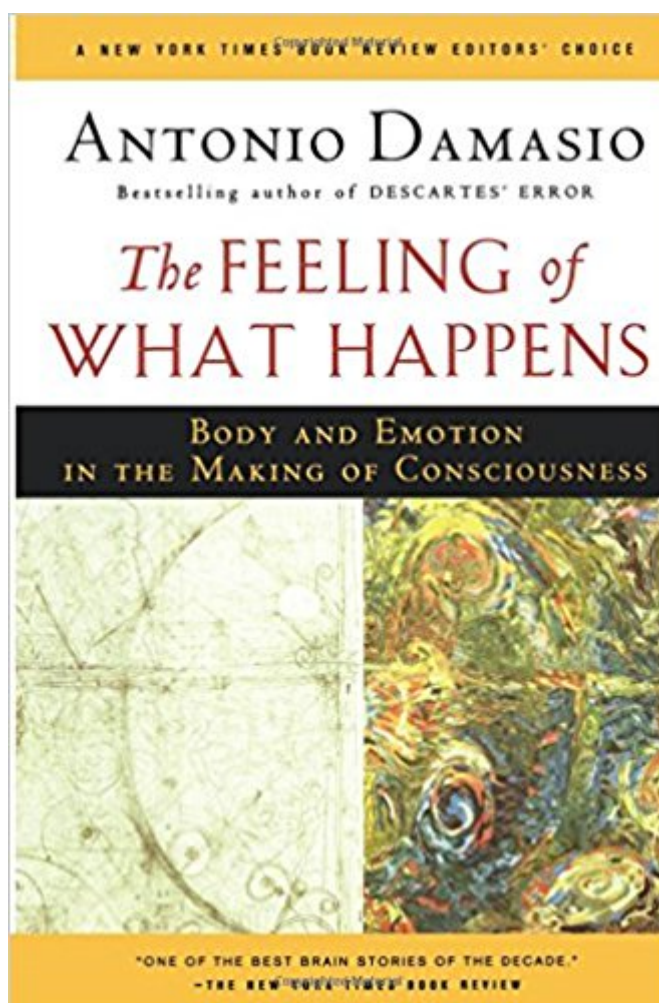


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# The Feeling Of What Happens: Body And Emotion In The Making Of Consciousness



## Synopsis

The publication of this book is an event in the making. All over the world scientists, psychologists, and philosophers are waiting to read Antonio Damasio's new theory of the nature of consciousness and the construction of the self. A renowned and revered scientist and clinician, Damasio has spent decades following amnesiacs down hospital corridors, waiting for comatose patients to awaken, and devising ingenious research using PET scans to piece together the great puzzle of consciousness. In his bestselling *Descartes' Error*, Damasio revealed the critical importance of emotion in the making of reason. Building on this foundation, he now shows how consciousness is created. Consciousness is the feeling of what happens—our mind noticing the body's reaction to the world and responding to that experience. Without our bodies there can be no consciousness, which is at heart a mechanism for survival that engages body, emotion, and mind in the glorious spiral of human life. A hymn to the possibilities of human existence, a magnificent work of ingenious science, a gorgeously written book, *The Feeling of What Happens* is already being hailed as a classic.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As you read this, at some level you're aware that you're reading, thanks to a standard human feature commonly referred to as consciousness. What is it—a spiritual phenomenon, an evolutionary tool, a neurological side effect? The best scientists love to tackle big, meaningful questions like this, and neuroscientist Antonio Damasio jumps right in with *The Feeling of What Happens*, a poetic examination of interior life through lenses of research, medical cases, philosophical analysis, and

