

# Interpretation of Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens*

## E. Christopher Mare – Somatics Seminar

### Module 2 – 12 September 2011

I was introduced to Antonio Damasio's thinking during my KA\*702 study, with a reading of the momentous *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994). What I found to be most remarkable was the way in which Damasio was able to apply current research to his own practice as a neurologist, and then formulate an integrated synthesis. I say "remarkable" because the field of neurology is so prevalently *reductionist*, as is traditionally respectable science more generally. Damasio's synthesis was able to portray complex functions of the nervous system in a manner that could become meaningful to non-scientists – to artists, perhaps, or to any thinking and feeling human being wishing to understand more completely the role of the nervous system in their phenomenological reality. In particular, *Descartes' Error* revealed that emotion is *integral* to the functioning of reason; whereas we have always been taught, thanks to our Cartesian inheritance, that emotion and reason are entirely separate and distinct operations of the total person. After reading *Descartes' Error*, I was inspired more than ever to not only accept but *accentuate* my emotional life. I even intuited that I could use this discovery in my work as a village designer: if we create places that are able to stir emotion – through the knowing deployment of features and patterns capable of sensitively impinging on sensory inputs – would it not follow that the people living in these places would become somehow 'smarter?'

Based on this rewarding initial encounter, it was with great anticipation that I opened the pages of Damasio's subsequent work *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999). As I made my way through the book, however, I began to grow critical of Damasio's exposition. This criticality is no doubt a consequence of several years as a doctoral student (indeed, I am unable to read *anything* anymore without a critically judging eye!); yet I also thought that the treatment by this neurologist of the delicate issue of consciousness was, well, inescapably *reductionist*, and so somehow missing the point. Let me explain what I mean.

As a practicing neurologist – a respected scientist – Damasio gets all the data for his studies through the observation and treatment of "patients" with neurological disorders. Most of the conclusions that are drawn about the workings of the nervous system, therefore, come from deducing which normal functions go awry based on the location of specific lesions within specific cortical regions of the brain. For example (from pp. 101-2):

The stroke suffered by this patient, whom I will call L, produced damage to the internal and upper regions of the frontal lobe in both hemispheres. An area known as the cingulate cortex was damaged, along with nearby regions. She had suddenly become motionless and speechless, and, by and large, she was to remain motionless and speechless for the best part of the next six months. She would lie in bed, often with her eyes open but with a blank facial expression. On occasion she might catch an object in motion – me, for instance, moving around her bed – and track for a few instants, eyes and head moving along for a moment, but the quiet, nonfocused staring would be resumed rapidly.<sup>1</sup>

The unfortunate patient L was diagnosed with a condition called *akinetic mutism*; and the means for arriving at this diagnosis was, of course, classic third-person methodology: observation at a distance – and how could it be otherwise? Once a literature begins to accumulate describing such and such a condition coinciding with such and such neural damage, it becomes possible, by negation, to identify and associate specific cognitive or behavioral capacities with specific regions of the brain. This is good science: it has produced a vastly expanded store of useful knowledge about the structuring and processing of the nervous system. It is when these same methodologies are applied to a potentially ephemeral, emergent (and potentially non-reducible) capability such as consciousness, however, that inescapable reductionism arises – and this is just what Damasio has done.

Based on his experience with patients, Damasio has hypothesized varying levels of consciousness, and to each of these levels he has assigned a separate “self.” When I got to this part of the book, I started writing question marks in the margins because I thought some big assumptions were being made. In the following passages (from p. 173, original emphasis), the relationships between the various postulated “selves” are explained:

When certain personal records are made explicit in reconstructed images, as needed, in smaller or greater quantities, they become the *autobiographical self*. The real marvel, as I see it, is that the autobiographical memory is architecturally connected, neurally and cognitively speaking, to the non-conscious proto-self and to the emergent and conscious core self of each lived instant.

Unlike the core self, which inheres as a protagonist of the primordial account, and unlike the proto-self, which is a current representation of the state of the organism, the autobiographical self is based on a concept in the true cognitive and neurobiological sense of the term.

Antonio – I’m having trouble keeping track of all these selves and locating them in my own experience!

---

<sup>1</sup> Reading accounts like these, I was struck by how heartbreaking a job the neurologists have, witnessing day by day once vital human beings reduced to such stupor.

And that's just my point: Having reduced and divided consciousness to the capacity of various somatic selves – selves which he no doubt recognizes in the eyes of his patients – Damasio has subsequently reduced consciousness itself, and he states as much in “A Counterintuitive Fact” (p. 275):

[A]lthough even the simplest core consciousness requires ensemble activity that involves regions of every tier and quarter of the brain, consciousness does depend most critically on regions that are evolutionarily older, rather than more recent, and are located in the depth of the brain, rather than on its surface. In a curious way, the “second-order” processes I propose here are anchored on ancient neural structures, intimately associated with the regulation of life, rather than on the modern neural achievements of the neocortex, those which permit fine perception, language, and high reason. The apparent “more” of consciousness depends on “less,” and the second-order is, in the end, a deep and low order. The light of consciousness is carefully hidden and venerably ancient.

Despite my doctoral student criticality, I still think Antonio Damasio is brilliant (I especially appreciate the way he interjects references to poetry and fine literature into his verse) and providing a valuable service to artists, designers, and other thinking and feeling people; yet by reaching some of these conclusions he is aligning himself with dense materialistic, reductionistic cognitive scientists like Daniel Dennett, whose book *Consciousness Explained* (1991) would have been more accurately titled *Consciousness Explained Away!*

And I might not have even noticed except that I also have been reading accounts of consciousness written not by scientists but by spiritual practitioners, using not prosaic third-person methodology but exalted first-person phenomenology. For example, whereas Damasio associates consciousness with three levels of bodily functioning, Yogananda (1946) states unequivocally that body consciousness is none other than *ego*. This would imply that Damasio's “selves” are simply representing various levels of ego-consciousness. And in a wonderful book written by Elisabeth Haich (1960), in which the author purports to recall the experiences of being “initiated” by the Egyptian priest Ptahotep, there is claimed to be only *one* self, and that self is the animating force behind the universe – God. And whereas first-person accounts are notoriously devalued because they lack “objectivity” and “reproducibility,” they are, nevertheless, constituted by the same neural structures that produce third-person accounts. Or are they?

*Thus the bodies of people in the various planes of development, only appear to consist of the same matter. Actually they are composed of different chemical elements whose resistance always corresponds to the level of consciousness of the spirit dwelling within* (Haich, p. 218, original emphasis).

The way I see it, Antonio and Daniel are looking down to find their self of consciousness while Elisabeth and Yogananda are looking up. Naturally, they will arrive at different conclusions – *and*, both conclusions could be interpreted as valid within the context in which each is applied.

## References

- Damasio, Antonio (1994). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Grosset/Putnam
- Damasio, Antonio (1999) *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. San Diego: Harcourt
- Dennett, Daniel (1991). *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company
- Haich, Elisabeth (1960). *Initiation*. Palo Alto: Seed Press
- Yogananda, Paramahansa (1946). *Autobiography of a Yogi*. New York: The Philosophical Library, Inc.