledgeable to find possible problems of the sort we are considering. As an example remember the case of those religious believers who think that a woman who commits adultery should be stoned to death.

Ethics and Social Conventions

Let us return to the relationship of ethics and social conventions. For more than a hundred years in the United States, most people considered slavery to be justified and desirable. It was part of social custom. There can be no question that, all along, this practice was unethical. Moreover, throughout history, many groups of people, including people of various nationalities and skin colors, as well as females, children, and individuals with disabilities, have been victims of discrimination as the result of social convention treated as ethical obligation. Yet, all social practices that violate ethical principles deserve to be rejected by ethically sensitive, reasonable persons no matter how many people support those practices.

Unless we learn to soundly critique the social mores and taboos that have been imposed upon us from birth, we will accept those traditions as "right." All of us are deeply socially conditioned. Therefore, we do not naturally develop the ability to effectively critique social norms and taboos.

Practices That Are Socially or Culturally Relative

Cultural relativity derives from the fact that there are an unlimited number of alternative ways for people in social groups to go about satisfying their needs and fulfilling their desires. Those traditional ways of living within a social group or culture take on the force of habit and custom. They are handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in a given group they seem to be the ONLY way, or the only REASONABLE way, to do things. For most people these practices guide their behavior from cradle to grave. They answer questions like this:

- How should marriage take place? Who should be allowed to marry, under what conditions, and with what ritual or ceremony? Once married what role should the male play? What role should the female play? Are multiple marriage partners possible? Is divorce possible? Under what conditions?

- Who should care for the children? What should they teach the children as to proper and improper ways to act? When children do not act as they are expected to act, how should they be treated?

- When should children be accepted as adults? When should they be considered old enough to be married? Who should they be allowed to marry?

- When children develop sensual and sexual desires, how should they be allowed to act? With whom, if anyone, should they be allowed to engage in sexual exploration and discovery? What sexual acts are considered acceptable and wholesome? What sexual acts are considered perverted or sinful?

- How should men and women dress? To what degree should their body be exposed in public? How is nudity treated? How are those who violate these codes treated?

- How should food be obtained and how should it be prepared? Who is responsible for the obtaining of food? Who for its preparation? How should it be served? How eaten?

- How is the society "stratified" (into levels of power)? How is the society controlled? What belief system is used to justify the distribution of scarce goods and services and the way rituals and practices are carried out?

- If the society develops enemies or is threatened from without, who will defend it? How will they engage in war?

- What sorts of games, sports, or amusements will be practiced in the society? Who is allowed to engage in them?

- What religion is taught to members of the society? Who is allowed to participate in the religious rituals or to interpret divine or spiritual teachings to the group?

- How are grievances settled in the society? Who decides who is right and who wrong? How are violators treated?

Societies regulate virtually every aspect of a person's life—with rules, requirements, taboos, and rituals. Many of these regulations are neither right nor wrong, but simply represent social preferences and subjective choices. However, sometimes, without knowing it, social practices violate basic human rights. Then, they may be criticized. For example, if a society accepts among its social practices any form of *slavery, torture, sexism, racism, persecution, murder, assault, rape, fraud, deceit,* or *intimidation,* it is subject to ethical criticism. The question ceases to be one of social preference and relativity.

Schools and colleges often become apologists for conventional thought; faculty members often inadvertently foster the confusion between convention and ethics because they themselves have internalized the conventions of society. Education, properly so called, should foster the intellectual skills that enable students to distinguish between cultural mores and ethical precepts, between social commandments and ethical truths. In each case, when conflicts with ethical principles exist, the ethical principles should rule.

Test the Idea
Distinguishing Between Ethics and Social Conventions

Prior to and during the civil rights movement in the United States, many whites believed that African Americans were intellectually inferior to them. This belief gave rise to laws that denied African Americans basic human rights. It would be hard to find a clearer case of socially accepted conventions leading to socially defended unethical practices.

Identify one newspaper article that embodies the confusion between social conventions and ethical principles. What we are looking for is an article in which a commonly held social belief results in the denial of some person's or group's basic human right(s):

1. The substance of this article is…

2. The reason this article implies at least one violation of human rights is…

3. The universal ethical principle(s) violated was/were…

Ethics and the Law

As persons interested in developing your ethical reasoning abilities, you should be able to differentiate not only ethics and social conventions but also ethics and the law. What is illegal may be ethically justified. What is ethically obligatory may be illegal. What is unethical may be legal.

Laws often emerge out of social conventions. Whatever is acceptable and expected in social groups becomes the foundation for many laws. But, because we cannot assume that social conventions are ethical, we cannot assume that human laws are ethical.

What is more, laws are ultimately made by politicians whose primary motivation is often power, vested interest, or expediency. One should not be surprised, then, when politicians are not sensitive to ethical principles or confuse ethical principles with social values or taboos.

Ethics and Sexual Taboos

The problem here is that social taboos are often matters of strong emotions. People are often disgusted by someone's violating a taboo. Their disgust signals to them that the behavior is unethical. They forget that what is socially unacceptable may not violate any ethical principle but, instead, be a violation of a social convention of one kind or other.

One obvious area to think through, based on this common confusion, is the area of human sexuality. Social groups often establish strong sanctions for unconventional behavior involving the human body. Some social groups inflict strong punishments on women who do no more than appear in public without being completely veiled, an act socially considered indecent and sexually provocative. The question for us, then, is when is human behavior that is considered illicitly sexual by some society a matter for ethical condemnation, and when is it properly considered a matter of social nonconformity?

Our overall goal—which we hope this chapter will inspire readers to pursue—is to become so proficient in ethical reasoning and so skilled in distinguishing matters of ethical principle from matters of social taboo, legal fact, and theological belief that you will rarely confuse these domains in your experience and, rather, render to each of them their due consideration and weight in specific cases as they might arise in your life. In the Test the Idea activities that follow, you can gain some practice in developing these important skills.

Test the Idea
Ethics, Social Taboos, and Criminal Law

In this exercise, we will briefly describe the substance of two news articles. Both articles depict examples of cases in which a given social group has established a law with a significant punishment attendant on its violation, regarding behavior judged by that group to be highly unethical. Think through how you would analyze and assess the act in question using the distinctions discussed in this chapter.

Here are some questions to think about as you read summaries of these articles:

• Would you conclude that the social group in question has properly or improperly treated the sexual behaviors in each case as matters worthy of ethical condemnation?

- To what extent should these behaviors be considered serious crimes?
- Ethically and rationally speaking, how in your judgment should the two cases be treated?

Read each article summary, and answer the questions above for each one. Explain your reasoning. In each case, you may have to make explicit some of your assumptions about important details of the case that may not be in the article summary. Your judgment might vary depending on what details you suppose.

For example, you might come to a different judgment depending on whether violence or outright bodily harm is involved. As you work through the activities, take into account the probable reasoning that might be advanced against your position (for example, you might say, "Someone might object to my reasoning by saying … To them my reply would be…").

Article 1 (San Francisco Chronicle, Feb. 6, 1999)

We read, "For the first time in 23 years, the Philippines executed a prisoner yesterday, a house painter convicted of raping his 10-year-old stepdaughter. Leo Echegaray, 38, was put to death by lethal injection after months of legal delays and an emotional nationwide debate over the death penalty." Philippines president Joseph Estrada refused to stop the execution of Leo Echegaray, "despite pleas from the Vatican, the European Union, and human rights groups." Amnesty International "called Echegaray's death 'a huge step in the wrong direction for human rights in the Philippines'." President Estrada said that the execution signifies "proof of the government's determination to maintain law and order."