unashamed introspection. Damasio's perspective is, fortunately, becoming increasingly common in the scientific community; despite all the protestations of old-guard behaviorists, subjective consciousness is a plain fact to most of us and the demand for new methods of inquiry is finally being met. These new methods are not without rigor, though. Damasio and his colleagues examine patients with disruptions and interruptions in consciousness and take deep insights from these tragic lives while offering greater comfort and meaning to the sufferers. His thesis, that our sense of self arises from our need to map relations between self and others, is firmly rooted in medical and evolutionary research but stands up well to self-examination. His examples from the weird world of neurology are unsettling yet deeply humanizing--real people with serious problems spring to life in the pages, but they are never reduced to their deficits. *The Feeling of What Happens* captures the spirit of discovery as it plunges deeper than ever into the darkest waters yet. --Rob Lightner --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Tackling a great complex of questions that poets, artists and philosophers have contemplated for generations, Damasio (*Descartes' Error*) examines current neurological knowledge of human consciousness. Significantly, in key passages he evokes T.S. Eliot, Shakespeare and William James. In Eliot's words, consciousness is "music heard so deeply/ That it is not heard at all." It, like Hamlet, begins with the question "Who's there?" And Damasio holds that there is, as James thought, a "stream of" consciousness that utilizes every part of the brain. Consciousness, argues Damasio, is linked to emotion, to our feelings for the images we perceive. There are in fact several kinds of consciousness, he says: the proto-self, which exists in the mind's constant monitoring of the body's state, of which we are unaware; a core consciousness that perceives the world 500 milliseconds after the fact; and the extended consciousness of memory, reason and language. Different from wakefulness and attention, consciousness can exist without language, reason or memory: for example, an amnesiac has consciousness. But when core consciousness fails, all else fails with it. More important for Damasio's argument, emotion and consciousness tend to be present or absent together. At the height of consciousness, above reason and creativity, Damasio places conscience, a word that preceded consciousness by many centuries. The author's plain language and careful redefinition of key points make this difficult subject accessible for the general reader. In a book that cuts through the old nature vs. nurture argument as well as conventional ideas of identity and possibly even of soul, it's clear, though he may not say so, that Damasio is still on the side of the angels. Agent, Michael Carlisle; 9-city author tour. (Sept.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I liked this book very much and found it to be quite thought provoking. While it can be criticized on various grounds including being difficult to follow, having redundancies and containing a lot of speculation, it still provides good theoretical concepts that are plausible and worth considering. I also like that Damasio is focusing significant attention on the role of the emotions in thinking and consciousness in general. Although it might turn out that things aren't quite what he says, he has set a new benchmark for explorations in this area and made difficult concepts accessible to large numbers of people. This can only help our understanding of emotions and consciousness as more talented people become involved in studying these areas. I also like Damasio's other books, which are much more readable, but somewhat less fascinating. If you want to wade into reading some of Damasio's more accessible work, then "Looking for Spinoza" might be a better place to start. I don't fault Damasio for including non-scientific speculations or using empirical case studies to back up some of his thinking. Clearly, he is doing some philosophizing and in an area such as consciousness, I don't know how one could avoid this. I value scientific rigor, but I also don't dismiss creative thinking. After all, it is usually at the level of intuition that most great discoveries get their start. I do have a bias that consciousness is more than an epiphenomenon. Therefore, I accept validity criteria outside of the scientific method that might be appropriate to studying subjective phenomenon. Interestingly, it is difficult to study love via the scientific method, yet people are willing to give up their lives for love. While I can't look at love under a microscope, I am convinced it exists. I think the study of consciousness brings up similar kinds of epistemological difficulties, so I can forgive Damasio for pushing the limits of the current scientific paradigm and its underlying assumptions. I find him provocative, but in a good way. I believe it is the fact that words are fuzzier than mathematics that allows someone like Shakespeare to express beautiful thoughts poetically. While mathematics might be more precise, it can't always capture every dimension of human experience. In a similar way, I don't think initial inquiries into the nature of consciousness can avoid speculation or a lack of precision at times. I give the guy credit for taking the whole question on in the first place. At least he is asking the important questions and taking a "swing at the ball" in terms of explaining them in a way that engages others in meaningful dialogue and further research.

"There would have been good reason to expect that, as the new century started the expanding brain sciences would make emotion part of their agenda.... But that...never came to pass. ...Twentieth Century science...moved emotion back into the brain, but relegated it to the lower neural strata associated with ancestors whom no one worshipped. In the end, not only was emotion not rational,

even studying it was probably not rational." Damasio, 1999, p. 39 With that statement, Damasio courageously took his own discipline's psychologists and neuroscientists to the woodshed for ignoring the importance of the affective domain, and that quotation perhaps explains the love-hate relationship that different reviewers express about this particular book. His observation is verifiable. One source is the history of citations on "emotion regulation" in the *Handbook of Emotion Regulation* by James J. Gross, editor. Another is the consignment of Benjamin Bloom's research team's second volume *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives Book 2/Affective Domain* to a collector's item in used book heaps. In all honesty, that 1964 volume was decades ahead of its time, well before Damasio's, and it is still a useful resource if you can get a copy. It is unfortunate how quickly its importance was dismissed, but Damasio's statement largely shows why Bloom's older volume 1 on the cognitive domain *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain* received a much warmer reception. John Dunlosky and Janet Metcalfe *Metacognition* noted that history reveals psychologists according metacognition with similar low status and held metacognition hostage for a time as an aspect of consciousness not worth the study. Damasio's work seems instrumental in accounting for the exponential upswing in research on affect. I found the book fascinating, not particularly difficult reading, and a useful resource to me as a college teacher and faculty developer. I've recommended it to many professors.

Until this century, philosophers were generally people with immense scientific and empirical expertise who also asked, "So what does it all amount to?" Now, we have scientists who don't know how to think about that question and philosophers who have no body of knowledge to think about when they ask it. Damasio breaks the mold: Using the medium of a trade book to raise rigorous philosophical thinking unwelcomed within science, he provides the finest theory of mind since William James. This book is a model of how we ought to be thinking about minds: using both careful philosophical reflection to know what to make of scientific information, and scientific information to know which theories we should even bother thinking about any longer, Damasio escapes the blinkered (and misleading) thinking of true-believer scientists and no-knowing philosophers.

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