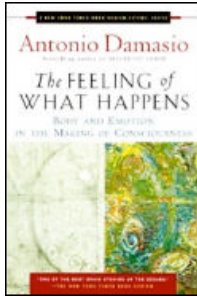


## A Feeling That Does Not Happen

**Michael Zorniak\***

Department of Biology  
Lake Forest College  
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045



By Antonio Damasio  
Harvest/HBJ Book (2000)

Feeling a Feeling. This recurring theme in Antonio Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens* boldly attempts to engage us in an understanding of consciousness. Damasio begins with a philosophical commentary on the act of knowing the self and quickly converges into his paradigm of "feeling a feeling". No harmony resonates with his existentialist divergence and reductionist approach to consciousness. Damasio ventures into the brain looking for avenues where his theories may ring true while the reader is hopelessly left outside his realm of reasoning.

Damasio's first priority in *The Feeling of What Happens* was to construct a model of consciousness and conveniently provide vocabulary for his revolutionary ideas. Some of these items include *core consciousness*, *extended consciousness*, *autobiographical self*, and *proto-self*. I am reminded here of Nobel laureate neuroscientist Stanley Prusiner, who coined the term *prion* for an infectious protein associated with several neurological diseases. In essence, Prusiner constructed a model of an infectious material before having scientific evidence that verified its existence. Initially, Prusiner was highly criticized for his early premonitions. Today, he has repeatedly confirmed his previous inklings, yet several scientists still disagree with his conclusions. Thinking outside the box should be encouraged as well as criticized; this is the nature of scientific progress. Although Damasio has some evidence for his proposed model, he fallaciously struggles to *ad hoc* results from neurological cases. In other words, he constructs a theory that, on its own, is not sufficient to explain the phenomena of consciousness. Yet, he makes laborious efforts to drag the reader through lofty textbook-like discussions on the integrity of his paradigm. Primarily, this approach gives the ending away before the book gets off the ground.

Damasio's first priority soon begins to consume the remaining text. He focuses most of his energy on arguments toward fitting attractive neurological manifestations into his model. He achieves

this with some eloquence but loses the audience with hypothetical and ornate assertions. He also creates numbered lists for these assertions, which suggest a concrete way of viewing the information, but become cumbersome to read. In one such list, he outlines the biological basis for emotions. Although his statements seem logical, they are simply opinions. More novel experiments need to be done to assess the validity of these perceived truths.

Many of Damasio's investigations lead me to believe that he is trying to find the headquarters of consciousness. He does this through his exploration of *core consciousness*. After analyzing an uncommon disease like *Akinetic Mutism* and a more common one like Alzheimer's Disease, he comes to a curious conclusion. He proposes that the absence of emotion is a reliable correlate of defective *core consciousness*. Damasio further speculates that *core consciousness* is located near the midline at the level of the brainstem. One may soon see that a course in neuroanatomy would be helpful to process the seemingly infinite structures to which Damasio alludes. These structures are phylogenetically the oldest structures of the brain, and many other mammals have very similar structures topographically. Does this conclusion imply that non-human mammals experience "feelings of feelings"? Damasio escapes speculation by ending the chapter on that thought. He does, however, sparingly comment on the intriguing plausibility of non-human consciousness in later chapters.

Generally, Damasio has difficulty finding the pinnacle seat of *core consciousness* (if it exists). What he does with ease is artistically mold consciousness into perceivable bodily representations. He claims that the "brain is truly the body's captive audience" (150). The brain is constantly being updated on the visceral and musculoskeletal apparatus of the body. He bridges the brain and the body together to comment on the nature of consciousness. Damasio coins this bridge the *proto-self*, defined as a "collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism" (154). However, he soon reverts to his old ways and attempts to find the area in which the *proto-self* is represented. This problematic because he is trying to find the location of a structure that he has created.

The level of reductionism he assumes is arbitrary. A holistic understanding of consciousness would encompass many disciplines including philosophy, psychology, physiology, molecular biology, and biophysics. Damasio does not comment upon this issue thoroughly, which is fundamental to his field of study. He looks at consciousness through the lenses of a modularist. This is not evident to the reader because he takes a complex approach indicative to his paradigm. The paradigm he uses places consciousness in a spectrum with two extremes and many shades of gray. Expanding on the previous argument, Damasio attempts to reduce the location of the *proto-self* to several locations: brain-stem nuclei, hypothalamus, insular cortex, cortices known as S2, and the medial parietal cortices. This methodology may appear to be holistic but, deceptively, is not. He has created his own terminology and locates them on his own. This idea is scientifically ungrounded because it fails to be testable.

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Only Damasio can truly verify the anatomical representations of the *proto-self*. To query consciousness on one anatomical level is like trying to understand the physical world in three dimensions. Three-dimensions serves as a good model of reality, but it does not comment upon the fourth-dimension of the space-time continuum developed by Einstein. When a physicist wants to send a rocket into space, he uses Newtonian physics. However, when dealing with theoretical frameworks of time travel, a more powerful theory is naturally necessary. Damasio's theory is a good model but it does not explain the reality of consciousness.

I am, as are many, hesitant to refute any of Damasio's arguments because I am afraid that I do not understand the full extension of his premises. Damasio is confident in what he is communicating, but he does it in a nonspecific way. There seems to be a motivation for this. Being a popular science book, he would like to not only touch the avid neurologist but, more importantly, the lay person. Damasio reaches no agreement between the writing styles directed to these very different audiences. As he stumbles and struggles to communicate his ideas to two audiences, the reader must make a great effort to digest the text, which requires Buddhist-like concentration to be comprehended satisfactorily. If you are so inclined, a second reading is recommended. You may then grasp the profoundness of his achievement.

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