After reflecting on the questions we asked you to consider for both articles, come to a determination as to whether, in your best judgment, the punishment fit the crime. Then complete these statements:

1. I believe that the law leading to this execution is or is not an ethically justified law, because…

2. If you believe the law itself violated some human right or ethical principle, complete the following statements:

   a. The reason this case contains at least one violation of human rights is…

   b. The universal ethical principle(s) violated is/are…

   c. From a strictly ethical point of view, the following action would have been called for in this situation…

3. If you believe the law was ethically justified, complete the following statements:

   a. The reason why this case does not contain any violations of human rights is…

   b. The relevant ethical principle(s) that justified this action is/are…

Article 2 (New York Times, Oct. 21, 1999)

This article, entitled "Boy, 11, Held on Incest Charge, Protests Ensue," states "the case of an 11-year-old Swiss-American boy charged with aggravated incest has led to an international dispute over the treatment of children in the American Justice System." The boy, "is accused of making inappropriate sexual contact with his 5-year-old sister when the children were in their yard." According to the article, after an arraignment date was set, the boy was released into foster care. "The boy has been living with his mother, stepfather, 13-year-old sister and two half-sisters, ages 5 and 3, in Evergreen, CO…A neighbor, Laura Mehmert, testified at the hearing that in May she saw the boy touching the younger girl's genitals with his face and hands. After speaking with the boy's mother, the neighbor reported the incident to the authorities. On Aug. 30, the boy was arrested and led in handcuffs from his home. Since then he has been held without bail in a county juvenile center." According to Manual Sager, spokesman for the Swiss Embassy in Washington, the circumstances of the boy's arrest "seemed disproportionate to us to the charges." He said the boy was taken into court in handcuffs and foot chains. According to Hanspeter Spuhler, director of the Swiss-American Friendship Society, "It's just a travesty… The reason why it's such a big deal to the Swiss and the Europeans is because this is part of growing up, playing doctor or something. If indeed he touched her inappropriately, then it will be talked over with the parents." The boy's parents fled to Switzerland with their other three children "out of fear that their three daughters would also be taken from them."

After reflecting on the questions we directed you to consider for both articles, come to a determination as to whether, in your best judgment, ethics is being confused with religious ideology, social conventions, or the law in the main issue that is the focus of the article. For your consideration, we have provided a brief analysis of the two fundamentally different perspectives that might be said to be indirectly implied in the article as it is written.

A Traditional View of Children's Sexuality

Children are not naturally sexual beings. If they engage in sexual acts, they are behaving in a mentally unhealthy manner. What is more, if older children behave in a sexual way toward a younger child, the

younger child will be permanently damaged, and the older child should be punished as a criminal would be punished. If the parents of children who engage in sexual behavior fail to take harsh action against that behavior, they are contributing to unhealthy mental development of their children, and therefore are not fit to rear those children.

An Opposing View

To engage in sexual behavior is a natural part of human life. It is natural, normal, and healthy for children to experience, explore, and appropriately express sexual desires. Very often, children invent games (such as "playing doctor") as a form of exploring their sexual feelings with other children. Parents who understand the biological make-up of humans and the natural desire of children to explore their sexual desires will not punish children for having, or appropriately acting upon, sexual thoughts and feelings. Rather, they should look upon exploratory forms of sexual behavior as part of most children's lives.

This latter view seems to be implied in the article by Hanspeter Spuhler, director of the Swiss-American Friendship Society, who states, "It's just a travesty. The reason why it's such a big deal to the Swiss and the Europeans is because this is part of growing up, playing doctor or something. If indeed he touched her inappropriately, then it will be talked over with the parents." In this view, if problems seem to be present with the child's behavior respecting sexuality, the parents will be expected to help the child overcome the problem as parents are generally expected to help children develop as responsible persons. The role of authorities, then, is to help the parents develop their abilities to deal with their children as effectively as possible rather than acting as punitive bodies.

Now, given these two differing perspectives, how would you answer the following questions:

1. From an ethical perspective, which of these points of view seems the more reasonable, given what you know from reading the article and from your own thinking?

2. To what extent do you think ethics is confused with social conventions in the minds of the legal authorities in this case?

3. To what extent do you think religious ideology might play a role in the thinking of either of the above perspectives?

4. To what extent do you think the law upholds what is ethical in this case or, conversely, reflects poor ethical reasoning?

5. How do you think this case should have been handled, given what is ethical for the children at issue and their parents? Do you agree with the way it was handled by the authorities, or would you have acted differently had you been in charge of the case? Explain your reasoning.

Test the Idea
Cultural Practice and Ethics

On June 12, 1999, the *New York Times* (p. A4) reported that in Muslim West Beirut, Lebanon, women and men are expected to avoid sunbathing together except when they are engaged or married to one another. At one beach only a handful of women could be seen, and most were fully clothed, and sheltered by tents or beach umbrellas. Those who swam simply strolled into the water, until their baggy dresses began to float along beside them… "I don't bring my fiancée here because if someone said something like "what a beautiful girl," there'd have to be a fight," said Hassam Karaki, who sat with other men on an all-male beach.

Randa Harb, 27, wore a modest pair of shorts and a tank top as she sat under an umbrella with her bare-chested husband and young son. "If you wear a bathing suit, you're going to attract more attention," Mrs. Harb said. "So my husband won't let me, because he doesn't want people to look and talk…"

Lebanon is not alone, of course, as home to a culture averse to women showing too much skin. In Iran, a strict Islamic republic, the insistence on female "modesty" means that women may not even enter hotel pools. In most Arab countries, except among elites, a standard woman's bathing costume is a dress.

Now answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does the cultural practice of denying women the right to wear swimsuits at beaches and swimming pools where men are present seem ethical or unethical to you?

2. On what ethical concepts and principles do you base your reasoning?

Determining Ethical Dimensions of Cultural Practices

On March 6, 1999, the New York Times (p. A15), reported:

In Maine, a refugee from Afghanistan was seen kissing the penis of his baby boy, a traditional expression of love by his father. To his neighbors and the police, it was child abuse, and his son was taken away….

[Some sociologists and anthropologists] argue that American laws and welfare services have often left immigrants terrified of the intrusive power of government. The Afghan father in Maine who lost his son to the social services, backed by a lower court, did not prevail until the matter reached the state Supreme Court, which researched the family's cultural heritage—while making clear that this was an exceptional case.

The same article also focuses on female circumcision, or genital mutilation, as some call it.

"I think we are torn," said Richard A. Shweder, an anthropologist and a leading advocate of the broadest tolerance for cultural differences. "It's a great dilemma right now that's coming up again about how we're going to deal with diversity in the United States and what it means to be an American."

Some, like Mr. Shweder, argue for fundamental changes in American laws, if necessary, to accommodate almost any practice accepted as valid in a radically different society if it can be demonstrated to have some social or cultural good.

The article states that Mr. Shweder and others defend controversial practices including the common African ritual that opponents call female genital mutilation, which usually involves removing the clitoris at minimum … But going more than halfway to tolerate what look like disturbing cultural practices unsettles some historians, aid experts, economists, and others … Urban Jonsson, a Swede who directs the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), said that there is "a global ethical minimum" regarding cultural practices. "There is a non-ethno-centric global ethicality," and that "scholars would be better occupied looking for it rather than denying it…. I'm upset by the anthropological interest in mystifying what we have already demystified. All cultures have their bad and good things."

Now answer the following questions:

1. Focusing on each case presented in this article separately, to what extent is there an ethical component to each?

2. To what extent do you think it is true that any culture has "bad" and "good" practices? Or do you think that all practices within a culture are to be honored?

3. To the extent that an ethical case exists for opposing positions described by this article, what ethical concepts and principles would have to be taken into account when determining the most reasonably defensible position for each?

4. The cases inherent in this article focus on culturally accepted practices that other cultures consider unethical. To what extent do you think each case contains a violation of human rights? Explain your reasoning.

It is important that you develop your ability to determine for yourself whether any belief system, practice, rule, or law is inherently ethical. To be skilled at ethical reasoning means to develop a conscience that is not subservient to unethical laws, or to fluctuating social conventions, or to controversial, theological systems of belief.

