

WORDS OF PRAISE

Tomasz Witkowski's book is an intense blast aimed at the comfortable notion that culture is about building a shared, truthful vision of the world. It does a great service to those of us who still cling to the hope that truth will win eventually and aspire to move things in that direction.

Prof. Roy Baumeister, Florida State University

Dr Witkowski's highly readable account exposes the reality of much of what we take for granted. While it will interest many, it should be required reading by government officials who develop and fund mental health programs

Marvin Ross, medical writer/publisher

Tomasz Witkowski is a chronicler of the good and bad in psychology. His previous book *Shaping Psychology*, emphasized the good. *Fads, Fakes and Frauds* turns to the dark side, discussing how dogma shaped by past or present authorities is accepted unquestioned by the field, as well as difficulties with replication, and other important issues that psychology is struggling with. The short, beautifully written essays are filled with contemporary examples and contextualized by relevant historical facts. *Fads, Fakes and Frauds* provides an important perspective on the field, and should especially help young psychologists, still untainted by tradition, find their way.

Prof. Joseph LeDoux, New York University

Although I occasionally disagree with Tomasz Witkowski, I whole heartedly embrace his take on psychology. His actions of scientific self-scrutinizing and straight forward skepticism is not only necessary for our field, it's a breath of fresh air.

Teddy Winroth, licensed psychologist and psychotherapist

People want to understand themselves and their purpose. The need for meaning creates opportunity for one's desires or good salesmanship to dominate over the truth. In this provocative book, Tomasz Witkowski illuminates the struggle

between science and pseudoscience, particularly in the search for meaning and well-being. Witkowski leans into challenging topics such as victimhood, suicide, and false accusations with literary force and a clear desire to pursue the evidence wherever it leads.

Prof. Brian A. Nosek, University of Virginia

Reading Witkowski's new book might cause you to doubt your parents, scientists and even yourself. While you may not agree with the author, his views force you to consider the basis of your own views.

Prof. Michael Posner, University of Oregon

If you want to look behind the facade of a seemingly consistent perception of the world then I would like to recommend these 18 excellent essays in this book. The author takes you on an entertaining and exciting journey of critical thinking, highlighting numerous socially relevant issues. A real reading pleasure for open-minded people.

Rouven Schäfer, Board of the German Skeptics Organization (GWUP e.V.)

You might not agree with every example provided by the innovative psychologist Tomasz Witkowski about how falsehoods have invaded our collective consciousness. But you will find his writing lively and provocative. Our widespread tendency to embrace fads, fakes, and frauds, can be damaging to large segments of our society—both those who are directly affected, and their heartbroken loved ones. Hopefully his pleas for more critical thinking will be heeded.

Prof. Elizabeth F. Loftus, University of California, Irvine

One reason NOT to buy this book is that Tomasz Witkowski inevitably challenges readers' own cherished beliefs with his strongly stated alternative opinions. Otherwise, the compelling reason to buy this book is that it provides a competitive advantage in conversations. People who read it carefully, or keep it handy on their desk for consultation, can sound much more intelligent on a variety of topics than people who do not have access to it.

Prof. James Coyne, University of Pennsylvania

An informed and highly readable account, it comes at a time when its message could not be more relevant.

Michael Heap, clinical forensic psychologist in Sheffield, UK

We too readily accept whatever we are taught. Not Tomasz Witkowski! He questions everything and discovers that much of psychology, culture, and even science itself are not supported by credible evidence.

Harriet Hall, MD, The SkepDoc

FADS, FAKES, AND FRAUDS

FADS, FAKES, AND FRAUDS

EXPLODING MYTHS
IN CULTURE, SCIENCE,
AND PSYCHOLOGY

TOMASZ WITKOWSKI

Foreword by Roy Baumeister
Translated by Ken Fleming



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Fads, Fakes, and Frauds: Exploding Myths in Culture, Science, and Psychology

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*The united voice of myriads cannot lend
the smallest foundation to falsehood.*

—Oliver Goldsmith

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FOREWORD

by Roy F. Baumeister

What separates humankind from all the animals? No doubt there are many answers. My own efforts to understand the human essence led me, after a long search, to realize a key point about essential human nature. Although it was shaped by evolution, just like all the other creatures, it was tailored for a very unusual strategy, namely culture. The traits that set us apart from all the other mammals are the result of adaptations to make culture possible. Culture is a way of organizing society, so as to improve the general prospects for survival and reproduction. Indeed, the very word ‘culture’ began with agriculture—farming—which is a method of producing food that is found all over the world among humans but is almost entirely absent in other species. Other animals need food too, but they have never realized that by farming they can produce more food, more reliably, than with other strategies.

