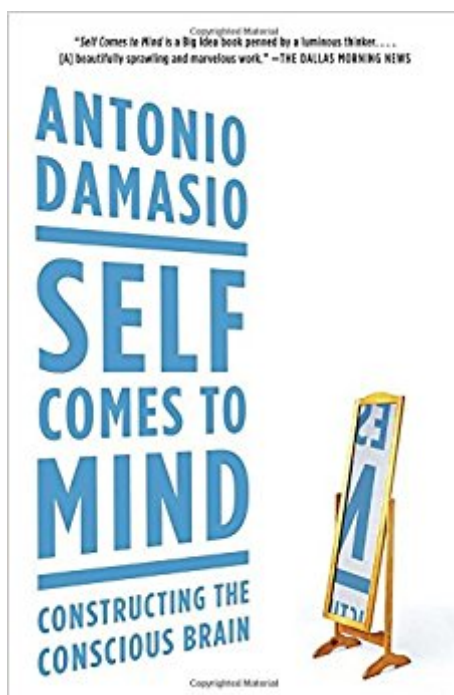


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Self Comes To Mind: Constructing The Conscious Brain



Synopsis

A leading neuroscientist explores with authority, with imagination, and with unparalleled mastery how the brain constructs the mind and how the brain makes that mind conscious. António Damasio has spent the past thirty years researching and revealing how the brain works. Here, in his most ambitious and stunning work yet, he rejects the long-standing idea that consciousness is somehow separate from the body, and presents compelling new scientific evidence that posits an evolutionary perspective. His view entails a radical change in the way the history of the conscious mind is viewed and told, suggesting that the brain's development of a human self is a challenge to nature's indifference. This development helps to open the way for the appearance of culture, perhaps one of our most defining characteristics as thinking and self-aware beings.

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Customer Reviews

As he has done previously, USC neuroscientist Damasio (*Descartes' Error*) explores the process that leads to consciousness. And as he has also done previously, he alternates between some exquisite passages that represent the best popular science has to offer and some technical verbiage that few will be able to follow. He draws meaningful distinctions among points on the continuum from brain to mind, consciousness to self, constantly attempting to understand the evolutionary reasons why each arose and attempting to tie each to an underlying physical reality. Damasio goes to great lengths to explain that many species, such as social insects, have minds, but humans are distinguished by the "autobiographical self," which adds flexibility and creativity, and

has led to the development of culture, a "radical novelty" in natural history. Damasio ends with a speculative chapter on the evolutionary process by which mind developed and then gave rise to self. In the Pleistocene, he suggests, humans developed emotive responses to shapes and sounds that helped lead to the development of the arts. Readers fascinated from both a philosophical and scientific perspective with the question of the relationships among brain, mind, and self will be rewarded for making the effort to follow Damasio's arguments. (Nov.) (c) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

"Self Comes to Mind is a Big Idea book penned by a luminous thinker. . . . [A] beautifully sprawling and marvelous work." • "The Dallas Morning News" • "Will give pleasure to anyone interested in original thinking about the brain. . . . Breathtakingly original." • "Financial Times" • "Damasio introduces some novel ideas. . . . Intriguing." • "New Scientist" • "Adventurous, courageous, and intelligent. Antonio Damasio is one of the leading workers in the field of consciousness research. . . . I have great admiration for this book and its author." • "John Searle, The New York Review of Books" • "Damasio's most ambitious work yet. . . . A lucid and important work." • "Wired.com" • "A very interesting book . . . cogent, painstaking, imaginative, knowledgeable, honest, and persuasive . . . Damasio's quest is both thorough and comprehensive." • "New York Journal of Books" • "Damasio's continental European training sensitizes him to the reductionist traps that ensnare so many of his colleagues. His is the only one of the many consciousness books weighing down my shelves that feels it necessary to mention Freud's . . . use of the term unconscious." • "The Guardian (Book of the Week)" • "A delight. You will embark on an intellectual journey well worth the effort." • "The Wilson Quarterly" • "Readers of [Damasio's] earlier books will encounter again the clarity and the richness of a scientific theory nourished by the practice of the neurologist." • "L'Humanité" (France) • "Some scientific heavyweights have dared approach consciousness. Among them, Antonio Damasio has the immense advantage of a dual knowledge of the human brain, as scientist and clinician. In Self Comes to Mind he gives us a fascinating window of this interface between the brain and the world, which is grounded in our own body." • "Le Figaro (France)" • "The marvel of reading Damasio's book is to be convinced one can follow the brain at work as it makes the private reality that is the deepest self." • "V. S. Naipaul, Nobel laureate and author of A Bend in the River" • "Damasio makes a grand transition from higher-brain views of emotions to deeply evolutionary, lower-brain contributions to emotional, sensory, and

homeostatic experiences. He affirms that the roots of consciousness are affective and shared by our fellow animals. Damasio's creative vision leads relentlessly toward a natural understanding of the very font of being. "Jaak Panksepp, author of *Affective Neuroscience* and Baily Endowed Chair for Animal Well-Being Science, Washington State University, was totally captivated by *Self Comes to Mind*. Damasio presents his seminal discoveries in the field of neuroscience in the broader contexts of evolutionary biology and cultural development. This trailblazing book gives us a new way of thinking about ourselves, our history, and the importance of culture in shaping our common future." Yo-Yo Ma

This outstanding book lights a lamp on the mind and consciousness. It is a milestone not a finish line. Antonio Damasio writes with a wonderful clarity that cuts through technical neuroscience to make it readily available to a broad swath of readers. For readers with rusty knowledge of neuroanatomy, open the appendix first.

