

## 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

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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