If one takes a closer look at the traits that separate humans from other animals, two clusters stand out: communication and cooperation. The august Jonathan Haidt dubbed humankind “the world champions of cooperation,” because we cooperate in more ways and more complex ways, with more different people, than other mammals. (One could make the argument that giant ant colonies are also pretty competent, but their cooperation is hard-wired, unconscious, and relatively inflexible.) Indeed, a market economy is essentially a giant framework for cooperation. The buyer wants to buy and the seller wants to sell, and if they can make the deal at a mutually acceptable price, they are both better off. That’s the essence of cooperation, working together for increased mutual

benefit. Trade is found in all modern cultures and most ancient ones. Yet you will have to look pretty hard to find anything resembling trade in any other species. Money makes trade much easier, which is presumably why all countries in the world today have money, and indeed, when money was invented it spread rapidly from one society to another. No society to my knowledge has ever succeeded in getting rid of money (though the Soviet Union tried, briefly, which was a disaster). But no animals have invented money.

If we are the world champions of cooperation, we are also, probably even more so, champions of communication. Linguists mostly agree that animal communication never reaches the level of having a genuine language. Meanwhile, every known human society has language. Anthropologists love to find exceptions to every general rule, and finding a society without language would be a major career coup for an ambitious anthropologist. But there doesn't seem to be one. Language is thus another of those traits that is central and essential to humankind. It is also a major part of culture. Without language, culture would be primitive.

What's so great about language? It enables us to share information. When a typical non-human animal reaches the end of its life, its brain contains all that it learned during its life. Nearly all of that knowledge comes from direct experience or direct observation of another animal doing something. Contrast that with the knowledge in the typical human brain. Only a tiny proportion comes from direct experience, and another small part from directly observing others. Much of it comes from talking, reading, listening. As an obvious example, most people know basic arithmetic, but hardly anyone worked it out for themselves. Instead, they learned it in school. The knowledge itself was built up over centuries and is efficiently passed on by schools. (Schools, too, are unique to humans, as there is so much information to transmit to new members of society that schools are the most efficient and effective means of doing so.)

So far, so good. I have spent my career as a scientist, cooperating and communicating with others in the joint pursuit of truth.

It is easy to see the value of information such as arithmetic. How to grow crops was of course vital for agriculture.

The problem with all that is that the obvious value of information (and thus of communication) depends on the information being *true*. The value of false information is much harder to appreciate. Indeed, false information can be dangerous. A street vendor who doesn't know enough arithmetic to make cash transactions correctly will soon be out of business.

Of course there are mistakes here and there. But it is comfortable to assume that these isolated errors will soon be corrected, such as by the progress of science. It is a pleasant and appealing vision of the world to assume that culture is about cooperating with other people to build a correct understanding of the world, gradually weeding out the few errors that may have crept in.

All of this brings me to Tomasz Witkowski's book, which you hold in your hands. It is an intense blast aimed at the comfortable notion that culture is about building a shared, truthful vision of the world. Error, bias, and distortion infest all manner of human thought, individually and collectively. Many people prosper in human society, not by advancing the collective understanding of the truth, but by actually promoting and disseminating falsehoods.

Indeed, while reading this rich and entertaining book you are likely to find yourself (as I found myself) laughing, moaning, and shaking your head. Not only is the extent of falsehood in human culture far greater than I, at least, had naively assumed—even faith in progress toward truth will be shaken here. In some respects, such as in his insightful analysis of victimhood culture, falsehood may be on the rise.

It is clear that many societies survive for a long time with false beliefs deeply embedded in the collective consciousness. Religion provides a compelling example. Even if you believe firmly in the truth of one particular religion, it is clear that there are many false religions and have been plenty more in the past. (This is almost guaranteed, because different religions contradict each other.) Yet these false beliefs are shared by large groups, even entire societies,

for a long time. Indeed, sometimes people who question the false beliefs are persecuted or even put to death.

All this calls for a serious reappraisal of the role of truth in human life and society. At very least, the drive to seek the truth often competes with a drive to believe what everyone else in your group believes. But even that's not quite so simple. People don't willingly embrace falsehoods, at least not in most cases. Instead, they accept what everyone else believes as true, and they don't question it.