I am excited to hear the advances in neuroscience which Damasio is leading, and helping us to understand. Brain stem foundations of a sense of self? Identified Convergence-Divergence Zones (neural net intersects) and PMC's ? Balancing the major sources of neuroscience knowledge (lesion, neuroimaging, neuron activity, magnetic) with the fourth correlate of optimal survival at primal levels--one of his many brilliant moves during his career. The same technique should be usable with additional criteria. The self experience as--(1) primordial, (2) core and (3) autobiographical--is pure explanatory power, since it allows for the embodied self experience, the customary self experience, and the self experience we become to ourselves and others (autobiographical/narrative)--all foundational to reality--with implicated underlying neuroanatomical processes: brain stem, thalamus, cerebral cortex, respectively. I loved hearing this neuroscientist give his account of witnessing a Pelican diving into the water: all explained by underlying neuroanatomical processes. Damasio, as a neuroscientist, has neuroanatomical maps that the rest of us do not see. That makes it very tempting for him to believe that what he "sees" automatically is truth. Damasio has a long history of fighting against the cognitive bent of both neuroscience and philosophy. He has provided cogent research on the foundation of emotions in neuroscience, which is still an uphill battle. He fought against philosophers who would reduce the human to Cartesian dualism. Congratulations to him for fighting the good fight, against the grain. And yet he finds himself ironically being critiqued for making the cognitive error of mistaking his scientific observations for philosophical truth, the circular reasoning of assuming consciousness to explain consciousness, call it what you will: [...] (See John

Searle, New York Review of Books, 2011) To clear it up, I have an idea of how to approach eliminating the problem for the reader: (1) If you think of having a text replace function, and go through his book and do the following: replace "image" with map (or schema), replace "self" with "self experience," and replace "consciousness" with "experience of consciousness," you will eliminate the problem of word choice. However, you can take the words out of the argument, but you can't take the argument out of the words. (2) Watch out for the ideological/metaphysical argument. He is arguing for "consciousness" as a construct (as a "thing-in-itself"), and for "self" as an agent of consciousness, and as "consciousness" as an increased level of species development. That is when the philosophers and all of us general readers start reacting/disorienting, and feel confused because he has gone off the road. You can tell when he is in the ditch: when he starts claiming that he is not Cartesian, because he is arguing for the existence of consciousness, that "image" is not about a false Cartesian correspondence theory between what we see and what is there, etc.. This false idealism is not only disorienting to critics and us, but also to his ability to simply put his brilliant science out there and let it speak for itself: Just let our sense of self be the product of the consciousness processes outlined. (3) Enjoy this otherwise brilliant life-work. (4) *Networks of the Brain* by Olaf Sporns helps to found brain mapping in a more coherent and emergent context so that the philosophical pitfalls of Damasio's approach are avoided. PS: You can skip the last chapter. His attempts to apply his theory to real life problems seem painfully naive: "cognitive unconscious" regarding ethics (yikes)? A neurobiological basis for writing just laws for society? etc.

Consciousness is a mysterious topic that very few authors have been able to discuss or explain in a clear and convincing way. Damasio has analyzed the subject to a depth that relates neuroscience to psychology and everyday experience. My own field is artificial intelligence, and I have been reading theories of consciousness from every branch of cognitive science. Damasio presents the first convincing theory I have seen. Unfortunately, the subject is difficult to present clearly for casual readers and accurately for experts. I give the author 4 stars for trying, but I'd give him 5 stars if he had included more diagrams and a more detailed appendix as a tutorial. He does include a few diagrams, but he should have included some that show every brain region he mentions in the text. As I was reading the book, I kept a textbook on the anatomy of the brain nearby so that I could look up the regions he mentioned. In general, I would consider this book required reading for students and experts in any branch of cognitive science that addresses phenomena and mechanisms related to consciousness. The footnotes contain copious references and occasional insights that clarify

issues discussed in the text. One footnote, for example, mentions the effects of propofol on the brain and explains why it was so powerful and dangerous for Michael Jackson.

Antonio Damasio turns conventional theory upside down. Rather than wrestling with a cumbersome model that starts with the cerebral cortex and goes top-down, Damasio explains the origins of consciousness from the bottom-up. Our brains become self-aware through a constant feedback loop of interoceptive, proprioceptive, and exteroceptive systems that effervesce upwards from the upper brainstem. This process creates the protagonist we call the self. Reading this book one begins to understand that Rene Descartes was only half right. It is more accurate to say "I feel and think therefore I am."

I think, Antonio Damasio is one of the most influential thinkers in the last 30 years. No one, not even Ramachandran, has EVER articulated human consciousness better than he did in this book. This is his best book. Real thinking, not summarizing or chatting. If you want to read neuroscience entertainment / anecdotes, then Oliver Sacks is for you. If you want real thinking, this book is for you. I think this is a landmark book for consciousness.

Antonio Damasio writes his fourth book about brains, especially human ones. With a lifetime of very extensive medical (he's a doctor) and research (he heads a research group at a California university) documentation stuffed back into his head, he takes a deep breath and exhales the guts of that information (and it IS the latest, being written in 2010 as I recall) to the common man rather than to fellow specialists. Yes, he gets detailed on the brain anatomy stuff. But isn't that too what one of us who wants to understand himself or herself is interested in? I sense here the balancing influence of his wife and fellow researcher, Hanna Damasio. Takes care to credit fellow researchers. And to respectfully even directly disagree with them. This adds to our suspicion that he's very basically interested in the truth. Nice updating from his previous also very excellent three books.

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