But consistently sound ethical reasoning, like consistently sound complex reasoning of every type, presupposes practice in thinking through ethical issues. As you face ethical problems in your life, the challenge will be in applying appropriate ethical principles to those problems. The more often you do so, the better you will become at ethical reasoning.

Understanding Our Native Selfishness

In addition to the above, ethical reasoning requires command over our native tendency to see the world from a self-serving perspective. Chapter 10, on human irrational tendencies, focuses on the problem of human self-centeredness at length. Here we apply some of the major points of that chapter to problems in ethical reasoning.

Humans naturally develop a narrow-minded, self-centered point of view. We feel our own pain; we don't feel the pain of others. We think our own thoughts; we do not think the thoughts of others. And as we age, we do not naturally develop the ability to empathize with others, to consider points of view that conflict with our own. For this reason, we are often unable to reason from a genuinely ethical perspective. Empathy with the thinking of others, then, is not natural to humans. Nevertheless, it is possible to learn to critically think through ethical issues. With the right practice, we can acquire the skill of considering situations from opposing ethical perspectives.

As we have argued in previous chapters, the human tendency to judge the world from a narrow, self-serving perspective is powerful. Humans are typically masterful at self-deception and rationalization. We often maintain beliefs that fly in the face of the evidence right before our eyes and engage in acts that blatantly violate ethical principles. What is more, we feel perfectly justified in doing so.

At the root of every unethical act lies some form and degree of self-delusion. And at the root of every self-delusion lies some flaw in thinking. For instance, Hitler confidently believed he was doing the right thing in carrying out egregious acts against the Jews. His actions were a product of the erroneous beliefs that Jews were inferior to the Aryan race, and that they were the cause of Germany's problems. In ridding Germany of the Jews, he believed himself to be doing what was in the best interest of his Germany. He therefore considered his actions to be completely justified. His unethical ethical reasoning resulted in untold human harm and suffering for millions of people.

To become skilled at ethical reasoning, we must understand that ethical reasoning means doing what is right even in the face of powerful selfish desires. To live an ethical life is to develop command over our native egocentric tendencies. It is not enough to espouse the importance of living an ethical life. It is not enough to be able to do the right thing when we ourselves have nothing to lose. We must be willing to fulfill our ethical obligations at the expense of our selfish desires. Thus, having insight into our irrational drives is essential to living an ethical life.

Test the Idea
Identifying Your Unethical Behavior

Each of us engages in unethical behavior, but few of us recognize that we do. To become highly skilled at ethical reasoning, we must become everyday observers of our own thoughts and actions. Over the next week, closely observe your behavior to "catch" yourself doing something unethical (like being selfish, or hurting someone unjustifiably).

Complete the following statements for five "unethical acts":

1. This situation in which I behaved unethically is as follows…

2. The unethical action I engaged in was…

3. The reason(s) why this act was unethical is/are…

4. The basic right(s) I violated is/are…

5. To avoid behaving unethically in future such situations, I should…

To develop as an ethical reasoner, then, we must deeply internalize the fundamental roots of ethics. This means learning to identify and express ethical concepts and principles accurately. It means learning how to apply these principles to relevant ethical situations and learning to differentiate ethics from other modes of thinking that are traditionally confused with ethics. Finally, it means taking command, with intellectual humility, of one's native egocentrism. Without such an organized, well-integrated, critically based approach to ethics, some counterfeit of ethics, but not ethics itself, is the likely result. To date, all across the world, ethics has routinely been confused with other domains of thinking. The use of ethics and its misuse have been nearly one and the same.

Chapter 13

Analyzing and Evaluating Thinking in Corporate and Organizational Life

Introduction

Living a human life, as we have seen, entails a variety of relationships and membership in a variety of human groups. Both the relationships and the groups to which we belong typically have a profound influence on our thinking, our emotions, and our desires. In Chapter 11, we considered the broadest implications of this fact, especially the implications of sociocentrism, a term that highlights group-dominated thinking in human life. In this chapter, we will focus somewhat more narrowly, on the problem of thinking effectively and working for change in corporate and other organizational structures.

To think effectively in corporate and organizational settings, it is helpful to consider the logic of these structures and explicitly face the questions one should ask when operating within them. The more we understand the logic of our circumstances, the more effectively we can act.

Here is our plan. We will deal with the logic of organizational structures in some detail first, approaching their potential transformation from a number of different standpoints, including that of three predictable obstacles: the struggle for power, group definitions of reality, and bureaucracy. We will also look at the problem of "misleading success" as well as the relation between competition, sound thinking, and success. We will spell out some essential questions each of us should ask when working within a corporate or organizational setting. Following that, toward the end of the chapter, we will analyze six hypothetical cases illustrating some of the ways critical thinking might be applied to decision-making in a corporate or organizational setting. We will close the chapter with a list of conditions essential for

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success in facilitating a culture of critical thinking. The conditions we list suggest ways that an organization or corporation can begin to organize itself for long-range success through the use of critical thinking.

There are a number of factors we must take into account in thinking our way through organizational and corporate structures, factors that interact in different ways in different settings. Often we lack some of the vital facts we need to make sound decisions and must therefore judge in terms of probabilities rather than certainties. Often we cannot answer all the questions we would like to answer. In any case, critical thinking does not guarantee us the truth—rather, it affords us a way to maximize our best chance for it.

Critical Thinking and Incremental Improvement

The success of any organization is largely a function of the quality of the thinking done within it. But success is usually partial rather than complete. Doing one thing well, we may do another thing poorly. Thinking well in one context, we may think poorly in another. We may achieve our goals in the short-run at the expense of achieving them in the long-run. We may succeed simply because we perform at a somewhat higher level than the competition. We rarely have absolute success in human life. The spirit of critical thinking is an organized and disciplined way of achieving continual improvement in thinking and therefore of attaining fuller and more complete success over time. It consists in thinking at progressively higher levels in virtue of a deliberate and practical commitment to quality of thinking.

**Test the Idea
Self-Assessment**

Name one domain or context (for example, the professional domain) in which you believe that you think reasonably well and compare it to another in which you believe your thinking to be of lower quality (for example, in intimate relationships). Explain the "evidence" you have that convinces you of this.

An Obstacle to Critical Thinking Within Organizations: The Covert Struggle for Power

To what extent are organizations and institutions capable of making a commitment to critical thinking? For one, every organization, every institutional structure, consists not only of a multiplicity of individuals, but a hierarchy of power among those individuals. No matter how noble the ultimate goals of an organization are, there is often a struggle for power beneath the surface. In this struggle, the thinking motivating the behavior of individuals may be highly complex as well as obscure. Personal

strategies in use may be tacit, that is, not apparent even to those who are using them. Some strategies in the struggle for power are particularly deceptive.

For example, in a best selling book *The 48 Laws of Power,* Robert Greene (1998) puts into blatant language, 48 strategies that he claims are effectively used by those who seek and gain power. A short sampling of them is revealing:

- "Never outshine the Master."
- "Never put too much trust in Friends; learn how to use enemies."
- "Conceal your intentions."
- "Always say less than necessary."
- "Get others to do the work for you, but always take the credit."
- "Make other people come to you—use bait if necessary."
- "Learn to keep people dependent on you."
- "Use selective honesty and generosity to disarm your victim."
- "When asking for help, appeal to people's self-interest…"
- "Pose as a friend, work as a spy."
- "Crush your enemy totally." (pp. ix–xi)

Greene goes on to argue for a private, though deliberate, commitment to deviousness: "In the world today…it is dangerous to seem too power hungry, to be overt with your power moves. We have to seem fair and decent. So we need to be subtle—congenial yet cunning, democratic yet devious…Everything must appear civilized, decent, democratic, and fair. But if we play by those rules too strictly, if we take them too literally, we are crushed by those around us who are not so foolish." (p. xvii)

He continues: "Power requires the ability to play with appearances. To this end you must learn to wear many masks and keep a bag full of deceptive tricks…Deception is a developed art of civilization and the most potent weapon in the game of power. You cannot succeed at deception unless you take a somewhat distanced approach to yourself—unless you can be many different people, wearing the mask that the day and the moment require…Playing with appearances and mastering arts of deception are among the aesthetic pleasures of life. They are also key components in the acquisition of power." (pp. xx–xxi)

It is our considered view that most of the strategies that Greene recommends are ethically unjustifiable except in rare circumstances and for compelling reasons. We are also dubious as to the extent to which most persons could explicitly adopt those strategies without suffering pangs of conscience. Nevertheless, we recognize that some individuals—those we have called "selfish" or "sophistic" critical thinkers—do act in ways that come close to embodying the kinds of strategies that Greene recommends.

