

## Re: Antonio Damacio

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James Landle wrote:

> *Hi,*

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> *Is Antonio Damacio's theories well accepted in the neuroscience*  
> *community. This is regards to his books "The Feeling of What Happens"*  
> *and "Looking for Spinoza: Joy and Sorrow in the brain". The former*  
> *focuses on how the brain produces consciousness, the latter on how*  
> *feelings arise.*

>

> *James*

I've read *The Feeling of What Happens*, and in it Damasio posits that feelings are the root of consciousness — that consciousness is in fact a feeling — "a feeling of what happens." In order to make this case, Damasio naturally discusses how feelings arise, but that's not the actual point of the book, as I read it.

Does it make sense? As a Just So story, it makes more sense than a lot of others, since he essentially posits that feelings are a feedback system to enable the organism to monitor its internal states, its physiology, its physical integrity, the attitude of its body, etc, and so can adapt its behaviour to and as a consequence of those states. Thus far, his ideas seem reasonable to me — an organism must be able to respond to injuries, its mechanical behaviours (such as walking) are impossible without feedback systems, and so on. Damasio goes a step further, and claims that consciousness appears to be a monitoring of the monitoring, at which point I'm not convinced — not because this is a crazy idea, but because the evidence to support it seems to me flimsy. But maybe it's merely incomplete.

But without a deal more evidence, both at the level of gross behaviour and at the level of neural functioning, Damasio's ideas remain at best a plausible speculation. There will be those who think that "plausible" is too strong a word. :-) In the meantime, Damasio's ideas do suggest testable questions, eg, it implies that pain, for example, should appear as a gamut ranging from the simple tropisms of single-cell creatures to the attempts at self-regulation (ie, dampening of pain responses) in more complex creatures, to expression of awareness of pain in creatures

such as ourselves and our nearer relatives. At all levels, simpler pain responses are included. Up to a point, this seems to be the case, but things such as learned responses ("Ouch!" is a learned response) muddy the issue. Humans and other creatures can learn to delay or suppress the behaviour we take as signs of pain, for example. In such cases, can one say that the subject "feels" pain? IOW, there are unexamined assumptions in Damasio's use of "feeling", not least being the one that an external observer can be pretty sure that a subject is feeling something.

Damasio bases his speculations on the cases he encountered in his career as a neurologist, and to that extent they are grounded in fact. But many speculations are possible when one encounters a case. I myself have always been perturbed when in the company of stroke victims who can no longer speak. In one such case, I got the distinct impression that comprehension was occurring, but that my friend could not respond appropriately, which caused him rather more frustration than it caused me — and I found it almost unbearable. It's not at all pleasant to contemplate what his subjective experience might have been.

His case is also IMO a major corrective to those who would dismiss behaviour as being somehow no more than external, and not in any way of the essence of what we call a person. As you may guess, I disagree — we are our behaviour, at all levels and in all ways. Impair that behaviour through stroke, and the person is diminished. It's not "just his behaviour" that is impaired.

BTW, it's the gamut in the expression of pain (which Damasio appears to take for granted, and not just for pain) that causes a lot of obscure and confused talk about pain. What's true of a tropism isn't true of an expression of awareness, etc.