
Drawing upon some of the best thinking in the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, economics, evolutionary psychology, politics, and social psychology, Baumeister develops an extended, 450-page argument that humans are unique in their ability to use language and derive meaning from words. Though this idea is not new, his approach to examining research findings is different and challenging.

This book might make an excellent text for a senior-level capstone course or an interdisciplinary honors course in which the goal is to address fundamental questions about
human nature. The author is not shy about taking reasoned and reasonable positions on such issues as the degree to which human behavior is rational, whether there is free will, and what distinguishes humans from other animals. Baumeister writes well, has a wry sense of humor, provides intellectually stimulating discussions of important and interesting psychological questions, and presents a well-conceived framework for use in interpreting many psychological findings.

This book is definitely not light reading. The elaborate extended arguments are exceedingly well documented and copiously footnoted at the end of each chapter (the chapter on thinking has 165 footnotes). As a textbook, this work would have benefited from shorter chapters or better summaries at the end of each chapter.

In Chapter 1, Baumeister presents the central ideas and overarching themes of the book. He argues that nature (evolution) has designed humans for participation in a cultural society. He distinguishes among three environments—physical, social, and cultural—and emphasizes that it is the cultural environment that is most unique to, and most developed by, humans. According to Baumeister, culture is an information-based system, the foundation of which is language and the shared meanings that allow people to live together and satisfy their needs. Cultural animals differ from social animals in the plasticity of their emotional systems, their duplex processing systems, and their use of language and meaning systems that include rules, roles, and division of labor. As cultural animals, humans believe they have free will, can defer gratification, and do not live only in the present. In the course of evolution, humans have gained conscious controlled processes (which create a perception of causality), self-regulation, and lifelong behavioral plasticity.

In Chapter 2, Baumeister further elaborates on the differences between mere social animals and the more evolved cultural animals, between physical and social causality and between conscious and automatic processes. An important theme consistently expressed throughout the book is that human thought, languages, and gender differences are far more similar cross-culturally than they are different.

In Chapters 3–7, Baumeister uses his theoretical perspective to examine fundamental research findings and theories about wanting (motivation), thinking, feeling, acting, and interacting. The chapters read like first-person extended arguments, which they are, and many readers may find the length of the chapters (up to 75 pages) and the breadth of coverage daunting. Moreover, there is considerable duplication across chapters that could have been eliminated without sacrificing the arguments.

Nonetheless, my margin notes in the review copy of this book are full of admiration (“clever,” “nice simile,” “creative,” “nice analogy,” “brilliant”). Though I might quibble with the looseness in usage of some words (psyche = mind?), the wealth of ideas presented and the framework for synthesis offered are deserving of the highest praise.

This is an important book that should have broad appeal to those who are interested in grappling with a creative synthesis of findings in psychology. It offers a fascinating and
logically compelling point of view on the root causes of human behavior and the relationship between our behavior and that of other animals.