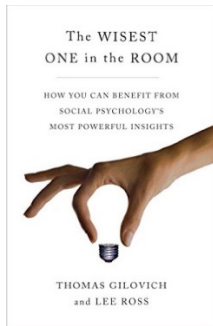


Seeing Beyond Illusion



The Wisest One in the Room: How You Can Benefit from Social Psychology's Most Powerful Insights

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Review by Leland R. Beaumont

Of the many definitions proposed for wisdom, perhaps the most intriguing is “seeing beyond illusion.” When most people are captivated by illusions, the wisest one in the room sees past them and proposes new solutions. The authors draw on recent research in social psychology, judgement, and decision making to help us become wiser. These insights help us see beyond five classes of compelling illusions that often mislead us. The second part of the book applies these wise perspectives to solving several important real-world problems.

These five “pillars of wisdom” are demonstrated with relevant research and clear examples in the first part of the book:

- 1) Illusions of objectivity — *Naïve realism* is the ubiquitous error of mistaking our perception of the world for an objective assessment of the world. Wise people recognize that their take on reality is only their own perception and not an objective assessment of the world as it actually is. This leads to the *false consensus effect*—a tendency to project your preferences onto a majority of people. Wise people recognize that bias affects them as much as it does others because most of the mental processes of perception operate automatically without our awareness. Wise people acknowledge their own perspective is no more valid than another’s.
- 2) The surprising power of subtle situational influence — Organ donation participation rates are close to 100 percent in countries that require people to opt-out and only about 15 percent in opt-in countries. Wise people know it is important to make the path from good intentions to effective action clear and simple. Nudges in the form of helpful options, honesty reminders, and removing obstacles on: retirement plans, saving money, recycling waste, tax filing, healthy eating, and lab experiments greatly influence the participation rates. Wise people understand the power of getting the ball rolling in the right direction. When we ignore situational influences we commit the *fundamental attribution error* and confuse situational influences with personal motivation, values, and character. To avoid confusing the person with the role, wise people withhold judgment until the situation is known.

- 3) The label frames the issue— “The names we give to plans, policies, and proposals determine what associations and images come to mind when we think about them.” In early 2000 the board of Ursinus College put this to the test by raising tuition nearly 20 percent. Applications soared, largely because prospective applicants see tuition costs as a proxy for the prestige of the school. Context, motivation, and timeliness influence the meaning we attach to various ambiguous stimuli. Understanding *negativity dominance* can help us evaluate alternatives framed as losses by considering the corresponding gains; understanding *denominator neglect* can help us fairly compare financial alternatives.
- 4) Beliefs follow from actions—“Once people have acted in a way that seems consistent with a particular belief, they are inclined to endorse that belief.” It can cheer us up to whistle while we work or to manage to smile when we might otherwise be feeling glum. The physical actions of social movements, whether for good or evil, nudge people toward adopting the beliefs of those already moving. “I act; therefore I believe.” Wise people follow their own well-chosen beliefs even if they must oppose the crowd.
- 5) Ideology blinds us to contrary evidence—“The information we can access most readily is often but a small fraction of the information we need, and often a biased sample at that.” Our intuitions automatically access this readily available, but incomplete information, “Many mistakes are made not because the right answer is too hard but because the wrong answer is too easy.” To overcome *confirmation bias*, wise people deliberately seek out evidence that contradicts their intuition.

The second half of the book applies these insights to analyzing and suggesting solutions to four pressing real-world problems. The problems addressed are: 1) What leads to human happiness and well-being? 2) What sustains human conflict? 3) How can at-risk populations be more effectively educated? and 4) What can we do to minimize global warming? These examples demonstrate how overcoming the frailties of ordinary thinking can help us arrive at new solutions to persistent problems.

This well-researched and thoughtfully presented book explores several mind traps that trick every one of us. The authors skillfully illustrate and apply relevant research with accessible examples. Although the book is more nearly an exposition of the research interests of the authors than it is an in-depth and comprehensive exploration of wisdom, it does provide clear guidance that can help any of us move forward on the long path toward wisdom.