

MINDWISE: WHY WE MISUNDERSTAND WHAT OTHERS THINK, BELIEVE, FEEL, AND WANT BY NICHOLAS EPLEY

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"Insightful and important, *Mindwise* is one of the best
books of this or any other decade."

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Why We Misunderstand
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From Booklist

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Winner of the 2015 Book Prize for the Promotion of Social and Personality Science (Society for Personality and Social Psychology)

Why are we sometimes blind to the minds of others, treating them like objects or animals instead? Why do we talk to our cars, or the stars, as if there is a mind that can hear us? Why do we so routinely believe that others think, feel, and want what we do when, in fact, they do not? And why do we think we understand our spouses, family, and friends so much better than we actually do?

In this illuminating book, leading social psychologist Nicholas Epley introduces us to what scientists have learned about our ability to understand the most complicated puzzle on the planet—other people—and the surprising mistakes we so routinely make. Mindwise will not turn others into open books, but it will give you the wisdom to revolutionize how you think about them—and yourself.

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39 of 41 people found the following review helpful.

Why we are so often wrong about what others think and feel - and how to gain a new perspective

By Kcorn

Why do we so often fail - in spite of our best efforts - to grasp the minds of those we meet? Do we truly know what our spouse thinks about common situations? Can we even vaguely imagine what it feels like to walk in another person's shoes?

According to Nicholas Epley, the answer is often a resounding "No". But he counters this discouraging conclusion with many suggestions, often supported with lively examples, for gaining new insights about what might work better. Reading this well-researched book offers readers the opportunity to foster understanding and closeness, not only with casual acquaintances, but those we think we know - spouses, children, close friends.

I think it is important to note that the book isn't filled with step-by-step directions or techniques for "reading" people's minds. But gaining a new perspective about how others think can be invaluable. A changed outlook may automatically lead to new and better ways of understanding others.

One of the most fascinating parts of the book for me focused on couples, including those married for many years. Most had the illusion that they could easily predict how their spouse would react or feel in a common situation. But when put to the test, Epley proves that they were often way off the mark.

Many people also believe that they can size up another person. So they listen to conversations and form conclusions about what others feel and believe. Or they try to grasp another person's lifestyle and views, yet are baffled when this doesn't foster any real communication.

To improve understanding, Epley suggests we examine our conclusions about other people's thoughts and beliefs. Real examples underline the importance of positive relationships. Slip-ups at work can threaten job security. Regularly missing a spouse's emotional cues can result in frequent hurt feelings. Extreme conflicts can even lead to violence or death.

To support his conclusions, Epley's provides fascinating studies as well as examples from his own life and others. These reveal how often assumptions are wrong. He even brings up critical moments in history. Some were successfully resolved (and Epley explains why). Others led to political crises.

This is not a pop psychology book so don't expect a glib or easy read. Although it has many lively moments, others are more dense. These may take a fair amount of your time and concentration. But this book is so worth the effort, with the potential to foster authentic and accurate understanding of other people. For me, that made it a thoroughly rewarding read.

29 of 32 people found the following review helpful.

Pogo Was Right

By M. Hallisey

When it comes to understanding other folks, we do a fairly good job, but - according to Mr. Epley, author of this book - we botch it up by over-estimating how good we are. We have the correct tools, but we both over-use and under-use them. Epley addresses essential social survival skills (such as dehumanizing, stereotyping, empathizing, inferring, etc.) and attempts to demonstrate that our best intentions generally go awry. In the end, Pogo was right: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

While the title of the book tells us it will address how we understand others, we learn that the first "other" is not someone else but our own self (see page 29 where Epley quotes Jung: "In each of us there is another whom we do not know"). This is an awfully good insight and one that should be remembered while reading the book: we will never be better at reading others while we kid ourselves about our own selves.

So Mr. Epley gives us (or tries to) the tools to make us better mind readers (of our own selves and of others). I'm not sure he makes his stated case. So while this is not a bad book, it certainly does not seem to me to be a great (or even good) book. While there are a number of good/interesting insights, anecdotes, and notes throughout (who would have thought a psychology monograph would cite John Mearsheimer?), I found myself alternately intrigued and bored. The book would catch my attention and within paragraphs lose it. I found it a struggle to stay engaged.

Whether my struggle came as a result of a writing style that just wasn't my cup of tea or a recognition of the trouble the author has integrating philosophy and rhetoric (and what not) into a psychology book I can't say. I can say I loved the extensive notes; I can also say that I wasn't thrilled with an effort that seemed disjointed, disorganized, and ultimately, superficial.

