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Marvelous Psychology

Review of 'How do we know ourselves? Curiosities and Marvels of the human mind'
by David G. Myers

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(excluding references)

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It has always been enough to be a part of the natural sequence of things. – Delia Owens

David G. Myers is one of the legends of psychology and social psychology in particular. When I arrived at the University of Oregon in 1983 for my graduate studies, Myers's social psychology text was already the authoritative resource for undergraduate instruction. Now co-authored with Jean Twenge, this book has reached its 14th edition. Myers's general psychology textbook, now co-authored with Nathan DeWall, is in its 13th edition. Myers has written other books, notably a text on "Intuition" (Myers, 2002; reviewed in Krueger, 2004), and he has contributed to empirical research, notably studies on group polarization (Myers & Bishop, 1970) and happiness (Myers & Diener, 1995). Who would be better placed to put together a top-forty list of curious and marvelous discoveries of psychological science?

Whence this list of 40 Myers presents in *How do we know ourselves*? Are these truly the 40 most surprising or important discoveries? Is this list a quasi-random or semi-representative sample from a population of discoveries? Are these 40 marvels Myers's personal favorites as they have gelled in his mind over the years? We cannot know, but the gelling hypothesis is plausible, and hence we have a window into Myers's mind.

The book is structured with the top forty falling into three buckets: "Part I: Who am I?" (marvels 1 to 12), "Part II: Who are we?" (marvels 13 to 27), and "Part III: What in the world?" (marvels 28 to 40). This sorting follows the familiar progression from the personal to the interpersonal to the intergroup level of analysis. The contents are mostly social psychological with the occasional nod to the broader discipline. The reader may expect the familiar and time-honored mixed with the more recent and surprising. Some of the usual suspects appear. The overarching theme in Part I is human egotism, but discussions of

various self-related biases such as overconfidence, self-enhancement, confirmation bias, and the hindsight bias are sprinkled throughout the book. These phenomena reveal the ego as a psychological attractor. This is not surprising. After all, we see the world through the lens of our own assumptions and experiences (Alicke, Dunning, & Krueger, 2003). It could not be otherwise.

To Myers, the common denominator of these biases is *pride*, a term he uses in a biblical rather than a psychological sense. The opposite of pride is *humility* (Exline, Campbell, Baumeister, Joiner, & Krueger, 2004), a psychological trait or attitude Myers favors and which he has researched (Van Tongeren & Myers, 2017). Like pride, humility comes with ecclesiastical overtones. The battle between pride and humility in the human soul invokes a familiar imagery of inner conflict and it is laden with moralistic meaning. Surely, we want humility to vanquish pride, and most of us have convinced ourselves that the battle is won, at least in our own psyches. We believe we are humbler than others, which is ironic enough (Epley & Dunning, 2000).

As if to say, "Here is egotism, but it is not your fault," Myers opens up with a review of Pelham's famous demonstrations of self-related associative biases (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). This is lovely research, but it does little to support the narrative of prideful selfishness. Selfishness entails ill-gotten gains, or at least attempts to ill-get such gains. The implicit egotism shown by Pelham and colleagues operates under the utility radar. If Dennis chooses to be a dentist in Delaware, he might be worse off financially than if he practiced law in New York. Implicit egotism does, however, support the narrative of automaticity and general unawareness, a second theme Myers develops. The concept of automaticity comprises classic phenomena such as social facilitation and mere exposure effects.

Furthermore, automaticity is a goal in learning and habit formation, which Myers duly recognizes.

Marvels and curiosities suggesting that humans are unaware of how their psyches work are marvelous and curious because they show us what we could not have gathered from introspection or folk psychology. Equally important, the psychology of automaticity lightens the average person's moral burden that comes with the suite of self-serving biases.

Myers admits that he does not know what to make of egotism. He states that "self-serving bias is social psychology's modern story of pride" (p. 60). Although pride comes before the fall (Proverbs 11:2) and although it "fuels racism, sexism, and [other] chauvinisms" (p. 61), Myers notes that "believing in our relative superiority also emboldens us to venture and potentially succeed" (p. 60), but he provides no supportive evidence. Indeed, the case for this intuitively compelling claim is rather weak (Moore, 2020; reviewed in Krueger & Heck, 2021).

The case for the perilousness of pride was, according to Myers, made by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in a debate with Carl Rogers. Whereas Rogers believed that most people turn out to be decent if we only listen to them attentively and non-judgmentally, Niebuhr's thinking was anchored in the Christian doctrine of original sin. To him, pride – and thus the suite of self-serving biases uncovered by psychologists – is humanity's "fundamental flaw" (p. 61). This is heavy, and it is troubling that Myers views human psychological frailties through a theological lens. He wants to eat his Christian cake and have it too. This is a difficult balancing act. Once Myers has chosen to view psychological phenomena in a theological light, he might wish to see this choice through to its logical conclusion. He

should, in order to remain coherent, also tell a story of redemption in psycho-theological terms.