> **Test the Idea**
> **The Game of Power**
>
> To what extent do you agree with Robert Greene's claim "…all of us hunger for power, and almost all of our actions are aimed at it…?" (xix) Think through your view of this idea as well as his view of the implications it has (e.g., that, as a result, it makes sense to engage in this struggle for power aggressively and without pangs of conscience).

We recognize that all humans engage in self-deception and manipulation. There are contradictions and inconsistencies in the behavior of all humans. Therefore, it is wise to develop the ability to detect deviousness and cunning in human behavior. This requires that we learn the art of interpreting intentions not from explicit statements and "public" behavior alone, but from decisions and acts that typically escape notice. We must become students of the human ego and its machinations. We must become keenly aware of the fact that much human motivation is below the level of consciousness. Deciphering the motivations that underlie human behavior and the character of individuals is a challenging activity, yet one in which we must all develop skills if we want to protect ourselves in the real world of manipulation, power struggles, and vested interest.

Within all organizational or institutional structures, the thinking of some is treated as having more force, more authority, than that of others. High position in a hierarchy naturally leads others to yield. What is more, there is an incentive in most stratified groups for those with superior position to hold the view that their thinking is superior to those below them. To some extent this is natural, for if I am superior to you in authority and power and yet admit that your thinking is better than mine, I raise the question as to whether you should have more authority and I less. The more mistakes in thinking I admit to, the less credibility I usually have.

> **Test the Idea**
> **The Game of Power Once More**
>
> Do you see the difference between the view we are expressing about power and that of Greene, or do you think that, when all is said and done, both are more or less the same? (We hold, for example, that you can become effective in protecting yourself in the game of power without adopting unethical strategies in the process. We do not believe that because your opponents are unethical in their attempts to defeat you that you must adopt unethical strategies simply to protect yourself). This, of course, is a dispute very much alive in the real world. For example, it is argued in agencies like the CIA which have used such strategies as assassination and the overthrow of foreign governments (with the plea that these are the lessor evils in the case).

The main point is this: We must learn to take into account the power and position of persons with whom we deal in corporate and other organizational structures. We must be cautious in sharing our private thoughts, especially those that might offend those in power. If our views diverge in any way from the received views, it is prudent to be cautious lest our views be perceived as a personal threat to those in power

Another Obstacle: Group Definitions of Reality

Within all organizations, there is a natural generation of "favorable self-description" or "self-serving representation." This involves an image the organization fosters of itself, both inwardly and outwardly. How explicitly and openly these representations are stated varies from organization to organization, as does the degree of contradiction between presentation and fact. By their very nature groups have a vested interest in presenting the most favorable picture of themselves to those outside. Typically, therefore, a rosier picture than is actually the case is created for external consumption. Even within an organization there are usually some truths that remain unspoken and taboo. Being an "insider" does not mean you can say anything you want to other insiders.

For example, some doctors are aware of more medical malpractice than they are willing to publicly discuss. Lawyers sometimes play down the fact that some lawyers routinely bill clients for more time than they spend on their clients' cases and that judges sometimes decide a case as a result of their personal beliefs and reaction to the appearance and demeanor of the accused, rather than by the relevant facts of the case and the meaning and intent of the law. Sociologists study this phenomenon under the categories of "in-group and out-group" behavior. Social psychologists study it under the category of social self-deception.

Test the Idea
Group Definitions of Reality

When we experience people we do not *first* see the person as a set of independent characteristics and then synthesize the parts into a whole. Rather, we typically see people as "instant" wholes. We interpret the "parts" accordingly. Behind these judgments, that often occur in a fraction of a second, are often an organized set of "definitions" of how things are. Hence, a person in management will often approach a "union" man with as many preconceptions as the union man approaches him. Select some job or professional situation in which you had a role. Review it in your mind and see if you can isolate any of the implicit (biased) "definitions" that guide behavior and perceptions on the job. How were you supposed to behave? How were others supposed to behave? Can you think of any situation in which you "opposed" some definition implicit in the established view of things? Do you remember how that opposition was received?

These realities must be taken into account in seeking to establish a culture of critical thinking within any organization or institution. This does not mean that it is unrealistic to attempt to foster that culture. But it does mean that the advantages of critical thinking may not be apparent to all concerned. In the short run, critical thinking may expose short-comings in the status quo. Those who personally gain from the status quo may be threatened by such an exposure of weaknesses. Individuals may confuse critical thinking with negative thinking or mistakenly assume that critical thinking is equivalent to whatever they personally happen to think. Individuals may also feel personally threatened by discussions that may suggest potential problems associated with them and their work. One must proceed with great caution in these circumstances.

A Third Obstacle: The Problem of Bureaucracy

No matter how successful any organization may be at the present, there is no guarantee of future success. The challenge is to break-through the natural assumption that future success is somehow guaranteed. In companies and organizations transitioning from small to large, for example, one must explicitly face the difficulty of emerging bureaucracy. Bureaucratization is a state in which employees work increasingly by fixed routine rather than through the exercise of intelligent judgment. With bureaucracy, narrowness in thinking emerges. There is a proliferation of hard-and-fast rules and fixed procedures—wrongly thought to contribute to efficiency and quality control. With bureaucracy in place, the original goal of an organization fades into the background. Individuals within the organization begin building small bastions of power and devising ways of warding off any potential threats to their power. Change is usually interpreted as a threat.

The problem of bureaucracy exists in virtually all large organizations—for example, in legal systems that sacrifice justice to power and expediency; in public health systems that poorly serve the health of the citizens; in schools that fail to educate; in governmental structures that serve the vested interests of those in power rather than the public. Large bureaucracies generate a vast network of regulations and tacit "strategies" that define "appropriate" rules of conduct. They stifle creativity and innovation. Important questions are coldly received. Thinking that challenges the status quo is stifled. Innovative thinking is dismissed as irresponsible, absurd, unreasonable, or impractical. Rules and regulations become ends in themselves rather than vehicles for reasonable decisions.

All organizations, even small ones, have a natural tendency toward stagnation. This includes a tendency to lose sight of their original goals, a tendency to begin to serve those who operate it rather than those it purports to serve. But largeness presents special problems. And large organizations that do not have to face any real competition are doubly at risk of becoming bureaucratic. Governmental bureaucracies, for example, are notorious for serving the vested interest of those who

operate them, rather than the interests of those they were originally designed to serve. They typically respond only to public scandal or to the few with the external power to put political pressure on them. Rigidity and a lost sense of mission are their normal state.

Test the Idea
Bureaucratic Thinking

Can you think of any situation in which you experienced problems that resulted from "bureaucratic thinking?" Can you identify how, in this situation, attachment to fixed routine prevented someone from exercising intelligent judgment? Do you see a relationship between a "letter-of-the-law mentality" and bureaucratic thinking? In your experience how widespread is the problem of bureaucratic thinking in your culture?

The Problem of Misleading Success

Poor thinking does not necessarily reveal itself immediately as such. The fact is that even thinking of the most absurd kind may prove successful for a time, if it caters to the egocentrism and prejudices of people and fits into an established logic of power. We can see this clearly in a historical context if we examine some of the Facist thinking which, though deeply flawed, was accepted by highly intelligent people, including leaders of German industry, in the 1930's and 40's.