Finally, I must comment on the way the book wrapped up. First, the author's choice of vignette to summarize the book's thesis missed the mark and as such, contributed to an afterword that just fell flat. From an historian's perspective, Epley's view of the Cuban Missile Crisis is woefully under-informed in that he essentially sole-sourced his information and the sole source he used had a political agenda to advance (and thus should be considered biased). But even if the reader is not disappointed with the choice of vignette, I suspect I am not the only person who thought the book just ran out of gas. This was one of the most anti-climatic and disappointing wrap-ups I have ever read.

Summary: 3 stars. Flip a coin: some things grabbed me, some didn't. I am a bit more educated for reading the book, but rue the amount of time spent getting to the last page.

26 of 29 people found the following review helpful.

Misreading the Mind of Others: The Major Source of Wreckage in All Human Relationships

By Thomas M. Loarie

With "Mindwise," Author, Financial Times' "professor to watch," and University of Chicago Booth School of Business' professor of psychology, Nicolas Epley, PhD., brings our "sixth sense" of understanding others out of the shadows into the light of scientific inspection. This "sixth sense," an extraordinary ability to understand what others think, feel, and believe, allows us to connect with others deeply, intimately, and honestly. Unfortunately, this ability can also be the greatest source of misunderstanding, leading to damaged relationships, bitter fights, and even war.

"Mindwise" brings your brain's greatest ability out of the shadows and into the light, showing how, and how well we reason about our thoughts, motives, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of others. Epley's insights,

gained over two decades of scientific inspection, will serve as a guide to show how predictable malfunctions (dehumanization, egocentricity, stereotypes, and misleading information from behaviors) keep us from truly understanding the minds of others and create personal difficulties. With this knowledge as the backdrop, he sets out to show us how our ability to think about the minds of others can improve so we can be wiser in our personal and professional relationships, improving our lives and the lives of those we come into contact with.

"Mindwise" is organized into four parts - (Mis) Reading Minds, Does It Have a Mind?, What State Is Another Mind In?, and "Through the Eyes of Others." Some takeaways include:

- * Reading minds is a sense we use with great overconfidence. We are likely to understand much less about the minds of family members and friends, neighbors, coworkers, and competitors than we guess.
- * We cannot read anyone's mind perfectly. Our mistakes are especially interesting because they are a major source of wreckage in our relationships, careers, and lives, leading to needless conflict.
- * We routinely make mistakes by failing to consider the mind of another and run the risk of treating him or her more like a relatively mindless animal or object. These mistakes are at the heart of dehumanization.
- * Our most common mistakes come from egocentrism, an overreliance on stereotype, and all too easy assumptions we make about others when we match their mind to their actions. six uses and abuses of stereotypes

Epley uses a great metaphor to explain the need for self-correction when we use our "sixth sense" when trying to understand the mind of the other. He notes that however great our greatest abilities are, they far from perfect. Just like vision. While most can see reasonably well, we still need corrective lenses to see clearly. Likewise, while our ability to understand the mind of others is reasonably accurate, it is also home to systemic mistake and needs its own corrective lens to provide clarity.

This is a very thoughtful, provocative, and well written book... a book I would recommend to those seeking improvement in their relational life - stronger friendships, better marriages, etc. Being able to understand others is the grease that allows us to move smoothly through life.

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"Animals and humans think, but only humans can understand what others are thinking. Without this ability, cooperative society is unimaginable. It's a sixth sense, akin to mind reading, writes Epley in this clever psychology primer....Epley ably explores many entertaining and entirely convincing mistakes, so readers will have a thoroughly satisfying experience." —Kirkus Reviews

"This book isn't pop psychology but popularly written, genuine behavioral psychology, based on the findings of carefully constructed experiments. Its subject is the so-called sixth sense, by which humans descry what others feel, think, and know, and which we variously call intuition, sympathy, and mind reading. The experiments Epley describes verify its reality and, more important, that it isn't nearly as reliable as we assume; indeed, it's only modestly better than chance at rightly ascertaining particulars (e.g., opinions, preferences, details), even those of spouses, family members, and bosom friends....Useful!" —Booklist

"Mindwise' is good reading for negotiators, the makers of public policy, heck, for anyone who interacts with other people, and that should be all of us. Mr. Epley is a genial, informative host in this tour of some of the most interesting findings in the social psychology of understanding one another, which he calls "mind-reading." His examples are drawn from the headlines as well as the peer-reviewed literature, and he keeps things going at a quick pace without dumbing-down the science." —David J. Levitin, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Psychologist Nicholas Epley’s *Mindwise* provides a guide to understanding the minds of others. His engrossing book outlines the strategies that we use: projecting from our own minds, using stereotypes, and inferring from others’ actions....Epley is a lucid and magnetic host, and his book...is crammed with evidence-based research.” —Leyla Sanai, *The Independent*

