

Just say, for the sake of something to do to pass the time on a drowsy July Sunday why don't I ask you to rate yourself, compared to everybody else, for, I don't know, intelligence? Where would you put yourself on that distribution? Donald Trump supporter, below average, average, above average, pretty damned smart, or who are you - lesser mortal? Let's make it easier and pretend, just in case you might be tempted to excessive modesty or indeed compulsive boastfulness, that you can write your response on a piece of paper and then I'll eat it before anyone has the chance to read it. What would you put?

Well, although yes, you are all individuals, chances are, that if you're like everybody else (and most of us are), you would almost certainly put 'above average'. Maybe not by much, but still, just slightly better than everybody else. And what do you know, this little rule of social psychology follows for pretty much anything else you may be asked to rate yourself on: most famously how good a driver you are, but also how attractive you are, how well off you are, how cultured, how tasteful, how caring, how kind or compassionate etc. You name it: you're above average.

If you ask each of a domestic couple what their percentage share of the housework is and then add up the totals, regardless of the gender mix of that couple, or the modernity of their household arrangements, the total of housework the couple perform will, without fail come to more than 100 per cent, which means either a really fabulously clean house, or that at least one of the pair- most likely both- are overestimating.

We all do it, which, with delicious irony, makes us all pretty much average, standard human beings, and mediocly bad mathematicians, as hopefully, you will have worked out that, mathematically, it is just not possible for everybody to be above average - only an absolute maximum of half of us could possibly be, on a perfect bell-shaped distribution.

Even factoring in the sobering wake-up&smell-the-coffee effects of various life lessons in the schools of hard knocks we almost always over-estimate ourselves in comparison with others.

OK, you might say, that's because we don't really understand things like averages and percentages- you think you do, but it's a bit more complicated than that. Statistical illiteracy is certainly widespread- a glance at almost any article in the Daily Mail with

numbers in it will tell you that- but even if we snip out the digits the phenomenon is still there.

Let me demonstrate without going near a mean, a mode or a median. Drum roll please.

I am big boned, you are fat

I have a sluggish metabolism; you're greedy.

I'm mature, you're old.

I'm young, you're immature.

I'm being tactful, you're a liar.

And here's particular persistent one: I am hardworking; you are lucky.

Study after study has shown that when we have succeeded in life, we relentlessly overestimate the effects of our own talents and hard work in that success, and downplay the role of luck. Those who are rich, for example, usually consider that they are so endowed because of all the hard work they've put in, from those early days hawking their wares on the East end market stall, to the last few years distilling the tears of the downtrodden exploited working poor- it's their own talent and graft that's filled their bank account, rather than the reality, which is, they have been in the right place, with a passable idea, at the right time. Some musicians and actors hit the big time: others, equally, sometimes more talented don't: it's not always talent that guarantees you a place at the top of the charts. All I need say here is Cliff Richard, QED.

Fame is fickle, our place in life is a lot more about random luck than we ever like to think, hard work doesn't guarantee success and talent more often than not goes completely unrewarded and unnoticed. We'd like to think we got where we are today because of our innate qualities, charms and talents, but alas, no.

Now the more religious minded- and you never know, there may even be some here now- might say, well that's certainly true, but there is a way that it's not all entirely random: it just looks that way, but actually God is rewarding those who have worked hard at their religion, those who have used their talents for doing good, he has blessed those who have feared and loved Him, read their Bible, gone to Mass and not done that which we ought not to have done and that's why I'm living a good life. Might look like it's luck, but it's actually payback for all that hard Sunday graft, self-interested self-denial and precocious praying. After all, if you open a Bible at random,

you'll almost always land in the book of Proverbs, and what does it say there, but 'The Lord loves those who love the Lord.'

Playing the open the Bible at random game you're unlikely , just by the law of averages to land in the book of Joshua which is a fortunate thing as its a darker and more atavistic place. Apart from being stuffed to the gunnels with barely pronounceable Hebrew place names Joshua is violent, vindictive and repulsive as only the Old Testament can be, as it tells the tale of Israel's invasion and ethnic cleansing of the land of Canaan. It's grim, and the grimmest thing about all that smiting and conquering, quashing and destroying, is that it is entirely gratuitous, because even before Israel had crossed the Jordan, while they were waiting in the wilderness, trapped in the book of Deuteronomy, God tells them:

*"I have promised you this land, a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant"*

And there it is. Israel gets to live in a land of milk and honey that it hasn't made, eating the fat of someone else's land, live the *dolce vita* out of sheer luck, getting all the good things in life not because of its own hard work, not because of its intrinsic talents or worth, not- definitely not, let us be absolutely clear about this- because they're a particularly religious, God-fearing all-praying sabbath-keeping son-circumcising bacon-eschewing gay-hating crew. They get all this stuff they haven't had to work for because it's God's to give. They possess the land because it belongs to God, and so do they.

And so to the point of this peroration. Everything in this world, everything that we think has value, everything we think gives value to ourselves, everything we strive for, work for, yearn for, beg, borrow and steal for, everything belongs to God. If we have more, sometimes that's because we have taken more, we have compared ourselves with God's other children and decided we've worked harder, we have more merit, we deserve more. We haven't and we don't. Othertimes though, it's pretty much as though God's gifts are being given in an entirely random way. Be sure, if that is the case, he's taking great interest in how the recipients respond.

In the world we make, some have less and some have more; the reality is not one of actually has anything. Nothing from our own hands: everything is on loan from God.

No rates of interest, no payback, no terms and conditions apply but one, the one thing God wants in return: our love.