Selling social psychology to the self help reader: a review of 'The Wisest One in the Room: How You Can benefit from Social Psychology's Most Powerful Insights,' **Thomas Gilovich and Lee Ross, Free Press: New York and London, (2016).**

Review by Richard Harper and Dave Randall, England.

Gilovich and Ross have produced a book which extols the virtue of one of the social sciences. Social psychology, they argue, helps one understand 'the most common and powerful influences on people's behaviour.' (p4). These influences are not, in their view, at all obvious. We are subject to a variety of errors in the ways we think, in how we comprehend and how we judge; all this can significantly affect our decision-making. This might not matter when the decisions are inconsequential, but if they affect our life chances, the relations between Nation States, or the future ecology of the planet they do – all examples from the book. This is, then, not a textbook. Rather, it's a guide to understanding our cognitions and how to make them better – or our use of them better. As they put it, the book is for those who want to be 'the wisest in the room'. Hence, the eponymous title. In short, it is a self-help book for those who want to make better judgements, and want recommendations in this regard. These recommendations do not come from nowhere, but are grounded in science, Gilovich and Ross explain, and as a consequence, if taken heed of, will make decisions better.

With this purpose in mind, the authors make their case through a rather charming admixture of evidence and anecdote. Indeed, their book is to be admired for their enthusiastic tone and evident optimism in regard to what benefits might accrue from a better understanding of our natures. Their overall theme is, as the title suggests, 'wisdom'; the idea that there are intellectual, emotional and social sensibilities that can allow the 'wise' to transcend the biases that can otherwise infect their reasoning. Their opening vignette reports on how two different generals wished their soldiers well on the day before battle in different ways. One gave a final briefing, a recapitulation of what was to be done. The other, apparently, said nothing, simply shaking the hands of those whom he had charged with leading the fight the next day. His silence demonstrated wisdom, whilst the speech of the other general simply showed a kind of 'rational' intelligence. This nicely sets up the purpose of the book, the kind of reader it is appealing to, the problems it will focus on and, in the end, how these insights can be enlisted to solve at least some of the problems we face as individuals and as members of a social world.

The topic of the book, then, is how to make sense of various types of behaviour and how this can be ascertained, measured and understood. In doing so, it aims to distinguish between the ordinary, common sense ways in which human beings conduct their affairs (often, it has to be said, very badly) and scientific insights which may shine more light into what is going on and how to attain sought for ends. Of course, and this is a strong theme in the book, such insights would mean very little if they simply confirmed what we already known in everyday life and so it is stressed that, "some of the most important insights about human behaviour are by no means obvious. This conviction stems from provocative research findings that contradict our everyday assumptions – findings that force us to recalibrate our impressions about what is likely to matter a lot or only a little in determining how people behave …" (p7)

The book is divided into two parts. The first examines accumulated evidence concerning the biases that may underpin our behaviour. These are divided in the following way. Chapter one deals with what they term the 'objectivity illusion': our predilection for believing that our own assumptions must of necessity be better than those of others (except, of course, when they agree with us). There is no doubt that this 'naïve realism', as they term it, does inflect many of our attitudes and assumptions. This has a particular resonance, unsurprisingly, in relation to political matters. It leads disputants to make unwarranted, highly negative inferences about each other's values. In politically charged circumstances, including the current US presidential campaign and tellingly for us, in the UK where a referendum led to the country leaving the European Union, such assertions ring very true. Having said that, it is scarcely surprising given the very charged nature of these sorts of events. Whether or not, and why, 'things matter' is evidently important but it is as yet not fully understood. Consider, why do some people feel so aggrieved at gun control law? And why might the strength of their views deepen after legal changes? While Gilovich and Ross want us to believe it is largely the result of illusions of objectivity, there is doubtless more to it than this. Our view is that, while biases do indeed seem to vary according to how much we care about the result, exactly what it is that we care about, and how deeply, is a cultural and interactional matter and social psychology might not be best equipped to deal with these.

The second chapter is concerned with what Gilovich and Ross term, 'The Push and Pull of Situations'. Much of this relates to what is usually called, 'nudge theory' and is associated with Thaler and Sunstein (2008). Here, as readers will probably know, the basic proposition is that people are eminently persuadable if the persuasion is gentle and enticing as against directive; once this is recognised a 'choice architecture' can be produced that can inform public choices in

more optimal ways. The authors draw on the classic work of Kurt Lewin on 'push' and 'pull' factors to describe the way in which subtle forms of encouragement and the removal of various kinds of obstacle can both work to stimulate certain kinds of choice. They also interpret Milgram's classic studies on authority as having 'slippery slope' ramifications. Put simply, the electric shock experiment can be seen as supporting the view that gradual changes can influence our behaviour in surprising, even frightening ways. Of course, the 'definition of the situation' has been recognised as a critical behavioural determinant since the time of W.I. Thomas at least, but how we might best understand what a 'situation' looks like is a methodological problem, and one we say more about below.