There are also powerful forces that have an interest in spreading and maintaining falsehoods. When contrary opinions are viciously suppressed, one should generally suspect that some powerful elites are trying to maintain a false view. After all, if you have the truth on your side, you don't need to intimidate or punish people who dissent. You also don't need to stifle research. True theories gain strength from the open competition of ideas and evidence. But the more your preferred view is false, the more dangerous is the free play of ideas, and the more risk there is that open-minded inquiry will reveal your falsehood. This principle seems to be disappearing from modern American society and even from social science, where the suppression of dissent has now become entrenched in many places.

By providing so many lively and fascinating instances of cultural falsehoods, Witkowski's book does a great service to those of us who still cling to the hope that truth will win eventually and aspire to move things in that direction. The path ahead to the eventual triumph of truth is at best very long, at worst hopelessly blocked. And apart from concern about society, the book is informative and entertaining. I wish you a pleasant albeit sobering read!

Roy F. Baumeister

Bremen, Germany, May 2022

INTRODUCTION

In Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, a vain ruler employs two tailors to sew some new clothes, although in fact they are sophisticated frauds. They promise not only garments with unusual colors and patterns, but also having a peculiar quality—they will be invisible to all who are unworthy of holding office or ... are simply stupid. The emperor found this last quality particularly attractive, because this way he would be able to meet both stupid and wise people. However, this temptation leads both the ruler and his courtiers—and the whole population—into a trap with no way out. Everybody, including the emperor, not wanting to be foolish or unworthy of their office, pretends to see the robes and their splendor. Until, during a solemn procession, a small child rips apart the veil of illusion, shouting the startling words: "Look, he is naked!" A scandal erupts. A scandal involving everyone.

Andersen caricatured the mechanism of creating an illusion of the existing order. Similar illusions fill our space—not only in everyday social life and culture, but also in science, medicine and psychology. Except that it is rare to find someone who shouts: "The emperor is naked!" And even if such a daredevil appears, they are quickly called "crazy", or even regarded as suffering from mental illness, because everyone else can obviously see the splendor of the emperor's robes. The increasing pace of life and the increasing flow of information favor our succumbing to illusions, prompting us to act and make decisions based on commonly accepted assumptions and values, to turn on the autopilot, and simply accept existing axioms. This is an effective strategy for surviving

the flood of information, but it does not always bring beneficial results. Tolerance, which is an extremely precious and unquestionable value, imperceptibly turns into indifference towards people who do evil. Such a cherished openness to discussion and various points of view becomes an obstacle in unambiguous situations requiring decisive action. Former moral signposts, in collision with developing biotechnology and genetics, turn out to be useless. Although effective in the times when we roamed the savannah, following authority is no longer enough within the walls of universities, leading science astray, and the biblical command to subdue oneself led to the sixth great extinction of species in the history of the earth; and all indications are that it will not avoid the species which has taken the proud name of *Homo sapiens*. The twenty-first century requires all of us to think critically and independently, on a scale unprecedented in the history of mankind. Unfortunately, neither the modern education system nor the media provide us with the tools for critical thinking which were developed over two thousand years ago by representatives of the Greek school of philosophy known as skepticism. Improved by the next generations of philosophers, these tools allow us to look under the veneer of reality, and verify the axioms adopted by our culture.

This book contains a series of essays devoted to particular methods of critical thinking, being examples of their use in the process of deconstructing certain concepts. In my essays, I examine the scenery which surrounds us, and although the observations presented in the book reflect my own views, they have been well-documented by many sources and research results, which are often a starting point for general consideration. Some of the texts contained in the book first appeared in original—often more modest—versions, in such media as *Areo Magazine*, *Quillette*, *Merion West*, *Culturico*, or *Science-Based Medicine*. Some appear in print for the first time.

The volume consists of five parts, the first of which, “Under the Veneer of Reality”, opens with an essay devoted to critical thinking,

and in particular to ways of countering the simplifications and distortions often used in contemporary discussions. Subsequent essays deal with the perspective from which we evaluate history, and the errors which appear when we try to apply it to our contemporary reality; naturalistic error and Hume's guillotine in our daily life choices; and the evolutionary origins of the victim culture and the consequences of its rapid development.

In the second part, entitled "On the Edge of Life and Death", some of the most serious social issues are discussed, such as suicide and how to prevent it, as well as the cultural factors which determine the acceptance of suicide. The last extensive essay in this part is devoted to the principle of presumed innocence as the basis of the rule of law, and cultural tendencies to break it.