Winston Churchill (1948) summarizes the thinking of Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*:

> Man is a fighting animal; therefore the nation, being a community of fighters, is a fighting unit. Any living organism which ceases to fight for its existence is doomed to extinction. A country or race which ceases to fight is equally doomed. The fighting capacity of a race depends on its purity. Hence the need for ridding it of foreign defilements. The Jewish race, owing to its universality, is of necessity pacifist and internationalist. Pacifism is the deadliest sin; it means the surrender of the race in the fight for existence. The first duty of every country is therefore to nationalize the masses; intelligence in the case of the individual is not of first importance: will and determination are the prime qualities. The individual who is born to command is more valuable than countless thousands of subordinate natures. Only brute force can ensure the survival of the race; hence the necessity for military forms. The race must fight; a race that rests must rust and perish. Had the German race been united in good time, it would have been already master of the globe. The new Reich must gather within its fold all the scattered German elements in Europe. A race which has suffered defeat can be rescued by restoring its self-confidence. Above all things the Army must be taught to believe in its own invincibility. To restore the German nation, the people must be convinced that the recovery of freedom by force of arms is possible. The aristocratic principle is fundamentally sound. Intellectualism is undesirable. The ultimate aim of education is to produce a German who can be converted with a minimum of training into a soldier…(pp. 55–56)

Despite the absurdity of this thinking, the vast majority of Germans came to accept it, including, we should emphasize, the heads of German industry. German industrial leaders were quite willing to work within the confines of (absurd) Nazi ideology—as long as it brought profits. For almost five years, this thinking seemed to produce economic and military success. German industry thrived. German aggression triumphed. Fascist ideology flourished.

History provides us with many examples of successful, but poor, thinking based on the Immediate-Gain-Above-All-Else mentality—i.e., the plantation system based on slavery; the factory system based on child labor; Stalin's system of forced labor; and more recently, the asbestos industry, the tobacco industry, and the nuclear power industry. More pointedly, of special note are the American Oil industry's success in taking advantage of the monopolistic practices of OPEC to achieve windfall profits or the global emphasis on short-term economic gain over environmental health. Short-term thinking that sacrifices the public good may bring immense short-term profits. The long-term costs of their thinking are enormous, and often go far beyond the strictly economic dimensions of life.

For example, historians generally agree that Hitler could not have succeeded without the support of the heads of industry. The cost of their thinking—along with that of their fellow Germans—included upward of 50,000,000 lives lost and untold human suffering. We should never assume that individuals will automatically think critically, not even people of high position or high intelligence.

The problem of short-term vested interest thinking can be found both on a large scale and in everyday "mundane" business practices. In one case, a United States District Court Judge in Norfolk, Virginia found that the nation's largest income-tax preparation company had engaged in false advertisement in using the phrase "rapid refund" and other terms "deliberately intended to disguise expensive loans that Block arranges for people anticipating refunds on their income taxes." The judge found that Block had gone to great lengths "to conceal the reality that, rather than receiving refunds, clients were taking out high interests loans to obtain their money a few days

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Test the Idea
Short-Term Thinking

Can you think of any situation in which you experienced problems that resulted from "short-term thinking?" Can you identify how, in this situation, attachment to a short-term goal prevented someone from recognizing significant problems for the future? In your experience how widespread is the problem of short-term thinking? Some might argue that short-term thinking, even thinking such as implied in the quote above by the Block company executives, is good business thinking if significant scandal can be avoided.

sooner." He pointed out that in some loans "the annual percentage rate charged was more than 500 percent." He also roundly condemned the company for "signing consent decrees promising not to engage in false advertising," and then after "they consented to one state's order they have simply taken their advertisements to a new jurisdiction and continued to run similarly offensive advertisements." (*New York Times*, Business Day, February 28, 2001)

A key question is how can organizations, both small and large-scale, avoid defective forms of thought, i.e., rigid thinking, short-range thinking, bureaucratic thinking, ideological thinking, or just plain unethical thinking? That is, how can organizations, in the light of predictable obstacles, cultivate critical thinking as an organizational value? How can we, situated as we are, persuade leadership in the organizations in which we live and work that critical thinking is a key to long-range growth and dynamic change fueling that growth? Our answers to these questions will emerge as we synthesize our thinking at the close of this chapter.

We can advance the discussion now by exploring some of the connections between competition, sound thinking, and success.

Competition, Sound Thinking, and Success

Businesses, in contrast to governmental agencies, have the "advantage" of needing to make a profit to survive. Unlike governmental bureaucracies, which become largely a world unto themselves, businesses must continually pass the muster of competition. Only a few, like large oil companies colluding on a world-wide basis to fix prices, are able to force everyone else to conform to their demands. Most businesses face genuine competition they must meet to survive.

For example, out of new (small) businesses, 3 out of 4 fail in the first year; 9 out of 10 over a ten year period. Failure is much more common in business than success. The market is a stern task master. This forces companies to do some critical thinking, at least enough to survive the competition.

Nevertheless, large-scale success in business, even over 20 or 30 years, is no guarantee of success in the future. When businesses become large they become bureaucratized. When they become bureaucratized, they verge toward organizational stagnation. Their thinking is paralyzed by red tape and policies and procedures that prevent growth and adjustment to changing circumstances and realities.

When bureaucratic thinking rules an organization, it tends to lose market strength and growth potential. It's earnings decline; it becomes less competitive, and rigidity becomes the order of the day. Examples include the American auto industry (from 1960-1980), Woolworth, Motown Records, the Sears catalog division, and Rolls-Royce. All significantly declined despite holding a previously strong place in the market. Each lost the spirit of innovation. Sears began to significantly decline when it failed to successfully

participate in the mail-order boom and General Motors when it ignored the small-car revolution until it had lost major market share to Japanese auto makers.

Stagnating Organizations and Industries

In the vast majority of stagnating organizations or industries, thinking is used to justify *not* changing, to defend the status quo, not to transform it. Defective thinking becomes an internal obstruction: justifying a refusal to seriously consider evidence that indicates flaws. Weak earnings, low morale, obsolete product lines, are rationalized. Poor thinking is denied. The evidence that should precipitate a change in thinking is set aside or denied. It is very difficult for a critical thinker to work effectively in an organization trapped in poor thinking. This is one of the many reasons that excellent thinkers tend to gravitate toward organizations which are smaller, less committed to a party line, more open to innovation and new lines of thought.

Poor corporate thinking produces poor policies, rigid bureaucratic procedures, resistance to change, complacency, and internal conflict—though not necessarily all at once, and certainly not all from the beginning. Only when critical thinking is a corporate value will an organization remain dynamic in the long-run. Critical thinking as an organizational value serves as a motivator to routinely "re-think" policies, procedures, and ideas. Change becomes a given, but of course not change for change sake. Rather, change becomes the product of new thinking that has effectively analyzed and assessed more established thinking, retaining what is well-grounded and relevant, replacing what is out of touch or inaccurate. With critical thinking as the instrument, one never jumps off the deep end. One learns to read the relevant evidence from multiple standpoints.

Questioning Organizational Realities

In light of the analysis developed thus far in the chapter, there are a set of fundamental questions we should ask in reflecting on the limiting conditions within which we work:

- To what extent is there a struggle for power underway in the organization?

- To what extent must we deal with "power hungry" individuals?

- What is the hierarchy of power in the organization? To what extent are those at the top easily threatened by thinking that diverges from their own?

- How does the organization present itself both within and without? Are there any important contradictions or inconsistencies between the two? To what extent do inconsistencies exist between how the organization represents itself and how it actually functions?

- To what extent is short-range thinking dominant in the organization?

