



Book Review

Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain
by Antonio Damasio. 2003. Harcourt Inc., Orlando.

Reviewed by Roy Sugarman

Yet another review of this now famous trilogy that began with *Descartes Error*, and continued with *The Feeling of What Happens*. One of the leading neuroscientists in the world, Antonio Damasio, together with his wife and colleagues continue to explore how we interpret somatic sensations, and Damasio continues to write books.

One might question why he has chosen to write books, as opposed to his myriad publications and interviews and other media expansions on the themes he chooses to investigate.

Reading them makes it clear we are watching his thinking in progress, his musing, using direction from famous case histories, and from philosophical works. Apart from the view of a fatherly God in Heaven, Spinoza, the great 17th Century Jewish philosopher, taught us to look for a god everywhere, and in everything, within and without ourselves, not a disconnected God in heaven, male, grey haired, with a charismatic presence from a distance.

Instead, Damasio follows up on Spinoza, inspired when he tried to verify a previous reference to the great ancestor of emotional thought,

to write this third book.

As neuroscience has come of age, neurologists are no longer confining themselves to only what they can see, and psychiatrists not only to what no-one can. Psychologists, well, let's not go there; we are still defining ourselves in that milieu, to the benefit of neuropsychology. Damasio's musings may lack scientific rigor, but hey, he leaves that to his scholarly journal articles, this is his hobby we are examining here, and we should not expect ultimate closure. He is developing things gradually in these works, blending theory and facts so that hypothesis testing can take place, and his workshop is the book, not the laboratory. In short, Damasio is offering us a personal peek into his psyche and his mind, into the feelings of what happens when he thinks with Descartes or Spinoza's words subsuming his own thoughts. It's a great idea, worthy of Hughlings Jackson and other predecessors.

Damasio's work, as I comment elsewhere (See Sugarman 2002) always assumes hierarchical levels of thinking, an assumption of meta-cognition, and although they seem to ig-

nore each other Russ Barkley and Damasio, along with Gualtieri and Gazzaniga, all seem to be following the same lines of thought

Executive functioning and consciousness share a common identity, and one juxtaposed with the other allows for theories of what enables the human condition. Inevitably, one comes across theories of levels, of different levels of abstraction in fact, that allow for one part of the mind to observe another, to simulate, to comment. Russell and Whitehead are conjured up, as epistemological confusion looms, a kind of homeostatic rebound with members of classes conflated with the class itself, and so Gregory Bateson, Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela and others are in the wings there too. I like the presence of these spectres, along with Phineas Gage, René Descartes, and Baruch Spinoza, as well as Freud, Kant, James and others, as they suggest that the stream of human consciousness is leading along a single highway to hypothesis testing.

In short, different aspects of mind at different theoretical and philosophical levels must be present to enable executive activity in the brain-mind interactions, and feelings and emotions must be at different levels to enable the human condition of self-awareness, monitoring and feedback. Homeostatic second order cybernetic systems demand this of the functional apparatus, it must be allopoietic, and allostatic at the same time. To resolve these issues, at least partially, Damasio invokes the proto self, the core self, and the autobiographical self, all at different levels in relation to the brain and to each other, allowing for extratensive and introspective observation and comment. There is a flow to these assumptions, and one must have the lower orders to attain the higher level, but can lose the higher while still retaining the lower in the hierarchy.

Primitive man may have had emotions, points out Damasio in an earlier work, but was unaware that he had them. Conscious awareness of somatic-driven emotions requires a feeling, an apperception that the emotion is there,

generated in the viscera, but such emotion is only known about with conscious perception, we can have emotion with no feeling, and this defines a second order circular unconscious, with a conscious knowledge of that feeling. We become, we are, we perceive we are, we feel we perceive, and then we know we have feeling and hence come to know we are, we exist, in juxtaposition to the world around and within us. Of course, we simulate the world, as we have no light or sound inside our bodies, this is all translated simulator.

Damasio is reworking limbic interactions with the brain, and hence draws on not just Spinoza and Descartes, Freud and Varela, but of course Papez and MacLean and into the world of my local neuroscientists, such as William Blessing of Flinders University, on what might be considered to be the 'real' brain. Can one after all rework the feeling of thirst from the search for water, the anxiety that feeling can bring, or the joy that succeeding can bring?

Such mixtures of levels must run the Russell-Whitehead gauntlet of epistemological error, if there is a third level, of which we are aware, such as the autobiographical one, our awareness of that would stand as a fourth level, and so on. Members of a class should not be confused with being the class itself, or one finds oneself as a mythical snake consuming itself from the tail up, a kind of Escher's gyrus effect. Linearity and circularity bedevil post-modernism with the potential for what Bateson called epistemological error, and Damasio, as others do, and have done, struggles in the resolution of the foundations of the circular homeostatic theory of brain and mind.

I am certainly not alone in feeling this way, I note Aldo Mosca of Monash University in Australia has much of the same thoughts on the matter of Damasio's musings in *The Feeling of What Happens* (see <http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v6/psyche-6-10-mosca.html>) as does the reviewer for *Scientific American*, as does Neil Levy (<http://menthelp.net/books/books.php?type=d>

[e&id=1577](#)).

Damasio's argument on spirituality on page 284 is typical as Damasio speaks of an awareness of harmony, awareness of a complete whole, implying, but not defining what meta-ordered observing system might be aware of the awareness and so on. Spinoza speaks of this himself, saying sense perception and imagination, though not capable of error themselves, lead to error if they are not placed in the right *contexts*, as states of the body, not parts of a system of ideas in the Bateson sense, and prone to philosophical states of confusion. The mind, in Spinozan terms, is the idea of the body, the apperception of the body. The doings of men whose ideas are confused and inadequate are to be called passions, and here, in these books, we are privileged to see Damasio pursuing his passions, led by the master of ethics, Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza, the excommunicated lens-grinding Portuguese Jew.

The happy ending seems to evade us all. Perhaps the knowledge of the third grade, the

highest one of all, the *scientia intuitiva*, belongs to God alone. The knowledge of the lowest grade, the *imaginatio*, seemingly belongs to us all, and in between, the ratio is where Damasio is most comfortable, as was Spinoza.

Finally then, Damasio is the master of the apperception of emotion, and his latest offering does not disappoint any more than the previous book does, allowing those of us who love the philosophy of the monist approach, to get seriously excited by the attack on dualism across the centuries, in the hands of the passionate scholar scientist, Antonio Damasio. This, along with his others before and hopefully to come, will further entrench Damasio as the leading bioscientist in the study of the feeling of what could happen next.

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