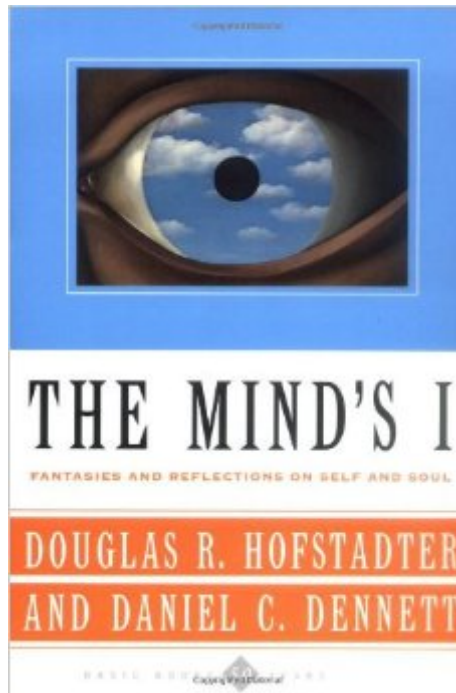


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The Mind's I: Fantasies And Reflections On Self & Soul



Synopsis

With contributions from Jorge Luis Borges, Richard Dawkins, John Searle, and Robert Nozick, *The Mind's I* explores the meaning of self and consciousness through the perspectives of literature, artificial intelligence, psychology, and other disciplines. In selections that range from fiction to scientific speculations about thinking machines, artificial intelligence, and the nature of the brain, Hofstadter and Dennett present a variety of conflicting visions of the self and the soul as explored through the writings of some of the twentieth century's most renowned thinkers.

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Customer Reviews

A fascinating tour of fundamental issues too often ignored or finessed. Philosopher scientists Hofstadter and Dennett offer an anthology of probing essays along with their own running commentary on the the topics of identity, consciousness, and reductionism vs. holism. More compelling and less of a challenge to read than Hofstadter's more famous book, *Gödel, Escher and Bach*, it none the less guides the reader to reconsider many of his assumptions about what he is and where he fits in the world. The book unfortunately was written just as complexity theory was maturing and Maturana's autopoietic version of consciousness was appearing in English. [See Capra's *Web of Life*] Its confidence in the creation of programmed Artificial Intelligence might also not withstand the arguments presented by Winograd and Flores in *Understanding Computers and Cognition*. I would very much like to know what these authors think of those approaches to the problem, paradigms I find more plausible and useful than anything presented here. Still, I highly

recommend the book to two classes of readers. First, those interested in a slightly incomplete survey of modern thinking about consciousness and, second, those fascinated by mental gymnastics, cerebral cleverness, and the ultimate puzzles of existence. Happily, I am firmly in both classes.

Philosophy, especially cognitive philosophy, can be a rather dull and dry topic, which is a shame given that it directly pertains to questions that we all ask, such as "Who am I?", "What is self?", "What would it be like to be another person?", and so on. This book takes the innovative approach of presenting an anthology of absolutely fascinating essays and stories that relate to these subjects, with each essay/story followed by commentary from Dennet and Hofstadter (both of whom are heavy hitters in Philosophic circles). It is especially interesting that a large fraction of the stories are taken directly from the annals of science-fiction, capitalizing on the genre's ability to deal with these kinds of deep issues in a manner that's entertaining and accessible. Nor does the book push any particular agenda. For instance, although Dennet and Hofstadter are both strong AI proponents (in every sense of the term "strong"), they do not hesitate to include essays that argue against the possibility of AI. Of course, there is a certain point beyond which popularizations cease to illuminate, and anyone seriously interested in these topics would be well advised to turn to heavier treatments (including those of the editors), but, as an introduction to the subject, you could certainly do worse, although you would be hard-pressed to do better, than to read this book.

After writing the magnificent 'Godel, Escher, Bach', for which he won a Pulitzer Prize, computer scientist Douglas Hofstadter (a professor at my alma mater, Indiana University) collaborated with philosopher Daniel Dennett on this anthology of essays and stories that explore the areas of human and artificial intelligence. What is the mind? What is the self? Is there really a soul? Are feelings and emotions artificial constructs of information bits inside of us, and if so, is it possible that machines can think and feel for themselves? For that matter, do we truly think and feel for ourselves? Hofstadter and Dennett have selected pieces that approach these questions from many angles, from hard-science observational techniques to spirituality dimensions in stories. Each piece is followed by a reflection that sets the context of the piece in relation to the larger question of intelligence. Contributors include mathematician Rudy Rucker ('Infinity and the Mind'), philosophers Raymond Smullyan (perhaps best known for logic puzzles) and Robert Nozick, literary figures such as Jorge Luis Borges and Stanislaw Lem, and pioneers in the field such as Alan Turing. The editors use a section of Turing's early article on 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' from 1950 to set

up much of the subsequent discussion. One often overlooked idea from Turing, oddly popular among British scholars of the first half of the twentieth century (and still more prevalent among British scholars and intellectuals than those of other cultures) is the idea of ESP and paranormal abilities. Turing felt that the final difference between machine-thinking, once it had reached full potential, and human thinking would be that humans have the capacity for ESP and other such abilities. Turing's foundational point rests on the answer to and the meaning of the question, will a machine ever think? Turing's answer to this is yes, and upon this assumption, the meaning of a machine thinking becomes the critical determinant. People infuse too much emotionalism into the question, Turing thought. Ironically, half a century after Turing and two decades after publication of *The Mind's I*, people watch depictions of thinking machines in science fiction shows without a second thought, even as these shows explore the connection between thinking and emotion. As many of the essays and stories make clear, it is often as much the way the question is asked as it is the content of the answer that can make a difference in the way the observer reacts and interprets. And yet, it becomes difficult to distinguish linguistic intelligence, intellect, and 'having a soul'. One question that is addressed can serve as illustration: Do animals have souls? For instance, does a chimpanzee with partial linguistic ability learned in a laboratory and greater ability to care for herself and her offspring have more of a soul than an human being who is physical and mentally impaired? Almost everyone would say no, but how this difference is characterised becomes difficult in many contexts. Terrel Miedaner has an intriguing set of stories, 'The Soul of Martha, a Beast' and 'The Soul of the Mark III Beast', which explores the fuzzy dividing line between the way in which we think of human feelings, animal feelings, and potentially even machine emotional responses. Part of the analysis of Hofstadter and Dennett focuses upon the construction of the stories, which are purposefully designed to evoke human emotional responses to anthropomorphised creatures. But this begs the question -- if we can anthropomorphise them, to what extent might they in fact have elements in common with human beings that make them worthy of consideration on a human level? Issues such as the difference between education and programming, free will and determined patterns, conscious and unconscious potentials, and (perhaps both most maddening and enlightening) the difference between reality, apparent reality, belief, and thought about belief (see Smullyan's 'An Epistemological Nightmare'). This is a very entertaining, often witty, occasionally disturbing book, that presents these philosophical problems in an accessible format.

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