- To what extent is there a problem of bureaucratic inefficiency within the organization?
- To what extent is there a problematic "ideology" that stands in the way of change?
- To what extent is the organization forced to compete meaningfully with other organizations?
- To what extent is the organization suffering from stagnation?
- To what extent is bad short-term thinking misleading the leadership of the organization?
- To what extent are ethical considerations ignored or denied in favor of vested interest within the organization?

Test the Idea
Dealing with Reality
Think through the questions listed above focusing on the organization for which you work, or on an organization for which you worked in the past.

Now, using the elements of thought, we can refine or follow-up on the background questions we just asked:

- **Purpose**. What is the announced purpose or mission of this organization? To what extent is the announced purpose or mission an accurate characterization of the actual functioning of this organization? What is your personal mission in this organization? How does it relate to the actual functioning of the organization? What is the personal agenda of those immediately above you in the organization? To what extent do those agendas serve the announced purpose of the organization? To what extent is it consistent with your agenda?

- **Problems.** What kinds of problems does the organization have to solve to function effectively? What expertise or special skills do you have with respect to those problems? To what extent can you help the organization solve the problems it has? What are the main problems the organization tends to focus on? To what extent are these problems the most important ones facing the organization?

- **Information**. What kinds of information or factual data does the organization need to function effectively and solve the problems that it exists to solve? What role do you have to play with respect to those information-gathering processes? How skilled are you in analyzing and evaluating information gathered? What information do you need to take into account to understand what is going on in this organization? How much of the information is made explicit? How much of

it is buried behind the scenes? What is the announced distribution of power in the organization? To what extent is the announced distribution of power an accurate characterization of the actual functioning of this organization? What power do you have within the organization? How can you gain more power and influence within it? What important information, if any, is being ignored by those in power? What problems are being ignored or under-estimated?

- **Key Concepts**. What are the key concepts or ideas that underlie the mission or day-to-day activities of the organization? To what extent are there conflicting concepts or ideas vying for the allegiance of members of the organization? How do these ideas relate to those who wield the most power in the organization?

- **Conclusions**. Given the way the organization functions day-to-day, what is the thinking that is driving the organization? What "conclusions" or "solutions" are incorporated in organizational practice?

- **Assumptions**. What are some of the key assumptions that underlie the dominant thinking of the organization? What are the key assumptions underlying your thinking in the organization? Which are most questionable?

- **Implications**. What are the long-term implications of the organization continuing in the direction it is now headed? What are some implications for you if you remain with the organization?

- **Point of View**. What is the dominant point of view in the organization? What other possible ways to look at things ought to be considered? Is leadership open to considering alternative ways of thinking? How does your point of view relate to the dominant organizational viewpoint?

Each of these questions, taken seriously, enables us to think more accurately and realistically about the organization and the role we might seek to play. They enable us to form the big picture, to put things into a larger perspective, to adopt goals and strategies that make sense. They make it possible to protect ourselves.

Test the Idea
Dealing with Reality II

Spend some time pondering the questions in the section you just read. The idea is that the more time we spend analyzing the logic of the organizations within which we work, the better we can function within them (assuming our analysis does not imply we should leave).

Assessing Irrational Thinking in Organizational Life

We all participate in life in a multi-dimensional way. We play many roles. We become involved in many groups, organizations, and institutions. For the most part,

we act in settings in which critical thinking is not a basic value on the part of others. Often, we are dealing with people who are egocentric or irrational in various dimensions of their lives. Often, we are dealing with people who are striving for more power and are willing to sacrifice basic values to their short-term vested interest. Often, we are dealing with people who are easily threatened by thinking that differs from their own or with bureaucracies enveloped in red tape and disfunctional regulations or with people who are significantly self-deceived. Sometimes we are dealing with people who use critical thinking skills to obscure rather than reveal the truth and are principally focused on their own selfish advantage. Sometimes we may find ourselves working within an industry that has a negative effect on the quality of life in the community—e.g., the tobacco industry.

Nevertheless, it is in our long-term interest to develop as thinkers, to apply our best thinking in our lives, and to become lifelong learners. It is in all our interests that critical thinking becomes part of the culture of the organizational structures in society. The question is: "how can we use our thinking to best advantage in settings that often do not reward the best thinking and may at times punish it?"

There is no simple answer to this question. Becoming skilled in analyzing and assessing our personal circumstances in organizational structures takes insight and practice. We must ask the right questions, but we must also discover the essential facts. In the end, our judgments will still often be no more than probabilities. Let us look at some hypothetical cases and consider some elementary thinking about the logic of the decisions they offer. The thinking we propose is merely illustrative. We do not consider it definitive. A great deal would depend on the precise facts of the situation. We present our analysis as merely plausible and reasonable (as far as it goes). You might disagree with us in one or more case. Your analysis might be better than ours—or at least a plausible alternative.

Case # 1: An American Auto Maker Executive or Manager during the 1970s or '80s

You recognize that your company (and other American companies) is losing market share to Japanese automobile manufacturers. This trend is not denied by the company, but is explained as a product of the "fact" that Japanese workers work harder and more efficiently than American workers (with their union protections). Within the received view of management, the solution to the problem is that Japanese imports should be restricted since the competition is "unfair." It seems to you that emerging data gathered from auto plants operated by Japanese companies in America (using American labor) support the conclusion that the problem is not that of American worker laziness but rather of poor (American) management. You recognize that your view will not be well received by upper management and that your future with the company may be jeopardized by pressing this viewpoint. What are your options?

Analysis of Case # 1: The options in a case like this will vary in accordance with the specific facts in the situation and must be determined in context. Some facts may be hard to obtain. For example, it is often difficult to predict what individuals may do in circumstances in which you have not observed them. What is more, how individuals respond is dependent on how they interpret the situation. How they interpret the situation, in turn, depends in part on how the situation is presented to them and what their interests are. You may not be well positioned to make accurate predictions regarding the probable response of a number of people.

Clearly, your overall choice is to stay or go. If you stay, you must decide whether to try to influence present company policy or simply do your best within it. If you decide to influence company policy you must decide how to present your views in the least challenging way, and to whom and under what circumstances. If you decide to go, you must decide your timing and your transition to another job situation. As part of this thinking, you should make sure you are not simply trading one inflexible environment for another.

In addition, your values and needs are crucial. To what extent is it important to you to feel that you are part of a thriving concern? To what extent will you be frustrated if you suppress your actual views and work in a setting in which views that you consider inaccurate are being used as a basis for company decision-making? To what extent can you derive satisfaction simply by doing your job to the best of your ability within the context of decisions you cannot control? To what extent can you indirectly and behind the scenes encourage the company to move in the direction that you consider is important? What are your long-term hopes and plans? What would you like to be doing in five years? In ten years? What does all of this add-up to in your mind?

Case # 2: A Professor Recognizing the Need for Academic Reform

You are a professor with tenure in an academic department at a State University. You observe a number of problems that are not being addressed by the university. You notice that professors are largely assessed in terms of their ability to get along with the other professors in their department, on the one hand, and by their popularity with students, on the other—rather than by their professional standing and actual teaching ability. You recognize that some professors who are poor teachers and questionable scholars are promoted. You recognize that some professors who are excellent teachers and scholars are released. In addition, you discover that many graduating seniors lack fundamental reading, writing, and thinking skills. You recognize also that it is politically dangerous to suggest to faculty committees that there are serious problems of instruction and learning at the university. You also come to recognize, through informal conversations, that the administration is not likely to adopt any policy that will bring it into serious conflict with the faculty.

Analysis of Case # 2. The options in a case of this kind, like case # 1, varies in accordance with the specific facts in the situation and must be determined in context. As in case # 1, some of those facts may be hard to come by. There is always the problem of predicting what particular individuals may do in circumstances in which you have not yet observed them. In this case, the problem is largely political rather than academic. The political problem is one of gaining sufficient support for reform among those who have the power to facilitate it. Clearly, those most threatened by reform will organize to defend their interests, as soon as they see those interests threatened. The political issue becomes one of determining how to motivate those open-minded enough to see the need for reform—while minimally threatening those likely to oppose it. Of course, like most organizational political problems, much of the work must be done behind the scenes rather than openly. Few will openly oppose the idea of more effective assessment of professors or measures designed to produce more effective instruction. Yet within a large organization there are always many ways for those whose interest is in perpetuating the status quo to undermine reform efforts.