The third chapter has to do with the interpretation of situations. Here, various versions of the Prisoner's Game and its modified versions are used to show how different interpretations of situations produce different responses. One striking result is produced by the simple strategy of changing the name of the game. Thus, calling the game, 'Wall Street', produces quite different outcomes from when the game is called, 'Community', even when the conditions of the game remain unaltered. More generally, Gilovich and Ross explain that this kind of research shows how habit, experience, motivation, and so on, can influence our decision- making processes. There could be no argument about general conclusions of this kind.

Chapter four is concerned with what the authors call 'The Primacy of behaviour'. William James's well-known contention that behaviour dictates emotion rather than vice-versa is the starting point. They then explore how emotional states are weak, ambiguous and uninterpretable, and as such can be subject to social as well as calculative appraisal. If one's emotions seem dissonant with what one understands the situation to be, then one alters how one understands and labels those emotions. Festinger's views about cognitive dissonance and how it is resolved is one of the themes running through this chapter. They present evidence, for instance, that we become more confident that we have made the right choice after the choice has been made – and hence reconstrue what we understood at the time the choice was made, including the emotional aspects of that choice. The example of gun control mentioned above, our own we ought to add, comes to mind. Similarly, our degree of commitment to certain attitudes may sometimes be inversely correlated with material reward that derives after the commitment has been acted upon.

In chapter five the authors discuss the famous 'Linda problem' in order to show that our attention to matters is in large part affected by a range of factors which can influence our own

beliefs, the accuracy with which we judge the conditions affecting ourselves and others (including their and our own beliefs), and so on. They advocate 'widening the keyhole', or finding better ways to examine how we think and act. Again, we can hardly disagree, but this widening may be a matter of more than relying on experimental evidence - it may require some serious cultural analysis. Careful examination of language use may be appropriate, for example.

These five chapters make up the empirical substance of the book, and provide the material for exploring how to be wise or 'wiser' in real situations of choice (rather than in experimental conditions). This makes up the topics of chapters six to nine, the second part.

Chapter six deals with how to be happy. The importance of behaviour as a source of well-being is articulated and here the contrast is being made between the role of ideas and action on one's emotions: roughly speaking, simply labelling some act or circumstance as good does not necessarily lead to hedonic benefit. Acting accordingly does. One becomes happy through doing. They explain there are techniques that can deepen this happiness – making sure that the best part of some experience, a holiday say, comes at the end, is one such. Chapter seven looks at the problem of conflict, and how to shift the registers of understanding that can make one side fail to understand the views of the other. The notion of naïve realism is important here, as well as pragmatic tools that shift what is expected and aimed for in some negotiation. Appropriate negotiative procedures, it seems, matter. Chapter eight explores the problem of parenting, education, and self-attainment. The impact of stereotypes on judgement of others and the self are considered, as are experiments that have sought to alter the orientation that people have to tests. Chapter nine looks at environmental change, focusing on how to circumvent social norms that inhibit such change, and hence more generally the relation between culture, community and individual practice. The authors are sanguine about this, and while doubtful that all the changes the world needs will be achieved, believe that many are possible if the right shifts in attitude and outlook are created. We can but agree. Who could deny that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict turns around differences in worldview? No-one would disagree either that parenting is best when it encourages and rewards hard work and discipline, and when it entails directing children to realistic aspirations. Whether the methods for so doing are at hand is another matter.

We can do no justice in a review to the very wide-ranging themes that the authors of the book address, nor to the often quite nuanced conclusions that they reach. Having said that, it is appropriate to introduce at least a note of caution about some of the results that Gilovich and Ross refer to. We do so not with a view to disputing them on arcane grounds but with a view to

thinking about what the *intended reader* will take away. Though there is some mention of the disputes one finds in social psychology, the difficulty of replicating the results of Rosenthal and Jacobson's studies of school life come to mind, we do think a book of this sort ought to articulate more of the nuances that are characteristic of debates about such things. Questions about appropriate methods in the social sciences are, we think, questions readers ought to have some awareness of.

