

Recenzja

Nicholas Epley

Mindwise. Why we misunderstand what others think, believe, feel and want

Mądrość umysłu. Dlaczego zniekształcamy to, co myślą, czują, w co wierzą i czego chcą inni ludzie

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It is common in psychology, as well as in everyday life, to ask: What do other people think? We seldom analyse if understanding another person is actually possible. That basic question is reconsidered in the book *Mindwise* written by Nicholas Epley and published in 2015 by Vintage Books, New York (first published by Knopf, New York, 2014). The publication contains a brief analysis of over two decades of studies concerning empathy, perspective taking, theories of mind and interpersonal communication. The author refers to the perspective of modern science, and describes how people attribute the conscious mind and hidden motives towards other persons and non-human agents.

Nicholas Epley's scientific experience comprises research on social cognition, the role of subconscious processes in decision making, and common judgements about reality, people and objects. In the last number of years his studies have concentrated on the problem of anthropomorphism and dehumanisation. He is the co-author of a series of studies on anthropomorphism, and of the *Three Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism* (Waytz, Cacioppo & Epley, 2007), which remains one of the most important publications concerning this issue. *Mindwise* synthesises all Epley's scientific experience and shows chapter by chapter how he developed his studies and made

conclusions which inspired him to conduct further investigations. The book shows briefly the researcher's thought process, which is additional value also for the reader who had an opportunity to read Epley's articles before.

The clear structure of *Mindwise* makes its content easy to understand with all the complexity of presented information. The publication consists of an introduction, four parts of the major content: summary, notes containing exhaustive descriptions of presented experiments, and the index of names and concepts. The data presented in the book is carefully selected and illustrated with graphs and charts. It all gives the possibility to study extensively more interesting issues, and at the same time to follow the thought process of the author.

The introduction to the book starts with a statement that everyone is a *mind reader*. Epley emphasizes, however, that our *mind reading* involves a lot of mistakes: we often make wrong assumptions on other people's motives or feelings, and we even misinterpret our own ones. In this way the author refers to the Socrates' thought "I know that I know nothing" and puts this sentence into a psychological context. Coming out from the general assumption that we cannot know what others really think, gives a pretext to discuss a lot of arguments including the results of

psychological experiments and their implications, both surprising and practical. Epley estimates the level of people's ignorance, not the level of their knowledge. Paradoxically it leads the reader to get a kind of consciousness, which makes him able to communicate with others more effectively and know better what can happen in their minds.

In the first part of the book entitled (*Misreading Minds*) the author puts in doubt common beliefs in people's intuitive knowledge about themselves and others. The first chapter presents experiments verifying the truth of common judgements about the characteristics and views of other people. The studies were performed on couples as well as on people who had not known each other before. The conclusions are sophisticated, and sometimes surprising for the reader. The results of presented experiments provoke reflections about how astonishing the human ability to act effectively in reality is, which is in fact a product of pure, and often mistaken suppositions. What is interesting is the fact that an acting person seems to be convinced that the suppositions are true. Epley argues that this delusion of knowledge is more dangerous than actual mistakes people make evaluating others. In the second chapter, the author develops that idea and indicates how mistaken our judgements about ourselves can be. Here Epley starts to play with the reader, making him an object of his experiments. The reader is exposed to optical delusions, and experiences what it is like to overestimate his own possibilities. Then he is confronted with the results of the research on subconscious decision-making, which additionally puts in doubt the adequacy of people's knowledge about themselves.

By putting into question the readers' ability to know what is happening in people's minds, Epley prepares them to notice the relativity of more basic knowledge about the world. *Is that having a mind?* – asks the author in the second part of the book, containing two chapters on dehumanisation and anthropomorphism. Experiments described in this part of the book

investigate the situational and perceptual determinants of these phenomena. Before we interpret mental states of an object we must conclude whether it has a mind at all. Yet Epley proves, that in some circumstances a person can be convinced that another human is actually more similar to an animal or subject, and at the same time that animal or subject can be identified as a human being. The reader gets to know that in a more or less conscious way he shapes his reality on his own by perceiving the things around him in a specific way. Moreover, the realities of different people can vary a lot depending on whom they classify as a human being.

The third part of the book, entitled *What State is Another Mind in?*, describes the efforts people make to understand others. The first chapter remains the wide-ranging analysis of egocentrism in acting and thinking. Anyway, it is difficult to answer how to successfully prevent egocentrism. Epley presents scientific data undermining the myth of perspective taken as a good way to understand others. Then he asks if we can use general knowledge we already have to guess what others think. A brief description of experiments on stereotypic thinking and its influence on action makes us even less certain of being *mindwise*. In this part of the book the reader's sense of ignorance peaks and at the same time he is prepared for new knowledge, which enables him to deal with the problem of misreading minds.

In the fourth part of the book: *How, and How Not, to Be A Better Mind Reader*, Epley describes practical implications of the studies presented before. In contrast to sophisticated research data, solutions of the problem seem to be very simple and applicable. Instead of guessing what others think, the author proposes to ask them about that. However, he underlines the importance of asking in a proper way, referring to the knowledge presented in the theoretical part of the book. Therefore, the solution presented by Epley is more difficult than it should be: we can communicate with others effectively only when we know

exactly in what points we are unconscious about what happens in their minds.

Every piece of information presented in the book is significant from a practical point of view for the researcher as well as for the common reader. The book emphasizes the importance of effective communication, including the knowledge about how to ask others what they are feeling, and how to interpret the answers without (or with fewer) mistakes. Data provided by the book gives the possibility to gain this knowledge and at the same time be conscious that mistakes are always possible.

Although the text is very complex and illustrates scientific data, it has also the characteristics of an essay. Various references, taken from history, literature, and Epley's biography, create a picturesque description which is very absorbing for the reader. The author unveils his subjective perspective: he refers to his life experience, describes his feelings connected with the presented content, his motives and inspirations. It gives a sensation that the book has an absorbing action driven by the following studies, and makes the reader able

to follow more easily the scientific data. That richness and variety of information make the publication unusual in comparison to other scientific texts.

The book describes the contemporary knowledge on the issue thoroughly and exhaustively. Some of the studies described are already well known, but even those gain new value from being presented in a different context than before. Epley looks at the problem deeply, with a fresh approach and reaches significant practical conclusions. Beyond satisfying the need for knowledge of its subject, the book also has a message which can be applied to everyday life. As such, it can be recommended both to researchers investigating the presented issues, and to non-psychologists who want to increase self-awareness and communicate with others more effectively.

Amelia La Torre

References

- Epley N., Waytz A., & Cacioppo J.T. (2007). On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism. *Psychological Review*, 114 (4), s. 864–886.