One option is to take the long view and work quietly behind the scenes over a number of years. Another option is to concentrate one's efforts on improving one's own scholarship and instruction, ignoring the problems requiring action on the part of others. A third is to become an agent for change in a larger arena, seeking to document problems in a more global way, while studiously avoiding documenting "local" problems. In this latter case, one might write articles or books on the general problems facing universities. A fourth option is to leave academia for industry.

As always, your personal values, preferences, and needs are very important. In which option are you likely to be doing the sorts of things that motivate and fulfil you? Some people seem to thrive in a political environment, others find it distasteful and unrewarding. Some seem able to work well within a system that has significant problems. Others find it difficult to "ignore" or set aside systemic problems while functioning within a system.

Case # 3: Working in a Setting in which There is Significant Personal Conflict

You are working in a setting in which there is a great deal of personal conflict. You find yourself suffering from stress even though you are not a party to the conflict. Each side in the conflict attempts to draw you in on their side.

Analysis of Case # 3. Here are some of the crucial questions: To what extent is the conflict a matter of conflicting personalities or conflicting styles? To what extent are there important issues at the root of the personal conflict? How would you assess the rationality of the conflicting sides? To what extent does the conflict relate to the structure of power and to questions of power? What are the implications of one or the other side winning the struggle? What are the implications for the individuals?

What are the implications for the organization? To what extent can you change your own thinking—the thinking that is leading you to feel stress? To what extent can you focus inward on your immediate job and escape involvement in the conflict? Ideally, what is the best way to resolve the conflict? What are the chances of the "best way" being achieved? Is there anything you can do to facilitate resolution of the conflict?

Case # 4: Working for an Unreasonable Boss

You are working in a setting in which the main person you must answer to is an irrational person, one given to extreme mood swings and to blaming others for his own deficiencies. Though irrational much of the time, he sees himself as a reasonable person who does not suffer fools gladly.

Analysis of Case # 4. Since the person you are working for is significantly irrational, appeal to his reason will be ineffective. Secondly, since he has significantly more power than you have, you have no choice but to pander to his ego and thereby avoid his wrath or to seek other employment or both. If you make the mistake of attempting to show him that he is being irrational, you will regret it, for he will find a way to conceptualize your behavior in a negative way and seek ways to punish you for "misrepresenting" him.

Case # 5: An Unreasonable Employee (with an underdog ego)

You are supervising an employee with an "underdog" ego. He regularly blames himself for mistakes he makes, but does not make any serious improvement. He is always willing to negate himself, but does not seem to be able to make progress. He continually promises to do better, but does not.

Analysis of Case # 5. Since the person working for you has an inferiority complex and lacks insight into his own make-up, appeals to his reason will be ineffective. The best solution will probably be to release him and try to hire a more rational person in his place. If you decide to work with him, you must set a specific time-line with specific expected improvements. You must follow-through on that timeline and on the consequences you establish in the event he does not improve. It is very unlikely that a person who is used to criticize himself as a substitute for changing himself will escape the pattern by himself (unless, in his more rational moments, he recognizes the pattern and is strongly motivated to change).

Case # 6: An Unreasonable Employee (with a dominating ego)

You are supervising an employee with a "top dog" ego who is also a skilled weak-sense critical thinker. She regularly finds ways to blame others for her deficiencies. She has an explanation for every mistake. The problem almost always turns out—when she does not blame it on others—to be a result of her having too little resources or out of date equipment or other circumstances beyond her control. She is very creative in evading personal responsibility for any problem or mistake.

Analysis of Case # 6 . Since the person working for you has a superiority complex and lacks insight into her own make-up, appeals to reason will be ineffective. The best solution will probably be to release her and try to hire a more rational person in her place. If you decide to work with her, you will have a great deal of difficulty because of her skills of rationalization. Since she already thinks of herself as performing at a high level and this conception is an important part of her self-identity, it will be very difficult to get her to take ownership of his deficiencies.

Case #7: A College President Uses College Funds to Support a Project at His Sister's Request

You are an administrator on a college campus reporting to the president. A local public school submits a request to the college for textbook covers. The school asks that the college produce paper covers with the college's logo and information about what the college offers printed on back. In this way, the college is able to market its programs while also providing the school with the covers it needs. As the Vice President of Community Relations, this request comes to your office. At first glance the request seems reasonable. But as you inquire further into the request you find that the person submitting it is the sister of your college president. When you bring the situation to the president for discussion, he says that he knew his sister would be submitting it. Furthermore he says that, since the college will be able to advertise its programs in a relatively inexpensive way by granting the request, he supports it. You mention your concern that it might seem to others that the real reason why the request was granted is because the president is motivated to help a family member. You also tell the president that should other schools make similar requests you will be hard-pressed not to grant them given the fact that you will be doing it for this one school. You add that the college cannot afford to do this for all schools in the large city within which you live. The president says not to worry, that it is unlikely that any other school will make such a request. He also says that he is not granting the request because his sister made it, rather that he thinks it is a good way of marketing the college's programs. He tells you not to get so worked up about things.

Analysis of Case #7: One option is simply to accept the president's reasoning. Because the book covers are going to provide information about the programs offered by the college, you can justify using money from the marketing budget to fund the project. On the other hand, it seems clear that the real reason behind the plan is to use college funds to help the president's sister. Reasoning further with the president seems futile since it seems clear that he is committed to his position. Moreover you know from your past interactions with him that when he has a vested interest in a project he will become disgruntled if you try to convince him that he should consider alternative ways of looking at the situation.

The question you must answer is whether it is in your best interest and in keeping with your values to proceed with the request. You will need to decide whether you are able, in good conscience, to work within the conditions set by the president and

the current power structure. If you leave the college and move to a new college, will you likely find yourself in a similar situation? Since you understand how the "old boy network" operates, could you even get a job at another college or, through his connections, might the president be able to effectively block other opportunities you might have for employment? Do you have other viable career possibilities?

If you decide to tell the president you cannot in clear conscience support the project, what would the likely implications be? Would he find opportunities to "punish" you? Might he, for example, refuse to give you an annual pay increase? Might he see that you do not receive further promotions? Might he find another position for you on campus, one with less responsibility and power so that you cause him fewer problems?

Test the Idea
Analyzing Situations

Generate your own case for analysis. First, describe a problematic situation at work. Then, analyze the situation. What are your options for action?

The Power of Sound Thinking

Any company or industry that makes critical thinking a company-wide or industry-wide value acquires the ability to anticipate and effect constructive change, for only critical thinking can provide the impetus for continual re-thinking and evaluation of all present ideas, policies, and strategies. Without critical thinking built into the culture of an organization, short-range thinking is likely to predominate. Of course, short-range thinking may work for a time. For a time, it may be new. It may represent essential change. But if novel thinking is not eventually subject to critique, to adjustment, to refinement, to transformation, then, sooner or later, it becomes problematic and rigid.

One challenge we face in bringing critical thinking into any organizational structure is that, upon being questioned, most people think they already think critically and therefore that there is nothing significant for them to learn. If you ask all of those present in a room full of people: "Would all those who think uncritically please raise your hand?" you are likely to have no takers. There is a natural illusion fostered by the human mind that leads all of us to think that our own thinking is well-tuned to reality—even when it is not, in fact *especially* when it is not. Only as people begin to develop as thinkers do they commonly recognize that their own thinking is often flawed and in need of transformation.