For example, one reads *The Wisest One in the Room* and would never know that there are methods other than the experimental to understand human endeavour. Indeed, the invocation of experimental data often directs attention away from debates about technique, relevance, scope and so on. This lacuna serves to persuade the reader that the findings can be taken for granted; they are 'proved'. It would be wiser, in our view, to explain to the reader that 'scientific' findings are not always as clear as they sometimes seem, that findings are more often disputed than is apparent here, and alternative ways of understanding the facts in the case are often at hand. To be wise, we suggest, is to know what degrees of certainty might apply to data collection methods, to the choice of one explanation over another, or to the degree to which one can legitimately generalise from one's results.

After all, and as the reader will doubtless have observed themselves, there has been a tendency in some scientific endeavours to cherry pick the data which supports particular conclusions, to rely heavily on methodologies which might be, at least in some respects, be flawed in detail (or even in principle), and to underestimate certain things that are requisite to a particular epistemology, but not always dealt with effectively - the replication problem in experiment is one. This, of course, is scarcely a problem for social psychology alone. For example, recent medical research has been heavily critical of published literature on health outcomes and, notably, on the benefits or otherwise of various drugs, for precisely these reasons. In the context of social or behavioural psychology, meanwhile, Brian Nosek, for instance, has generated some controversy with his meta-studies which purport to show that less than 40% of published studies in the discipline have been replicated (see Gilbert et al, 2016; Anderson et al, 2016, for differing interpretations of these results). Augustine Brannigan (2004), in a book that is cited much less than it deserves, has made similar observations. One particular concern he raises is that social psychologists sometimes use experiments not to uncover evidence but to give scientific gloss to their own moral positions. The method is used as theatre, not as investigative tool. Brannigan, we note, is not against experimentalism at all; on the contrary, he is worried about the somewhat shaky

conceptual foundations of some classic studies in social psychology where that technique is used. None of this is mentioned in *The Wisest One in the Room*.

Our caveats can be seen as introducing a note of scepticism in more than this regard. The authors use a joke from George Carlin about the behaviour of other drivers to make what is a fundamental point about one's everyday perspective on our own rationality. Gilovich and Ross assert, "Since you adjust your speed to what you consider appropriate … anyone driving more slowly must be driving too slowly, and anyone driving faster must be driving too fast" (p15). We feel like saying, 'Well, hardly'. It is a problem with anecdotes of this kind that, while on the surface they are quite convincing, a moment's reflection about how we actually behave makes us reconsider. It is not, in fact, true that we automatically see others as driving too fast or too slow when they behave differently to ourselves. What is true is that when our attention is drawn to driving behaviour that is *very significantly* different from our own, to such a degree that we perceive it as causing problems for our own driving or perhaps where we might draw inferences about what safe driving looks like, then we might start think about others being 'too fast' or 'too slow'. Within those parameters, however, there may be wide margins of normality. After all, one might be overtaken by a car going much faster and not think the driver is bad; one might simply reflect that he or she is in more of a hurry than we are. We may have no deadline to meet and so can drive at my leisure – slower than they.

Such reservations are perhaps most salient in the final chapters of the book where, and as we say, discussion has to do with happiness and well-being, to political resolution, and educational effectiveness. To be clear, it may well turn out over time that some of the corrective policies mentioned in regard which the authors present can be – will be – shown to be effective. But there is a strong vein of liberal paternalism present in *The Wisest*. Distinguishing between what seem optimistic, possibly exaggerated claims and those that seem more rounded is important, and one wonders whether the intended reader will do so. It may be that the reader may be insufficiently cautious. As critics have argued, in response to Sunstein and Thaler 's (2008) research as a case in point, the kinds of paternalism Gilovich and Ross describe may not always be effective and, indeed, may not always be desirable.

Other kinds of problem become apparent when we look at arguments about the distribution of wealth. In chapter six, the claim is made that wealth inequality leads to higher murder rates. A similar position has been advocated by the British sociologists, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010). In a comparative study, they purport to show that inequalities produce a number of undesirable outcomes. While this may indeed be true, critics have pointed out that in the absence of

comparative material which demonstrates precisely how the relevant statistics were collected, and the degree to which they were collected differently in different countries, one cannot be sure about the conclusions they reach. The same holds true here in relation to the hedonic effect. We do not know in any clear way whether well-being is being consistently measured from one sample to another, and from one context to another and hence the relation to economic wealth and dissatisfaction seems tenuous at best. To be fare, Gilovich and Ross allude to these kinds of difficulties in their discussions of this topic. Our point is that they might be even more profound than they imply.