The third part, entitled "Behind the Altar of Science", shows the role of authority in science, and the mistakes we make when following them. Next, the consequences of the deference which today we have in ambiguous judgments have been analyzed. This part ends with an essay devoted to *subtractive epistemology*—an extremely important and rare approach, not only in cluttered science, but also in life, medicine and art.

Part four, "Under the Scenery of Pop-psychology", shows the different faces of loneliness, the problem of free will and the so-called embodied cognition, and the little-known negative effects of auto-suggestion, known as the *nocebo effect*. The last essay is devoted to some of the distortions perpetuated by prominent psychologists—particularly relating to the relationship between our behavior and personality traits and health, in particular susceptibility to cancer.

The fifth and final part contains essays showing the consequences of the developing therapeutic culture. They include the rapid development of various therapeutic schools of unverifiable effectiveness and harmfulness, its economic aspects, and in particular the growing ethical problems of psychotherapy.

Although the essays are thematically arranged in various parts, they are nevertheless written in such a way that each of them is

a separate entity, and can be read in any order, independent of the others.

Looking under carpets, behind picture frames, unpacking beautifully wrapped concepts, scraping the layer of frosting from saints—all are invariably accompanied by curiosity and excitement. I am counting on the fact that this volume provides readers with both of them, and also encourages them to investigate more, and peep into the scenery in which we live.

PART I

UNDER THE VENEER OF REALITY

*Reality is that which, when you stop
believing in it, doesn't go away.*

—Philip K. Dick

1

BEWARE FALSE HUMANISTS¹

I cannot find a single discovery in the history of science that has been made by following the conviction that everybody is different. This invariably leads to helplessness and powerlessness.

I have yet to meet anybody with three feet. Nor have I been successful in meeting someone with more than five fingers on each hand. I have also noticed that all the people I have observed during mealtime take the food into their mouth and do not attempt to suck it up through their nose. With boring regularity, most people—apart from those who are injured—have two eyes and two ears. They excrete in the same way and speak in the same manner. Even if they speak in a completely different language, they use verbs and nouns and similar sentence constructions. Nor have I ever met a person whom I might suspect of not being a human being but, rather, a representative of some other species, no matter how far neglected that person is. And yet almost daily I come across people who, with complete confidence, emphasize that “Everybody is different!” I call those claiming this “false humanists.”

Are they perhaps thinking about such details as the length of both feet, or the color of a pair of eyes always fixed immutably on each side of one (and only one) nose, albeit sometimes bigger or smaller, flatter or bonier? I do not think so. I believe that such statements are formulated for a variety of reasons. One of them is thoughtlessness, which is not worth bothering with. Another

might be the defense of a person's individuality. However, it is a poor individuality that can only be expressed through otherness. Another reason for expressing this "insightful" truth may possibly lie in a need to negate the precepts that allow us to understand the functioning of the human being.

Profitable dissimilarity

But who possibly needs this? This is irrelevant, but only at first glance. Let us take a look at what happened to the representatives of those professions that agreed with the statement that everybody is very similar to each other, and even if they differ, it is still possible to place them in a few groups to which they roughly fit. Shoemakers were replaced by shoe factories making shoes that fit the majority of feet. Those who order bespoke shoes do it rather from a need to be different, rather than being induced by their own otherness. Similarly, the defining of a few typical body shapes eliminated the once-ubiquitous master tailor. Even dentists, saving us from excruciating pain and its concomitant afflictions, do not take advantage of the otherness of teeth, but carry out their repetitive work in accordance with their position as highly-paid craftsmen. Indeed, even the surgeon—slicing with great confidence through our abdominal coating—derives that confidence from the deep conviction that underneath he will find a person's stomach in the same place as it was in all his previous patients, and the same goes for the appendix, liver, and spleen.

There are those among us, however, who are faithful to the ideals of humanism, and above whom a standard with the motto "Everybody is different!" boldly flutters. One such battalion arose during the 1940s, when the psychologist Theodore Sarbin, in his Ph.D. thesis² and later in a series of articles, showed the superiority of statistical (actuarial) methods over critical analysis of cases in predicting human behavior.³ He showed—more or less—that comparing precisely defined factors gained from research (with

results in tables summarizing the collected data) gives a more accurate diagnosis than those obtained by clinicians. And this is true also in many other fields other than clinical psychology. Paul Meehl, the then-very young future president of the American Psychological Association, became interested. He frequently raised the topic in his series of lectures, which were later transcribed and published in 1954 in the form of a modest monograph.⁴ This small booklet proved to be a can of gasoline poured onto the embers kindled ten years earlier by Sarbin. It fueled a discussion which still rages.