The result is that any really new corporate leadership must break-through the mundane self-deception characteristic of human thinking itself. It must overcome what might be called "the natural attitude." Hence, corporate leadership based on

critical thinking must not only define a purpose and communicate that purpose, but an intrinsic part of that purpose must be commitment to critical thinking on the job at all levels. It is not enough that an organization have and communicate a purpose, it must be a *well-thought-through purpose.* It is not enough to energize workers, there must be a mechanism in place that helps ensure that the energy is intelligently used and effectively applied. Achieving, for example, a balance between control and empowerment is something that must be carefully thought through, for only *quality of thought and analysis* will generate the right balance.

The same holds for the balance between policy and autonomy. The employees and the managers must exercise judgment regarding both. Poor judgment regarding either will not effect a release from paralysis. By the same token, "listening to employees and customers" should be listening to them *critically.* In short, the notion of dynamic change and growth presupposes that the change and the growth are *the right change* and *the right growth*, and those judgments require nothing less than critical thinking. Unfortunately, *critical thinking cannot be presupposed.* It must be systematically fostered. Once a balance is achieved between policy and autonomy, between control and empowerment, and critical thinking is systematically fostered, it releases the collective energy of all parties in an organization.

When rigid thinking becomes pronounced, and the individuals in an organization no longer feel part of a vital purpose, or connected to the company's activities as a whole, a negative atmosphere emerges. Employees become estranged from the company, though part of it. They may or may not verbalize that estrangement. They will perceive their superiors as irresponsive to them and to their needs. Policies will seem to lack sense or be connected to the facts of their workaday world. They may hide their perceptions, believing that their perceptions would be rejected or ridiculed. Their only connection with their work becomes their paycheck, and perhaps a few friends who share their views.

Some Personal Implications

Use the following list of recommendations to assess your internalization of the main points of this chapter and your willingness to put the ideas into action:

1. Establish the personal habit of routinely evaluating your thinking on the job. This includes answering and up-dating your answers to the following questions: What is your central goal in light of the job you have or role you play on the job? What are the obstacles or difficulties you face in accomplishing your job or fulfilling your role? What are you best at? What evidence do you have to support your conclusions? What do you do least well? What evidence do you have to document your conclusions? What strategies are you using to improve your job performance?

2. Determine your level of power. What power do you have in virtue of your position? What additional power do you have, in comparison to others, in virtue of your willingness to think critically and face unpleasant realities?

3. Determine the level and quality of thinking of those with whom you work. How would you assess the strengths and weaknesses of the thinking of your fellow workers? How does their thinking impact you?

4. Determine the "in-house" definitions of reality. What "party-lines" or "propaganda" are generated on the job which you recognize to be both self-serving and, of course, false? To what extent must you verbally honor that propaganda as a condition of being taken seriously?

5. Assess the level of bureaucratic thinking at your company. This will tie into "in-house" definitions of reality and favored "myths." Remember that bureaucracy is a state in which employees work increasingly by fixed routine rather than through the exercise of intelligent judgment. With bureaucratization, narrowness in thinking emerges. There is a proliferation of hard-and-fast rules and fixed procedures that make change difficult (when not impossible).

6. Assess the level of short-term thinking at your company.

7. Assess the level of stagnation in your company (or in your industry).

8. Assess the level of egocentric thinking among those you work with (this ties in with # 3 in this list).

9. Assess your own involvement, as a thinker, in "in-house" definitions of reality, party-lines, propaganda, as well as in bureaucratic, short-term, and egocentric thinking. Reconcile this analysis with your response to question # 1 in this list.

Conclusion

Membership in human groups is a blessing and a curse. The pressure to conform to the dominant thinking in a group is an inescapable problem. It is hard to improve one's thinking when forced to work with others who routinely assume that their unsound thinking is sound. What is more, we should never forget that within corporate and other organizational structures the full range of human emotions, motivations, and interests play themselves out. The flaws of the group and the flaws of the individuals in the group interact in a multitude of ways. In all of this, there is commonly a struggle for power taking place. Both group self-deception and the negative personal characteristics of the individuals (in the group) have an impact on corporate and organizational life.

To think effectively in corporate and organizational settings, we must understand, therefore, not only the general logic of these structures, but also the specific logic of the particular organizations in which we are living and working. In the privacy of our minds we must learn to ask the right questions. We must focus on essential facts. We must decide on our personal priorities. We must take the long view. We must be

realistic and practical. We must be comfortable with probabilities, and we must be willing to test our ideas and change them in the light of our critically analyzed experience.

If we can successfully persuade organizational leadership to work toward a culture of critical thinking, both we and the organization can benefit in a lifelong way. Here are some important conditions for success:

1. The leadership must consist in essentially rational persons with an abiding recognition that they, and everyone else in the organization, are capable of thinking and performing at a higher level than they are at present.

2. The leadership must be intellectually humble, and hence, recognize mistakes they have made in the past, the limitations of their own present knowledge, and have a desire to grow and develop as thinkers.

3. The leadership must take a long-term view of building a culture of critical thinking within the organization. Short-term thinking must be used only as a stopgap measure and should not be typical of the thinking of the organization.

4. The leadership must be willing to release those persons who will actively resist making critical thinking an essential element in the organization's mission.

5. All key personnel must, over an extended period of time, become proficient in analyzing and evaluating thinking.

6. All key personnel must strive to be explicit as to the thinking (especially the assumptions) they are using in making key decisions. They must also be willing to fair-mindedly consider the pro's and con's of alternative possible decisions.

7. All key personnel must actively invite alternative points of view and strive to incorporate the strengths and insights of those views.

8. The language of critical thinking must be actively adopted as the language in which policies and decisions will be discussed.

9. Critical thinking will be used in the conduct of meetings on all issues. (What is our purpose? What is the key question here? What data do we need to make this decision? Is there another way to interpret these data? What are we taking for granted here? Do we need to question that? What other points of view do we need to consider?).

10. All key personnel and departments will operate with the assumption that whatever we do, and however high our present level of performance, we can perform at a higher level (tomorrow, next week, by mid year).

11. All policies, rules, regulations, and procedures are open to being questioned and replaced by a better policy, rule, regulation, or procedure. No policy, rule, regulation, or procedure will be maintained simply because it is traditional. All will be kept to a minimum. All must effectively serve a clear-cut purpose.

12. All attempts to build domains of power within the organization that do not clearly support the mission of the organization will be resisted.

13. All communications within the organization will be models of clarity, accuracy, brevity, and relevance.

14. All employees will maintain a portfolio of self-assessment, in which personal strengths and weaknesses are documented, as well as strategies adopted to improve one's performance and effectiveness.

15. In hiring personnel, an emphasis should be placed on candidates who are open-minded, willing to consider constructive criticism, and having a low level of ego-involvement in their work and relationships. During the probation period, special steps should be taken to verify these qualities.

Obviously, excellent planning and well-designed staff development in critical thinking could play a significant part in making these policies a practical reality. It is doubtful that significant changes in the thinking of an organization can take place without excellent planning, long-term commitment, and expertise in such a shift. As Stephen Covey (1992) puts it:

> I have long advocated a natural, gradual, day-by-day, step-by-step, sequential approach to personal development. My feeling is that any product or program—whether it deals with losing weight or mastering skills—that promises "quick, free, instant, and easy" results is probably not based on correct principles. (p. 29)

Peter Senge (1990) puts it this way:

> Recognizing that most new ideas in American management get caught up in the dynamics of the fad cycle leads to some sobering questions. What if the time required to understand, apply, and eventually assimilate the new capabilties suggested by a "new idea" is longer than the fad cycle itself? If organizations have an "attention span" of only one or two years (some might say one or two months), is it impossible to learn things that might require five or ten years? (p. x)

In any case, whether an organization is or is not open to significant change, our first responsibility must be to the integrity of our own lives as persons and thinkers. We serve others best by being true to ourselves. We must play the most positive role we can play in any organization of which we are a part, but when rigidity sets in, the most positive role we can play may be to leave and go our separate way.