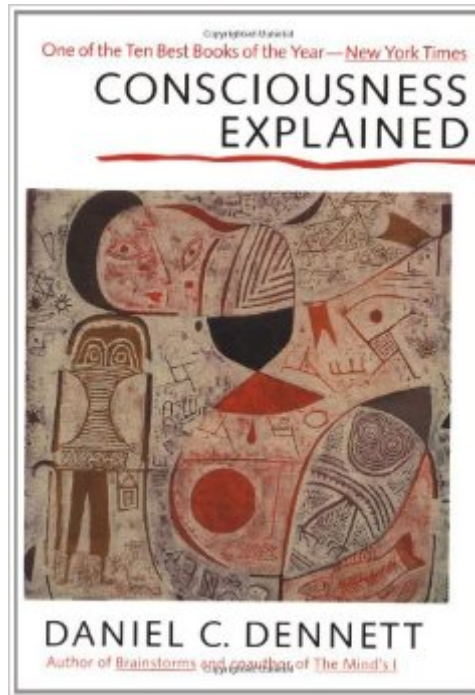


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Consciousness Explained



Synopsis

Advances a new theory of consciousness based on insights gleaned from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and artificial intelligence, and clears away obsolete myths about the process of thinking in conscious beings.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I believe it was Thomas Wolfe who once remarked with pride that he was a generous literary putter-inner, while minimalists like Ernest Hemingway were stingy leaver-outers. No one who finishes "Consciousness Explained" will doubt that Dennett belongs among the putter-inners. For example, on reaching page 280 the reader is casually told, "I have been coy about consciousness up to now." If only we had known, Daniel, that you've been toying with us through half the book...Dennett does make a coherent case, but the theme is buried in so many asides and diversions that one needs a conceptual GPS to stay oriented. Since he has the whole map in his head, the author naturally tends to forget that others on the tour bus may have lost their bearings two or three turns ago. On the plus side, Dennett's pleasantly conversational tone, clever analogies and colorful terminology (Stalinesque, Multiple Drafts, Witness Protection Program) help to sustain our interest and clarify difficult concepts. The big picture (I think) is that investigations of consciousness have traditionally been hindered by reliance on the concept of a "Cartesian Theater" in the mind where a homunculus (the audience) makes conscious observations. As long as the nature of the theater and the homunculus remain elusive, the whole approach merely begs the questions of what consciousness is and how it happens. Dennett proposes that neither the theater nor the audience exists (i.e. the analogies are empty) and that a massively parallel process he calls

Multiple Drafts is more descriptive of what happens in a conscious brain. The thrust of his argument is that understanding consciousness requires no ultimate appeal to mind/brain dualities, souls, spirits, quantum weirdness or other trappings of the "it can't be straightforward" school. This has led disappointed devotees of the ineffable to make dismissive remarks like "Dennett explains everything under the sun EXCEPT consciousness." Don't believe it. Dennett's background in philosophy serves him well in addressing the subtleties of cognition, but the resulting terminology may wear a bit on the reader. Sometimes I thought that if I saw the 22-letter monster "heterophenomenological" one more time, I would scream. On the other hand, Dennett's tale of the imaginary deity Feenoman, based on the root of this word, manages to be both hilarious and instructive. The book is an excellent choice for those who are not merely inclined, but also steadfastly determined, to learn more about the machinery of consciousness.

The good news is, this is a thought-provoking book, and anyone reading it will walk away feeling they know a little more about what makes humans conscious. The bad news is he doesn't come close to fulfilling the promise of the title. Dennett presents a pretty simple theory that could be explained in a few pages and a nice diagram. The theory is this: 'Basically, instead of a tiny "soul" that represents consciousness, our mind is composed of many simple task-specific processes'. He could have presented this concisely and dug deeper into the components of the theory. Instead he seems to want to stretch it out unnecessarily for about the first 200 pages of the book, and he's not even clear in explaining it! He also overstates the impact of this theory repeatedly - commenting that it "might seem outrageous" and that it's "counterintuitive". Actually, it's neither of those things, so it just seems like he's trying to over inflate the theory. Usually when reading these types of books I get that "Aha!" feeling now and then, but I didn't get it once reading this book. He also builds up a straw man in the form of "the Cartesian theater" and repeatedly bashes it. I don't know why it's so important to him to put this theory to rest - probably this is something important in philosophical circles. If this Cartesian Theater is a big force in philosophy, I must say I'm a little disappointed in the whole philosophical field. They should learn about programming. I would much rather see him building on his existing model, digging deeper into the specifics, cataloguing and explaining what some of these "mini-homunculi" or automatic functions might be. Instead he repeatedly beats a dead horse. Most programmers have the mindset that complex behavior can be built up from many simple functions. It's what we all do day in and day out when programming. This is exactly what Dennett argues about the human mind, so it is nothing new. Then he starts arguing against the theory of the Cartesian Theater, which posits that the mind has a "center" or pineal gland, or soul, or

one of many names it is given. As an atheist, this argument is also pretty much unnecessary to me, and probably to a lot of other readers out there. So it's similar to arguing to an astronaut that the earth is round. For 300 more pages! After a while you just want him to move on. He also didn't explore very much the role that emotions play, and how these might make our own consciousness seem slightly magical. I would have been interested in hearing him ponder that. He also talked about how words are important to thought, but then never bothered to mention how meditation (the absence of words/pictures/thoughts in the mind) is related to all this. If words are so important, is it possible to do thought without their use? I don't know - he never mentioned it. It may sound like I didn't like this book, but actually it is extremely thought provoking. Dennett is firmly in the materialist camp, so anyone with a scientific mind towards nature will agree with pretty much everything he says. The chapter on the evolution of consciousness is especially delicious. But it's like reading an astronomy book about the latest theories of the origins of the universe, and every five pages the author builds another straw man in the form of the earth being flat, then gleefully bashes the man down. Too much defense, not enough offense! He should have been braver and included more specifics. I think he was a little fearful of being proven wrong if he mentioned too many details. But a worthwhile read anyway.

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