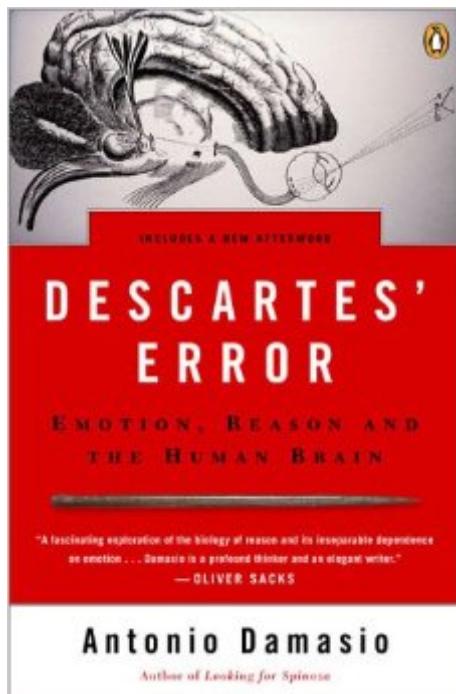


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Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, And The Human Brain



Synopsis

Since Descartes famously proclaimed, "I think, therefore I am," science has often overlooked emotions as the source of a person's true being. Even modern neuroscience has tended, until recently, to concentrate on the cognitive aspects of brain function, disregarding emotions. This attitude began to change with the publication of Descartes' Error in 1995. Antonio Damasio, "one of the world's leading neurologists" (The New York Times), challenged traditional ideas about the connection between emotions and rationality. In this wondrously engaging book, Damasio takes the reader on a journey of scientific discovery through a series of case studies, demonstrating what many of us have long suspected: emotions are not a luxury, they are essential to rational thinking and to normal social behavior.

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Customer Reviews

Damasio's book will be somewhat tough sledding for the non-specialist, but it's still a good book and worth sticking with to the end. Using Descartes's famous dictum as a departure point, and through a discussion of current theory and detailed case studies, he demonstrates the intimate relationship between the brain, mind, and body. The case studies of sensory agnosia were very interesting, especially the one where the patient had apparently lost the functioning of the part of his brain that stored the awareness of one side of the patient's body, to the point where the patient had no awareness or perception of that half at all, and even denied that he even had a problem with it. There can be no clearer demonstration of the fact that our consciousness and awareness depends

entirely on that 3-pound, convoluted mass of nerve cells we call the brain. As someone with a pretty fair background in the area myself (I did a master's and almost completed a Ph.D. in psychobiology) I can vouch for Damasio's command of the scientific and technical issues and details (notwithstanding that fact that Damasio is both an M.D. and a Ph.D.) so he has a good command of the medical issues also. The book is very well written, although not easy, but Damasio does a fine job of explaining the more difficult ideas. One further comment, I read one review that was critical of Damasio for supposedly misinterpreting Descartes's dictum, "I think, therefore I am," and then spent the whole review discussing Descartes instead of Damasio's book. The reviewer also stated that because of this Damasio lacks scientific objectivity. Since his comment is itself a good starting point for discussing the most important aspect of Damasio's book, I thought I'd write a little more on it here.

This book is already a classic of its kind. Yes, the hypotheses are not new, and yes, there is some speculation. So what? Damasio takes the abstruse and technically demanding field of neuroscience and turns it into a novel. The book is not dumbed down, nor is it patronizing. Damasio's main contention is that logic and reason are impossible without emotion. That is why intuitions are called gut feelings. He goes over many case studies, experiments, and introspection, to drive this point home. Our body is where the action takes place. Only after (or sometimes concurrent with) the body makes up its mind, does the mind follow. For a quick example, suppose you are sitting down in a college classroom. There is an open seat next to you. Suddenly, you spot a voluptuously delightful young lady walking toward you. What happens to you? Your heart starts to beat faster, your palms sweat a little, your body tenses up; and neurotransmitters release a cascade of chemicals into your blood stream which modulate your body's internal viscera. You focus your attention on this woman. Do you invite her to sit next to you? Or, are you too nervous to do so? If you are too nervous, think about what is going on. Is it because your brain is telling you that you are? No. Your body is sending signals to your brain and vice versa in a feedback loop. Your brain then 'reads' the signals coming from your body as nervousness. Without a body, you could 'feel' nothing. There would be no emotion. Thus, to a large degree, your decision was made prior to conscious awareness, and you could not control it. This way of thinking seems anathema to Westerners who love to believe that rationality means pure logic without emotion.

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