Since Sarbin's initial research, the accuracy of diagnoses based on statistical data (currently with the aid of computers and artificial intelligence) has outdistanced all diagnoses presented by specialists, and its dominance is systematically increasing.⁵ Despite this, adherents of traditional clinical diagnosis are still in an overwhelming majority, and do not count on a modern, swift, and accurate diagnosis with the help of artificial intelligence algorithms. Why? Because everybody is different, and no machine can replace the unique human experience! Thanks to this conviction, one in five medical patients have a completely false diagnosis, 66% have a diagnosis requiring significant reformulation, and initial diagnosis is confirmed in only 12% of patients.⁶ Inaccurate diagnosis leads to mistaken medication, which accounts for about 250,000 extra deaths in the United States annually.⁷ An even larger problem is the false diagnosis of mental health problems. A 2009 meta-analysis of fifty thousand patients published in *The Lancet* found that general practitioners correctly identified depression among patients in only 47.3% of cases.⁸

In praise of art

However, even though the problem of iatrogenesis in medicine can be researched fairly systematically (just a superficial search among the literature reveals a whole range of books and

monographs on the subject), only a few articles can be found relating to psychotherapy, and most of these are theoretical. I have not found one book devoted entirely to the iatrogenic effects of psychotherapy, and individual articles are mostly theoretical. For this reason, psychotherapy is probably a backwoods in which the conviction that everybody is different rules. Many psychotherapists go beyond this simple assertion, stating that because everybody is different, psychotherapy is an art and not a science. If they were to pass this statement through the filter of critical thinking, they would have to consider its consequences. In psychotherapy, as in art, are there no limits other than the creator's imagination? Can they, like artists, provoke and even shock? When learning their profession, do they leave a trail of shattered sculptures and worthless canvasses? Do they, like artists, enjoy unhampered freedom? It seems, however, that instead of critical analysis, they find the glitter of the word "art" sufficient, especially when placed next to the less inspiring word "science," and they care less about the consequences of such comparison.

Psychotherapists have invented more than six hundred different therapeutic approaches (or schools).⁹ None of them are even able to remember all of their names, let alone acquire any knowledge regarding them and be able to assess their usefulness. It is beyond anyone's capacity, and yet they are continually developing new ones. It is a herculean task, because by assuming that everybody is different, six hundred approaches do not count for much when compared to the number of patients seeking therapy.

The reasons for maintaining the conviction that everybody is different which I have outlined here are nevertheless basically interesting, even if the matter is not fully understood by using them. Most often we accept this kind of conviction with the ethos of our profession, and, as long as we do not subject it to conscious deconstruction, its significance can remain hidden. Another situation in which people very often reach for the "false humanist" formulation is in discussions about suggested public policies, or methods of operating in society (or within a profession).

In the service of one's own right

Let us imagine a hypothetical situation. In the course of a conversation about the best methods of (let us say) improving teaching results, a first person, "Andrew," states: "The XYZ approach in education gives the best results. Statistically, most students improved their results by at least 20% in a short space of time." Without thinking too long, a second person, "Brian," ripostes: "Perhaps, but we should remember that every student is different and has different needs, and we cannot thoughtlessly apply one approach to all."

After this somewhat tasteless exchange of views, in which Brian brought nothing new to the conversation, he nevertheless gains a psychological advantage over Andrew, who tries to stuff everybody into the same drawer. The understanding and tolerant Brian has perceived and recognized the diversity of students. His approach is "humanistic," in opposition to the mechanical approach of Andrew, who has reduced everybody to statistics and numbers. Witnesses of such a discussion might misinterpret Brian's false humanism as real care, even if, in reality, Andrew proposed a solution that offered 20% better results, while Brian ridiculed it and offered nothing in exchange.

False humanists are able to negate policy proposals, suggested treatment methods, therapies, ways of conducting negotiations, approaches to motivating workers, rehabilitation techniques—and hundreds of other more or less effective solutions. The basis for the false humanists' dismissals is that such proposals and suggestions apply to more than a single person. Perhaps this is why some false humanists repeat so often that they have "no knowledge of mathematics."

I know of only one human achievement resulting from the conviction that everybody is different. And that is tolerance. At the same time, I cannot find a single discovery in the history of science that has been made by following the conviction that everybody is different. This invariably leads to helplessness and powerlessness, because—just as we cannot produce several billion different pairs