Some of the marvels and curiosities speak to the redemption issue. There is, of course, humility, which Myers discusses in Part II (“Who are we?”), but this attitude too has a dark side as when people brag in all humility (“What a drag that the archbishop invited me to the reception. I have nothing to wear.”). The research showing that talking to strangers lifts one’s mood is refreshing. Small-talk with a barista will do, but substantive conversations have a more profound impact, an effect not lost on those familiar with certain European conversational norms. Social connection, even on the cheap, contributes to happiness and social harmony. Just don’t humblebrag!

Alas, some of the “Who are we” marvels speak to the psychology of division. Social perception depends on categorization, and invidious intergroup comparisons arise all too easily. The internecine conflict between the Catholic and the Protestant Irish has captivated the imagination of generations. Jonathan Swift (1726/2005), Irish cleric and satirist, anticipated the idea of ingroup favoritism in minimal groups. Myers deflects the religious element of the Irish conflict by quoting a source who told him that Christian belief and church-going were correlated with less militant attitudes.

Myers presents more good news in Part III (“What in the world?”). With regard to intergroup relations, immigration is good in that it creates contact with outgroup members. German and a U.S. American data show strong correlations over regions between the presence of immigrants and the positivity of attitudes toward them. Impressive as this is, one should pause and consider how regional differences in the United States in the strength of anti-black prejudice are related to the proportion of Blacks in the region. As this correlation

appears to be positive (Quillian, 1996), it remains to be explained why this same correlation is negative when it comes to recent immigrants. Myers bets on the so-called contact hypothesis, which raised great hopes in the 1950s, but which was all but pronounced dead in the 1980s (Rothbart & John, 1985). Today, the contact hypothesis enjoys renewed acceptance, in part thanks to tireless efforts of Thomas Pettigrew (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

At the individual level, we learn that walking is good for thinking, and that psychological science has uncovered more simple but surprising techniques to refocus perception to greater hope and robust confidence. Most dramatically, we learn that the fear of death is overblown. There is renewed interest in the question of death experiences patients report who were clinically dead for minutes. One researcher is reportedly planning a study with the intention to show that people can have experiences while their brains are inactive. Myers now sides with the scientists against the theologians and bets against the dualism hypothesis. Experiences had “while dead” are natural phenomena. It is death that has to be redefined (Ayer, 1988ab).

Myers describes research analyzing blog posts of terminally ill patients and the last words of prisoners on death row. A lot of positivity can be found in these records. There are frequent references to “love, meaning, and faith” (170). This is encouraging, but it is well to keep the possibility of sampling bias in mind. The most miserable patients may not have been willing or able to blog, and the most terrified death row inmates may not have spoken about their fears. There is survivor bias before the survivors die.

Before death, there are worries about money. Myers discusses two stylized findings of the social sciences: the claim that the rich are not happier than those who are merely a little better off than average, and the idea that “extreme inequality is toxic” (p. 201). From

these two claims it seems to follow that societies could "increase human flourishing with economic and tax policies that spread wealth" (p. 201). Again, however, we must pause and reconsider. Although the evidence suggests that above an annual household income of about $90,000 further increments have little effect on well-being, there remains a linear association between happiness gains and the logarithm of income (Killingsworth, 2021). As to the desire to reduce inequality, it is well to recall that equality as such is neither a moral value (Frankfurt, 2015) nor do people want it. People want fairness (Starmans, Sheskin, & Bloom, 2017). Having cited the Pope, the psalmist, Paul of Tarsos, and C. S. Lewis (multiple times), Myers leaves the last – rather cryptic – word to Isaiah and then rhetorically asks "what's to be lost by sharing our wealth above the income-happiness satiation point?" (p. 202).

Much as a personal list of psychological favorites is a welcome gift coming from a senior and distinguished surveyor of the field, *How do we know ourselves?* falters in its mission. No overarching narrative emerges from the collection of 40 marvels. The reader aches to know what the process of mental gelling has led Myers himself to conclude. What is the psychological world view emerging from the surveyed work? There does not appear to be one. The prevailing theme is one of morality and theology. Let us be humble and love our neighbors. If this sounds unremarkable and unobjectionable, it is also well to remember that Christian ethics is not self-evident, that it is not universally endorsed (Reginster, 2021; reviewed in Krueger, 2022), and that the case for its toxicity has been argued (Hitchens, 2009). Naturalism (see epigraph) is a more natural ally to psychological science than is, say, Calvinism.

Myers is steadfast. Interestingly – and ironically – it is in chapter 36, on confirmation bias, that he tries to push the round peg of faith into the square hole of science. He relates the

story of Archbishop Temple countering a skeptical student by asserting that “you believe that I believe what I believe because of the way I was brought up, because of the way you were brought up” (p. 192). This sounds nihilistic because it is. Myers again acknowledges the power of confirmation bias only to then seek refuge in the fact that often – perhaps half the time – this bias strengthens beliefs that are true. Indeed, but this line of argument begs the question of whether firmly held beliefs are true.

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