More pertinently, much of what is argued only has the status of a promissory note. An excellent example of this is the approving way in which Dweck's 'mind set' theory of educational progress is discussed. Here, on the basis of some small and limited interventions, a relatively small effect is discovered about children's response to encouragement to hard work (in contrast to assumptions about ability). Gilovich and Ross invite us to imagine how much greater the effects might be with longer exposure to these forms of encouragement. In the absence of any information concerning whether the effects would be linear or not, all we can say is we simply don't know whether this might be true or not. In passing, we should also note that some other studies have failed to replicate the results and it has been suggested that positive effects can only be discerned when Dweck herself conducts the studies. This might be because a range of other factors intervene at various points, factors which are, in effect, 'noise' in experimental conditions.

Our own caution (some may think, scepticism) leads us to the conclusion that their arguments might have been just a bit better if they conveyed rather more of just how contentious research can be. It is, of course, difficult to do in a book which is designed to be positive, and aimed at an audience that might feasibly benefit through a 'light touch'. Even so, arguments about evidence, implications, and conclusions are important. To paraphrase Lev Grossman, the novelist, "If there's a single lesson that life teaches us, it's that wishing [that the world might be better] doesn't make it so." Wishing that social psychological results tell you what you need to know to act wisely seems to be a case in point. Wisdom, one might argue, comes from knowing what the limits of the work might be and why these limits are fought over so vigorously.

Let's look at this more widely. Chapter nine remarks that the single most important aspect of human affairs is that it is social; made up of communities and societies dictating not only what is thought but how things are done. Individual life is situated not merely in some temporal-geographic point; it is embedded in culture. Of course, Gilovich and Ross make this case since this justifies the *social* in their *psychology*. But one must not forget that other disciplines take this,

the *social*, as their fundamental topic, their focus and concern. 'Situatedness', to use an overworked term, is a profound feature of social arrangements. The degree to which competent behaviour in a given context is bounded by that context (one example of such thinking is the 'bounded rationality' hypothesis which is an alternative, unremarked upon, to the 'irrationality' thesis) is a fundamental problem for enquiries in the social sciences. Different disciplines within the social sciences deploy different methods and conceptual foundations to deal with such concerns. They have, also, many different ways of gathering data and developing insight. For some of the social sciences, the experimental method is not their preferred one. They deploy other techniques to gather. Anthropology, for instance, uses ethnography as its *modus operandi*. Why would that be? There is a preference here for good, thorough and contextual description, description from which theoretical argument may or may not be produced. This raises, of course, the vexed question of ecological validity. Pace the postmodernists, we can be reasonably confident that most anthropological descriptions are culturally accurate – they past this ecological measure. Now, going back to the experimental method, when results from such methods are properly derived, correct for the narrow circumstances in which they are arrived at, this does not mean that it is automatically clear what are their wider cultural ramifications. Anthropologists argue that the world of meaning, of cultural understandings, has to be understood by immersing oneself in those meanings; this is the gist of Clifford Geertz's famous book, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). In this view, the trouble with the experimental method strips those meanings out. Another way, perhaps, of saying the same thing is that social scientific enquiries are always concerned with why it is that things may appear similar or different to us (the researcher as well as his/her subjects). There is no simple or singular answer to these issues.

Accordingly, our view is not that one method is wrong and the other right; ethnography and experiment are not being viewed as competitors here. Rather our view is that they are different tools. Their utility is related to their role, to the kinds of data that one starts with, seeks to examine, and which one hopes will produce 'results'. Our view is that part of the problem of being wise has to do with being judicious about just these things - method, technique and the kinds of evidence these produce. One needs to be wise as to how one gathers and uses data, and what one can say on the basis of it. Our perspective is cautious because it is not unusual for the social sciences to extrapolate to highly general conclusions from very limited evidence. This, we admit, holds true for anthropology just as much as social psychology. Recognising the relative pitfalls, as well as the merits, of these respective trades is arguably also where wisdom resides.

So, in sum, what are we saying about Gilovich and Ross's *Wisest in the Room?* In our view, this is a good book, easy to read and pleasing to the inquisitive imagination. If it has any pitfalls, it is rather too positive, too glowing about the science it reports. A little more scepticism would not go amiss. Behaviour really can be enormously complex and difficult, and our understanding of it limited and partial. A book on the subject needs to articulate some of those limitations and explain, if it can, why they exist.

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