“Nuanced, authoritative and accessible.” —*Nature*

“Since Malcolm Gladwell’s *Tipping Point* and *Freakonomics* there has been a vast output of books on behavioural science. Many have been quite poor—formulaic books supporting obvious conclusions at unnecessary length. *Mindwise* stands out from the crowd. It is surprising, intelligent, and convincing. It continues to make worthwhile points in every chapter (after about chapter two most books of this kind are repeating themselves) and the author tells you things you don't know without straining for effect. You emerge from reading it understanding both yourself and others better, which is not a bad dividend from reading fewer than 200 pages.” —Daniel Finkelstein, *The Times*

“What to expect of a book with such a title? In this neuroscience-obsessed age, the best guess would be an enthusiastic account, illuminated with dramatic, if misleading, colour images of the brain regions that light up when people placed inside an MRI scanner are asked to think about their social relations. Or, by contrast, philosophical reflections on free will, the intentional stance and theories of mind. Refreshingly, however, *Mindwise* is free of such neuro- or philosophical ruminations; it takes for granted that we and our fellow humans have minds, and can exercise free will. Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavioural science at the Chicago Booth business school, by and large takes the internal workings of our brains for granted, and focuses instead on the common – and sometimes uncommon – sense of how we understand our own thoughts and actions, and, above all, read the thoughts and intentions of others.” —Steven Rose, *The Guardian*

“This is a fascinating exploration of what scientists have learned about our ability to understand the most complicated puzzle on the planet—other people—and the surprising mistakes we so routinely make.” —Podacademy.org

“Immensely readable....not only clear but enjoyable as well....a fascinating look at how people understand one another, the obstacles to that understanding, and the ways in which they can hone their natural mind-reading ability. Though it may not be the kind of mind-reading found in science fiction, *Mindwise* gives readers the tools to get one step closer to better grasping the minds around them.” —Amanda Wicks, *Washington Independent Review of Books*

“Epley’s account suggests that unless you genuinely value the perspective of others, and not just those that conform to your own, you are not going to understand them. Really effective smart thinking is not, therefore, just a means to an end: it has to be rooted in what we see as ends in themselves, the values by which we live.” —Julian Baggini, *Financial Times*

“One of the smartest and most entertaining books I have read in years. At a time when there are dozens of popular social science books to choose from, Epley's masterpiece stands out as the cream of the crop.” —Steven D. Levitt, coauthor of *Freakonomics*

“*Mindwise* is a brilliant and beautiful exploration of the mystery of other minds—and how we fail to solve it. Insightful and important, *Mindwise* is one of the best books of this or any other decade.” —Daniel Gilbert, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Stumbling on Happiness*

“What is it like to be someone else? How can we get into other people’s heads? These questions have

challenged the greatest thinkers in Western philosophy, and they obsess every one of us as we try to deal with our family, lovers, friends, enemies, colleagues, and allies. In *Mindwise*, the distinguished social psychologist Nicholas Epley offers a lively and fascinating tour of the latest science on how we figure out (and all too often fail to figure out) what everyone else is thinking.” —Steven Pinker, Johnstone Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *How the Mind Works* and *The Stuff of Thought*

“‘Know thyself,’ commanded the Oracle at Delphi. *Mindwise* shows us why that’s so hard to do, yet so vital as the starting point for understanding others. Epley writes with scientific authority, grace, and deep humanity. You’ll come away from this book understanding the African concept of Ubuntu: A person is a person through other people.” —Jonathan Haidt, NYU Stern School of Business, author of *The Righteous Mind*

“Why are we often so terribly bad at figuring out what other people are thinking? Nicholas Epley is one of the smartest and most creative social psychologists alive, and in his extraordinary new book, he explores the powers and the limits of our capacity for ‘mindreading.’ Epley is a clear and engaging writer, and *Mindwise* is replete with fascinating insights into human nature.” —Paul Bloom, Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor of Psychology, Yale University, author of *Just Babies*

“Too much of life's misery comes from misunderstanding what others are thinking, and from assuming that those we love must know what is (obviously!) on our mind. *Mindwise* is a highly enjoyable and informative book by one of psychology's rising stars that will make you spend less time in pointless arguments and more time in rewarding relationships. Gaining some wisdom about the minds of others will be painless and priceless.” —Richard H. Thaler, Ralph and Dorothy Keller Distinguished Service Professor of Economics and Behavioral Science, Booth School of Business, University of Chicago

“Epley delivers the good news that we all have a sixth sense, an ability to read minds. The bad news is that we are not very good at it...Epley draws on a wealth of empirical social psychological research to help make sense of how humans understand and misunderstand one another.” *Science* (2014 Summer Reading Selection)

About the Author

Nicholas Epley is the John T. Keller Professor of Behavioral Science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. He has written for *The New York Times*, and over 50 articles in two dozen journals in his field. He was named a “professor to watch” by the *Financial Times*, is the winner of the Theoretical Innovation Prize from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and was awarded the Distinguished Scientific Award for Early Career Contribution to Psychology from the American Psychological Association. He lives in Chicago.

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