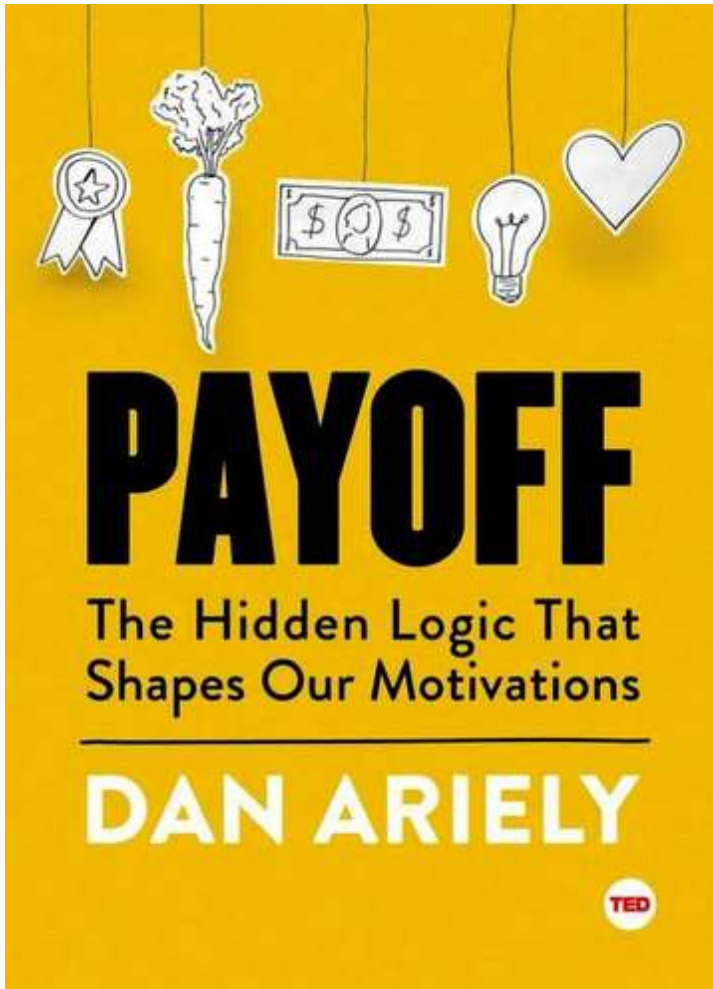


## ‘Payoff’ delivers enlightenment in various areas

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*“Payoff: The Hidden Logic That Shapes Our Motivations” by Dan Ariely. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016, 128 pages, \$16.99.*



“This book explores the jungle of motivation’s true nature, as well as our blindness to its strangeness and complexity,” Dan Ariely explains near the beginning of “Payoff: The Hidden Logic That Shapes Our Motivations,” his delightful treatise on why we do the things we do – and feel the way we feel. “Rather than seeing motivation as a simple, rat-seeking-reward equation, my hope is to shed some light on the beautiful, deeply human and psychologically complex world.”

“Motivation is a forest full of twisting trees, unexplored rivers, threatening insects, weird plants and colorful birds,” he continues. “This forest has many elements that we think matter a lot, but in fact don’t. Even more, it’s full of unusual details that we either ignore completely or don’t think matter, but that turn out to be particularly important.”

“Payoff,” which consists of an introduction, four relatively-straightforward chapters and an epilogue, is written in a conversational style that relies extensively on anecdotes. My first acquaintance with the author was through his TED Talk, “Beware Conflicts of Interest,” which I used in my graduate

research methods class in 2011. A master storyteller, the way Ariely approaches the written word closely mirrors the way he speaks – comfortable and almost seductive. By the time I finished this delightful primer, I felt like I knew Ariely personally; such is the power of his prose to communicate on multiple levels.

Ariely is the James B. Duke Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics at Duke University, where he founded and currently directs the Center for Advanced Hindsight. He has a Bachelor of Arts in psychology from Tel Aviv University, as well as a M.A. and a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His articles have appeared in The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Business 2.0, Scientific American and Science. His work has also been featured on a variety of media outlets, including CNN. His previous books include “Predictably Irrational, Revised and Expanded Edition: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions,” “The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves,”

“The Upside of Irrationality: The Unexpected Benefits of Defying Logic” and “Behavioral Economics Saved My Dog: Life Advice for the Imperfect Human.”

One feature about “Payoff” that I found particularly appealing involves the way Ariely seamlessly integrates interesting vignettes that serve to bring his ideas and concepts to life in a very visceral way with rigorous academic research studies that serve to provide a solid empirical framework for his primary thesis. These two components perfectly complement each other throughout the narrative and help maintain the reader’s attention as he labors through the deceptively-intricate labyrinth that characterizes human motivation. For instance, consider the following marriage of theory to application the author captures in “Money is from Mars, Pizza is from Venus and Compliments Are from Jupiter,” the third chapter and one that hit really close to home with me:

“In a fascinating set of studies, Kaitlin Woolley and Ayelet Fishbach (both at the University of Chicago) measured the importance of intrinsic factors (the degree to which we are engaged in a task for its pure enjoyment) and the importance of extrinsic factors (how much we get paid). In short, their findings suggest that, when we are in the midst of a task, we focus on the inherent joy of the task, but when we think about the same task in advance, we overfocus on the extrinsic motivators, such as payment and bonuses. This is why we are not good predictors of what will motivate us and what will crush our motivation. This inability to intuit what will make us happy at work is sad. If you are a new college graduate considering your options, you might go for the high-paying job at a bank instead of pursuing your dream career as a jazz musician. Certainly, you will be able to afford more stuff and a nicer apartment if you take the bank job, but as you mull over these two options, are you overestimating the extrinsic motivators and underestimating the intrinsic joy of work?”

Ariely has hit upon the central dilemma facing many of the college students I see on a daily basis. The all-too-human conflict between doing what you want to do and doing what you think you need to do is probably as old as human civilization itself. I believe it has taken on renewed relevance, however, in light of a fundamental shift in the nature of work we have been experiencing as the inevitable consequence of the unprecedented influence of globalization, technology and diversity on our core societal institutions. Even those from the lowest economic classes have access to more creature comforts than any generation in history, yet we somehow seem less satisfied with our lives than our ancestors were only a few decades ago. Why did my grandparents often reminisce about the Great Depression as the “happiest” time of their lives in some respects? They didn’t have many material possessions – we have all heard the stories – but they, along with most of the people they knew during those trying times, seemed much more at peace than the generations that followed them a few short years later. Ariely helped me to understand the dynamics at play here better than any of my previous attempts to get my head around how Granny and Granddad could possibly have recalled the experiences of their youth in such a decidedly optimistic manner.

As you may have surmised, I found “Payoff” to be enlightening in a variety of different respects. Ariely is one of those rare thinkers who coaxes you out of your comfort zone and gets you to question primary assumptions about what you really want out of life; i.e., what it genuinely takes to make (and keep) you happy. So if you want some additional insight into what makes you – and the people you encounter on a daily basis – want to get out of bed in the morning and continue the quest for ultimate meaning, you might want to pick up a copy.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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